

1. SYNTAX: MODELS
CLASSES OF WORDS AND FUNCTIONS OF WORDS
SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

The definitions and examples below work fairly well as descriptions of English. We'll undoubtedly come across examples of English sentences in which these descriptions won't quite fit. Not to worry. What we have here is at least a starting place.

Before we start, however, you should know that in addition to **single** words, you can have "strings" of words in the form of either phrases or clauses. Both phrases and clauses are groups of words that cohere in some way, but a clause must further contain a verb. Clauses are subdivided into independent and dependent or subordinate; the first can stand alone, while the second can't.

Nouns name persons, places, things, or abstract ideas; they **function** as

1. subjects (about which verbs make assertions; see example 1):
2. direct objects (receivers of the actions of transitive verbs; see example 2);
3. indirect objects (to/for whom/what something is done; see example 2);
4. objects of prepositions (**on the table**);
5. predicate nouns (nouns that occur in the predicate and that rename the subject or complete its meaning; used with linking verb). **Grendel is a monster.**

Pronouns replace nouns or other pronouns (**He snores.**) and come in a variety of kinds. For example,

personal (she, they)	relative (who, which, that)
demonstrative (this, those)	interrogative (Who? Why? Where?)

Verbs express action or states of being (**She goes. She is. She becomes.**) and are the hearts of clauses, because they predicate something about the subject. To name them more precisely, we call them **finite verbs**, because they are **limited** by person (first, second, third), number (singular, plural), and time (past, present, future). Another way to put the matter is to say that a verb agrees with its subject in person and number. **We go. (first person, plural, present tense)**

They also have **voice**; that is, they show whether the subject is the performer (active voice) or the receiver (passive voice) of the action of

the verb. **I hit the ball. vs. I was hit by the ball.**

They have **mood** or mode; that is, they indicate the status of assertions by indicating the writer's attitude toward the factuality or likelihood of the actions or conditions expressed. In a word, they indicate the writer's state of mind.

The three modes are

indicative (declarative statement or question),
imperative (command),
subjunctive (doubt, hypothesis or supposition, possibility, or any counterfactual statement).

Examples of the subjunctive are

If he were here, I'd be surprised.
Suppose that I were to ask you about the subjunctive.

Finally, English verbs can be **progressive** (the **aspect** of the verb). That is, they can emphasize the unfolding of the action.

I am going to the store vs. I go to the store.

The three kinds of finite verbs are

transitive which take a direct object;
intransitive which require no object;
linking which are forms of to be or verbs such as become, seem, feel, etc. that link the subject with a predicate noun or a predicate adjective.

Examples:

1. **Hrothgar snores.**
2. **Beowulf gives Grendel a surprise.**

Adjectives describe or modify nouns or pronouns. In relation to nouns and pronouns, adjectives answer the question "which?". An adjective found in the predicate of a sentence and modifying the subject is known as a **predicate adjective**.

Example:

3. **Young Hrothgar snores.**

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs, and in relation to these words, they answer the questions "where?" "when?" "why?" or "how?".

Example:

4. Hrothgar snores loudly.

Prepositions link nouns or pronouns (**objects of the prepositions**) to some other word in the clause or phrase. The entire unit, or **prepositional phrase**, functions as an adverb or an adjective. (Prepositions and conjunctions are like one another in that they both have conjunctive force. You can see the reason, therefore, that a few words [after, before] show up on both lists of prepositions and lists of conjunctions.)

Examples:

5. Hrothgar snores in bed.

6. Wealththeow is not a relative of Beowulf.

Verbals are a class of what you might call second-string verb forms. That is, they are non-finite with regard to person and number; different kinds of verbals function as nouns or modifiers. Verbals **may** express time, and they **can** take objects. However, because they do not make assertions, as do finite verbs, they **cannot** be used with a subject to make a clause. Along with their complements, verbals instead form phrases (e.g., a **participial phrase**). The kinds and functions of verbals and verbal **phrases** are:

1. present participle (adjective; see examples 7 and 8 below)
2. past participle (adjective. **Rolled, the sleeping bag took up little space.**)
3. infinitive (subject or object [noun]; adjective, adverb. **To roll** is fun.)
4. gerund (subject or object [noun]. **Rolling is fun.**)

Examples:

7. **Rolling** himself around in bed, Hrothgar snores.

8. **Running**, I caught up.

Nota Bene Two very common mistakes in the use of participial phrases are the **misplaced modifier** and the **dangling modifier**.

In the first, the phrase has been "misplaced" next to a noun it is not meant to modify. (**I lost my hat running down the street. "I shot an elephant in my pajamas" [Groucho Marx]. See the end of this document for more howlers.) The writer can set up the proper syntax or**

relation between the words in these assertions by moving the phrases.

Running down the street, I lost my hat. In my pajamas, I shot an elephant.

Dangling modification, on the other hand, is a more egregious error; properly speaking, there is no modification in this case.

Rushing over the mountain, the Pacific Ocean came into view.

This sentence cannot be corrected simply by moving the phrase; as the statement is currently written, the participial phrase "dangles" or modifies absolutely nothing. Dangling modifiers require the restructuring of the sentence.

As the train rushed over the mountain, the Pacific Ocean came into view.

Most often--and you really must pay attention to this--dangling modifiers show up at the ends of sentences.

Many people wanted to dress as if they were rich, thus supporting the illusion of general prosperity.

One way this sentence could be restructured is

Many people wanted to dress as if they were rich, an action which would support the illusion of general prosperity.

This form of dangling modification is no small potatoes, because it destroys a number of structures which are important in argumentation. These are structures such as premise and conclusion, data and conclusion, or, generally, any inference. I will indicate both misplaced modifiers and dangling modifiers with the abbreviations "mm" (misplaced modifier), "dm" (dangling modifiers), or "syn" (error in syntax).

Conjunctions join pieces of language. Depending on the kind of conjunction, you can join words, phrases, or clauses to one another and establish relations between them. **Coordinating** conjunctions (**and, but, for, or, nor, yet, so**) are the more versatile, because some of them can join all three; **subordinating** conjunctions (for example, **when, while, since, after, because, if**) connect only a **dependent** clause to another clause. Given the specific connection, the dependent clause may be an adverb, an adjective, or a noun. Below you will find a more complete list of subordinating conjunctions.

after*	since*	until*
although	so that	when
as*	than	where
because	that	whether
if	though	while
in order that	unless	

***This word may also function as a preposition.**

A special kind of subordinating conjunction is the **relative**. It both joins the dependent clause to another and also has a specific syntactic function in the clause in which it is found. Examples include

who	whose	that
whom	which	

Another group of words, which are in fact adverbs rather than conjunctions, is worth knowing about at this point, because members of this group are sometimes mistaken for conjunctions. These are the **conjunctive adverbs**; we sense rightly that they have a kind of conjunctive force, and, in fact, you'll see later that they can function as transitions within and between sentences. Within sentences, they often establish the thought connection between two independent clauses; however, they are not syntactically strong enough to hold the clauses together and require the support of a semi-colon. Examples of conjunctive adverbs are

therefore	however	likewise
hence	nevertheless	moreover
consequently	otherwise	indeed
thus	on the other hand	in fact
accordingly	furthermore	in other words
		similarly

Examples:

9. **When he sleeps, Hrothgar snores.**

10. **Hrothgar knows that Grendel is coming.**

Interjections are words syntactically unrelated to the rest of the sentence (**Good heavens**, are you going?)

Appositives are words or phrases that rename, explain, or identify other words or phrases (antecedents). They have the same function as the antecedents.

Example:

11. **Hrothgar, an old warrior, is besieged by Grendel.**

Misplaced modifiers, more howlers:

"At this juncture, we are moving to investigate the accident which killed x

and y to some degree." (from Wendy Munyon)

"We ate our hot dogs, as we sunbathed on the beach, dripping with ketchup and mustard." (From Marc Chamberland's 9th grade teacher, Gregory Banting)

"Democratic presidential hopeful x hugs y, 17, after she told him of trying to escape drugs and violence throughout her life at a campaign stop in Manchester, N.H. . . ." (The Washington Post, 1/26/99)

Once you've learned the rough definition found here in Dr. Syntax 1, you'll be able to analyze the syntax of an entire sentence. You can choose either to diagram or to give an account of kind and function of words, phrases, and clauses. Whichever way you choose, first locate all the verbs (don't be deceived by verbals!) and then determine who or what performs the action expressed by the verb(s) or "about" what the verb makes an assertion. If you're looking at a single clause, you will have found subject and what is predicated about the subject (the verb), both of which make up the core structure(s) of your sentence. You want to be alert to the possibility of simple compounds at the word or phrase level for both your subject ("Jack and Jill") and your verb ("went up the hill and fell down").