

Clauses and clause structure

Subject facts



Although sentences can take the form of statements, questions, commands and exclamations, statements are considered to be the basic type from which the other sentence types are derived by the processes outlined above (for example, inverting the subject and verb to make a question, and deleting the subject to make a command). In examining the structure of sentences, statements are the most convenient starting point, and will be used in all the examples below.

What is a clause?

The first point to notice is that sentences consist of one or more clauses. These are self-contained units, usually consisting of a subject and predicate. You should be able to identify three clauses in the sentence below:

The table was spread, the food was ready, and the band began to play.

Each of these separate, potentially independent groups of words is a clause. The division of clauses into subject and predicate has already been demonstrated. We have seen that a predicate consists of at least a verb (*Garlic stinks*); the verb can, however, be accompanied by other elements: objects, adverbials and complements. These are all clause elements.

Basic finite clause patterns

The different ways in which these clause elements combine give us seven basic patterns.

Subject + verb (SV)

subject	verb
The band	played.
The hungry audience	listened.
My appreciative friends	applauded.

Subject + verb + object (SVO)

subject	verb	object
Several noisy diners	were rattling	their cutlery.
Six of the percussionists	performed	a drum roll.
My children	were devouring	all the bread rolls.

The object usually denotes the entity 'affected' by the verb.

Subject + verb + complement (SVC)

subject	verb	complement
Our first course	was	deep-fried cod.
The bandleader	was looking	ravenous.
The customers	remained	impatient.

Note that the subject and the complement refer to the same entity: the *first course* and the *cod* are the same thing; the qualities of ravenousness and impatience are used to tell us more about the bandleaders and the customers (a useful mnemonic is to think of the complement 'completing' the subject). Therefore, the most typical verb in an SVC clause is the verb *be* or alternatives such as the ones above, which perform a similar function. Other possibilities include *seem*, *appear*, *become*, *smell* and *taste*.

Subject + verb + object + indirect object (SVOO)

subject	verb	direct object	indirect object
Alice	threw	an olive and an anchovy	to the violinist.
He	played	a passionate cadenza	for her.
The manager	offered	a job	to my friend.