

# A Grammar Glossary

If you think your understanding of grammatical terminology may be a bit rusty, then this glossary should be helpful. It defines familiar terms (such as *adjective*) and some not quite as familiar (such as *adjectival*) and gives examples. It is not intended to be a complete grammar glossary. More complete descriptions can be found in Martha Kolln and Robert Funk's *Understanding English Grammar* and other grammar texts.

**Absolute phrase:** A noun phrase with one modifier, often a participial phrase, following the noun headword. An absolute phrase can explain a cause or condition, as in *The temperature having dropped suddenly, we decided to build a fire in the fireplace*, or it can add a detail or a point of focus, as in *The children rushed out the schoolhouse door, their voices filling the playground with shouts of freedom*.

**Active voice:** A feature of sentences in which the subject performs the action of the verb and the direct object is the goal or the recipient: *The mechanic fixed the car*. See also **Passive voice**.

**Adjectival:** Any structure (word, phrase, or clause) that fills the role of an adjective—that is, that functions as an adjective normally does, modifying a noun: *The house on the corner is new*. In this sentence, *on the corner* is an adjectival prepositional phrase.

**Adjective:** A form-class word that functions as a noun modifier. Adjectives can be made comparative and superlative (*tall, taller, tallest*) and can be qualified or intensified (*very tall*).

**Adverb:** A form-class word that generally modifies a verb, as in *I will be going soon*. Adverbs can also modify the sentence as a whole, as in *Unfortunately, I was out when you phoned*. Some adverbs can be compared (more *quickly*) or intensified (*very quickly*). Their position in the sentence is often flexible (*I will soon be going; Soon I will be going*).

**Adverbial:** Any structure (word, phrase, or clause) that functions as a modifier of a verb—that is, that fills the role of an adverb. In *We drove to the airport to pick up Uncle Louie*, *to the airport* is an adverbial prepositional phrase and *to pick up Uncle Louie* is an adverbial infinitive phrase, both modifying the verb *drove*.

**Affix:** A meaningful unit that is added to the beginning (prefix) or end (suffix) of a word to change its meaning or its function or its part of speech: (prefix) *unhelpful*; (suffix) *unhelpful*. See also **Prefix**; **Suffix**.

**Agreement:** See **Pronoun-antecedent agreement**; **Subject-verb agreement**.

- Antecedent:** The word or phrase, usually a noun phrase, that a pronoun stands for: *Here is your present. I hope that you like it.*
- Appositive:** A structure that adds information by renaming another structure, as in *Ginger, my dog, is sweet but stubborn. Or, My daily exercise routine, running around the track, sometimes gets very boring.*
- Article:** The determiners *a* and *an* (the indefinite articles) and *the* (the definite article): *A View to a Kill; The Man with the Golden Gun.*
- Auxiliary verb:** A structure-class word used with verbs. Auxiliary verbs include *have*, *be*, and *do* when they are used in phrases with other verbs, as well as such modals as *will* and *must*: *Miguel will have left by tomorrow. Do you need to see him? See also **Modal**.*
- Base form of the verb:** The uninflected form of the verb, as it appears in the frame "To \_\_\_ is difficult." The base form appears in the infinitive (*To be or not to be*), in the present tense for all persons except third-person singular (*I walk, you walk, we walk, they walk*), and in other verb phrases (*He must walk; They will walk*).
- Case:** A feature of nouns and certain pronouns (personal and relative pronouns) that is determined by the role the noun or pronoun fills in the sentence. Pronouns have three case distinctions: subjective (for example, *he*, *we*, *who*), possessive (*his*, *our*, *whose*), and objective (*him*, *us*, *whom*). Nouns have only one case inflection, the possessive (*John's*, *the cat's*). See also **Objective case**; **Subjective case**.
- Clause:** A sequence of words that includes a subject and a predicate: *Ellen slept; Ellen dreamed about her daughter, who was away at school.* See also **Dependent clause**; **Independent clause**.
- Coherence:** The quality of being orderly, logical, and consistent. See also **Cohesion**.
- Cohesion:** The grammatical and semantic connections between sentences and paragraphs. Cohesive ties are furnished by pronouns that have antecedents in previous sentences, by adverbial connections, by known information, by repeated or related words, and by knowledge shared by the reader.
- Comma splice:** Two independent clauses joined by a comma, as in *Juana went home, she has a doctor's appointment for her son.* See also **Run-on sentence**.
- Complement:** A structure that completes the predicate, such as a direct object (*She planted roses*), indirect object (*He gave her a kiss*), subject complement (*He became sleepy*), and object complement (*She named him Theodore*).
- Complex sentence:** A sentence consisting of one independent, or main, clause and at least one dependent clause, as in *Computers are frustrating when they don't work.*

- Compound-complex sentence:** A sentence consisting of two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause, as in *Computers are frustrating when they don't work, but we all use them anyway.*
- Compound sentence:** A sentence consisting of two or more independent, or main, clauses, as in *Computers are frustrating sometimes, but we all use them anyway.*
- Conjunction:** A structure-class word that connects two or more words, phrases, or clauses. See also **Conjunctive adverb**; **Coordinating conjunction**; **Correlative conjunction**; **Subordinating conjunction**.
- Conjunctive adverb:** A conjunction with an adverbial emphasis (*however, therefore, nevertheless, moreover, etc.*) that connects two clauses, as in *Chocolate is delicious; however, I try my best to stay away from it.*
- Coordinating conjunction:** A conjunction that connects two words, phrases, or clauses as equals: *and, but, or, nor, for, and yet*. For example, *Abraham and Jeff worked Tuesday.*
- Correlative conjunction:** A two-word conjunction: *either-or; neither-nor; both-and; not only-but also*. For example, *Neither the sofa nor that table looks right in this corner.*
- Dangling participle:** A participial phrase at the beginning or end of a sentence in which the subject of the sentence is not the subject of the participle. In other words, a dangling participle is a verb without a subject, as in *Walking through the woods, the moon shone brightly.*
- Declarative sentence:** A sentence in the form of a statement (in contrast to a command, a question, or an exclamation): *April showers bring May flowers.*
- Dependent clause:** A clause that fills a role in a sentence (such as adverbial, adjectival, or nominal) and that cannot stand independently as a sentence: *He climbed until he was exhausted (adverbial clause); I wonder where I put my keys (nominal clause functioning as direct object).* See also **Independent clause**.
- Determiner:** A structure-class word that marks or signals a noun, appearing as the first word in a noun phrase, before the noun and before any modifiers in the phrase. Determiners include the articles *a, an, and the* and those words that can be used in their place: demonstrative pronouns, indefinite pronouns, numbers, possessive pronouns, and possessive nouns. For example, *The telephone is a wonderful invention; This darned telephone doesn't work; Some cell phones are expensive; We have three blue, cordless telephones; You're using my cell phone; Conchita's phone doesn't work anymore.*
- Direct object:** A noun phrase or other nominal structure that names the goal or receiver of the action of the verb, as in *Phil bought a used motorcycle; I enjoy watching basketball; I hope that it doesn't rain tomorrow.* See also **Indirect object**.

- Exclamatory sentence:** A sentence that expresses excitement or emotion. It may include a shift in word order and is usually punctuated with an exclamation point, as in *What a beautiful day we're having!*
- Expletive:** A word without semantic meaning used as a placeholder to fill the subject position at the beginning of an independent clause: *It is raining;* *There is a fly in my soup.*
- Finite:** Specific, or finite, as to tense. Verbs in the present tense or past tense are finite verbs: *He filled the tub.* Phrases with such verbs are finite verb phrases. In most finite verb phrases, the first verb is the only finite verb: *He had filled the tub.* (*Filled* in this sentence is a past participle.) Modals, which begin many verb phrases, are not as clear as to their finiteness. They don't take endings that indicate the past or present tense, but some of them suggest past, present, or future time as well as possibility or probability. For example, *She can go* can refer to the present or future but not the past. See also **Nonfinite; Modal; Participle.**
- Form:** The inherent features of grammatical units, as distinguished from their function. The forms of certain word classes are characterized by prefixes and suffixes. The forms of phrases are characterized by headwords and their objects, complements, or modifiers. The forms of clauses are characterized by subjects and predicates. See also **Function.**
- Form-class words:** The four large classes of words that contribute the lexical content of the language: nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. They are also called *content words*. Each takes characteristic prefixes and suffixes that distinguish its form. New form-class words appear frequently, and they are sometimes called *open-class words* for this reason. See also **Structure-class words.**
- Fragment:** A group of words that, although punctuated as if it were a sentence, is not a complete sentence. Some fragments are dependent clauses: *She drove frantically to the store. Because she had run out of bread for tomorrow's lunches.* Others are phrases, without a subject and complete verb: *She went to get bread for tomorrow's lunches. Driving frantically to the store.* While most fragments are the result of punctuation or structural error, they can be used purposefully by experienced writers for stylistic reasons.
- Function:** The role of a word, phrase, or clause in a sentence. Consider the sentence *To wear a winter coat in the summer is bizarre behavior.* *To wear a winter coat in the summer* is an infinitive verb phrase that functions as the subject of the sentence. *Winter* in *winter coat* is a noun that functions adjectivally, modifying *coat*. *In the summer* is a prepositional phrase that functions as an adverbial modifier of *to wear*.
- Gerund:** An *-ing* verb functioning as a nominal—that is, as a noun functions: *I enjoy reading; Playing the piano is relaxing.* See also **Gerund phrase.**

**Gerund phrase:** A gerund together with all of its complements and modifiers, as in *Playing the piano is relaxing*. See also **Gerund**.

**Headword:** The main word of a phrase, the one that the others modify or complement. In the sentence *The boys in the parade waved to the crowd*, *boys* is the headword of the noun phrase *The boys in the parade*; *in* is the headword of the prepositional phrase *in the parade*; and *waved* is the headword of the verb phrase *waved to the crowd*.

**Helping verb:** See **Auxiliary verb**.

**Imperative:** A sentence in the form of a direction or a command; the subject, *you*, is usually deleted, as in *Turn left at the light; Come here; Be quiet*.

**Independent clause:** The main clause of a sentence, one that can stand on its own: *The house that used to look run down is now painted a bright blue*. See also **Dependent clause**.

**Indirect object:** The noun phrase naming the recipient of the direct object. Indirect objects can be shifted into prepositional phrases with *to* or *for*, as in *Samantha gave her father a ticket; Samantha gave a ticket to her father*.

**Infinitive:** The base form of the verb often preceded by *to*: *To die, to sleep; / To sleep: perchance to dream; ay, there's the rub*. See also **Infinitive phrase**.

**Infinitive phrase:** The infinitive together with all of its complements and modifiers. Infinitive phrases function as adverbials, adjectivals, and nominals: *Rajesh wants to watch his favorite TV show* (infinitive phrase as direct object). See also **Infinitive**.

**Inflection:** See **Inflectional suffix**.

**Inflectional suffix:** A suffix added to a noun (*-s* plural, *'s* possessive), verb (*-s*, *-ed*, *-ing*), or adjective and adverb (*-er* comparative, *-est* superlative) that alters its grammatical role or meaning: *Dog, dogs; Sing, sang*.

**Interrogative:** A structure-class word that introduces questions and certain nominal clauses: *where, when, who, what, why*, and *how*. For example, *Why is she leaving?; I wonder why she is leaving*.

**Interrogative sentence:** A sentence in the form of a question (in contrast to a statement, exclamation, or command): *When are we leaving?*

**Intransitive verb:** A verb that has no complement, although it may take an adverbial modifier: *Denzel's parents arrived at the airport*. See also **Transitive verb**.

**Irregular verb:** A verb that does not form its past tense and past participle by adding *-ed*, *-d*, or *-t*, as regular verbs do: *Sing, sang, sung; go, went, gone*. See also **Regular verb**.

**Linking verb:** A verb that links the complement to the sentence subject, as in *The chicken is tasty; The salad looks delicious; The chef just became my husband*.

**Main clause:** See **Independent clause**.

**Main verb:** The verb that fills the last position in the main verb string, or the only position if there are no auxiliary verbs. Sometimes called the *lexical verb*, it carries the specific meaning about actions, events, or states of being, as in *Raheem has been writing a short story. He told me about it.* See also **Auxiliary verb**; **Main verb string**.

**Main verb string:** The part of the sentence consisting of the main verb and any auxiliary verbs that precede it: *Tyrone tried hard; Sheila should have been trying harder.* See also **Auxiliary verb**; **Main verb**.

**Modal:** An auxiliary verb that opens a main verb string and that conveys the probability, possibility, obligation, or other mood of the main verb. The principal modals are *can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might, and must*: *He should be here. He said he would be. He must be sick.* Other kinds of modals include *need* and *dare*, as in *You need not have said that and I don't dare say it.* Modal phrases include *had to*, as in *Anita had to leave.* See also **Auxiliary verb**; **Main verb string**.

**Modifier:** A word, phrase, or clause that adds information about a noun or verb or the sentence as a whole: *The blue chair that I bought at the auction needs painting; The tomatoes grow fast when the nights are warm; Unfortunately, she lost her job.*

**Nominal:** A word, phrase, or clause that functions as noun phrases do. Nominals do not necessarily contain nouns: *Traveling can be hard work; I'll accept whoever volunteers.* See also **Noun phrase**; **Nominal clause**.

**Nominal clause:** A clause that functions as a noun phrase does, often a *that* clause or an interrogative clause, as in *I know that she knows; Denise wondered why they were late.*

**Nonfinite:** Not definite as to tense. The nonfinite verbs are infinitives, participles, and gerunds. Nonfinite verbs appear in the main verb phrase, where they are preceded by a finite verb (one with tense), as in *Melissa is running in the race* (present participle). They also appear in other phrases where they function nominally, adjectivally, or adverbially; such phrases are nonfinite verb phrases: *Yuri loves to sing* (infinitive); *The snoring man is next door* (present participle); *She likes riding roller coasters* (gerund). See also **Finite**.

**Nonrestrictive modifier:** A modifier—a word, phrase, or clause—in the noun phrase that comments on the noun but is not necessary for defining or identifying it. It is set off with commas: *The Finance Committee, which met last week, is still working on the budget.* See also **Restrictive modifier**.

**Noun:** A form-class word that can usually be made plural or possessive, as in *boy, boys, boy's*. Nouns fill the headword slot in noun phrases (*my old Kentucky home*); they can also serve as adjectivals (*the home team*) and adverbials (*They went home*).

**Noun phrase:** The noun headword together with all of its modifiers. In the sentence *The gardener trimmed the pine tree with the broken branches, the gardener* is a noun phrase that functions as the sentence subject, and its headword is *gardener*. *The pine tree with the broken branches* is a noun phrase functioning as a direct object, and its headword is *tree*. *The broken branches* is a noun phrase embedded in the longer noun phrase; it functions as the object of the preposition *with*, and its headword is *branches*.

**Object complement:** A word or phrase in the predicate that completes the idea of the verb and modifies or renames the direct object: *I found the play exciting*; *We consider Rose Marie a good friend*.

**Objective case:** The role in a sentence of a noun phrase or pronoun when it functions as an object—direct object, indirect object, object complement, or object of a preposition. Personal pronouns and the relative pronoun *who* have special forms for the objective case: *me, him, her, us, and them*, as well as *whom*. For example, *He gave him a stereo for his birthday*; *Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls is a great novel*.

**Object of a preposition:** See **Preposition**.

**Parallelism:** Two or more of the same grammatical structures that are coordinated—given equal weight—within a sentence, as in *He came early and left late*; *My words went in one ear and out the other*. The term also applies to repeated structures in separate sentences within a paragraph.

**Participial phrase:** A present or past participle together with its subject or complements and/or modifiers: *Still clutching their pizza in their hands, the kids left the room*. See also **Participle**.

**Participle:** The verb forms that appear in verb phrases after the auxiliary verbs *to be*, as in *I was eating* (present participle), and *to have*, as in *I have eaten* (past participle). *Participle* is also the term used to refer to the present or past participle in its role as an adjectival, as a modifier in the noun phrase: *The band members, wearing their snazzy new uniforms, proudly marched onto the field*. See also **Present participle**; **Past participle**.

**Particle:** Any of various words accompanying the verb as part of a phrasal verb, such as *on* in *catch on* and *up* and *with* in *put up with*.

**Passive voice:** A feature of sentences in which the object or goal of the action functions as the sentence subject and the main verb phrase includes the verb *to be* and the past participle, as in *The car was fixed by the mechanic*. See also **Active voice**.

**Past participle:** The form of the verb used in the frame “We have . . .”: *We have forgotten something*; *We have walked two miles*. The past participle can stand on its own, without *have*: *Forgotten by his friends, he lived alone*. The past participle is also used with a form of *to be* in the passive voice, as in *The car was fixed by the mechanic*. Even though the past participles that end in *-ed* have the same form as the past tense of regular verbs, the

“past” in the name of this verb form does not denote past time: *We have walked* (past participle); *We walked* (past tense); *The dog is walked by the girl next door* (present tense, passive voice). See also **Participle; Present participle**.

**Past tense:** The *-ed* form of regular verbs, usually denoting an action at a specific time in the past: *They walked down the street*. Irregular verbs have various past tense forms, as in *She bought the car; They took a walk; He was happy*.

**Phrasal verb:** A verb consisting of a verb plus a particle or particles: *look up the statistics, give in to the pressure, put up with the noise, find out the truth, make up a lie, turn in at midnight, come by a fortune, go in for horse racing, and many other everyday verbs*.

**Phrase:** A word or group of words that functions as a unit in the sentence and is not a clause. *The boy* is a noun phrase. *The boy with the blue shirt* is a noun phrase that includes a prepositional phrase modifying the noun *boy*. *The boy who is mowing the lawn* is a noun phrase that includes an adjectival clause modifying the noun *boy*. See also **Noun phrase; Verb phrase; Preposition; Absolute phrase**.

**Predicate:** One of the two principal parts of the sentence, it's the comment made about the subject. The predicate includes the verb together with its complements and modifiers: *The building finally collapsed after years of decay*. See also **Subject**.

**Predicate adjective:** The adjective that functions as a subject complement following a linking verb, as in *He became sleepy*. See also **Linking verb; Subject complement**.

**Predicate nominative:** The noun or nominal that functions as a subject complement: *She became an engineer*. See also **Linking verb; Subject complement**.

**Prefix:** A meaningful unit added to the beginning of a word to change its meaning (*illegal*) or its class (*enable*). See also **Affix; Suffix**.

**Preposition:** A structure-class word that combines with a nominal (the object of the preposition) to form a prepositional phrase, which functions adjectivally or adverbially, as in *On Tuesday, the circus came to town*. Prepositions can be simple (*above, at, in, of, for, from, etc.*) or phrasal (*according to, instead of, etc.*).

**Present participle:** The form of the verb used with the frame “We are . . .”: *We are going; They should be leaving soon*. This *-ing* form of the verb is also used as an adjectival modifier as well as a main verb: *Leaving the park, she was feeling the excitement of the city*. The word *present* in the label for this verb form does not denote present time, and in fact the present participle is not definite as to time: *He is leaving; He was leaving*. See also **Participle; Nonfinite**.



**Present tense:** The base form (*eat*) along with the *-s* form (*eats*) that is used with a third-person singular subject. The present tense denotes a present point in time (*I like your new hairdo*), a habitual action (*My parents live in Arizona*), or the “timeless” present (*The earth revolves around the sun*).

**Progressive:** A verb construction consisting of the auxiliary *be* and the present participle, expressing ongoing activity or a temporary state, as in *Jamal is eating*; *Molly was being silly*.

**Pronoun:** A word that substitutes for a nominal, as in *Sam tried to stop laughing, but he couldn't do it*. Types of pronouns include demonstrative pronouns (*this, these, that, those*), personal pronouns (*I, me, it, you, etc.*), indefinite pronouns (*every, everyone, many, any, etc.*), relative pronouns (*who, that, which*), and reflexive pronouns (*myself, yourself, himself, etc.*).

**Pronoun-antecedent agreement:** The matching of the number (whether singular or plural) of the pronoun to the number of its antecedent: *The boys did their chores*; *Each girl did her best*.

**Qualifier:** A structure-class word that qualifies or intensifies adjectives and adverbs, as in *We worked very hard*; *Joan was slightly annoyed*; *It's much colder today*.

**Regular verb:** A verb that forms the past tense and past participle by the addition of *-ed* (or, in a few cases, *-d* or *-t*) to the base form: *Yesterday, he walked to school*; *Maria has walked all the way*. See also **Irregular verb**.

**Relative clause:** A clause introduced by a relative pronoun (*who, which, that*) or a relative adverb (*when, where, why*) that generally functions as an adjectival, as in *The book that you wanted has arrived*; *The area where I live is densely populated*. The broad reference *which* clause functions as a sentence modifier: *John bought a gas-guzzler, which surprised me*. See also **Subordinate clause**.

**Relative pronoun:** The pronouns *who, whose, whom, that, and which*, used to introduce relative clauses: *The boy who lives here is named Jorge*.

**Restrictive modifier:** A modifier—a word, phrase, or clause—in the noun phrase that restricts and identifies the meaning of the noun. It is not set off by commas: *Homer's epic poem The Odyssey is a great book to teach*; *The chair that you just sat on is broken*. See also **Nonrestrictive modifier**.

**Rhetoric:** The aspects of language use and organization that make it effective and persuasive for an audience; the study of those aspects.

**Run-on sentence:** Two independent clauses with no punctuation between them, as in *Juana went home she has a doctor's appointment for her son*.

**Semantics:** Meaning in language; the study of meaning in language.

**Sentence modifier:** A word, phrase, or clause that modifies the sentence as a whole, rather than a particular structure within it. It is sometimes called

a free modifier: *Ironically, the other team won; In an ironic turn of events, the other team won.*

**Simple sentence:** A sentence consisting of a single independent clause, as in *Computers can be frustrating.* See also **Complex sentence; Compound sentence; Compound-complex sentence.**

**Structure-class words:** The classes of words that show the grammatical or structural relationships between form-class words. The major structure classes are conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliaries, determiners, qualifiers, interrogatives, and expletives. New structure-class words appear rarely and for this reason they are referred to as *closed classes*. See also **Form-class words.**

**Subject:** The opening position in the basic structure of a sentence, filled by a noun phrase or other nominal that functions as the topic of the sentence, as in *This old upright piano still sounds beautiful.* See also **Predicate.**

**Subject complement:** The nominal or adjectival that follows a linking verb and renames or modifies the sentence subject: *Charleston, South Carolina, is a beautiful city.* See also **Predicate adjective; Predicate nominative.**

**Subjective case:** The role of a noun phrase or a pronoun when it functions as the subject of a clause. Personal pronouns have distinctive forms for subjective case: *I, he, she, we, they.* For example, *She and Tom are happy.*

**Subject-verb agreement:** The matching of the number and person of the subject to the form of the verb. When the subject is third-person singular and the verb is in the present tense, the verb takes the *-s* inflection, as in *The dog barks all night. He bothers the neighbors.* With other subjects and in other tenses, verbs (with the exception of *be*) do not change to match the number or person of the subject: *I sleep; we sleep; he slept; they slept.*

**Subordinate clause:** A dependent clause introduced by a subordinating conjunction such as *if, since, because, and although.* Subordinate clauses are usually adverbial: *We left because it was getting late.* See also **Dependent clause.**

**Subordinating conjunction:** A conjunction that introduces a subordinate clause. Among the most common, both simple and compound, are *after, although, as long as, because, before, if, since, so that, provided that, though, until, when, whenever, and while.*

**Suffix:** A meaningful unit added to the end of a word to change its class (*laugh—laughable*), its function (*eat—eating*), or its meaning (*dog—dogs*). See also **Affix; Prefix.**

**Syntax:** The structure and arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses in sentences; the study of this topic.

**Transitive verb:** A verb that requires a direct object as its complement to be complete, as in *He drove the car.* Many verbs can be either transitive or

intransitive: *Charles drove*. Most transitive verbs can be made passive: *The car was driven by Charles*. See also **Intransitive verb**; **Passive voice**.

**Verb:** A form-class word that names an action, process, event, or state; that can always take both *-s* and *-ing* endings; and that can be signaled by auxiliary verbs: *It goes*; *She is going*; *We should go*.

**Verbal:** Another term given to nonfinite verbs—participles, gerunds, and infinitives—when their function is other than that of main verb: as adjectivals, adverbials, or nominals.

**Verb phrase:** A verb together with its auxiliaries, modifiers, and complements. The predicate of the sentence is a verb phrase, as in *He left all his belongings, including his guitar, in the house*. The term is sometimes used more narrowly to refer to just the main verb and its auxiliaries. See also **Main verb string**.