

Basic Sentence Patterns

We do not speak English by merely stringing words together in some random fashion. Instead, we arrange our words, for the most part unconsciously, into patterns. In English we use nine basic sentence patterns. It will now be our purpose to examine these basic sentence patterns of English. Any sentence you speak will probably be based on one of them.

Patten 1: N be Adj

e.g. *Food is good.*

In the nine basic patterns the subject always occurs in the first N position. In Pattern 1 the grammatical meaning of the subject is “*that which is described.*” Here the meaning of the verb is “*may be described as*” and third term must be adjective or adjectival. Be may be *is, are, was, were,* and *am.*

Examples:

That food is poisonous.

The box is large.

My mother is kind.

Ali is smart.

Her brother was hungry.

Pattern 2: N be Adv

e.g. *The girl is here.*

Pattern 2 differs from Pattern 1 in these respects:

- 1- The verb *be* in this pattern usually has the meaning of “*be located*” or “*occur.*”

2- The third position is occupied by “*the adverbial.*” Words of this type include *here, there, up, down, in, out, inside, outside, upstairs, downstairs, on, off, now, then, tomorrow, yesterday, over, through, above, below, before, after.*

Examples:

The picnic was outside.

The jaunt is here.

They are on the lawn.

Our appointment is now.

Pattern 3: **N1 be N1**

e.g. *My mother is a doctor.*

The superscript after the second N (noun) means that this noun has the same referent as N1; that is, both *brother* and *doctor* refer to the same person. The meaning of to be in Pattern 3 is “*be identified or classified as.*” The first N1 (subject) has grammatical meaning of “*that which is identified.*” The second N1 means grammatically “*that which identifies the subject*” and this is called the subjective complement. Personal pronouns also occupy this position.

Examples:

This is she.

It's me.

It was they.

That is mine.

They are my friends.

Ali was an instructor.

Pattern 4: N LV Adj

e.g. *The acrobat seems young.*

In pattern 4, the verb is called a linking verb (LV), as it links the adjective with the subject. Any verb except *be* that may be substituted for *seems* in this frame is a linking verb.

Examples:

The cyclist appears weary.

The physicist grew sleepy.

The milk remained sweet for a week.

You look sharp today.

The dogs smell bad.

Some of the common linking verbs are *seem, appear, become, grow, remain, taste, look, feel, smell, sound, get, continue, go.*

Note: a linking verb may be preceded by an auxiliary.

The party may become lively.

Pattern 5: N¹ LV N²

e.g. *My sister remained an outstanding student.*

The two superscripts show that both nouns have the same referent. The verb, which links student and sister, is a linking verb. The number of linking verbs that may occupy the verbal position in this pattern is very small. Among them are *remain, become, appear, seem, continue, stay, make.*

Examples:

My mother becomes a doctor.

Donald continued my friend, despite our differences.

We shall continue the discussion tomorrow.

Pattern 6: N InV (=intransitive verb)

e.g. *Girls smile.*

The verb in Pattern 6 is of the kind called intransitive. An intransitive verb is self-sufficient; it can stand alone with its subject.

Examples:

The sportsman fished.

The sportsmen were fishing.

If you are in doubt whether a word following the verb is a modifier that goes with an intransitive verb or a completer of a transitive verb, a substitution can settle the matter. If you can substitute *him, her, it, or them*, the word is a completer and the verb is not intransitive.

He hammered fast. (Intransitive verb)

He hammered the nail. (Transitive verb)

In the first sentence you cannot substitute *it* without spoiling the structural meaning. But in the second, *He hammered it* is a suitable equivalent for *He hammered the nail*. Therefore the first *hammered* is intransitive and the second one is transitive.

Pattern 7: N1 TrV (= transitive verb) N2

e.g. *The girl bought a dress.*

In Pattern 7 the verb is completed by a noun (or pronoun), for which one can substitute *him, her, it* or *them*. This noun, as shown by the superscript 2, does not have the same referent as the subject. It is called *the direct object* of the verb and has the grammatical meaning of “*undergoer of the action*” or “*that is affected by the verb.*”

Examples:

The driver turned the car around.

Someone cleans the palace.

The waitress poured the tea.

She read the message.

Pattern 8: N¹ Tr-V N² N³

e.g. ***The mother bought the girl a dress.***

In Pattern 8 there are five matters to be observed:

- 1- The superscripts 1, 2, and 3 indicate that each noun has a different referent; *mother, girl, and dress* are three separated entities.
- 2- We see two grammatical objects after the verb *bought*. These two objects are called, in order, *the indirect* and *the direct object*. If we omit the first one, the pattern becomes number 7 and *dress* is seen to be the direct object.
- 3- The verbs that can be used in Pattern 8 are restricted. Some of the common ones are *give, make, find, tell, buy, write, send, ask, play, build, teach, assign, feed, offer, throw, hand, pass, sell, pay*.
- 4- A Pattern 8 sentence may be transformed into passive by making either the direct or the indirect object the subject of the passive verb.

****A dress was bought the girl by her mother.***

The girl was bought a dress by her mother.

In some cases, however, the passive transform does not sound fully natural and seems to demand a preposition, as in:

The sergeant found the recruit a rifle.

A rifle was found (for) the recruit.

5- The grammatical meaning of the indirect object is “*beneficiary of the action of the verb-plus-direct-object.*”

She sold the student a ticket.

He built them a playpen.

He played me a game of chess.

She asked her a question.

Pattern 9: **N1 TrV N2** plus one:

a) N2 b) Adj c) Pronoun d) Adv (of place), uninflected e) Verb, present participle

f) Verb, past participle g) Prepositional phrase h) Inflectional phrase with *be*.

Pattern 9 contains a choice of eight different forms in the final position. These are illustrated in the following examples:

a) The basketball team chose John captain.

b) He considered her brilliant.

c) I thought the caller you.

d) We supposed him upstairs.

e) I imagined her eating.

f) I believed him seated.

g) We considered her in the way.

h) We thought Kim to be a fine player.

Pattern 9, like its predecessor Pattern 8, has two objects following the verb. But it differs from Pattern 8 in three respects:

- 1- In the order of objects the direct object comes first. In some sentences, if we eliminate the second object, we are left with Pattern 7 which contains only the direct object after the verb:

The basketball team chose John.

The second object is called the *objective complement*, because it completes the direct object.

- 2- In Pattern 9 both objects have the same referent; that is, both *John* and *captain* refer to the same person.
- 3- In Pattern 9, only the first object, the direct object, can be made the subject of a passive verb. We can transform the pattern sentence into:

John was chosen captain.