Chapter 4

Who's Doing What? How to Find the Subject

In This Chapter

- Understanding the role of the subject and subject–verb pairs
- Spotting the subject and subject–verb pairs in simple sentences
- Identifying the subject and subject–verb pairs in more challenging sentences
- Finding subjects in questions

In Chapter 2, I describe the sentence as a flatbed truck carrying your meaning to the reader or listener. Verbs are the wheels of the truck, and subjects are the drivers. Why do you need a subject? Can you imagine a truck speeding down the road without a driver? Not a pleasant thought!

Who's Driving the Truck? Why the Subject Is Important

All sentences contain verbs — words that express action or state of being. (For more information on verbs, see Chapter 2.) But you can't have an action in a vacuum. You can't have a naked, solitary state of being either. Someone or something must also be present in the sentence — the *who* or *what* you're talking about in relation to the action or state of being expressed by the verb. The "someone" or "something" doing the action or being talked about is the subject.

A "someone" must be a person and a "something" must be a thing, place, or idea. So guess what? The subject is usually a noun because a noun is a person, place, thing, or idea. I say *usually* because sometimes the subject is a pronoun — a word that substitutes for a noun — *he, they, it*, and so forth. (For more on pronouns, see Chapter 9.)

Teaming up: Subject and verb pairs

Another way to think about the subject is to say that the subject is the "who" or "what" part of the subject–verb pair. The subject–verb pair is the main idea of the sentence, stripped to essentials. A few sentences:

Jasper gasped at the mummy's sudden movement.

In this sentence, *Jasper gasped* is the main idea; it's also the subject–verb pair.

Justin will judge the beauty contest only if *his ex-girlfriend competes.*

You should spot two subject–verb pairs in this sentence: *Justin will judge* and *ex-girlfriend competes.*

Now try a sentence without action. This one describes a state of being, so it uses a linking verb:

Jackhammer has always *been* an extremely noisy worker.

The subject–verb pair is *Jackhammer has been.* Did you notice that *Jackhammer has been* sounds incomplete? *Has been* is a linking verb, and linking verbs always need something after the verb to complete the idea. I give you more links in the verb chain in Chapter 2; now back to the *subject* at hand. (Uh, sorry about that one.) The subject–verb pair in action-verb sentences may usually stand alone, but the subject–verb pair in linking verb sentences may not.

Compound subjects and verbs: Two for the price of one

Subjects and verbs pair off, but sometimes you get two (or more) for the price of one. You can have two subjects (or more) and one verb. The multiple subjects are called *compound subjects.* Here's an example:

Dorothy and *Justin* went home in defeat.

Here you notice one action *(went)* and two people *(Dorothy, Justin)* doing the action. So the verb *went* has two subjects.

Now take a look at some additional examples:

Lola and *Lulu* ganged up on George yesterday to his dismay and defeat. (*Lola, Lulu* = subjects)

The *omelet* and *fries* revolted Eggworthy. (*omelet, fries* = subjects)

Snort and *Squirm* were the only two dwarves expelled from Snow White's band. (*Snort, Squirm* = subjects)

Another variation is one subject paired with two (or more) verbs. For example:

> Justin's ex-girlfriend *burped* and *cried* after the contest.

You've got two actions *(burped, cried)* and one person doing both *(ex-girlfriend). Ex-girlfriend* is the subject of both *burped* and *cried.*

Some additional samples of double verbs, which in grammatical terms are called *compound verbs:*

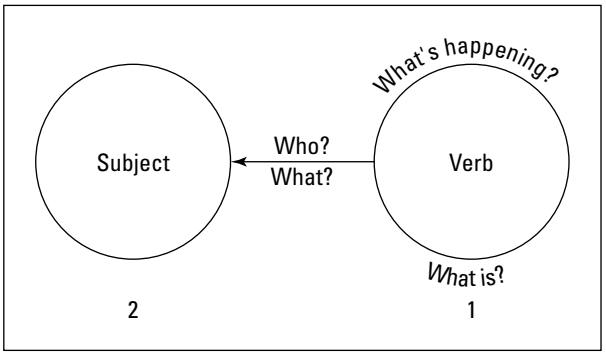
> George *snatched* the atomic secret and quickly *stashed* it in his navel. (*snatched, stashed* = verbs)
>
> Ella *ranted* for hours about Larry's refusal to hold an engagement party and then *crept* home. (*ranted, crept* = verbs)
>
> Eggworthy *came* out of his shell last winter but *didn't stay* there. (*came, did stay* = verbs)

Pop the Question: Locating the Subject–Verb Pairs

Allow me to let you in on a little trick for pinpointing the subject–verb pair of a sentence: Pop the question! (No, I'm not asking you to propose.) Pop the question tells you what to ask in order to find out what you want to know. The correct question is all important in the search for information, as all parents realize.

> WRONG QUESTION FROM PARENT: What did you do last night?
>
> TEENAGER'S ANSWER: Nothing.
>
> RIGHT QUESTION FROM PARENT: When you came in at 2 a.m., were you hoping that I'd ignore the fact that you went to the China Club?
>
> TEENAGER'S ANSWER: I didn't go to the China Club! I went to Moomba.
>
> PARENT: Aha! You went to a club on a school night. You're grounded.

In Chapter 2, I explain that the first question to ask is not "Is this going to be on the test?" but "What's the verb?" (To find the verb, ask *what's happening?* or *what is?*) After you uncover the verb, put "who" or "what" in front of it to form a question. The answer is the subject.



Try one:

Jackknife sharpens his dives during hours of practice.

1. Pop the question: What's happening? Answer: *sharpens. Sharpens* is the verb.
2. Pop the question: Who or what *sharpens?* Answer: *Jackknife sharpens. Jackknife* is the subject.

A pop quiz on popping the question. What are the subject and verb in the following sentence?

Jolly Roger will soon be smiling because of all the treasure in his ship.

Answer: The verb is *will be smiling* and the subject is *Jolly Roger.* Try one more. Identify the subject and verb.

No matter what the weather, Roger never even considers wearing a hat.

Answer: The verb is *considers* and the subject is *Roger.*

What's a Nice Subject Like You Doing in a Place Like This? Unusual Word Order

Most of the sentences you encounter are in the normal subject–verb order, which is (gasp) subject–verb. In other words, the subject usually comes before the verb. Not every sentence follows that order, though most do. Sometimes a subject hides out at the end of the sentence or in some other weird place. (Hey, even a subject needs a change of scenery sometime.)

Me, myself, and I

You can use *I* as a subject, but not *me* or *myself.*

> Wrong: Bill and me are going to rob that bank. Bill and myself will soon be in jail.
>
> Right: Bill and I are going to rob that bank. Bill and I will soon be in jail.

Me doesn't perform actions; it receives actions. To put this rule another way: *me* is an object of some action or form of attention: He gave the check to *me.*

Myself is appropriate only for actions that double back on the person performing the action: I told *myself* not to be such a nerd! *Myself* may also be used for emphasis (though some grammarians object to the repetition), along with the word *I: I myself* will disclose the secret to the tabloid offering the most bucks.

If you pop the question and answer it according to the meaning of the sentence — not according to the word order — you'll be fine. The key is to put the subject questions (who? what?) in front of the verb. Then think about what the sentence is actually saying and answer the questions. And voilà! Your subject will appear.

Try this one:

> Up the avenue and around the park trudged Godzilla on his way to tea with the Loch Ness Monster.

1. Pop the question: What's happening? What is? Answer: *trudged. Trudged* is the verb.
2. Pop the question: Who *trudged?* What *trudged?* Answer: *Godzilla. Godzilla* is the subject. (I'll let you decide whether Godzilla is a who or a what.)

If you were answering by word order, you'd say *park.* But the *park* did not *trudge, Godzilla trudged.* Pay attention to meaning, not to placement in the sentence, and you can't go wrong.

What are the subjects and verbs in the following sentences?

A. Alas, what a woefully inadequate grammarian am I.

B. Across the river and through the woods to the grammarian's house go Ella and Larry.

Answers: In sentence A, *am* is the verb and *I* is the subject. In sentence B, the verb is *go* and the subjects are *Ella* and *Larry.*

Always find the verb first. Then look for the subject.

Find That Subject! Detecting You-Understood

"Cross on the green, not in between."

"Eat your vegetables."

"Don't leave your chewing gum on the bedpost overnight."

What do these sentences have in common? Yes, they're all nagging comments you've heard all your life. More importantly, they're all commands. The verbs give orders: *cross, eat, don't leave.* So where's the subject in these sentences?

If you pop the question, here's what happens:

1. Pop the question: What's happening? What is? Answer: *cross, eat, don't leave.*
2. Pop the question: Who *cross, eat, don't leave?* Answer: Uh . . .

The second question appears to have no answer, but appearances can be deceiving. The answer is *you. You* cross at the green, not in between. *You* eat your vegetables. *You* don't leave your chewing gum on the bedpost overnight. What's that you say? *You* is not in the sentence? True. *You* is not written, but it's implied. And when your mom says, "Eat your vegetables," you understand that she means *you.* So grammarians say that the subject is *you-understood.* The subject is *you,* even though *you* isn't in the sentence and even though *you* don't intend to eat any taste-free lima beans.

Pop the questions and find the subject–verb pairs in these three sentences.

A. Ella, dancing the cha-cha, forgot to watch her feet.

B. Stop, Ella!

C. Over the bandleader and across five violin stands fell Ella, heavily.

Answers: In sentence A, *forgot* is the verb and *Ella* is the subject. *Dancing* is a fake verb. (I discuss finding fake verbs and subjects later in this chapter.) In sentence B, *stop* is the verb and *you-understood* is the subject. The remark is addressed to *Ella,* but *you-understood* is still the subject. In sentence C, *fell* is the verb and *Ella* is the subject.

Searching for the Subject in Questions

Does everyone love grammar? Don't answer that! I started this section with that sentence not to check attitudes toward grammar (I'd rather not know) but to illustrate the subject's favorite location in a question. Most questions in English are formed by adding a helping verb — *do, does, will, can, should,* and so forth — to a main verb. (For everything you need to know about helping verbs, turn to Chapter 2.) The subject is generally tucked between the helping verb and the main verb, but you don't have to bother remembering that fascinating bit of trivia. To locate the subject in a question, simply "pop the question" the same way you do for any other sentence. Here's how to attack the first sentence of this paragraph:

1. Pop the question: What's happening? What is? Answer: *does love.*
2. Pop the question: Who *does love?* Answer: *everyone.*

When you're "popping the subject question" for a question, the "popped question" may sound a little odd. Why? Because in a question, the subject usually isn't located in front of the verb. But if you ignore the awkwardness of the phrasing and concentrate on meaning, you can easily — and correctly — identify the subject of a question.

Pop the questions and find the subject–verb pairs in these three questions.

A. Will George ever floss his teeth?

B. Could I possibly care less about George's hygiene?

C. Won't George's dentist charge extra?

Answers: In sentence A, *will floss* is the verb and *George* is the subject. In sentence B, *could care* is the verb and the subject is *I.* Sentence C is a bit tricky. The word "won't" is short for "will not." So the verb in C is *will charge*, and the subject is *George's dentist.* You may be wondering what happened to the *not. Not* is an adverb, not that you need to know that fact. It changes the meaning of the verb from positive to negative. (For more on adverbs, turn to Chapter 7.)

Don't Get Faked Out: Avoiding Fake Verbs and Subjects

As I walk through New York City, I often see "genuine" Rolex watches (retail $10,000 or so) for sale from street peddlers for "$15 — special today only!" You need to guard against fakes when you're on the city streets (no surprise there). Also (and this may be a surprise), you need to guard against fakes when you're finding subject–verb pairs.

Finding fake verbs

Verbs in English grammar can be a little sneaky sometimes. You may ask *who?* or *what?* in front of a verb and get no answer or at least no answer that makes sense. When this happens, you may gather that you haven't really found a verb. You've probably stumbled upon a lookalike, or, as I call it, a "fake verb." Here's an example:

> Wiping his tears dramatically, Alex pleaded with the teacher to forgive his lack of homework.

Suppose you pop the verb question *(What's happening? What is?)* and get *wiping* for an answer. A reasonable guess. But now pop the subject question: *Who wiping? What wiping?* The questions don't sound right, and that's your first hint that you haven't found a real verb. But the question is not important. The answer, however, is! And there is no real answer in the sentence. You may try *Alex,* but when you put him with the "verb," it doesn't match: *Alex wiping.* (*Alex is wiping* would be okay, but that's not what the sentence says.) So now you know for sure that your first "verb" isn't really a verb. Put it aside and keep looking. What's the real verb? *Pleaded.*

To sum up: Lots of words in the sentence express action or being, but only some of these words are verbs. (Most are what grammarians call verbals; check out Chapter 24 for more on verbals.) At any rate, if you get no answer to your pop-the-subject question, just ignore the "verb" you think you found and look for the real verb.

Watching out for "here" and "there" and other fake subjects

Someone comes up to you and says, "Here is one million dollars." What's the first question that comes into your mind? I know, good grammarian that you are, that your question is *What's the subject of that sentence?* Well, try to answer your question in the usual way, by popping the question.

> Here is one million dollars.
>
> 1. Pop the question: What's happening? What is? Answer: *is.*
> 2. Pop the question: Who *is?* What *is?* Answer: ?

What did you say? *Here is?* Wrong. *Here* can't be a subject. Neither can *there.* Both of these words are fake subjects. (*Here* and *there* are adverbs, not nouns. See Chapter 7 for more on adverbs.) What's the real answer to the question *What is? One million dollars.* Here and there are fill-ins, place markers; they aren't what you're talking about. *One million dollars* — that's what you're talking about!

Choosing the correct verb for "here" and "there" sentences

If you write *here* and *there* sentences, be sure to choose the correct verb. Because *here* and *there* are never subjects, you must always look *after* the verb for the real subject. When you match a subject to a verb (something I discuss in detail in Chapter 10), be sure to use the real subject, not *here* or *there.* Example:

Here are ten anteaters. NOT Here is ten anteaters. (anteaters = subject)

If you want to check your choice of verb, try reversing the sentence. In the sample sentence above, say *ten anteaters is/are.* Chances are your "ear" will tell you that you want *ten anteaters are*, not *ten anteaters is.*

Standardized tests often check whether you can detect the right verb for a "here" or "there" sentence. Test-taker beware!

Which sentence is correct?

A. There are 50 reasons for my complete lack of homework.

B. There's 50 reasons for my complete lack of homework.

Answer: Sentence A is correct. In sentence B, *there's* is short for *there is,* but *reasons,* the plural subject, takes a plural verb.

Subjects Aren't Just a Singular Sensation: Forming the Plural of Nouns

Distinguishing between singular and plural subjects is a really big deal, and I go into it in detail in Chapter 10. But before I go any further, I want to explain how to form the plural of nouns (words that name persons, places, or things) because most subjects are nouns. If you learn how to form plurals, you'll also be able to recognize them.

Regular plurals

Plain old garden-variety nouns form plurals by adding the letter *s.* Check out Table 4-1 for some examples.

Table 4-1 Examples of Regular Plurals

Singular	*Plural*
xylophone	xylophones
quintuplet	quintuplets
worrywart	worrywarts
nerd	nerds
lollipop	lollipops
eyebrow	eyebrows

Singular nouns that end in *s* already, as well as singular nouns ending in *sh, ch,* and *x* form plurals by adding *es.* Some examples are shown in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2 Examples of Regular Plurals Ending in -s and -ch

Singular	*Plural*
grinch	grinches
box	boxes
kiss	kisses
George Bush	both George Bushes
mess	messes
catch	catches

The -IES and -YS have it

If a noun ends in the letter *y,* and the letter before the *y* is a vowel (a, e, i, o, u), just add *s.* For examples, see Table 4-3.

Table 4-3 Examples of Regular Plurals Ending in a Vowel Plus y

Singular	*Plural*
monkey	monkeys
turkey	turkeys
day	days
boy	boys
honey	honeys
bay	bays

If the noun ends in *y* but the letter before the *-y* is not a vowel, form the plural by changing the *y* to *i* and adding *es.* For examples, see Table 4-4.

Table 4-4 Examples of Regular Plurals Ending in a Consonant Plus -y

Singular	*Plural*
sob story	sob stories
unsolvable mystery	unsolvable mysteries
a cute little ditty (it means *song*)	cute little ditties
pinky	pinkies
bat-filled belfry	bat-filled belfries
tabby	tabbies

Never change the spelling of a name when you make it plural. The plural of *Sammy* is S*ammys,* not *Sammies.*

No knifes here: Irregular plurals

This topic wouldn't be any fun without irregulars, now would it? Okay, you're right. Irregulars are always a pain. However, they're also always around. Table 4-5 gives you examples of irregular plurals.

Table 4-5 Examples of Irregular Plurals

Singular	*Plural*
knife	knives
sheep	sheep
man	men
woman	women
child	children
deer	deer

Listing all the irregular plurals is an impossible task. Check the dictionary for any noun plural that puzzles you.

Are you affected? Or effected?

Has the study of grammar affected or effected your brain? Should you set or sit on the porch to think about this sentence? These two pairs of words are a complete annoyance, but once you learn them, you're all set. (And I do mean set.) Here are the definitions:

Affect versus effect: Affect is a verb. It means to influence. Effect is a noun meaning result. Hence

> Sunlight affects Ludwig's appetite; he never eats during the day.
>
> Ludmilla thinks that her vegetarian pizza will affect Ludwig's dietary regimen, but I think the effect will be disastrous.

Special note: Affect may also be a noun meaning "the way one relates to and shows emotions." Effect may act as a verb meaning "to cause a complete change." However, you rarely need these secondary meanings.

Sit versus set: Sit is a verb meaning "to plop yourself down on a chair, to take a load off your feet." Set means "to put something else down, to place something in a particular spot." Thus

> Ratrug seldom sits for more than two minutes.
>
> I'd like to sit down while I speak, but only if you promise not to set that plate of pickled fish eyeballs in front of me.

The brother-in-law rule: Hyphenated plurals

If you intend to insult your relatives, you may as well do so with the correct plural form. Remember: Form the plural of hyphenated nouns by adding *s* or *es* to the important word, not to the add-ons. These words are all plurals:

- mothers-in-law
- brothers-in-law
- vice-presidents
- secretaries-general
- dogcatchers-in-chief

You may hear references to "attorney generals." If you do, call the grammar police. An "attorney general" is a lawyer, not a military officer. Therefore, *attorney* is the important part of this title, and it's a noun. The *general* is a description — a reference to the rank of the *attorney.* To form a plural, you deal with the noun, not with the descriptive word. Therefore, you have one *attorney general* and two or more *attorneys general.*