

Are you in the Mood to Learn the Subjunctive?

VOA Learning English

5-6 minutes

For VOA Learning English, this is Everyday Grammar.

Today, we're going to talk about using the **subjunctive**. English speakers use the subjunctive to express a wide variety of unreal or possible situations. Today, we will only focus on how to use the subjunctive with a noun clause to express urgency or importance. For example, "I suggest that you arrive early."

Polite, yet urgent

The subjunctive offers speakers a polite and diplomatic way to tell someone to do something, or stress that something is very important. It is a useful alternative to a direct command. A mother might tell a child, "Stop eating with your hands." How can we be polite and stress urgency at the same time? We suggest that you use the subjunctive. Instead of the direct command, "Stop eating with your hands," you could say, "It is important that you eat with a fork."

Imagine you are a supervisor. You want your employee to stop being late for work. You could say, "Come to work on time." But a more polite way would be to use the subjunctive: "It is very important that you come to work on time" or "It is essential that you manage your time more efficiently." In most situations, the speaker using the subjunctive has power over the listener. In our examples, the mother has power over the child, the boss has power over the employee.

Verb + that + object + simple verb

There are two common structures for the subjunctive. The first one uses a verb followed by *that*, followed by the *object*, followed by the *simple form* of the verb. For example, "His father demanded that he join the army." In this example, *demanded* is the verb, *that* marks the beginning of the noun clause, *he* is the object, and *join* is the subjunctive verb. *That* is optional. You could also say, "His father demanded he join the army." The most common verbs that are followed by the subjunctive are *advise*, *ask*, *propose*, *suggest*, *request*, and *insist*.

Listen for the subjunctive in this conversation between cartoon characters Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. In this scene, Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck come across Elmer Fudd, a hunter who is looking for rabbits.

Bugs Bunny: *Would you like to shoot me now or wait till you get home?*

Daffy Duck: *Shoot him now! Shoot him now!*

Bugs Bunny: *You keep out of this. He doesn't have to shoot you now.*

Daffy Duck: *He does so have to shoot me now. I demand that you shoot me now.*

[gunshot]

The subjunctive sentence in the dialog is, "I demand that you shoot me now." Daffy Duck meant to say, "I demand that you shoot him now" – *him* referring to Bugs Bunny. Listen again.

Bugs Bunny: *Would you like to shoot me now or wait till you get home?*

Daffy Duck: *Shoot him now! Shoot him now!*

Bugs Bunny: *You keep out of this. He doesn't have to shoot you now.*

Daffy Duck: *He does so have to shoot me now. I demand that you shoot me now.*

[gunshot]

It is + adjective + that + object + simple verb

The second form of the subjunctive uses *it is* followed by an *adjective*, followed by *that*, followed by the *simple form of the verb*. For example, "It is vital that he take his medicine." Remember, there is no third person -s in the subjunctive. Don't say, "It is **vital** that he takes his medicine."

Fortunately, there are only a few adjectives that are used in this form of the subjunctive. Here are some examples:

It is **essential** that you bring your wallet.

It is **imperative** that you read the instructions.

It is *important* that she arrive on time.

It is *necessary* that she book the ticket in advance.

Politicians love to use the subjunctive because it gives a serious and authoritative tone to what they are saying. Listen to Florida Senator Marco Rubio using the subjunctive in a 2015 speech. At the time, he was seeking to become the presidential nominee of the Republican Party.

"And I just think it's critically important that the next president of the United States be someone that understands the 21st century and has ideas that will make America...allow America to fulfill its **potential**."

A good way to practice the subjunctive is to listen to political speeches in English. You are likely to hear both of the forms that we discussed today.

There are many other ways that English speakers use the subjunctive. We covered some of them in our episodes on [conditionals](#) and [advanced conditionals](#). Another common use is to express wishes, as we showed in our episode on [modals of certainty and hope](#).

Until next time, remember: it is important that you learn the subjunctive.

For Everyday Grammar, I'm Jill Robbins.

Adam Brock wrote this story for Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

Now it's your turn. In the comment section below, give some advice for Learning English. Use the subjunctive in your response. For example, "To improve your English it is important/imperative/necessary that you..."

Words in This Story

subjunctive – *grammatical term of or relating to the verb form that is used to express suggestions, wishes, uncertainty, possibility, etc.*

vital – *adj. extremely important*

essential – *adj.* extremely important and necessary

imperative – *adj.* very important

potential – *n.* a quality that something has that can be developed to make it better