

# Verb Phrase

## Definition of Verb Phrase

A verb [phrase](#) is a syntactic unit consisting of an auxiliary (helping) verb preceding the main verb. It often contains a head verb, complements, objects, and modifiers as its dependents.

Helping verbs may appear as: is, are, be, such as, was, were, been, being, have, had, has, do, did, does, can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, must, might, etc. In generative grammar, a verb phrase may consist of just a single verb. However, typically it contains a main verb, an auxiliary verb, optional specifiers, compliments, and adjuncts. For instance, “Tomorrow is going to be a good day with this current” (*The Old Man and the Sea*, by Ernest Hemingway). Here ‘is’ an auxiliary, while ‘going’ is the main verb.

## Types of Verb Phrase

There are two types of verb phrase:

### Finite Verb Phrase

If a [sentence](#) has just one verb phrase, it is a finite verb phrase. The head verb is finite and either comes in present or past form. For instance:

I go to college in the morning.

### Nonfinite Verb Phrase

In this type of verb phrase, the head verb is [participle](#), [gerund](#), or [infinitive](#). For instance:

She is hearing someone crying for help.

## Common Use of Verb Phrase

Despite his knee injury, he did go to gym.

Here “did go” is a verb phrase.

Mary is going with me to school.

“Is coming” is a verb phrase. “Coming” is the main verb, while “is” the [helping verb](#).

Sara might need our help for her car.

“Might need” is a verb phrase.

Her favorite activity is reading about history.

Here “is reading” is a verb phrase, and “about history” is a [subject](#) compliment.

He is interested in playing new games.

In this sentence, the verb phrase, “is interested,” is functioning as an objective phrase compliment “in playing new games.”

## Examples of Verb Phrases in Literature

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### Example #1: *A Tale of Two Cities* (by Charles Dickens)

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“It was appointed that the water should be locked in an eternal frost, when the light was playing on its surface, and I stood in ignorance on the shore. My friend is dead, my neighbor is dead, my love, the darling of my soul, is dead ...”

In this instance, the verb phrases are underlined. Dickens has used three verb phrases, among which the second verb phrase is a nonfinite verb phrase using “ing,” and followed by its [object](#) “on its surface.”

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### Example #2: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (by James Joyce)

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“He was caught in the whirl of a scrimmage and, fearful of the flashing eyes and muddy boots, bent down to look through the legs. The fellows were struggling and groaning and their legs

were rubbing and kicking and stamping ... It was useless to run on ...”

Joyce has used four verb phrases in this example. He has added objects and modifiers in the first and the thirds phrases, which give additional information, making the sentences good predicates.

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### **Example #3: *Heart of Darkness* (by Joseph Conrad)**

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“The day was ending in a serenity of still and exquisite brilliance. The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck ... It was accepted in silence. I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago – the other day ... “

This is another good excerpt comprising verb phrases. The first verb phrase “was ending,” and the third verb phrase “was thinking,” are nonfinite verb phrases.

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### **Example #4: *Pride and Prejudice* (by Jane Austen)**

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“Do you consider the forms of introduction, and the stress that is laid on them, as nonsense? I cannot quite agree with you there ... I am sorry to hear that; but why did not you tell me that before? If I had known as much this morning I certainly would not have called on him.”

In this example, subjects and modifiers appear within the phrases. In the first verb phrase, “do” is a helping verb, while “consider” is a main verb. “You” is a [pronoun](#) working as a subject, but not a part of this phrase.

## **Function**

There are various functions verb phrases perform. They serve as phrase heads, as predicates, modifiers, compliments, and objects. Verb phrases also function as noun phrase modifiers, containing a word and phrase, and

complements, and verb phrase complements. In traditional grammar, verb phrases function as predicates, adding meaning to sentences. In fact, verb phrases make a sentence semantically clear and comprehensible for readers.