Chapter 2

Verbs: The Heart of the Sentence

In This Chapter

- Finding the verb
- Distinguishing between linking verbs and action verbs
- Choosing pronouns for sentences with linking verbs
- Using helping verbs correctly

Think about a sentence this way: A sentence is a flatbed truck. You pile all your ideas on the truck, and the truck takes the meaning to your audience (your reader or your listener). The verb of the sentence is a set of tires. Without the verb, you may get your point across, but you're going to have a bumpy ride.

Every sentence needs a verb, so you start with the verb when you want to do anything to your sentence — including correct it. Verbs come in all shapes and sizes. In this chapter, I explain how to distinguish between linking and action verbs and to sort helping verbs from main verbs. Then I show you how to choose the correct verb for each sentence. Finally, I explain which pronouns you need for sentences with linking verbs.

Linking Verbs: The Giant Equal Sign

Linking verbs are also called *being verbs* because they express states of being — what is, will be, or was. Here's where math intersects with English. Linking verbs are like giant equal signs plopped into the middle of your sentence. For example, you can think of the sentence

> Ralph's uncle *is* a cannibal with a taste for finger food.

as

> Ralph's uncle = a cannibal with a taste for finger food.

Or, in shortened form,

Ralph's uncle = a cannibal

Just as in an algebra equation, the word *is* links two ideas and says that they are the same. Thus, *is* is a linking verb. Here are more linking verbs:

Lulu *will be* angry when she hears about the missing bronze tooth.

Lulu = angry (*will be* is a linking verb)

Stan *was* the last surfer to leave the water when the tidal wave approached.

Stan = last surfer (*was* is a linking verb)

Edgar *has been* depressed ever since the fall of the House of Usher.

Edgar = depressed (*has been* is a linking verb)

Being or linking — what's in a name?

In the preceding section, you may have noticed that all the linking verbs in the sample sentences are forms of the verb *to be,* which is (surprise, surprise) how they got the name *being verbs.* When I was a kid (sometime before they invented the steam engine), these verbs were called *copulative,* from a root word meaning "join." However, copulative is out of style with English teachers these days (perhaps because you can also use the root for words referring to sex). I prefer the term *linking* because some equal-sign verbs are not forms of the verb *to be.* Check out these examples:

With his foot-long fingernails and sly smile, Big Foot *seemed* threatening.

Big Foot = threatening (*seemed* is a linking verb)

A jail sentence for the unauthorized use of a comma *appears* harsh.

jail sentence = harsh (*appears* is a linking verb in this sentence)

The penalty for making a grammar error *remains* severe.

penalty = severe (*remains* is a linking verb in this sentence)

Lochness *stays* silent whenever monsters are mentioned.

Lochness = silent (*stays* is a linking verb in this sentence)

Seemed, appears, remains, and *stays* are similar to forms of the verb *to be* in that they express states of being. They simply add shades of meaning to the basic concept. You may, for example, say that

With his foot-long fingernails and sly smile, Big Foot *was* threatening.

but now the statement is more definite. *Seemed* leaves room for doubt. Similarly, *remains* (in the third sample sentence) adds a time dimension to the basic expression of being. The sentence implies that the penalty was and still is severe.

No matter how you name it, any verb that places an equal sign in the sentence is a *being, linking,* or *copulative verb.*

Savoring sensory verbs

Sensory verbs — verbs that express information you receive through the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and so forth — may also be linking verbs:

Two minutes after shaving, Ralph's double chin *feels* scratchy.

Ralph's double chin = scratchy (*feel* is a linking verb)

The ten-year-old lasagna in your refrigerator *smells* disgusting.

lasagna = disgusting (*smells* is a linking verb)

The ten-year-old lasagna in your refrigerator also *looks* disgusting.

lasagna = disgusting (*looks* is a linking verb)

Needless to say, the ten-year-old lasagna in your refrigerator *tastes* great!

lasagna = great (*tastes* is a linking verb)

Verbs that refer to the five senses are linking verbs only if they act as an equal sign in the sentence. If they aren't equating two ideas, they aren't linking verbs. In the preceding example sentence about Ralph's double chin, *feel* is a linking verb. Here's a different sentence with the same verb:

With their delicate fingers, Lulu and Stan *feel* Ralph's chin.

In this sentence, *feel* is not a linking verb because you're not saying that

Lulu and Stan = chin.

Instead, you're saying that Lulu and Stan don't believe that Ralph shaved, so they went stubble hunting.

Which sentence has a linking verb?

A. That annoying new clock sounds the hour with a recorded cannon shot.

B. That annoying new clock sounds extremely loud at four o'clock in the morning.

Answer: Sentence B has the linking verb. In sentence B, clock = extremely loud. In sentence A, the clock is doing something — sounding the hour — not being. (It's also waking up the whole neighborhood, but that idea isn't in the sentence.)

Try another. In which sentence is "stay" a linking verb?

A. Larry stays single only for very short periods of time.

B. Stay in the yard, Fido, or I cut your dog-biscuit ration in half!

Answer: Sentence A has the linking verb. In sentence A, Larry = single (at least for the moment). In sentence B, Fido is being told to do something — to stay in the backyard — clearly an action.

If you're dying to learn more grammar terminology, read on. Linking verbs connect the subject and the subject complement, also known as the *predicate nominative* and *predicate adjective.* For more on complements, read Chapter 6.

Here is a list of the most common linking verbs:

- Forms of *to be:* am, are, is, was, were, will be, shall be, has been, have been, had been, could be, should be, would be, might have been, could have been, should have been, shall have been, will have been, must have been, must be
- Sensory verbs: look, sound, taste, smell, feel
- Words that express shades of meaning in reference to a state of being: appear, seem, grow, remain, stay

Due to a grammar error

The picnic has been cancelled *due to? because of?* the arrival of killer sparrows from their Southern nesting grounds.

Okay, which one is correct — *due to* or *because of?* The answer is *because of.* According to a rule that people ignore more and more every day:

- *Due to* describes nouns or pronouns. It may follow a linking verb if it gives information about the subject. (See "Linking Verbs: The Giant Equal Sign," earlier in the chapter, for more information.)
- *Because of* is a description of an action. (See "Lights! Camera! Action Verb!" later in this chapter for information on action verbs.)

The semi-logical reasoning that underlies this rule draws you deep into grammatical trivia, so keep reading only if you're daring (or bored). *Due to,* by definition, means "owing to." *Owing* is in the adjective family, whose members may only describe nouns and pronouns. In a linking verb sentence, the subject (always a noun or pronoun) may be linked to a description following the verb. An example:

> Lola's mania for fashion is *due to* her deprived upbringing in an all-polyester household.

Due to her deprived upbringing in an all-polyester household describes *mania.*

Because of and *on account of* describe an action, usually answering the question why. An example:

> The bubble-gum gun that George fired is no longer being manufactured *because of* protests from the dental association.

Why is the gun no longer being manufactured? Because of protests from the dental association.

In real life (that is to say, in everyday conversational English), *due to* and *because of* are interchangeable. When you need your most formal, most correct language, be careful with this pair! One easy solution (easier than remembering which phrase is which) is to avoid them entirely and simply add *because* with a subject–verb pair.

Completing Linking Verb Sentences Correctly

A linking verb begins a thought, but it needs another word to complete the thought. Unless your listener is a mind reader, you can't walk around saying things like "the president is" or "the best day for the party will be" and expect people to know what you mean.

You have three possible completions for a linking verb: a descriptive word, a noun, or a pronoun (a word that subs for a noun). Take a look at some descriptions that complete the linking-verb equation:

After running 15 miles in high heels, Renee's thigh muscles are *tired.*

thigh muscles = *tired* (tired is a description, an adjective in grammatical terms)

Renee's high heels are *stunning,* especially when they land on your foot.

high heels = *stunning* (*stunning* is a description, also called an adjective)

Oscar's foot, wounded by Renee's heels, seems particularly *painful.*

foot = *painful* (*painful* is a description, an adjective)

Lola's solution, to staple Oscar's toes together, is not very *helpful.*

solution = *helpful (helpful* is a description, an adjective. The other descriptive words, *not* and *very,* describe *helpful,* not *solution.)*

You may also complete a linking verb equation with a person, place, or thing — a noun, in grammatical terms. Here are some examples:

The most important part of a balanced diet is *popcorn.*

part of a balanced diet = *popcorn* (*popcorn* is a thing, and therefore a noun)

Lulu's nutritional consultant has always been a complete *fraud.*

Lulu's nutritional consultant = *fraud* (*fraud* is a noun)

Sometimes you complete a linking verb sentence with a *pronoun,* a word that substitutes for the name of a person, place, or thing. For example:

The winner of the all-state spitball contest is *you!*

winner = *you* (*you* is a substitute for the name of the winner, and therefore a pronoun)

Whoever put glue in the teapot is *someone* with a very bad sense of humor.

Whoever put glue in the teapot = *someone* (*someone* is a substitute for the name of the unknown prankster and therefore a pronoun)

You can't do much wrong when you complete linking verb sentences with descriptions or with nouns. However, you can do a lot wrong when you complete a linking verb sentence with a pronoun — a fact that has come to the attention of standardized test-makers, who love to stump you with this sort of sentence. Never fear: in the next section, I show you how to avoid common linking verb–pronoun errors.

Placing the Proper Pronoun in the Proper Place

How do you choose the correct pronoun for a sentence with a linking verb? Think of a linking-verb sentence as reversible. That is, the pronoun you put after a linking verb should be the same kind of pronoun that you put before a linking verb. First, however, I give you an example with a noun, where you can't make a mistake. Read these sentence pairs:

Ruggles is a *resident* of Red Gap.

A *resident* of Red Gap is *Ruggles.*

Lulu was a resident of Beige Gap.

A resident of Beige Gap was Lulu.

Both sentences in each pair mean the same thing, and both are correct. Now look at pronouns:

The winner of the election is *him!*

Him is the winner of the election!

Uh oh. Something's wrong. You don't say *him is.* You say *he is.* Because you have a linking verb (*is*), you must put the same word after the linking verb that you would put before the linking verb. Try it again:

The winner of the election is *he!*

He is the winner of the election!

Now you've got the correct ending for your sentence.

If you pay attention to linking verbs, you'll choose the right pronouns for your sentence. Subject pronouns are *I, you, he, she, it, we, they, who,* and *whoever.* Pronouns that are not allowed to be subjects include *me, him, her, us, them, whom,* and *whomever.* (In case you're curious, these pronouns act as objects. More on objects in Chapter 6.)

Remember that in the previous examples, I discuss formal English, not conversational English. In conversational English, the following exchange is okay:

Who's there?

It is me. OR It's me.

In formal English, the exchange goes like this:

> Who is there?
>
> It is I.

Because of the linking verb *is,* you want the same kind of pronoun before and after the linking verb. You can't start a sentence with *me*, but you can start a sentence with *I.*

Now you've probably, with your sharp eyes, found a flaw here. You can't reverse the last reply and say

> I is it.

I takes a different verb — *am.* Both *is* and *am* are forms of the verb *to be* — one of the most peculiar creations in the entire language. So yes, you sometimes have to adjust the verb when you reverse a sentence with a form of *to be* in it. But the idea is the same; *I* can be a subject. *Me* can't.

You don't need to know this information, but in case you're having a slow day: grammarians divide pronouns into groups called *cases.* One group, the *nominative* or *subject case*, includes all the pronouns that may be subjects. The pronoun that follows the linking verb should also be in nominative, or subject, case. Another group of pronouns, those in *objective case*, acts as objects. Avoid object pronouns after linking verbs. (For more information on pronoun case, see Chapter 17.)

Lights! Camera! Action Verb!

Linking verbs are important, but unless you're in some sort of hippie commune left over from the sixties, you just can't sit around being all the time. You have to do something. Here's where action verbs come into the picture. Everything that is not *being* is *action,* at least in the verb world. Unlike the giant equal sign associated with linking verbs (see "Linking Verbs: The Giant Equal Sign," earlier in the chapter), something *happens* with an action verb:

> Drew *slapped* the offending pig right on the snout. (*Slapped* is an action verb.)
>
> Fred *will steal* third base as soon as his sneezing fit *ends*. (*Will steal* and *ends* are action verbs.)
>
> According to the teacher, Roger *has shot* at least 16 spitballs in the last ten minutes. (*Has shot* is an action verb.)

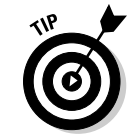
Don't let the name *action* fool you. Some action verbs aren't particularly energetic: *think, sit, stay, have, sleep, dream,* and so forth. Besides describing my ideal vacation, these words are also action verbs! Think of the definition this way: if the verb is *not* a giant equal sign (a linking verb), it's an action verb.

Getting by with a Little Help from My Verbs

You've probably noticed that some of the verbs I've identified throughout this chapter are single words and others are made up of several words. The extra words are called *helping verbs.* They don't carry out the trash or dust the living room, but they do help the main verb express meaning, usually changing the time, or *tense,* of the action. (For more on tense, see Chapter 3.)

Here are some sentences with helping verbs:

> Alice *will have sung* five arias from that opera by the time her recorder *runs* out of tape and her listeners *run* out of patience.
>
> (In *will have sung, sung* is the main verb; *will* and *have* are helping verbs; *runs* and *run* are both main verbs without helping verbs.)
>
> Larry *should have refused* to play the part of the villain, but his ego simply *would* not *be denied.*
>
> (In *should have refused, refused* is the main verb; *should* and *have* are helping verbs; in *would be denied, denied* is the main verb; *would* and *be* are helping verbs.)



Distinguishing between helping verbs and main verbs isn't particularly important, as long as you get the whole thing when you're identifying the verb in a sentence. If you find only part of the verb, you may confuse action verbs with linking verbs. You want to keep these two types of verbs straight when you choose an ending for your sentence, as I explain in "Placing the Proper Pronoun in the Proper Place," earlier in the chapter.

To decide whether you have an action verb or a linking verb, look at the main verb, not at the helping verbs. If the main verb expresses action, the whole verb is action, even if one of the helpers is a form of *to be.* For example:

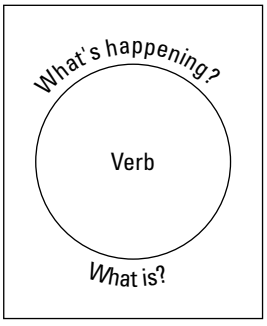
> is going
>
> has been painted
>
> should be strangled

are all action verbs, not linking verbs, because *going, painted,* and *strangled* express action.

Pop the Question: Locating the Verb

A scientific study by a blue-ribbon panel of experts found that 90 percent of all the errors in a sentence occurred because the verb was misidentified. Okay, there was no study. I made it up! But it is true that when you try to crack a sentence, you should always start by identifying the verb. To find the verb, read the sentence and ask two questions:

- What's happening?
- What is? (or, What word is a "giant equal sign"?)



If you get an answer to the first question, you have an action verb. If you get an answer to the second question, you have a linking verb.

For example, in the sentence

> Archie flew around the room and then swooped into his cage for a bird-seed snack.

you ask "What's happening?" and your answer is *flew* and *swooped. Flew* and *swooped* are action verbs.

If you ask, "What is?" you get no answer, because there's no linking verb in the sentence.

Try another:

> Lola's new tattoo will be larger than her previous fifteen tattoos.

What's happening? Nothing. You have no action verb. What is? *Will be. Will be* is a linking verb.

The way it's suppose to be?

Do these sentences look familiar?

> Lola *was suppose* to take out the garbage, but she refused to do so, saying that garbage removal was not part of her creative development.
>
> Ralph *use* to take out the trash, but after that unfortunate encounter with a raccoon and an empty potato chip bag, he is reluctant to venture near the cans.
>
> George *is suppose* to do all kinds of things, but of course he never does anything he *is suppose* to do.

If these sentences look familiar, look again. Each one is wrong. Check out the italicized verbs: *was suppose, use,* and *is suppose.* All represent what people hear but not what the speaker is actually trying to say. The correct words to use in these instances are *supposed* and *used* — past tense forms.

Pop the question and find the verbs in the following sentences. For extra credit, identify the verbs as action or linking.

A. Michelle scratched the cat almost as hard as the cat had scratched her.

B. After months of up-and-down motion, Lester is taking the elevator sideways, just for a change of pace.

C. The twisted frown on Larry's face seems strange because of the joyful background music.

Answers: A. *scratched* is an action verb, *had scratched* is an action verb. B. *is taking* is an action verb. C. *seems* is a linking verb.

Forget To Be or Not To Be: Infinitives Aren't Verbs

You may hear English teachers say, "the verb *to sweep*" or some such expression. In fact, in this chapter I refer to "all forms of the verb *to be.*" But *to be* is not actually a verb. It's an infinitive. An *infinitive* is *to + a verb* (yet another mixing of math and English). Examples or infinitives include *to laugh*, *to sing*, *to burp*, *to write*, and *to be*.

The most important thing to know about infinitives is this: When you pop the question to find the verb, don't choose an infinitive as your answer. If you do, you'll miss the real verb or verbs in the sentence. Other than that, forget about infinitives!

Okay, you can't forget about infinitives completely. Here's something else you should know about infinitives in formal English: Don't split them in half. For example, you commonly see sentences like the following:

> Matt vowed to really study if he ever got the chance to take the flight instructor exam again.

This example is common, but incorrect. Grammatically, *to study* is a unit — one infinitive. You're not supposed to separate its two halves. Now that you know this rule, read the paper. Everybody splits infinitives, even the grayest, dullest papers with no comics whatsoever. So you have two choices. You can split infinitives all you want, or you can follow the rule and feel totally superior to the professional journalists. The choice is yours.

Two not for the price of one

Here's a spelling tip: the following words are often written as one — incorrectly! Always write them as two separate words: *a lot, all right, each other*.

Example: Ella has *a lot* of trouble distinguishing between the sounds of "l" and "r," so she tries to avoid the expression *"all right"* whenever possible. Ella and Larry (who also has pronunciation trouble), help *each other* prepare state-of-the-union speeches every January.

Here's another tip. You can write the following words as one or two words, but with two different meanings:

Altogether means "extremely, entirely."

All together means "as one."

Example: Daniel was *altogether* disgusted with the way the entire flock of dodo birds sang *all together.*

Another pair of tricky words:

Sometime means "at a certain point in time."

Some time means "a period of time."

Example: Lex said that he would visit Lulu *sometime,* but not now because he has to spend *some time* in jail for murdering the English language.

Still more:

Someplace means "an unspecified place" and describes an action.

Some place means "a place" and refers to a physical space.

Example: Lex screamed, "I have to go *someplace* now!" Lulu thinks he headed for *some place* near the railroad station where the pizza is hot and no one asks any questions.

And another pair:

Everyday means "ordinary, common."

Every day means "occurring daily."

Larry loves *everyday* activities such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing. He has the palace staff perform all of those duties *every day.*

Last set, I promise:

Anyway means "in any event."

Any way means "a way, some sort of way."

Example: *"Anyway,"* added Roy, "I don't think there is *any way* to avoid jail for tax evasion."