

A Quick Guide To Basic Sentence Structure

(Using finite and non-finite verbs)

Understanding the basic, underlying structures of sentences helps us to write more clearly and be confident that we are communicating what we mean. This guide will highlight some common grammatical issues with finite and non-finite verbs, which can result in sentences not making sense.

Please note: This guide contains various exemplars. Where a particular exemplar is designed to highlight a grammatical inaccuracy, it has a cross next to it (X). Where an exemplar is correctly written to differentiate it from an inaccurate one, it is followed by a tick (✓)

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1: Basic Sentence Structure

Every sentence must contain a subject and at least one main verb. The subject is the 'who' or the 'what' we are writing about. When the subject of our sentence is a person, object or concept, we use a noun:

- The assignment
- Figure 6.1
- My book
- Forgiveness

A verb is a word that expresses an action or a condition:

- The assignment is due. (from the verb 'to be')
- Figure 6.1 contains relevant information. (from the verb 'to contain')
- My book has an index. (from the verb 'to have')
- Forgiveness costs nothing. (from the verb 'to cost')

Sometimes, the positions of the subject and the verb are reversed, for example in sentences beginning with phrases such as 'There is', 'It is', or 'This is'.

In the examples below, the underlined subject and the (verb in brackets) are still present.

- There (is) controversy.
- It (is) a challenge.
- This (is) my friend.

2: Finite Verbs

i. Finite Verbs

A finite verb is a verb that appears in various modified forms according to who or what the subject of the sentence is, and which tense (past-present-future) is being expressed. For example:

- I play tennis.
- She plays tennis.
- We played tennis.

- He is here.
- You are here.
- She will be here.

- I have evidence.
- You had evidence.
- She has evidence.

In each of the examples above, the verbs 'to play', 'to be' and 'to have' appear in their finite forms, which change according to who the subject is and what tense (past-present-future) is being used.

3: Non-Finite Verbs Cannot Stand Alone

i. Present participles

A non-finite verb has no tense (past, present or future), and does not change according to who is doing the action. An example of a non-finite verb is 'playing'.

This is a 'present participle':

- I am playing.
- You are playing.
- He is playing.
- They are playing.

In the examples above, notice that a finite verb (derived from the verb 'to be') is also present (appearing as 'am', 'are', 'is' and 'are'). It is this finite verb, not the non-finite verb 'playing', which is being modified according to subject and tense.

PAUSE:

A non-finite verb cannot be the only or main verb in a sentence. Therefore, the following four examples are incorrect:

- I playing. X
- You playing. X
- He playing. X
- They playing. X

All four of the above sentences are grammatically inaccurate because they only contain a non-finite, participle verb.

ii. Present participle as subject

A verb in present participle form can be used like a noun, as the subject of a sentence. In such cases, a finite verb must also be used. In the examples below, the finite verb is underlined:

- Playing is a pleasant activity.
- Playing has many benefits.

Once again, if we omitted our finite verb, the sentences would be grammatically incomplete:

- Playing a pleasant activity. X
- Playing many benefits. X

iii. Infinitives

Another type of non-finite verb is the 'infinitive', which is defined as a 'basic' verb form that expresses the general concept of what the verb means:

- To play
- To study
- To think

Like present participles, infinitive verbs cannot stand alone in a sentence without a finite verb:

- To study oversees. X
- They to study. X

Here are the sentences rewritten, with the finite verb underlined in each case:

- To study oversees is my ambition. ✓
- They intend to study. ✓

4: Inaccurate Punctuation Causes Problems

Sometimes, a sentence ends up without a finite verb because of punctuation issues. For example, a prematurely-placed full stop can 'interrupt' a sentence before the finite verb arrives:

- Finishing an assignment on time. Is a challenge. X

The correct version would be:

- Finishing an assignment on time is a challenge. ✓

Alternatively, a premature full stop may leave an infinitive verb or a participle verb 'dangling' on its own rather than being attached to the main part of the sentence containing the finite verb:

- The research team has been asked. To prove the hypothesis. X
- The research team has been asked to prove the hypothesis. ✓

- There are many advantages in. Upgrading your account. X
- There are many advantages in upgrading your account. ✓

5: Consolidation

In the following pairs of examples, the first sentence in each case is grammatically incorrect because it only contains a non-finite verb. The second sentence in each pair is correct because it does contain at least one (and sometimes more than one) finite verb (underlined):

- Finishing an assignment. X
- Finishing an assignment on time is a positive achievement. ✓

- The person making the claim. X
- The person making the claim has no evidence. ✓

- Managing a budget. X
- Managing a budget presents various challenges. ✓

- To prove the hypothesis. X
- To prove the hypothesis, we need more evidence. ✓

- Surveying all the literature on my chosen subject. X
- Surveying all the literature on my chosen subject, I think my dissertation will be quite challenging. ✓

- To gain entry onto the course. X
- To gain entry onto the course, you need 3 A-levels. ✓

- The students taking part in the survey. X
- The students taking part in the survey gave positive responses. ✓

6: Further Steps to Improve Your Grammar

In addition to studying this guide, we recommend the following:

Enrol on the English Support Pages on Blackboard	<p>The English Support site on Blackboard contains resources to help you with all aspects of language development, including grammar.</p> <p>You will find a link to Blackboard on the university's Spelling and Grammar page.</p>
Consult books and other resources	<p>The Students' Guide to Writing is a useful resource if you want to improve your confidence with English grammar.</p>
Do some analytical reading specifically to develop your awareness of English grammar.	<p>One of the best ways to improve your grammar is to study passages of English academic writing, and observe how writers handle finite and non-finite verbs in sentences.</p>
Proof-read	<p>Check and proof-read your work, and try to make sure your sentences all contain a subject and at least one finite verb.</p>