

Introduction to Sentence Patterns

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Summary: Reviews sentence patterns as defined by Martha Kolln in *Rhetorical Grammar*.

Learning Objectives: To identify sentence patterns. To gain or increase knowledge of parts of speech.

Martha Kolln's book *Rhetorical Grammar* lays out seven basic sentence patterns. Being able to recognize a variety of sentence patterns enhances your ability to *use* those patterns in your own writing and to understand better how grammar functions. Plus, with an understanding of the most elemental structures, you will more easily be able to experiment with word-order variations, inversions, sentence combinations, and other writing techniques.

In the following pages, we review these basic sentence patterns, primarily to review both sentence structure and the elemental word forms that help build sentences.

Each sentence pattern appears on its own page (with a test your knowledge section) for ease of reference. A glossary that contains terms used throughout the document appears below.

Glossary

Adjective – a word that modifies a noun.

Adverbial – any structure that functions as an adverb does: as a modifier of a verb, adjective, or other adverb.

Direct Object – a noun in the predicate following a transitive verb; it names the objective or receiver of the verb's action.

Indirect object – a noun in the predicate following a transitive verb; it names the recipient of the direct object.

Intransitive verb – an action verb that requires no complement.

Linking verb – a verb that requires a subjective complement to be complete.

Noun phrase – a noun headword (Ex. "boy" in "the boy") with all of its attendant pre- and post-noun modifiers.

Object complement – an adjective/adjective phrase or noun/noun phrase that completes the idea of the verb and modifies or renames the direct object.

Subject complement – the nominal or adjectival that follows a linking verb, renaming or describing the subject.

Transitive verb – action verbs that require at least one complement (a direct object) to be complete.



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Sentence Pattern 1: The **Be** Patterns (Type 1)

Let's look first at two "Be" patterns, as Kolln names them.

Below is the pattern:

<u>Slot 1</u>	<u>Slot 2</u>	<u>Slot 3</u>
Subject	Be Verb	Adverbial (Time or Place)
California	is	in the West U.S.

A subject fills Slot 1. The **subject** of a sentence is a noun phrase that functions as the topic of the sentence. Examples include *He is . . .*, *The kids are . . .*, *Swimming is . . .*, and *To live is . . .*

A *be* verb fills Slot 2. A **be verb** is any verb form of *be*, such as *is*, *are*, *was*, or *will be*.

Finally, an adverbial fills Slot 3. An **adverbial** is a structure (word, phrase, or clause) that modifies a verb, adjective, or another adverb; it can describe the *when*, *where*, *why*, or *how* of the word it modifies. In this sentence pattern, the main **adverbial** always modifies the *be* verb. Examples include *at the mall* (place) and *before the conference* (time).

The adverbial in this pattern describes the location of California. The modifying phrase clearly fulfills the *where* function of an adverb. In the next pattern we'll be looking at how to construct sentences with modifiers that describe the subject rather than the verb.

Test Your Knowledge

In the sentences below, label each part of the sentence based on the terms used above:

1. The performance will be next month.
2. Your teacher is on this campus.
3. For a short respite was Michael's only hope.

Answers

1. The performance (subject) will be (*be* verb) next month (adverbial telling when).
2. Your teacher (subject) is (*be* verb) on this campus (adverbial telling when).
3. For a short respite (adverbial) was (*be* verb) Michael's only hope (subject).
This sentence is inverted; normally it would read "Michael's only hope was for a short respite."



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Sentence Pattern 2: The **Be** Patterns, (Type 2)

The second sentence pattern from Martha Kolln's *Rhetorical Grammar* involves *be* verbs again. This time, instead of adverbials, we'll learn about subject modifiers.

Subject modifiers, or **subject complements**, explain or rename *what* the subject is.

<u>Slot 1</u>	<u>Slot 2</u>	<u>Slot 3</u>
Subject	Be Verb	Subject Complement
Michael	was	an Olympic gold medalist. (<i>Noun phrase</i>)
That dog	is being	silly. (<i>Adjective</i>)

A subject fills Slot 1. The **subject** of a sentence fills the opening slot of the sentence as a noun phrase or nominal structure that functions as the topic of the sentence.

A *be* verb fills Slot 2. A **be verb** is any verb form of *be*, such as *is*, *are*, *was*, or *will be*.

Finally, a subject complement fills Slot 3. A **subject complement** is the noun phrase or adjective that follows the linking verb. The subject complement renames (noun) or describes (adjective) the subject. Examples include *referee* (noun) and *openly cynical* (adjective phrase).

In the first example above, the noun phrase subject complement refers back to the subject, stating *what* Michael was. For example, in the sentence "Mrs. Balensiefen is *my teacher*," the noun phrase *my teacher* tells us what Mrs. Balensiefen is, just as in the reverse, "My teacher is Mrs. Balensiefen," the noun (a name) tells us who is the *teacher* of the subject position.

In the second example, the adjectival subject complement, *silly*, modifies the noun *dog*, describing a characteristic belonging to the dog at that moment. Other examples can include any adjective or adjectival, such as "That field of grass is not very green."

Test Your Knowledge

Use the cues to finish each sentence with the specified type of subject complement:

1. Will you be (noun phrase)?
2. Shakespeare's writing was (adjective)!
3. Joshua isn't being (noun phrase).

Answers (will vary)

1. Will you be *my lab partner*?
2. Shakespeare's writing was *ingenious*!
3. Joshua isn't being *an obedient child*.



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Sentence Pattern 3: The Linking Verb Pattern

The third sentence pattern from Martha Kolln's book *Rhetorical Grammar* uses linking verbs other than *be* and a subject complement. Remember that **subject complements** explain or rename *what* the subject is.

Slot 1	Slot 2	Slot 3
Subject	Linking Verb	Subject Complement
The lake	appears	calm. (<i>Adjective</i>)
Kara	became	a teacher. (<i>Noun Phrase</i>)

After the sentence's subject, a linking verb fills Slot 2. A **linking verb** is typically a verb "of the senses," according to Kolln: *taste, smell, feel, sound, and look*. Other common linking verbs include *become, remain, seem, appear, and prove*. Kolln prefers to distinguish these "other" linking verbs from *be* verbs, since *be* verbs do not have the restriction of connecting the subject to a subject complement (remember, *be* verbs can be followed by an adverbial instead of a subject complement). **The linking verbs discussed here always tie the subject to its adjective or noun phrase complement.**

A subject complement fills Slot 3. Remember that a **subject complement** is the noun phrase or adjective that follows a linking verb, renaming or describing the subject. In the first example, the adjective describes a quality the exam "appears" to have. In the second example, the noun phrase renames Karalyn as what she becomes; similarly, Karalyn could be said to rename the noun "teacher."

Test Your Knowledge

Select a linking verb for each of the following sentences (as opposed to a *be* verb):

1. Making a gourmet meal (*is, seems*) too time-consuming.
2. The mark (*looked, was*) distinct, like a fingerprint.
3. Don't (*become, be*) a cynic; they're no fun.

Answers (will vary)

1. Making a gourmet meal *seems* too time-consuming.
2. The mark *looked* distinct, like a fingerprint.
3. Don't *become* a cynic; they're no fun.



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Sentence Pattern 4: The Intransitive Verb Pattern

The fourth sentence pattern from Martha Kolln's book *Rhetorical Grammar* involves only two components: a subject and an intransitive verb. **An intransitive verb is an action verb that requires no complement.** In other words, the verb can stand alone.

<u>Slot 1</u>	<u>Slot 2</u>
Subject	Intransitive Verb
The camera battery	died.
Audiences	laugh.

Note that the action verbs in the examples, *died* and *laugh* can stand alone. They could certainly be accompanied by modifiers, too. For instance, the battery could have *died suddenly* or audiences could *laugh at the joke*. The adverb *suddenly* and the prepositional phrase *at the joke* both function as **adverbials** modifying the verbs they follow. Therefore, this sentence pattern allows you to construct brief sentences, then expand upon them by adding details in the form of **adverbials**.

Test Your Knowledge

State whether the verbs below are intransitive. Determine whether or not they can stand alone by inserting a subject and asking if any more information is necessary to complete the sentence.

Walk

Play

Depart

Respect

Select

Stand

Give

Scream

Answers

Walk (Intransitive)

Play (Intransitive)

Depart (Intransitive)

Respect (Transitive – needs more info)

Select (Transitive – needs more info)

Stand (Intransitive)

Give (Transitive – needs more info)

Scream (Intransitive)



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Sentence Pattern 5: The Basic Transitive Verb Pattern

The fifth sentence pattern from *Rhetorical Grammar* employs a different kind of verb. Rather than intransitive, this pattern uses **transitive** verbs, which *must* be followed by a **direct object**. A **direct object** is the person or thing receiving the action of the verb. Note that transitive verbs can also, of course, be accompanied by modifiers just as intransitive verbs can.

<u>Slot 1</u>	<u>Slot 2</u>	<u>Slot 3</u>
Subject	Transitive Verb	Direct Object
Joey	spoiled	his niece Rachel.
Our secretary	distributes	our weekly timesheets.

In the first example, the verb *spoiled* implies that there must be someone whom Joey spoiled; in other words, someone must have been affected by his action. Similarly, the second example uses the verb *distributes*. If there were no direct object following this verb, it would be unclear what the significance of the secretary's action is.

One useful characteristic of transitive verb patterns is that sentences with transitive verbs can be turned into passive sentences. That is, the direct object becomes the subject, while the subject—the “doer”—is typically relegated to a prepositional phrase at the end of the sentence. This transformation allows the writer to de-emphasize the doer and emphasize what is done and to whom.

Ex. His niece Rachel *was spoiled* by Joey.

Ex. Our weekly timesheets *were distributed* by our secretary.

Both examples place the receiver of the action at the sentence's beginning, thus accentuating the verbs directly after these subjects. Because the subjects are now contained within adverbials (both in prepositional phrases beginning with *by*), they are now optional modifiers and can easily be omitted. Omitting the doer can be useful if you want to keep from “pointing a finger” at someone.

Test Your Knowledge

Determine whether the verbs below are transitive or intransitive. If a verb is intransitive, complete the sentence with a period. If a verb is transitive, complete the sentence by adding on a direct object.

1. Maggie *contacted*
2. That novel *completes*
3. The ground *shook*

Answers (will vary)

1. Maggie *contacted* (transitive) *her pharmacist*.
2. That novel *completes* (transitive) *my collection*.
3. The ground *shook* (intransitive).



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Sentence Pattern 6: The Transitive Verb + Two Complements, (Type 1)

Kolln's sixth sentence pattern also uses transitive verbs. However, in this pattern, the verb is followed by a **direct object** and an **indirect object**. An **indirect object** is a noun or noun phrase that assumes an intermediary role in the action being described in a sentence or, to put this another way, an object that is affected indirectly by the verb.

Subject	Transitive Verb	Indirect Object (IO)	Direct Object (DO)
The sight of Big Ben	gave	me	goosebumps.
Nurse Baggins	handed	the child	a turquoise crayon.

How do you distinguish between a direct and an indirect object? If you can reconstruct the sentence so that there is an object being transferred *to* or *for* someone, then that someone is the indirect object. For example, with the sentence "Vince did us a huge favor," we can make the sentence "Vince did a favor *for* us." Or with the sentence "I read Charlotte a story," we can make "I read a story *to* Charlotte." In each case, the prepositions *for* and *to* indicate that there is something being transferred to a receiver. That receiver is the indirect object in a Pattern 6 sentence. Notice the order—the indirect object precedes the direct object.

Test Your Knowledge

In the sentences below, identify the indirect objects (IO) and direct objects (DO):

1. David handed Terrance the ball when they were done playing catch.
2. Give Cindy the notice once she leaves the meeting.
3. Do scientists really administer animals human medicines for official testing?

Answers

1. David handed *Terrance* (IO) *the ball* (DO) when they were done playing catch.
2. Give *Cindy* (IO) *the notice* (DO) once she leaves the meeting.
3. Do scientists really administer *animals* (IO) *human medicines* (DO) for lab testing?



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Sentence Pattern 7: The Transitive Verb + Two Complements, (Type 2)

The seventh sentence pattern from Kolln's book again uses a transitive verb, which requires a direct object to receive the action, as well as an **object complement** to modify or rename that object. Kolln compares this sentence pattern to her second, which similarly includes a subject and subject complement (Pattern 2 Ex. *The amount is insignificant*).

<u>Slot 1</u>	<u>Slot 2</u>	<u>Slot 3</u>	<u>Slot 4</u>
Subject	Transitive Verb	Direct Object	Object Complement
My mom	calls	me	a klutz. (<i>Noun phrase</i>)
Darcy	considered	Jane	indifferent. (<i>Adjective</i>)

The key to understanding this sentence pattern is to remember that a verb like *considered*, or *feared* from the example in the paragraph above, includes the understood phrase “to be” directly after itself (Ex. “feared his house *to be* destroyed...”). Kolln argues that omitting “to be” in this sentence pattern more effectively emphasizes direct object complements (versus placing more stress on the direct object when “to be” is used). It also eliminates awkward wording.

Test Your Knowledge

In the sentences below, identify the direct object (DO) and object complement (OC) of each verb and state whether it is a noun that renames or adjective that modifies the object.

1. The baker made the bread too chewy.
2. We elected him class president because of his speech.
3. The jury found him “not guilty” of murder in the first degree.

Answers

1. The baker made *the bread* (DO) *too chewy* (OC, adjective phrase).
2. We elected *him* (DO) *class president* (OC, noun phrase) because of his speech.
3. The jury found *the defendant* (DO) “*not guilty*” (OC, adjective) of murder in the first degree.

References

Kolln, M. (1999). *Rhetorical grammar: Grammatical choices, rhetorical effects* (3rd Ed.).

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