

Grammar Preview 3: Verbs

This preview of basic grammar covers the following: how to determine which words in a sentence are verbs. At the end of the preview we'll practice identifying verb forms in English sentences. To understand the grammar we're discussing in this preview, you must be able to identify the adjectives, prepositions, and especially the nouns in a sentence. If you are uncertain about your ability to do this, please watch the two grammar preview presentations preceding this one.

The Basic Grammar of Verbs. Verbs — I'm going to color verbs a really annoying bright green throughout this presentation so they'll really jump out at you — verbs are words that show action, like “run, jump, sit, play, come, act, go, blow, wait, watch, wiggle,” and English has thousands upon thousands more. The main verb in a sentence is the word which represents the sentence's central action, but sentences can and often do contain more than one verb form, sometimes even more than one main verb, as you're about to discover.

When trying to determine which word or words in a sentence are verbs, you should look for two features. First, can you change the tense or timeframe of the word? Can you, for instance, make it happen in the past, or the future? If you can, it's a verb because only verbs can change tense, that is, when they happen. The principal way English changes tense with verbs is by adding tense-markers like “have, did” — those make the verb past-tense — or “will” — “will” makes it future-tense — so if you have a word like “run,” try adding “have, did” and ask yourself if “have run” or “did run” makes sense. Does it? Yes, of course, it does. Can you make “run” future? Is it possible to say “will run”? Sure. That's because “run” is a verb. But a noun like — I don't know — “celery” can't change tense. “I did celery that”? Or maybe someday in the future “I will celery that”? Nope, it's just not possible to go “celery-ing.” Ever. Second, here's another feature unique to verbs in English. They can be replaced by “do, does, did, (have) done.” The English word “do” is a sort of “pro-verb.” It replaces verbs the same way pronouns replace nouns. In other words, just as you can substitute “it” for a noun like “celery” — I like celery; I like *it* — you can replace most verbs with a form of “do.” For instance, “I ate the celery” can also be expressed as “I did (it).” If “did” can replace “ate,” then “ate” must be a verb, a verb that makes sense as long as you're in a context where your reader or listener understands that “did (it)” means “ate (the celery).”

So, the upshot is there are two tests to see if an English word is a verb. One, if you can put tense-markers like “have, did, will” in front of it and it makes sense, it has to be a verb. “Will go” or “did go” makes sense, because “go” is a verb. “Will cucumber” doesn't make sense because “cucumber” is a noun, and nouns don't change tense. Two, can you replace the word with some form of “do”? “Obey” is a verb, so you can replace “I obey” with “I do,” as long as it's understood that “doing” means “obeying” in the context of the sentence. But “futile” in the sentence “Resistance is futile” cannot be replaced by “do” — “Resistance is do”? That is incorrect and makes no sense! — because “futile” is an adjective and “do” can't replace an adjective, only a verb. As with the tests for nouns and adjectives which we discussed in the first grammar preview, both these tests for verbs won't always work with every verb; however, one of them will almost invariably.

There is one other thing to note about verbs that may help you identify them in a sentence. English verbs often have “helping words” in front of them. “Helping words” include tense-markers, as we just noted — “will, did, have, had” — but they can also include other kinds of markers like “not, might, would, could, must.” These can also serve as simple, straightforward indicators that a word is a verb. But where “helping words” can be quite helpful in identifying verbs, the endings you’ll find on a lot of verbs won’t be, endings like *-ing*, or *-ed*, as in “he is *working*, he *worked*.” Though these endings are attached to a verb here (“work”), they have multiple uses in English and can signal that a word is a noun or an adjective as well, so they’re not very helpful when you’re trying to make basic distinctions between parts of speech. Therefore, in this lesson it’s best for you just to forget endings like *-ing*, or *-ed* when you’re trying to determine whether a word is a verb or not, and instead simply test the base of the word, for example, “work” instead of “worked, working.” For that reason, as we go about identifying verbs in sentences and paragraphs below, we’ll remove any *-ing* or *-ed* ending before we test to see if a word is a verb.

Here is a sentence, and if it’s a full sentence (which it is), it has a verb, but let’s not start by looking for the verb. Not yet. Let’s start with what you already know, how to determine which words are the nouns and adjectives in a sentence. If you take them out of the mix, it will be much easier to see which words are the verbs, for the simple reason you’ll remove from consideration half or more of the possibilities. So what are the nouns in this sentence? Which words are plural or can be pluralized with *-s*? Do any of them have — or can they have? — “the, a” in front of them? Can any of them be replaced with a pronoun like “they” or “it”? Those are the tests for nouns we outlined in the first grammar preview. Which words in this sentence pass any or all of those tests? What’s the first noun here? Good! “Romans”! It’s plural, it’s got “the” in front of it, and you could use “they” instead. Is there another noun in this sentence? How about “world”? You could say “worlds,” it also has “the” in front of it, and you could replace it with “it.” Those are obviously both nouns and I’ve colored them red the way we do with nouns.

But wait! What’s in between the “the’s” and the nouns? Yes, modifiers! Adjectives! “Ancient (Romans)” and “Mediterranean (world).” Clearly, both “ancient” and “Mediterranean” modify — i.e. delimit the possibilities of — the nouns they’re attached to. In other words, we’re talking about only the ancient Romans, not modern Romans, and only the Mediterranean world, not the whole world. For that reason, I’ve colored “ancient” and “Mediterranean” orange per our usual practice with adjectives.

Now, what’s left in this sentence? I see two articles (“the, the”), two adjectives (“ancient, Mediterranean”), and two nouns (“Romans, world”). That accounts for six of the seven words total in this sentence, which means the only word left has to be the verb, because full sentences have to have main verbs. So “conquered” must be a verb, but let’s test it anyway. Can you make “conquered” future-tense? [Remember to use the base word, “conquer.”] Can you say “will conquer”? Sure, that makes sense. What about the “do” rule? Can you substitute a form of “do”? Bear in mind you might have to put “do” in the appropriate tense for this context. That is, use “did” or “done” or some other form of “do.” So in place of “The ancient Romans conquered . . .,” can you say “The ancient Romans did (it)?” Sure! As long as you’re in a context where it’s clear that “did” means “conquered,” not “ate celery” or something. So “conquered” is a verb. Let’s tint it tainted green and try another sentence.

“Would sensible people in pre-Roman times have ever guessed that Rome would one day rule the whole Italian peninsula?” A somewhat longer thought, and thus a bit more complicated — well, at first sight at least — but the tests for verbs are simple and they don’t change, so don’t let the length of the sentence confuse you. Keep your focus and apply the simple tests for verbs to each word one by one. And let’s start the analysis here the same way we did in the last sentence, by determining which words are nouns. I’ll give you a hint: there are five nouns in this sentence. Can you find them all? Pause the presentation, run the noun-tests (plural, pronoun, “the/a”) and then start the presentation again to see if your answers are right. Done? Here are the nouns in this sentence: “people, times, Rome, day, peninsula.” All these words are or can be pluralized. All of them either have or could have “the” in front of them and/or be changed out for a pronoun.

Now, which words are adjectives? Remember: you have to have a noun to have an adjective, so look in front of the nouns which is where English adjectives tend to come. Remember, too, that one noun can have more than one stupid, silly, dumb adjective. Annoying, irksome and vile, isn’t it? And hint: there are five adjectives here, too. Pause the presentation, and I’ll be waiting here when you’re done. Okay, got them? “Sensible, pre-Roman, one, whole, Italian,” all of them right in front of their nouns, each modifying the noun it goes with.

So taking out ten words which are nouns or adjectives and thus can’t be verbs by definition cuts in half the possibilities for which words are verbs. That’s a good thing, yeah? Now apply the verb-tests (tense and “do”) to the remaining words to see which ones are verbs? Which words in this sentence can change tense? Can you, for instance, add “will” to “would”? “Will would”? No. “In”? That we already know is a preposition. We learned about prepositions like “in” in the last grammar preview. So if it’s a preposition, it can’t also be a verb. No green for “in”! What about “guessed.” Remember, look at the base word only, not “guessed” but “guess.” Can you say “will guess”? Sure. Can you say “have guessed”? I guess so because that’s exactly what this sentence says: “have ever guessed”! And it has “would” in front of it too, which is another “helper word” often attached to verbs. So if you can attach a tense-marker (“have”) and a helper word (“would”) to “guess,” then I guess it has to be a verb. But before greening it, let’s apply the other test too, just for practice. Can you replace “guess” with a form of “do”? “Have ever done (it)”? Sure you can, as long as the listener understands that “have done (it)” means “guessed.” “Guessed” is definitely a verb. Paint that “guess” green. Any other verbs here? Neither “ever” nor “that” can be verbs. “Will ever”? “Will that”? Don’t think so. “Would” we already decided can’t take “will,” so the only big word left in this sentence is “ruled.” Can you say “will rule”? “Have ruled”? Seems fine to me. Can you replace “rule” with “do”? “... would one day do (this) ...”? Sure. And note that “rule” has “would” in front of it and “would” is a helping word often seen with verbs. That’s three verb-y things that “rule” does. Case closed. “Rule” is a verb. Green it!

Ready to go mainstream and do a whole paragraph? Oh come on, sure you are! Here goes! [The early Romans ousted foreign kings and established a representative government led by executive officers and a legislative assembly of elders called the Senate. This state was not as democratic as it seems, because the only people who got a permanent seat in the Roman Senate had great wealth.] Start as we’ve been doing throughout this preview. Pause the presentation and find the nouns and adjectives in this passage first. I’ll tell you this much: there are twelve nouns and

eleven adjectives here. Finding them, you will remove almost half of the words from consideration as verbs, which will make identifying the verbs just that much easier. [If you did the first grammar preview, you'll recognize this passage and that will, no doubt, speed things along for you. If you didn't and you have trouble determining which words are nouns and adjectives here, please go back and review that grammar preview presentation (the first one) and learn how to identify nouns and adjectives.] So hit pause now and restart the presentation when you're done digging twelve nouns and eleven adjectives out of this paragraph. Alright, you got them all in your muddy hands? Here they are, in raging red and organic orange.

Now let's look for the verbs among the words that are left. Start at the top. "The"? That's not a verb. That's the English article. Forget that. Next word? "Ousted"? Using only the base word ("oust"), can you make it future? "Will oust"? Sure. Can you use "do" to replace it? "The early Romans did (oust)," meaning "they ousted their kings." Yep. "Oust" is a verb. "And"? ... Is a conjunction. You can't "will and" something, so what about "established"? Remember: use "establish," the base form of the word, not "established." Can you say "will establish"? "Did (establish it)"? Yes. So you can change the tense of "establish" and replace it with a form of "do." "Establish" must be a verb. Next? "Led." "Will lead"? "Did (lead it)"? Yep. Both tests work. "Led" is a verb. Are you seeing how to do this? Okay then, filthy fingers, you tell me which words in the rest of this passage are verbs. Pause the presentation again and run the tests. Go! Okay, you're back so you must know what the next verb after "led" is. What is it? Yes, "called." "Will call, did (call it)." Next verb? "Was"! That's a tough one because it looks like a small word, a conjunction or preposition perhaps, but it passes muster as a verb. You can say "will be" — "be" and "was" are two forms of the same verb — so if you can change the word's tense, it's a verb. Is there another verb here? Sure enough! "Seems." "Will seem, did seem." "As it does (seem)." Any more verbs? Yes, "got"! "Will get, who did (get)." And that's it, right? No, wait, what about "had"? Small word, super-simple form, but is it a verb? "Will have"? "... the only people ... did (have it)," i.e. "they had wealth"? "Had" passes both tests. It must be a verb. That makes eight verbs in this passage.

Want to try another paragraph? Sure you do! [Extended families of aristocratic extraction called *gentes* maintained absolute control over Rome throughout its early "Republican" history, a situation that lasted a half millennium until two such families, the Julians and the Claudians, established themselves as sole rulers in the first century, giving rise to the Roman "Empire."] Start with the nouns and adjectives. There are fifteen nouns and ten adjectives. [As before, if you did the first grammar preview, you'll recognize this passage too, which will make isolating the nouns and adjectives all that much easier. If you didn't, it'll take you longer. In either case,] I'll see you on the other side of the pause. Okay, here are the nouns and adjectives.

Now find me the first verb. Please. Well, it's not "of," is it? That's a preposition. What about "called"? "Will call"? Okay. "Did (call)"? Yuck. That really doesn't work here, but it would work in a different sentence — in a simpler sentence like "I call," "call" can be replaced by "do" ("I do [call]") so in a different context "call" can pass the do-test — and anyway, a word has to pass only one of the verb tests to be a verb, so the tense-marker test is really all you need. "Called" has to be a verb. Make it green! Next verb? Good! "Maintained." "Will maintain, the families did (maintain it)." Next? "Lasted." Good! Next? "Established." Excellent! Next?

“Giving.” Remember to look at the base word only, “give.” Does “give” pass the verb-tests? Yep. “Will give, does (give it).” Good job!

Here’s another passage: [Instead, they spent their energy waging violent war with other peoples. They gained a reputation as tenacious fighters and developed an impressive system of warfare for a nation their size. They also had a powerful weapon, the legion, a battle formation quite complex for its age and requiring considerable time to learn.] Let’s do the same. Find the nouns and adjectives first. Pause the presentation and I’ll see you on the flip side. Here are the nouns and adjectives in this passage.

What’s the first verb? “Spent.” Then? “Waging.” Next? “Gained.” Next? “Developed.” Next? “Had.” Then? All the way at the bottom, “requiring.” Any more? Yes, one: “learn.” I think you get it now: “think, get”! They’re verbs, right?

So let’s move up to battle speed. The rest of this presentation is a series of passages — seven, in fact — for you to test your ability to identify verbs in English. As before, I’ll give you a passage, then a slide showing the nouns and adjectives in that passage. You figure out which of the remaining words are verbs. Pause the presentation as necessary. When you’ve done enough that you feel confident in your ability to root out all the verbs in a paragraph, please move on to the last grammar preview presentation on subjects and direct objects. *Valete, discipuli!*

[Most battles in the days when Rome was young were fought in long, haphazard lines. The Thebans and later Alexander the Great had brought greater order to military formation, but their contributions consisted of simple innovations, stacking a line at one end or creating a huge block of men.]

[The Roman legion employed a flexible arrangement of men who were organized into sub-groups which could be moved as independent units about the battlefield. This design and the dedication of the Romans to physical might were important contributing factors in making them the conquerors of the Mediterranean world.]

[The greatest triumph that the early Romans achieved was the defeat of Carthage, a rival trading empire in North Africa. This conflict, actually a series of conflicts called the "Punic Wars," was to a large extent fought at sea, forcing the Romans to develop a full navy for the first time in their history.]

[The decisive battles, however, were fought on land, as when the Carthaginian general Hannibal and his elephants invaded Italy and later when the Romans attacked the area around Carthage and were victorious. In the second century (200-100 BCE) the Romans spread into Greece where they came into contact with eastern ways of life.]

[Greek philosophers, poets and playwrights flooded into Rome and began teaching ways of life foreign to the rustic Romans. The invasion of new types of learning led to a cultural crisis in Rome, whether to stand by their traditional, time-tested, conservative "Roman" *mores* or to take up new, exotic, dangerous and delightful "Greek" habits.]

[As time passed, the Romans came to see the Greeks as corrupters who wished to spoil them with outlandish pleasures and with all their oriental double-talk undermine the simple virtues that had once made Rome great. Thus, the fabric of Roman society began to unravel and fray.]

[Worse yet, these ideological struggles in the 100's BCE boiled over into military conflicts in the next century. For the first time in their history, Roman met Roman on the battlefield, and the outcome was nothing less than the destruction of the Republic and the establishment of a more peaceful but at heart autocratic empire.]