Sentence Patterns

Sentences are sometimes labeled by types (as simple, compound, complex); or by rhetorical structure (as loose, periodic, balanced) or by purpose (declarative, interrogative, imperative, exclamatory). Sentences may also be identified by patterns, that is, by the order of their words, or of word groups.

While English embraces many sentence patterns, our language features three basic patterns, as follows:

Pattern 1: Subject – Transitive Verb (S-Vi)

Pattern 2: Subject – Transitive Verb – Direct Object (S-Vt-DO)

Pattern 3 Subject – Linking Verb – Subject Complement (S-LV-SC)

Variations on these three main sentence patterns appear in negatives, in questions, or in the use of the passive voice. Similarly, complications occur with the addition of adjectives, adverbs, or phrases. Nevertheless, the three basic sentence patterns are common and frequent, and should be recognized by the student of composition.

Let us examine the three principle sentence patterns, using examples to illustrate the word peculiar to each. In pattern 1 (S-Vi), the subject is followed by a verb which does not take an object, a verb which can stand alone as the predicate. For example:

\[
\begin{align*}
 S & \quad \text{Vi} \\
 a. & \quad \text{He listened.} \quad S \quad \text{Vi} \\
 b. & \quad \text{The jazz band played.} \quad S \quad \text{Vi} \\
 c. & \quad \text{The long dance finally ended.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

In pattern 2 (S-Vt-DO), the subject is followed by a verb which requires an object to complete the sense, that is; the sentence needs a noun affected by the action of the verb to complete the predicate.

For example:

\[
\begin{align*}
 S & \quad \text{Vt} \quad \text{DO} \\
 a. & \quad \text{He bought a home.} \quad S \quad \text{Vt} \quad \text{DO} \\
 b. & \quad \text{An electrician wired the house.} \\
\end{align*}
\]
A licensed plumber installed the garbage disposal.

In pattern 3 (S-LV-SC), the noun in the predicate is not the object of the verb. The noun following the verb renames the subject. For example:

- S LV SC
- a. Princeton is a college.
- b. Woodrow Wilson was its dean.
- c. Wilson later became the President of the United States.

Note: A limited number of verbs can function as linking verbs. The verb “be” in all its forms is always a linking verb when used alone (“am”, “is”, “are”, “be”, “been”, “being”, “was”, “were”); verbs of the senses may be linking verbs (“look”, “sound”, “smell”, “taste”, “feel”). Verbs like, “become”, “remain”, “get”, “keep”, “prove”, “turn”, “fall”, “stand”, “appear”, “seem”, and “grow” may also be used a linking verbs.

Basic sentence patterns are of course subject to additions of words or word groups which may hinder recognition of the main pattern. For example, the sentence under 1.a (He listened.) might be read as follows:

While waiting for her call, he listened to FM radio.

The sentence is still composed of a simple subject (he) and an intransitive verb (listened). This is not to ignore the phrases which follow, but merely to point out the integrity of the basic sentence pattern.

A basic sentence pattern may, however, undergo some change in order. Pattern 2, for example (S-Vt-DO) may be modified to include an indirect object (IO) in the predicate. The pattern would read: S-Vt-IO-DO. The indirect object tells us “to whom” and “for whom” something is done. For example:

- S Vt IO DO
- a. Mother wrote Bill a letter. (She wrote a letter to Bill.)
- b. She also sent him a check. (She sent the check to him.)
- c. He then bought his son a bike. (He bought the bike for his son.)
Pattern 2 may also include an addition which either rename the direct object or which describes the direct object. If a noun follows the direct object and renames the direct object, it is called a noun object complement (NOC). The pattern would read: S-Vt-DO-NOC. For example:

S Vt DO NOC
a. They elected Bob vice-president.
   S Vt DO NOC
b. The manager named Fidrych opening-day pitcher.

If an adjective follows the direct object and describes the direct object, it is called an adjective complement (Adj.-c). The pattern would read: S-Vt-DO-Adj.-c. For example:

S Vt DO Adj-c
a. He considered students bright.
   S Vt DO Adj-c
b. He found none lazy

While pattern 2 may conclude complements in the predicate, pattern 3 always takes a complement in the predicate. Besides the basic pattern (S-LV-SC) where the noun in the predicate renames the subject, pattern 3 may include a word following the linking verb which describes the subject. That word is termed an adjective complement, as was the case in pattern 2 above. The sentence pattern is S-LV-Adj-c.

For example:

S LV Adj-c
a. Henry grew rich.
   S LV Adj-c
b. He now feels happy.

When a word or phrase following the linking very BE tells where the subject is, such a word or phrase is called an adverb complement (Adv-c). The sentence pattern is S-LV-Adv-c. For example:

S LV Adv-c
a. He was in the classroom.
   S LV Adv-c
b. He was home later.

Eight sentence patterns have been discussed above, grouped as follows:

1. S-Vi
2. S-Vt-DO
   S-Vt-IO-DO
   S-Vt-DO-NOC
   S-Vt-DO-Adj-c
3. S-LV-SC
   S-LV-Adj-c
   S-LV-Adv-c

Acquaintance with these sentence patterns can prove an aid in writing effective sentences.

Exercise:

Directions: Label the following sentences according to the eight patterns in this lesson. Then check your efforts against the key provided.

1. Frank sings ballads.
2. He is deservedly famous.
3. Fans world-wide have given Frank millions.
4. Money helps.
5. Band leader John Smith was his first boss.
7. Last year, Harvey Jones moved his family to Michigan.
8. On some cold mornings, motorists could not start their cars.
9. Stranded at home, Harvey Jones reluctantly called Eric Rogers, his office manager.
10. Jones considered his boss, who recently moved from the company’s Florida office, understanding.
Answers

1. S-Vt-DO
2. S-LV-Adj-c
3. S-Vt-IO-DO
4. S-Vi
5. S-LV-SC
6. S-Vt-DO-Adj-c
7. S-Vt-DO
8. S-Vt-DO
9. S-Vt-DO
10. S-Vt-DO-Adj-c