# Sentence Structure

## Subject and Verb Must Both Exist

If a sentence is missing the subject or the verb, the sentence is a **fragment**; in other words, it is not a complete sentence! On the GMAT, the correct answer must be a complete sentence, or **independent clause**.

The GMAT might disguise the error by dropping the verb: - Wrong: The cat sitting by the stairs.

Wait a minute, what about sitting? Sitting certainly looks like a verb. It is not, however, a **working verb**, a verb that can run a sentence by itself. Here's an

example of a working verb: - Right: The cat sitting by the stairs WATCHED the mouse.

In this sentence, the word watched is a working verb. Here's another example of a working verb:

* Right: The cat WAS SITTING by the stairs.

In this sentence, the words was sitting make up the full verb form. The word sitting is called a present participle and you'll see more of these “-ing” words throughout this book. For now, just remember that an -ing word by itself is never a working verb: The cat sitting by the stairs is not a sentence.

These are also not complete sentences:

* Wrong: BECAUSE the dog was never mine.
* Wrong: WHICH will be approved tomorrow

Because and which are connecting words. They add extra information to a sentence, but they are not sentences by themselves. They're examples of modifiers, which you will learn about in the next chapter.

The correct answer must contain at least one independent clause; if an answer choice does not, eliminate it!

## Subject and Verb Must Agree in Number

A singular subject requires a singular verb form: The dog runs out of the house.

A plural subject requires a plural verb form: The dogs run out of the house.

You already know this; you would never write the dog run out or the dogs runs out. The GMAT, therefore, has to try to obscure these errors so that some people will fall into a trap.

How? The GMAT might hide the subject, so that you are unsure whether the subject is singular or plural. If you do not know the number of the subject, then you will not be able to select the verb form that agrees with it. Consider this

example: The discovery of new medicines (was/were) vital to the company's growth.

What is the subject, discovery or new medicines? If you ask yourself, “What is/are vital to the company's growth?” you may be able to talk yourself into either choice. It makes as much sense to say the discovery was vital as it does to say the new medicines were vital.

In this case, The discovery…was is the correct subject–verb pair because the noun medicines is part of the prepositional phrase of new medicines. A noun in a prepositional phrase cannot be the subject of the sentence.

Are these sentences both correct? - Lin and Guy drive to work. - Lin, as well as Guy, drive to work every day.

The first sentence is a correct example of a compound subject: Lin and Guy together function as the subject of the sentence. Compound subjects are always plural because at least two nouns function as the subject.

A compound subject must be connected by the word and, but the second sentence uses the modifier as well as Guy. Only Lin qualifies as the subject, so the sentence is incorrect. It should read:

* Right: LIN, as well as Guy, drives to work every day. (Subject:LIN;Modifier:as well as Guy;Verb:drives;)

A sentence can also contain a compound verb (two or more verbs that all point to the same subject). For example: - Right: Lin drove to work and said hello to his co-worker.(subject:Lin; Verb:drove; Conjunction:and; Verb:said;) - Right: Lin[Subject] and[Conjunction] Guy[Subject] drive[Verb] to work together every morning and[Conjunction] greet[Verb] their co-workers cheerfully.

That last sentence contains both a compound subject and a compound verb. If the writer inserts enough distance between the two portions of a compound subject or verb, it could be easy to make a mistake. Read on to learn how the GMAT does this.

## Eliminate the Middlemen and Skip the Warmup

The most common way to hide a subject is to insert words between the subject and the verb; we call these words the middlemen. If you learn to ignore these words when looking for a subject, you'll be much less likely to pick the wrong noun as the subject.

Further, the GMAT often puts a significant number of words in front of the subject you want. In these cases, you have to ignore the warmup that comes before the subject of the sentence.

There are a few common types of middlemen and warmups. #### 1. Prepositional Phrases

A prepositional phrase is a group of words headed by a **preposition**. For example:

of mice、for milk、 by 1800、 in Zambia、 with her、 at that level to the store、 on their orders、 from the office

The prepositions underlined above are among the most common in the English language. A list of common prepositions is included in Appendix B.

Prepositions are followed by nouns or pronouns, which complete the phrase. Prepositional phrases modify or describe other parts of the sentence. A noun in a prepositional phrase will never be the main subject of the sentence.

* Near Galway, the houses on the road to Spiddle is/are gorgeous.
* ~~Near Galway~~, the HOUSES ~~on the road to Spiddle~~ ARE gorgeous.

In the example above, the subject is houses (plural) and the correct verb is are (also plural).

#### 2. Dependent Clauses

Dependent clauses, which begin with connecting words such as who or because, cannot stand alone as sentences. Nor are they part of the main subject or main verb; rather, they are always attached to independent clauses. Look at the first sentence in this paragraph: can you find the dependent clause? (Hint: examine the commas.) - Dependent: which begin with connecting words such as who or because - Independent: Dependent clauses cannot stand alone as 53 sentences.

If a dependent clause is stripped out of a sentence, what remains is still a complete sentence.

Try another example: - Because she studied hard, she earned a good score on the test.

What is the dependent clause? What is the independent clause (complete sentence)? - Dependent: because she studied hard - Independent: She earned a good score on the test.

## Use Structure to Decide

Consider the following sentence: - In the waning days of the emperor's life, the conquest of new lands on the borders of the empire was/were considered vital.

To find the subject of the verb was or were considered, you might be tempted to ask yourself, “What was or were considered vital?” This method will get rid of obviously inappropriate subjects, such as the emperor's life or the waning days, but you could fall into the trap of thinking that new lands is the subject. However, new lands is in a prepositional phrase modifying the noun conquest. Since a noun in a prepositional phrase cannot be the subject of the sentence (with limited idiomatic exceptions that you'll learn about later), the subject must be conquest: - Wrong:~~In the waning days of the emperor's life~~, the CONQUEST ~~of new lands on the borders of the empire~~ WERE CONSIDERED vital. - Right:~~In the waning days of the emperor's life~~, the CONQUEST ~~of new lands on the borders of the empire~~ WAS CONSIDERED vital.

Do not fall for tempting nouns, such as new lands, inserted to distract you!

Instead, use the structure of the sentence to eliminate the middlemen and find the subject.

Now consider this example: - The tidal forces to which an object falling into a black hole is/are subjected is/are sufficient to tear the object apart.

You have to match up two subject–verb pairs on this one. First, find the main subject and match it with the appropriate verb: - Better: The tidal FORCES ~~to which an object falling into a black hole is/are subjected~~ ARE sufficient to tear the object apart.

Next, match up the subject and the verb in the dependent clause:

* Right: The tidal forces to which an OBJECT ~~falling into a black hole~~ IS SUBJECTED are sufficient to tear the object apart.

## Mid-Chapter Quiz: Test Your Skills

Fix the following sentences. Look for issues outlined in this chapter.

1. The recent string of burglaries, in addition to poor building maintenance, have inspired the outspoken resident to call a tenants meeting.
2. A new textbook focused on recent advances in artificial intelligence assigned by our instructor.
3. The proliferation of computer games designed to involve many players at once were first developed before the widespread availability of high-speed internet connections.

**Answer Key: Test Your Skills**

Changes made to the original sentence are underlined.

1. The recent string of burglaries, in addition to poor building maintenance, has inspired the outspoken resident to call a tenants meeting. [String is used here as a singular noun. Omit the middlemen of burglaries and in addition to poor building maintenance.]
2. A new textbook focused on recent advances in artificial intelligence 55 was assigned by our instructor. [The original is a fragment. A simple fix is to add a form of the verb to be, such as was.]
3. Computer games designed to involve many players at once were first developed before the widespread availability of high-speed internet connections. [This is a tricky one! The subject and verb have to make sense together, but the original sentence says that the proliferation… were first developed; this is illogical. Rather, the computer games were developed. The corrected sentence is just one possible rewrite.]

You may want to pause to let the first half of this chapter sink in before you continue with the rest. Consider picking up this lesson again later today or tomorrow.

## Building Complex Sentences

How else can the test writers add complexity to sentences? Take a look at this example: Despite some initial concerns, the teacher is confident that her students mastered the lesson.

In the real world, people will often drop the word that from the sentence structure: - Wrong on the GMAT: The teacher is confident her students mastered the lesson.

This is acceptable in the real world, but it doesn't follow the strictest grammar conventions. Technically, the missing that can make the sentence ambiguous; consider this example: - Wrong: I know Meryl Streep is an actor.

Do you actually know Meryl Streep herself? Or do you know something about Meryl Streep? - Right: I know that Meryl Streep is an actor.

When a sentence is trying to convey something more complex, the word that signals to the reader that more information is coming. The teacher isn't just confident in her students in general. She is confident that they mastered the lesson.