

Grammar Preview 4: Subjects and Direct Objects

This preview of basic grammar covers the following: how to determine if a word in a sentence serves as a subject; how to determine if a word serves as a direct object; and at the end of the preview we'll practice identifying subjects and direct objects in sentences. Have you listened to the three grammar preview presentations preceding this one? Can you, for instance, tell which words in a sentence are adjectives or nouns or verbs? Does the color scheme used on this slide look familiar to you? What does coloring a word orange mean, or red, or green? If you're unclear on any of that, it would be a good idea to have a look at the earlier grammar previews.

Subjects. Subjects are always nouns, the noun or nouns in a sentence which do the action represented by the main verb, for example, "*I teach.*" "I" is the subject of the verb "teach," because "I" is doing the action of teaching. Throughout this presentation we'll color subjects purple. "*You will learn.*" "You" is the subject of the verb "learn." The time when the action takes place — in this case, at some point in the future — doesn't matter. "You" is still the subject of the sentence even if the action hasn't happened yet. "*We studied.*" "We" is the doer of "studied," thus the subject of the sentence. Here, the verb is past-tense but that doesn't affect the subject. "We" are still the actors who performed the action of studying even though it happened long ago. "*It isn't.*" "It" is the subject of "isn't." The subject can also be a noun which is said *not* to be doing the action of the verb if the verb is modified by a negator like "not, never, in no way." In other words, subjects can also be the *non*-doers of the verb action if the point of the sentence is to say outright that the subject *didn't* do something, as in "*she cannot forget.*" "She" is the subject of "forget," even when "she" isn't actually forgetting because she can't, according to the sentence. So even if "she" is a non-doer, grammatically she's still the "doer," the subject. One last example: "*they must leave.*" "They" is the subject, in this case, the need-to-doers of the verb action "leave." As you can see from this subject, and "we" in the third example, subjects can be plural, more than one person operating collectively. As plural, subjects can also be compound, for instance, "*You and I are happy.*" "You and I" is a compound subject where two singulars have been put together and add up to a plural, for instance, "*truth and justice will prevail.*" "Truth and justice" is another example of two singulars operating collectively to make a plural subject of the verb "prevail," or they will do at some point in the future. As we noted above, the timeframe of the sentence's action doesn't matter in determining the subject. The timeframe involves only the verb itself.

In every full sentence the main verb has a subject of some sort, be it singular, plural or plural-compound. The same is not true, however, of all types of verbs. Only main verbs have to have subjects. However, other stand-alone verb forms don't. For instance, those ending in "-ing" don't have subjects — if you're listening to this presentation because you're enrolled in one of my Latin or Etymology classes, you can expect a more in-depth discussion of *-ing* forms at some point during the term — but for this presentation and our immediate purposes here, i.e. to determine the subject of a sentence, you can ignore all verb forms ending in "-ing." Also, verb forms with "to" in front of them, such as "to do, to act, to make," very often don't have subjects or their subjects aren't stated explicitly as separate words. So with "-ing" and "to" forms, don't look for subjects.

Now that you know what a subject is, let's address how to identify it in a sentence. Since what subjects do is show who's performing the action of the main verb, to determine the subject you should ask yourself which noun in the sentence is doing (or did or will do) the action of the main verb. That assumes you know what the main verb of the sentence is, so you'll have to figure that out before you can pick out the subject. If identifying verbs is a problem for you, please review the third grammar preview presentation where we discussed verbs. At first in this presentation, we'll use sentences in which the only verb forms are main verbs. That is, no "-ing" or "to" forms, at least not to begin with. So until I tell you otherwise, you can count on all verbs here being main verbs so they will all have subjects.

Let's start with this simple example sentence: "Love will conquer all." The verb here is "conquer." As the only verb in a full sentence, it has to be the main verb. If you want to determine the subject, ask yourself who or what "will conquer (all)." The answer to that question is the subject of the sentence. What's the answer? What will conquer all, according to this sentence? "Love"! "Love" is the subject of this sentence. It's doing the action of conquering. Here's another example: "Nobody doesn't like money." [Or if you know anyone who doesn't, tell them to send me theirs. I hate to see people suffer.] Who doesn't like money? The answer to that question is the subject. And who is it? "Nobody." So "nobody" is the subject of the sentence. Note: even if the subject is negative — and the verb too! — it's still grammatically the subject. Next example: "But who doesn't want both?" Questions are sentences, too, so they have subjects just like any sentence. What's the subject here? Ask yourself who doesn't want both? "Who"! That's right: "who" is the subject! Question words like "who" can be subjects like any noun or pronoun. Indeed, they often are! That's all pretty simple, isn't it? Find the main verb, ask who's doing it — even if the "who" is "who?," or "nobody!" — and that's the subject.

Now let's look at the other half of the grammar in this preview: direct objects. A direct object is any noun which receives the action of a verb, for instance, "I see you." "I" is the subject, "see" is the verb, and "you" is the direct object because "you" is the object of the seeing in this sentence. That is, it's on the receiving end of the seeing that the subject ("I") is doing here. In the same way we've been coloring subjects purple, we'll dye direct objects blue. Here's another example: "You make lots of money." What's the verb here? "Make." Who's doing the making? "You," so that's the subject, and the thing or things that are being made by you are ... what? "Lots (of money)." "Of," you'll recall from the second grammar preview, is a preposition, and its object, the OP here, is "money." So "of money" is a prepositional phrase. If "money" is an OP, it can't also be a direct object. One noun can't do double-duty in a sentence. That's the rule. So you can always rule out an OP like "money" here as direct object. The direct object here is "lots" and "lots" alone. Of course, "lots" and "of money" really mean the same thing when you put them together, but meaning and grammar aren't always exactly the same. Grammatically, these words function in very different ways. So even though they share one meaning, "lots" is the direct object and "of money" is a prepositional phrase.

Next example: "Who can blame me for loving you?" Who is the subject? "Who" is the subject. [I'm not repeating myself. That's the answer! The word "who" is the subject!] "Blame" is the verb, so what's the direct object? Who's receiving the action of the verb? [That is a question!] "Me"! That's the direct object then. So far so good, but watch it! This sentence has another verb form "loving," which has its own direct object, "you." "You" is receiving the action of loving.

[Isn't that nice?] This is the first time we've seen an "-ing" verb form in an example and, just as we noted above, "loving" like many "-ing" forms doesn't have a subject, though, as is amply evident here, it can have a direct object. But let's talk more about that in a moment. First, let's finish talking about direct objects themselves. Please note that, just like subjects, direct objects can be plural or compound. That is, there can be more than one, for example, "We'll have fun and good times together." What will we have? "Fun" and "good times"! Those are two direct objects attached to the same verb "have." There can be three, or twenty, but having too many is usually frowned upon.

About direct objects there are two other important things worth noting. First, not all verbs have direct objects. Because of their meaning, some verbs like "to be" don't ever take a direct object. If you think about it, there is by definition no action built into "to be," no activity that can be directed at an object. "To be" is really the linguistic equivalent of an equals sign (=) in mathematics, a static symbol, which is in essence very different from a plus sign (+) or a minus sign (-) or a times sign (x). All those represent actions that change things — make numbers greater or smaller — but an equals sign like the verb "to be" doesn't change anything. It only says this is this. In that process "this" doesn't change. So verbs like "to be" don't take direct objects because there's no action for an object to receive, no change for anything to undergo. Besides that, some verbs which *can* show action and *can* take direct objects sometimes don't, depending on the context of the sentence. The upshot is, while all main verbs have subjects, there's no type of verb that always has a direct object. Even verbs that can take a direct object don't always have to have one. While you should be constantly on the lookout for direct objects after verbs, don't expect you'll always find one. Second, direct objects and subjects act in opposite ways in another respect. While "-ing" and "to" verb forms most often don't have subjects expressed, both of those verb types can and frequently do take direct objects. Think about it. Neither "doing" nor "to do" have a subject, but you can say "doing" *work* or "to do" *work*. In both cases "work" is the recipient of the action inherent in the verb "do," so it's the direct object.

And now that you know what a direct object is, here's how to identify one in a sentence. Ask yourself which noun is receiving (or received or will receive) the action of a verb or verb form. So, for instance, let's go back to the sentence we just analyzed: "Love will conquer all." "Love," we determined, is the subject. "Conquer" is the verb. So, what or whom will "love conquer"? "All" obviously, meaning "everyone"! So "all" is the direct object. Now what about this sentence? "But everybody needs money." The subject is "everybody," the verb is "needs," and what does "everybody need"? "Money"! "Money" must then be the direct object. "And who doesn't want both?" The subject is "who." [That's not a question. The word "who" is the subject.] The verb is "want," and even though the sentence says "doesn't want," it's still the verb, negative or not. So, what doesn't "everybody want"? "Both"! n Thus, "both" is the direct object. Got it? Good for you!

Now that you know the basic grammar of subjects and direct objects, let's practice identifying them in sentences, beginning with our favorite piece of ancient propaganda: "The ancient Romans conquered the Mediterranean world." What's the verb here? That's right! "Conquered." And what are the two nouns in this sentence? "Romans" (it's plural) and "world" (it's an "it"). What about "ancient" and "Mediterranean"? What part of speech are they? Adjectives, of course, but since adjectives are just modifiers, not things, and thus can't be subjects or direct objects —

nouns are the only part of speech that can function that way — adjectives simply don't matter in terms of what we're discussing here, so henceforth we're going to leave them out of this presentation. The only way adjectives can be even remotely relevant to our purposes here is that identifying them eliminates some words in a sentence from consideration as subjects or direct objects, and if that helps you, do it! But I'm going to stick to identifying only verbs and nouns as we proceed through this lesson. So, back to the sentence. Who conquered? Who did the conquering in this sentence? Who's the doer of the action, the subject? The "Romans"! And what or whom did "the Romans conquer"? The answer to that question is the direct object. "The Romans conquered ... the world." So "world" is the direct object. Got it?

Let's try doing the same in another sentence, one that's a little more complex. "The tiny Roman state ruled the whole Italian peninsula." Now, don't let all the adjectives distract you from your job here! Which words are the nouns and verbs in this sentence? Two nouns, one verb. What are they? Good! "State" and "peninsula" are the nouns — you can pluralize them (states and peninsulas) — and "ruled" is the verb. You can change its tense, make it future, for instance: "will rule." Now what about the subject? What do you ask yourself to determine the subject? Who or what "ruled?" And the answer is ... the "state." That's the subject. Now what's the direct object? What question do you ask yourself to determine the direct object? What or whom did "the Roman state rule"? What received the action of ruling? The "peninsula," of course. See how easy it is!!

Now let's test your understanding with a full paragraph: [The Romans ousted their kings and established a government with executive officers and an assembly of elders. This state was not truly democratic, because the only people with a permanent seat in the Roman Senate had great wealth.] If you did the earlier grammar previews, you'll recognize this passage which will make it easier to figure out the subjects and direct objects. Start by pausing this presentation and identifying the nouns here. Remember only nouns can be subjects or direct objects, so those will be the only candidates for correct answers. I'll give you a hint. There are eleven nouns in this passage. Find them and then restart the presentation. Here are the eleven nouns, marked in red. Got them all right? If not, maybe it's time to go back to the first grammar preview and practice identifying nouns.

Next step: find the verbs in this passage. While verbs can't be subjects or direct objects, they are very important in finding them because every subject and direct object depends on a verb form of some sort. No verb? No subject or direct object! In English, you're most likely to find a subject/s in front of the verb and a direct object/s after it. That's the normal English word order. Look for that. So while the verbs themselves aren't nouns and so they can't be subjects or direct objects, they can and do tell you where to look for subjects and direct objects. Go find the verbs in this passage. There are four. Pause the presentation and, when you've got all four, start it again. And here they are, in garish green.

Now let's look at the first sentence and its verb, "The Romans ousted their kings..." — "ousted" is the verb, right? — and let's ask ourselves the questions that tell us what the subject and direct object are. First, the subject. Who or what "ousted ..."? That is, who was the doer of the ousting? The Romans! So, the "Romans" is the subject. To determine the direct object, ask yourself,

“What or whom did ‘the Romans oust’?” And that is — look at the sentence! — their “kings.” “Kings” must be the direct object. Getting it?

Now let’s look at the next sentence, which is, in fact, part of the first sentence we just did, because the next verb “established” uses the same subject (the “Romans”) as “ousted” does. So we don’t have to determine the subject for “established” — we already have! — all we have to figure out is the direct object. What or whom did “the Romans establish,” according to this sentence? “Government”! So “government” is the direct object of “established.” No more verbs in this first sentence, so no more subjects or direct objects there either. Let’s look for the next verb in the next sentence. What is the next verb? “Was.” Who or what “was”? That is, what is the thing that was? “The state”! So “state” is the subject, right? But look on the other side of “was.” Is there a direct object? No! There can’t be. “Democratic” isn’t a noun. It’s an adjective. Adjectives can’t be direct objects, so “was” must be a verb that doesn’t set up the possibility of a direct object. Indeed, it’s a form of the verb “to be,” as we just discussed above, so no point in looking for a direct object here. You can’t have one with “to be.”

On to the next verb in the next sentence. Well, there’s only one verb left in the whole paragraph, “had” on the bottom line. So, ask yourself who or what “had.” Who is or was doing the having in this sentence? “The only people”! But “only” is only an adjective — it tells you what kind of people — “people” is the noun, and since only nouns can be subjects, “people” must be the subject of “had.” And what did “the people have”? “Great wealth,” which means “wealth” must be the direct object. That wasn’t hard, was it?

Let’s practice that again with another paragraph: [Extended families of aristocratic extraction maintained absolute control over Rome throughout its early "Republican" history. This situation lasted for half a millennium until two such families, the Julians and the Claudians, established sole rule in the first century, giving rise to the Roman "Empire."] Just like before, start by finding all the nouns, i.e. all the potential candidates for subjects and direct objects. Pause the presentation and then check your answers. Oh, okay, you want a hint. There are fourteen nouns. [Haven’t we already found the nouns in this paragraph, back in the first grammar presentation? Oh, well, never mind!] Off you go. Dig up fourteen nouns! Go! Now! Got them? Here they are.

Now find all the verb forms here. Verbs, remember, are very useful in this process, because verbs limit the possible number of subjects and direct objects. [You want another hint? You’re addicted to hints, aren’t you? Fine, fine.] There are four verb forms in this paragraph. Pause the presentation again please and find them. It shouldn’t take too long. And here are the four verb forms in this paragraph. Now let’s look on either side of these verb forms for subjects (in front) and direct objects (behind), starting with the first sentence which takes up the first three lines of this passage. Note there are two nouns — “families” and “extraction” — both of which come in front of the verb (“maintained”) and that’s exactly where you should expect to see a subject. Are either or both “families” and/or “extraction” the subject? Hmmm, look at what’s in front of “extraction”! First, an adjective (“aristocratic”) — ignore that! — but in front of “aristocratic” there’s “of,” which, as you learned in the second grammar preview, is a preposition. So “of aristocratic extraction” has to be a prepositional phrase. Can a noun be both the object of a preposition and the subject of a sentence? No. One noun can function only one way in one sentence. Therefore, by process of elimination, “extraction” can’t be the subject, which means

“families” must be. Is it? Ask yourself who’s doing the maintaining. The “families” are. So, yes, “families” is the subject, the doer of the verb action. Now what about the direct object? What did the families maintain? “Control.” “Control” has to be the direct object. But what about the other two nouns in this sentence: “Rome” and “history”? Are they also direct objects? Remember: there can be more than one direct object with a verb. Look at “over.” It’s a small word in front of “Rome.” What part of speech is it, do you think? A preposition! So, “over Rome” must be a prepositional phrase. That means “Rome” can’t be a direct object, too. And what about “history”? It’s got “throughout” in front of it — way in front of it because there are some adjectives in between (“early” and “Republic”) — but clearly “throughout” and “history” belong together. Granted, “throughout” doesn’t seem like much of a small word, but is it a preposition? It is! It’s really just two small-word prepositions mashed together, “through” and “out,” the same way “because” and “of” can combine to create one preposition “because of.” That means “throughout its early ‘Republican’ history” is a prepositional phrase with “history” as serving as the OP. If so, “history” can’t be another direct object. One noun can’t be two things in one sentence. You got that, right? Let’s move on to the next sentence and the next verb, “lasted.” What’s the noun in front of it? “Situation.” Is “situation” doing the action of the verb “lasted.” Is the situation “lasting”? Why, yes, it is! “Situation” must be the subject then. What about the noun after “lasted”? “Millennium”? Is that the direct object? If you say “yes,” then how do you explain “for”? What part of speech is “for”? Small word. Takes a noun after it. Must be a preposition. Prepositions need objects. So “millennium” must be its object, and “for half a millennium” must be a prepositional phrase — “half” here is just an adjective — and if “millennium” is an OP, it can’t also be a DO (direct object).

Next sentence, next verb? “Established.” Who or what did the establishing. “Families” again! That’s the subject, but those families are also restated here: “Julians” and “Claudians.” Those nouns are equivalent to the subject, so we should probably color them purple too. More important, what’s the direct object? What did “the Julian and Claudian families establish”? “Rule,” which must be the direct object then. But then what about “century”? Is that another DO? No. It’s inside a prepositional phrase: “in the first century.” So, OP is the only function “century” can have.

Finally, the last verb in this passage: “giving.” Remember that “-ing” forms won’t have subjects, but they can have direct objects. Does this one? Is anything being given here? What about “rise”? Isn’t “rise” the thing that’s being given? It’s a kind of funny way to think about it, but clearly the sense is that “rise” is what’s being given, so that’s got to be the grammar. “Rise” is clearly the direct object of “giving.” And last of all, what about “Empire”? A second direct object? No, another OP! “To” is a preposition beginning a prepositional phrase: “to the Roman Empire.” Whew! That was tough, but you did it. And you can do it again. It gets easier with practice, I guarantee.

Here’s another paragraph: [Instead, the Romans spent their energy in violent war with other peoples and gained a reputation as tenacious fighters, developing an impressive system of warfare for a nation their size. Rome also had a powerful weapon in the legion, a battle formation quite complex for its age and requiring considerable time to learn.] Find the nouns and verbs — there are sixteen nouns and six verbs — and I’ll see you on the other side when you’ve found them all. Go! Pause! [Oxymoron!] And here they are. Let’s accelerate this process and go

directly to the verbs, looking for subjects and direct objects on either side of the verb. What's the first verb? "Spent." Who "spent"? The "Romans." That's the subject. What did they spend? Their "energy." That's the direct object. Oh yeah, now we're cooking. Next verb: "gained." Who gained? The "Romans" again, so "Romans" is the subject of both "spent" and "gained." Good for them! But they gained something different from what they spent, so while the verbs "spent" and "gained" may have the same subjects, they have different direct objects. What did the Romans gain? A "reputation." That must be the direct object of "gained." In sum, then, this sentence has one subject ("Romans") with two verbs ("spent" and "gained"), and each verb has its own direct object ("energy" and "reputation," respectively). The next verb "developing" is an "-ing" form, which you'll remember doesn't have a subject, so let's go directly to looking for its direct object. What's being developed here? An impressive ... "system." "System" is the direct object of "developing." "Impressive" is just an adjective, and remember you can ignore adjectives in this exercise. What about the three nouns following "system": "warfare," "nation" and "size"? Are any of those additional direct objects dependent on "developing"? I see "of" and "for," two prepositions, one each sitting in front of "warfare" and "nation," so both of those nouns have to be OP's. And "their size" clearly modifies "nation." It's like a prepositional phrase without a preposition expressed, as if it were missing its "of": "of their size." [Oh, never mind. It's complicated. All you need to know is that "size" is not a direct object, nor is "warfare" or "nation."] So, no! None of these nouns serves as an additional direct object of the verb "develop(ing)." The next verb is "had." Who or what "had"? Rome had! So "Rome" is the subject of "had." And what or whom did "Rome have"? A "weapon"! That's the direct object of "had." What about "legion"? Is that a direct object? No. It's got "in" in front of it, so that's a prepositional phrase. If "legion" is an OP, it can't be a direct object too. Next verb, "requiring." That's another "-ing" form. Do "-ing" forms take subjects? Not as a rule, but they can have direct objects. Is there one after "requiring"? Sure, "time." "Time" is the direct object, the thing being required, right? And one last verb in this passage, "(to) learn." But "to" verb forms are like "-ing" forms. They don't usually have subjects, so there will be no subject with "to learn." But how about a direct object after it? Is there anything after it? No. So if there's no word there, then I guess there can't be a direct object, huh? Remember: sometimes even verbs that can take direct objects don't have them.

Here's another practice passage: [Most battles in these early days of Rome took place in long, haphazard lines. The Thebans and later Alexander the Great had brought better order to military formation, but their contributions included mostly simple innovations, stacking a line of fighters at one end or creating a huge block of men.] Let's accelerate things again. First, find the nouns and verbs here. There are fifteen nouns and five verbs. Go! Do it! I'll be right here waiting for you after the pause. And here they are: the fifteen nouns and five verbs in this passage. Let's do things a little differently again and first practice just the subjects. Go to each of the verbs and ask yourself who or what is doing the action of the verb. Bear in mind, some verbs will have more than one subject; some verb forms (like those ending in "-ing") will have no subject. I'll give you a hint: there are four subjects in this passage. Can you find them? Pause the presentation and, when you think you've found all four, start it back up again and I'll give you the answers. And here are the four subjects (in purple). "Battles" in the first line is what "took place." "Took" is the first verb in the passage. The "Thebans" and "Alexander (the Great)" in line three are both subjects of "(had) brought," because the Thebans and Alexander are each doing the bringing even if they did it at different times. Their "contributions" in line five is what's being "included,"

so “contributions” is the subject of “included.” Neither “stacking” nor “creating” have subjects because they’re “-ing” forms, but they could have direct objects. So let’s do that. Now let’s look for direct objects. There are five in this paragraph. Can you find them? Take all the time you need and then check your answers when you’re done. Hit pause now. And here are the five direct objects (in blue). “Place” in line two is the direct object of “took.” What did most battles take? They “took *place*.” “Lines” is an OP for the preposition “in,” so that can’t also be a direct object. “Order” in line four is the direct object of “brought.” What did the Thebans and Alexander bring? “Order.” “Formation” is another OP — it goes with “to” — so ignore it. “Innovations” is what their contribution included so that must be another direct object, and a “line” is what got stacked. That’s a direct object as well. “Of fighters” and “at one end” are two more prepositional phrases. You can ignore those nouns in this exercise. And finally the last verb form, “creating.” Creating what? “(A huge) block”! “Block” is the DO of “creating”. But what about “of men”? “Of” is a preposition, so that’s yet one more prepositional phrase, meaning the noun “men” doesn’t matter here because we’re looking for direct objects.

Did you get them all, all the subjects and direct objects on this slide? If so, good for you! If not, do you understand now how to get them? Practice is the key, so next I’ll give you a series of passages, six in total, where you can practice identifying the subjects and direct objects. Start by isolating the nouns and verbs, and then pick out which nouns are the subjects and which are the direct objects. Pause the presentation as necessary. When you’re done with all these passages, you should be able to find the subjects and direct objects in any English sentence. *Valete, discipuli!*

[The legion employed a flexible arrangement of men. The Romans organized soldiers into sub-groups and moved these cohorts as units around the battlefield. This design and the dedication to physical might provide an important element in their conquest of the Mediterranean world.]

The early Romans achieved their greatest triumph with the defeat of Carthage, a rival trading empire in North Africa. Roman forces waged these so-called "Punic Wars" mostly at sea. Because of the nature of this conflict Rome had to develop a full navy for the first time in its history.]

[The decisive battles, however, occurred on land, as when the Carthaginian general Hannibal and his elephants invaded Italy and later when the Romans attacked the area around Carthage and won the day. In the second century (200-100 BCE) the Romans spread into Greece where their soldiers first encountered eastern ways of life.]

[Greek philosophers, poets and playwrights flooded Rome and introduced lifestyles unfamiliar to the still rustic Italians. This incursion of new types of thought sparked a cultural crisis. Should the Romans uphold their traditional, time-tested, conservative "Roman" *mores*, or take up new, exotic, dangerous and delightful "Greek" habits?]

[As time passed, the Romans came to see the Greeks as corrupters. To many Romans, these foreigners wanted to spoil their children with outlandish pleasures and use their oriental double-talk to undermine the Romans’ simple virtues. Thus, the fabric of Roman society started to unravel and fall apart.]

[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. This tragic civil war initiated the destruction of the Republic and the establishment of a more peaceful but at heart autocratic empire.]