
Sentence Patterns – The Basic Five

Before determining the essential parts of a sentence, it is important to eliminate the “extras” in a sentence. These extras are adjective, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. At a later point there will be one exception involving adjectives, but at this point eliminate all of them. After you have done this, find the verb first and then the subject.

PATTERN 1: S – V [intransitive]

This is the most basic sentence pattern in English because every sentence **MUST** include both a *subject* and a *verb*. Below are different variations of this pattern.

S V
The boy ran.

S V
~~The little boy ran quickly.~~

S V
~~The little boy ran quickly down the hall.~~

As you notice in these sentences, each one consists of the subject (boy) and the verb (ran). In the second sentence, an adjective (little) and an adverb (quickly) are added for extra detail, but they do not affect the basic meaning of the sentence. In the third sentence, another element is added, a prepositional phrase (down the hall), but it also simply adds detail and can be eliminated. As a side note, it is always best to find the verb first because the noun that does what the verb says is subject.

PATTERN 2: S – LV – PN

In pattern 2, the verb shows no action. As a matter of fact, the verb in this pattern is very much like an equal sign in a math problem or a link in a chain that holds two things together. This type of verb is called a *linking verb*, and its function is to link the two nouns in this pattern.

Common linking verbs *include am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been, seem, appear, look, become, sound, smell, taste, feel, turn, grow, and remain*. If you are ever unsure if a verb is linking, you can simply insert the word “is” or “are” for the verb, and if the sentence makes sense, you will know you have a linking verb.

The other new element in this sentence pattern is something called a PN, a *predicate noun or predicate nominative* (both terms mean the same thing). Unlike a direct object, a predicate noun is receiving no action because the verb in this pattern shows no action. A predicate noun’s function is simply to rename or restate the subject. In other words, the subject and the predicate noun are the same person or thing. As a matter of fact, you could often flip the S and the PN, and the sentence would still make sense.

S LV PN
~~That girl is my sister.~~

Notice that “girl” and “sister” are the same person. That means “sister” is the PN. Also notice that the verb shows no action. It is simply acting as an equal sign:

girl = sister

You could even flip the sentence: My sister is that girl.

Here are some other examples of pattern S – LV – PN:

S LV PN
Susan became ~~the drum major of the band~~.

“Susan” and “drum major” are the same person. The verb “became” is like an = sign.

Susan = drum major

S LV PN
Carol remained ~~my best friend throughout high school~~.

Carol = friend

PATTERN 3: S – LV – PA

In this pattern, you will find some elements that you already understand, a subject and a linking verb. Pattern 3, however, has a new element and one that appears to contradict the instructions about crossing out adjectives. Rather than having a predicate noun following a linking verb, pattern 3 has something called a *predicate adjective* (PA). A predicate adjective is unlike most adjectives in sentences in that it does not come before the noun it modifies as almost all single-word adjectives do (GREEN shirt, ANGRY words, FUNNY joke). This particular adjective follows a linking verb and modifies the subject.

S LV PA
~~My little~~ brother is funny.
“funny” describes “brother” = “funny brother”

Notice that unlike every other adjective, this adjective cannot be removed. In sentences where adjectives come before a noun, that adjective can be removed: “My funny brother told a joke” can be “My brother told a joke.” In a pattern 4 sentence, however, it would not make sense to say, “My little brother is.”

Here are some more examples of pattern 3:

S LV PA
The kids were ~~really noisy in class~~. (noisy describes kids)

S LV PA
~~That~~ spaghetti tastes terrible. (terrible describes spaghetti)

Remember, if you don’t know where or not a verb is linking, you can substitute “is” or “are” for the verb to see if the sentence makes sense.

S LV PA
That spaghetti is terrible.

Yes, “That spaghetti is terrible” makes sense, so “tastes” is functioning as a linking verb.

Perhaps you are wondering if you will confuse pattern 3 (S-LV-PN) with pattern 4 (S-LV-PA) because they both have linking verbs. The easiest way to differentiate between them is to remember that a PN has to be a NOUN, and a PA has to be an ADJECTIVE.

PATTERN 4: S – V – DO

This pattern consists of the same two elements as pattern 1, except this time a second noun is added. This noun is called a *direct object*. There are several characteristics of a direct object. First, the direct object must be a noun (or pronoun). Second, the direct object follows an action verb. Third, the direct object must receive whatever action the subject is doing. Finally, a direct object can be found easily by saying the subject and the verb and then asking the question “what?” Below are some examples.

S V DO
The boy hit the ball.

(Notice that there is an action in the sentence – “hit.” The subject – “boy” – is performing the action – “boy hit.” Finally “ball” is receiving the action done by the “boy.” You can also ask the question “what?” The “boy” hit what? The answer is “ball.” So, “ball” is the direct object in the sentence.

No matter how many details you add to a sentence, the sentence is still S - V – DO if the second noun in the sentence is receiving the action of the subject and verb. See below.

S V DO
The ~~little~~ boy hit the ball ~~into left field~~.

PATTERN 5: S – V – IO – DO

Luckily, pattern 5 consists of three elements with which you are already familiar: subject, verb (action), and direct object. Pattern 5, however, adds a third noun, and that noun is an *indirect object*. An indirect object is a noun or pronoun that receives whatever the direct object is. An indirect object must ALWAYS come before a direct object in a sentence. Here are some examples:

S V IO DO
The teacher gave Bill a pencil.

Notice that “Bill” comes before the direct object “pencil.” Notice also that Bill is the person receiving the direct object (“pencil”).

You can find a direct object by asking the following:

The teacher gave a pencil to whom? Answer = Bill (indirect object)

Here is another example:

S V IO DO
I told ~~my best friend~~ a story ~~about her boyfriend~~.

I told a story to whom? Answer = friend (indirect object).