Types of Verbs

Lexical vs. Auxiliary

Lexical verbs—also called full verbs—convey the [semantic (or lexical) meaning](#) in a [sentence](#), such as:

- It *rained* last night.
- I *ran* fast.
- I *ate* the entire hamburger.

The great majority of verbs in English are lexical verbs. An *auxiliary verb*, by contrast, determines the mood or tense of another verb in a phrase, for example:

- It *will* rain tonight.

In this sentence, the verb *will* helps the verb *rain* by pointing to the future. In English, the auxiliary verbs are:

- Is, am, are, was, were
- Be, being, been
- Has, have, had
- Do, does, did
- Will, shall, should, would
- Can, could
- May, might, must

Dynamic vs. Stative

A *[dynamic verb](#)* is used primarily to indicate an action, process, or sensation as opposed to a state, such as:

- I *bought* a new guitar.

It is also called an *action* or *event verb*. There are three major types of dynamic verbs:

- *Accomplishment verbs*: expressing action that has a logical endpoint
- *Achievement verbs*: expressing action that occurs instantaneously
- *Activity verbs*: expressing action that can go on for an indefinite period of time

A *[stative verb](#)*—such as be, have, know, like, own, seem, prefer, understand, belong, doubt, and hate—describes a state, situation, or condition, as in:

- Now I *own* a Gibson Explorer.
- We *are* what we *believe* we *are*.

A stative verb primarily describes a state or situation as opposed to an action or process. It can be a mental or emotional state as well as a physical state of being. The situations are unchanging while they last and can continue for a long or indefinite time period. These words are also known as state verbs or static verbs.

Finite vs. Nonfinite

In English grammar, a finite verb is a form of a verb that (a) shows agreement with a subject and (b) is marked for tense. Nonfinite verbs are not marked for tense and do not show agreement with a subject.

If there is just one verb in a sentence, that verb is finite. (Put another way, a finite verb can stand by itself in a sentence.) Finite verbs are sometimes called main verbs or tensed verbs. A finite clause is a word group that contains a finite verb form as its central element.

In "An Introduction to Word Grammar," Richard Hudson writes:

"The reason finite verbs are so important is their unique ability to act as the sentence-root. They can be used as the only verb in the sentence, whereas all the others have to depend on some other word, so finite verbs really stand out."

Finite vs. Nonfinite Verbs

The main difference between finite verbs and nonfinite verbs is that the former can act as the root of an independent clause, or a full sentence, while the latter cannot.

For example, take the following sentence:

- The man **runs** to the store to *get* a gallon of milk.

"Runs" is a finite verb because it agrees with the subject (man) and because it marks the tense (present tense). "Get" is a nonfinite verb because it does not agree with the subject or mark the tense. Rather, it is an infinitive and depends on the main verb "runs." By simplifying this sentence, we can see that "runs" has the ability to act as the root of an independent clause:

- The man **runs** to the store.

Nonfinite verbs take three different forms—the infinitive, the participle, or the gerund. The infinitive form of a verb (such as "to get" in the example above) is also known as the base form, and is often introduced by a main verb and the word "to," as in this sentence:

- He wanted to *find* a solution.

The participle form appears when the perfect or progressive tense is used, as in this sentence:

- He is *looking* for a solution.

Finally, the gerund form appears when the verb is treated as an object or subject, as in this sentence:

- *Looking* for solutions is something he enjoys.

Examples of Finite Verbs

In the following sentences (all lines from well-known movies), the finite verbs are indicated in bold.

- "We **rob** banks." — *Clyde Barrow in "Bonnie and Clyde," 1967*
- "I **ate** his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti." — *Hannibal Lecter in "The Silence of the Lambs," 1991*
- "A boy's best friend **is** his mother." — *Norman Bates in "Psycho," 1960*
- "We **want** the finest wines available to humanity. And we **want** them here, and we **want** them now!" — *Withnail in "Withnail and I," 1986*
- "You **know** how to whistle, **don't** you, Steve? You just **put** your lips together and...**blow**." — *Marie "Slim" Browning in "To Have and Have Not," 1944*
- "**Get** busy living, or **get** busy dying." — *Andy Dufresne in "The Shawshank Redemption," 1994*

Identify Finite Verbs

In "Essentials of English," Ronald C. Foote, Cedric Gale, and Benjamin W. Griffith write that finite verbs "can be recognized by their form and their position in the sentence." The authors describe five simple ways to identify finite verbs:

1. Most finite verbs can take an -ed or a -d at the end of the word to indicate time in the past: cough, **coughed**; celebrate, **celebrated**. A hundred or so finite verbs do not have these endings.
2. Nearly all finite verbs take an -s at the end of the word to indicate the present when the subject of the verb is third-person singular: cough, he **coughs**; celebrate, she **celebrates**. The exceptions are auxiliary verbs like can and must. Remember that nouns can also end in -s. Thus "the dog races" can refer to a spectator sport or to a fast-moving third-person singular dog.
3. Finite verbs are often groups of words that include such auxiliary verbs as can, must, have, and be: **can be suffering**, **must eat**, **will have gone**.
4. Finite verbs usually follow their subjects: He **coughs**. The documents **had compromised** him. They **will have gone**.
5. Finite verbs surround their subjects when some form of a question is asked: **Is** he **coughing**? **Did** they **celebrate**?

A *finite verb* expresses tense and can occur on its own in a main clause, as in:

- She *walked* to school.

A finite verb shows agreement with a subject and is marked for tense. If there is just one verb in a sentence, that verb is finite. Put another way, a finite verb can stand by itself in a sentence.

Nonfinite verbs, meanwhile, are not marked for tense and do not show agreement with a subject. A nonfinite verb (an infinitive or participle) doesn't show a distinction in tense and can occur on its own only in a dependent phrase or clause, as in:

- While *walking* to school, she spotted a bluejay.

The main difference between *finite* and *nonfinite verbs* is that the former can act as the root of an independent clause, or full sentence, while the latter cannot. For example:

- The man *runs* to the store to *get* a gallon of milk.

The word *runs* is a finite verb because it agrees with the subject (man) and because it marks the tense (present tense). The word *get* is a nonfinite verb because it does not agree with the subject or mark the tense. Rather, it is an infinitive and depends on the main (finite) verb *runs*.

Transitive vs. Intransitive

A *transitive verb* takes an object (a direct object and sometimes also an indirect object):

- She *sells* seashells.

An *intransitive verb* doesn't take a direct object:

- She *sat* there quietly.

This distinction is especially tricky because many verbs have both transitive and intransitive functions, depending on how they are used. The verb *break*, for instance, sometimes takes a direct object (*Rihanna breaks my heart*) and sometimes does not (*When I hear your name, my heart breaks*).

Phrasal vs. Prepositional

A *phrasal verb* is a type of compound verb made up of a verb (usually one of action or movement) and a prepositional adverb—also known as an adverbial particle. Phrasal verbs are sometimes called two-part verbs (*take off* and *leave out*) or three-part verbs (*look up to* and *look down on*).

There are hundreds of phrasal verbs in English, many of them (such as *tear off, run out [of],* and *pull through*) with multiple meanings. Linguist Angela Downing points out in "English Grammar: A University Course" that phrasal verbs are "one of the most distinctive features of present-day informal English, both in their abundance and in their productivity." Phrasal verbs often appear in idioms.

A *prepositional verb*, by contrast, is an idiomatic expression that combines a verb and a preposition to make a new verb with a distinct meaning. Some examples of prepositional verbs in English are *care for, long for, apply for, approve of, add to, resort to, result in, count on,* and *deal with*.

The preposition in a prepositional verb is generally followed by a noun or pronoun, and thus prepositional verbs are transitive.

Other Types of Verbs

Since verbs describe all action or indicate all states of being in English, it's not surprising that there are other types of verbs, which are important to know.

Catenative: A *catenative verb* can link with other verbs to form a chain or series. Examples include *ask, keep, promise, help, want,* and *seem.*

Causative: A causative verb is used to indicate that some person or thing makes—or helps to make—something happen. Examples of causative verbs include *make, cause, allow, help, have, enable, keep, hold, let, force,* and *require*, which can also be referred to as causal verbs or simply causatives.

Compound: A *compound verb* is made up of two or more words that function as a single verb. Conventionally, verb compounds are written as either one word (*housesit*) or two words joined with a hyphen (*water-proof*).

Copular: A *copular* verb is a specific type of linking verb that joins the subject of a sentence or clause to a subject complement. For example, the word *is* functions as a copular verb in the sentences, "Jane *is* my friend" and "Jane *is* friendly."

Iterative: An *iterative verb* indicates that an action is (or was) repeated, such as, "Philip *was kicking* his sister."

Linking: A linking verb is a traditional term for a type of verb (such as a form of *be* or *seem*) that joins the subject of a sentence to a word or phrase that tells something about the subject. For example, *is* functions as a linking verb in the sentence: The boss *is* unhappy.

Mental-state: A *mental-state verb* is a verb with a meaning related to understanding, discovering, planning, or deciding. Mental-state verbs refer to cognitive states that are generally unavailable for outside evaluation. For example: Tom's teaching ability is *known by* all his colleagues.

Performative: A *performative verb* conveys the kind of speech act being performed—such as *promise, invite, apologize, predict, vow, request, warn, insist*, and *forbid*. It is also known as speech-act verb or performative utterance.

Prepositional: A *prepositional verb* is an idiomatic expression that combines a verb and a preposition to make a new verb with a distinct meaning. Some examples are *care for, long for, apply for, approve of, add to, resort to, result in, count on,* and *deal with*.

Reporting: A *reporting verb* (such as *say, tell, believe, reply, respond,* or *ask*) is used to indicate that discourse is being quoted or paraphrased, such as: I highly *recommend* that you get a better lawyer. It is also called a communication verb.