

Verbs: Lesson #1

Some definitions to consider

Definition #1:

- A verb is an action word. It shows the action in the sentence.

Source: Sr. Mary Agatha, St. Gabriel's Catholic School, 1968.

Definition #2

- A verb is the central unit of any sentence or clause, and all the other words in a sentence take grammatical form based on how they relate to it. A verb can express action (*run, live, change*), or states of being (*is, are*) or occurrences (*happen, become*). Sentences can have more than one verb. A clause is a sub-unit of a sentence that has one verb.

Source: The Brief Thomson Handbook (sec. 30c)

Definition #3

- A verb is a word that characteristically is the grammatical center of a predicate and expresses an act, occurrence, or mode of being, that in various languages is inflected for agreement with the subject, for tense, for voice, for mood, or for aspect, and that typically has rather full descriptive meaning and characterizing quality but is sometimes nearly devoid of these especially when used as an auxiliary or linking verb.

Source: www.merriamwebster.com

Definition #4

- A definition which works is one based on structure and function rather than meaning. Some structural and functional properties of verbs are:
 1. If tense is marked anywhere in the clause it is marked on a verb, the first verb in the verb phrase.
 2. If aspect is marked anywhere in the clause, it is marked on (and with) a verb.
 3. In the present tense in a finite clause, the first verb in the verb phrase marks agreement with the subject in person and in number.

Definition #4: continued

4. Verbs occur in two main subclasses: auxiliary and lexical (main) verbs. The order of these auxiliaries and the main verb is fixed.
5. Only verbs can be operators. An operator precedes the subject in a yes-no question and immediately precedes the negative “not” and can contract with the negative “not.”

Source: Lynn Gordon: Engl 255 Textbook

Differences in Definitions

Some definitions stress meaning.

These definitions often leave people confused.

What are the actions in these sentences?

His reaction is wonderful.

Her understanding seemed clear.

Some definitions stress structure and function. These definitions provide ways to test words to see if they are verbs. They require evidence to prove that words are verbs. These tests can be challenging to learn, but produce consistently reliable results.

For example, we can test the words in this sentence to see if they can be changed into the past tense.

His reaction is wonderful.

- His (hised?)
- Reaction (reactioned?)
- Is (was)
- Wonderfuled?

Test result: “Is” must be the verb in this sentence.

Inflection and Verb Form

Inflections

- One property of verbs is that they *inflect*. *Inflection* means they change form. So let's start by looking at what we mean by the "forms" of the verb.

The Base Form

- All English verbs start with a “base” form. This is the form you look up to learn about the verb in the dictionary. If you look up one of the other forms, you will be referred back to the base form. The base form is always uninflected, because it hasn't been changed.

Finding the Base Form

- If you aren't around a dictionary, you can always figure out the base form by filling in a verb in sentences like ONE of these:

EXAMPLE:

I really like to _____ (other words).

I really like to swim.

I really like to be (silly).

I really like to stab (the wet ground with a pitch fork). OR

That _____ frequently.

That happens frequently.

That occurs frequently.

The infinitive form

- The infinitive form of the verb is formed by adding “to” in front of the base form. The infinitive form is not an inflected form of the verb, since no change happens to the actual form of the verb.

EXAMPLES:

to have; to be; to do; to imply; to run

The -s form

- This is the form of the verb used to form the third person singular in the present tense. In English, this is most commonly formed by simply adding “s” or “es”, but there are spelling exceptions:

EXAMPLES:

have>>has; do>>does; imply>>implies

Dictionary/Language Note:

- Most dictionaries, including online ones, will mark exceptions to form rules.
- Whenever a verb form is slightly different than the general pattern (in other words there is an exception to the form rule), the verb or the form is called *irregular*.

The -ing participle form

- This form is produced by adding -ing to the base. Again, there are sometimes spelling changes in the base (usually dropped final “e” or doubling of the final consonant).

EXAMPLES:

do > doing; have > having; go > going;
be > being; write > writing; cut > cutting.

The past tense form

- This is the form used to create the past tense of the verb. In English many, but not all, verbs are formed by adding “d” or “ed” to the base form. There are numerous exceptions. And some verbs have two past tense forms!

EXAMPLES:

walk> walked; go> went; have> had; see> saw;
cut> cut; reject> rejected.

More on the past tense form

To figure out the past tense form of a verb, inflect the base form in a sentence with a past tense adverb:

Example: Yesterday, the man _____(other words)

(sleep; murder; have; reply; blow)

Yesterday, the man slept.

Yesterday, the man murdered (his best friend). OR

Yesterday, it _____.

Yesterday it happened.

The Past Participle Form

- For many, (but sadly not all), verbs the past tense form and the past participle form are the same form.

EXAMPLES:

Walk > walked (past tense form) > walked (past participle form);

Run > ran (past tense form) > run (past participle form).

Some important differences --

The past tense form is used by itself to express the past tense.

I walked a mile yesterday.

The past participle form is used with other verbs (called auxiliaries) to form perfect aspect or passive.

I have walked ten miles. The dog was walked by his owner.

Figuring out the past participle

- You can always figure out the past participle of the verb by moving the base form through a sentence with a form of the auxiliary verb “have.”

EXAMPLE:

The man has _____ (other words).

(buy) The man has bought (a gift).

(die) The man has died.

The accident has _____.

(happen) The accident has happened.

One wildly irregular verb: BE

You are going to hear a lot about the verb “be” (base form), which is sometimes called the verb “to be” (infinitive form). This verb is wildly irregular in English, and before we go on, it’s worth looking at it carefully.

The forms of “be”

- Base form: be
- Infinitive form: to be
- “s” form: is
- -ing participle form: being
- Past tense form: was/were (depending on subject)
- Past participle form: been (pronounced as “bin.”)

Editing for Verbs

People everywhere have trouble with verb forms, in part because English has so many irregular verb forms.

Common editing symbols for verb form problems are: **V, vb, and vb form.**

Exercise

- Look at the following sentences. Identify ALL the verbs in these sentences and determine if the verb forms are correct. If not, what verb form should be used?

Sentences

- 1. Mary had went to Florida for vacation with her friends.
- 2. The flight really shaked her up.
- 3. The plane dove into a spin.
- 4. The pilot fought for control of the plane.
- 5. The passengers cried loudly in their seats.
- 6. The stewardess strode towards the cockpit with a bottle of aspirin!
- 7. In Florida, Mary booked a return trip via train.