Grammar Terms

A glossary of English grammatical and linguistic terms, with definitions, explanations and example sentences.

This glossary of English grammar terms relates to the English language. Some terms here may have additional or extended meanings when applied to other languages. For example, "case" in some languages applies to pronouns and nouns. In English, nouns do not have case and therefore no reference to nouns is made in its definition here.

Term	Definition
active voice	one of two voices in English; a direct form of expression where the subject performs or "acts" the verb; see also passive voice eg: "Many people **eat** rice"
adjective	part of speech that typically describes or "modifies" a noun eg: "It was a **big** dog."
adjective clause	seldom-used term for relative clause
adjunct	word or phrase that adds information to a sentence and that can be removed from the sentence without making the sentence ungrammatical eg: I met John **at school**.
adverb	word that modifies a verb, an adjective or another adverb eg: quickly, really, very
adverbial clause	dependent clause that acts like an adverb and indicates such things as time, place or reason eg: **Although we are getting older**, we grow more beautiful each day.
affirmative	statement that expresses (or claims to express) a truth or "yes" meaning; opposite of negative eg: The sun is hot.
affix	language unit (morpheme) that occurs before or after (or sometimes within) the root or stem of a word eg: **un-** in unhappy (prefix), **-ness** in happiness (suffix)
agreement (also known as "concord")	logical (in a grammatical sense) links between words based on tense, case or number eg: this phone, these phones
antecedent	word, phrase or clause that is replaced by a pronoun (or other substitute) when mentioned subsequently (in the same sentence or later) eg: "**Emily** is nice because she brings me flowers."
appositive	noun phrase that re-identifies or describes its neighbouring noun

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	eg: "Canada, **a multicultural country**, is recognized by its maple leaf flag."
article	determiner that introduces a noun phrase as definite (**the**) or indefinite (**a/an**)
aspect	feature of some verb forms that relates to duration or completion of time; verbs can have no aspect (simple), or can have continuous or progressive aspect (expressing duration), or have perfect or perfective aspect (expressing completion)
auxiliary verb (also called "helping verb")	verb used with the main verb to help indicate something such as tense or voice eg: I **do** not like you. She **has** finished. He **can** swim.
bare infinitive	unmarked form of the verb (no indication of tense, mood, person, or aspect) without the particle "to"; typically used after modal auxiliary verbs; see also infinitive eg: "He should **come**", "I can **swim**"
base form	basic form of a verb before conjugation into tenses etc eg: **be**, **speak**
case	form of a pronoun based on its relationship to other words in the sentence; case can be subjective, objective or possessive eg: "**I** love this dog", "This dog loves **me**", "This is **my** dog"
causative verb	verb that causes things to happen such as "make", "get" and "have"; the subject does not perform the action but is indirectly responsible for it eg: "She **made** me go to school", "I **had** my nails painted"
clause	group of words containing a subject and its verb eg: "It was late **when he arrived**"
comparative, comparative adjective	form of an adjective or adverb made with "-er" or "more" that is used to show differences or similarities between two things (not three or more things) eg: **colder**, **more quickly**
complement	part of a sentence that completes or adds meaning to the predicate eg: Mary did not say **where she was going**.
compound noun	noun that is made up of more than one word; can be one word, or hyphenated, or separated by a space eg: toothbrush, mother-in-law, Christmas Day

Term	Definition
compound sentence	sentence with at least two independent clauses; usually joined by a conjunction eg: "You can have something healthy but you can't have more junk food."
concord	another term for agreement
conditional	structure in English where one action depends on another ("if-then" or "then-if" structure); most common are 1st, 2nd, and 3rd conditionals eg: "If I win I will be happy", "I would be happy if I won"
conjugate	to show the different forms of a verb according to voice, mood, tense, number and person; conjugation is quite simple in English compared to many other languages eg: I walk, you walk, he/she/it walks, we walk, they walk; I walked, you walked, he/she/it walked, we walked, they walked
conjunction	word that joins or connects two parts of a sentence eg: Ram likes tea **and** coffee. Anthony went swimming **although** it was raining.
content word	word that has meaning in a sentence, such as a verb or noun (as opposed to a structure word, such as pronoun or auxiliary verb); content words are stressed in speech eg: "Could you **BRING** my **GLASSES** because I've **LEFT** them at **HOME**"
continuous (also called "progressive")	verb form (specifically an aspect) indicating actions that are in progress or continuing over a given time period (can be past, present or future); formed with "BE" + "VERB-ing" eg: "They **are watching** TV."
contraction	shortening of two (or more) words into one eg: **isn't** (is not), **we'd've** (we would have)
countable noun	thing that you can count, such as apple, pen, tree (see uncountable noun) eg: one **apple**, three **pens**, ten **trees**
dangling participle	illogical structure that occurs in a sentence when a writer intends to modify one thing but the reader attaches it to another eg: "**Running to the bus**, the flowers were blooming." (In the example sentence it seems that the flowers were running.)
declarative sentence	sentence type typically used to make a statement (as opposed to a question or command) eg: "Tara works hard", "It wasn't funny"
defining relative clause (also called	relative clause that contains information required for the understanding of the sentence; not set off with commas; see also non-defining clause

Term	Definition
"restrictive relative clause")	eg: "The boy **who was wearing a blue shirt** was the winner"
demonstrative pronoun demonstrative adjective	pronoun or determiner that indicates closeness to (this/these) or distance from (that/those) the speaker eg: "**This** is a nice car", "Can you see **those** cars?"
dependent clause	part of a sentence that contains a subject and a verb but does not form a complete thought and cannot stand on its own; see also independent clause eg: "When the water came out of the tap..."
determiner	word such as an article or a possessive adjective or other adjective that typically comes at the beginning of noun phrases eg: "It was **an** excellent film", "Do you like **my** new shirt?", "Let's buy **some** eggs"
direct speech	saying what someone said by using their exact words; see also indirect speech eg: "Lucy said: '**I am tired**.'"
direct object	noun phrase in a sentence that directly receives the action of the verb; see also indirect object eg: "Joey bought **the car**", "I like **it**", "Can you see **the man wearing a pink shirt and waving a gun in the air**?"
embedded question	question that is not in normal question form with a question mark; it occurs within another statement or question and generally follows statement structure eg: "I don't know **where he went**," "Can you tell me **where it is** before you go?", "They haven't decided **whether they should come**"
finite verb	verb form that has a specific tense, number and person eg: I **work**, he **works**, we **learned**, they **ran**
first conditional	"if-then" conditional structure used for future actions or events that are seen as realistic possibilities eg: "If we win the lottery we will buy a car"
fragment	incomplete piece of a sentence used alone as a complete sentence; a fragment does not contain a complete thought; fragments are common in normal speech but unusual (inappropriate) in formal writing eg: "When's her birthday? - **In December**", "Will they come? - **Probably not**"
function	purpose or "job" of a word form or element in a sentence eg: The function of a subject is to **perform the action**. One function of an adjective is to **describe a noun**. The function of a noun is to **name things**.
future continuous	tense* used to describe things that will happen in the future at a particular time; formed with WILL + BE

Term	Definition
(also called "future progressive")	+ VERB-ing eg: "I **will be graduating** in September."
future perfect	tense* used to express the past in the future; formed with WILL HAVE + VERB-ed eg: "I **will have graduated** by then"
future perfect continuous	tense* used to show that something will be ongoing until a certain time in the future; formed with WILL HAVE BEEN + VERB-ing eg: "We **will have been living** there for three months by the time the baby is born"
future simple	tense* used to describe something that hasn't happened yet such as a prediction or a sudden decision; formed with WILL + BASE VERB eg: "He **will be** late", "I **will answer** the phone"
genitive case	case expressing relationship between nouns (possession, origin, composition etc) eg: "**John's dog**", "**door of the car**", "**children's songs**", "**pile of sand**"
gerund	noun form of a verb, formed with VERB-ing eg: "**Walking** is great exercise"
gradable adjective	adjective that can vary in intensity or grade when paired with a grading adverb ; see also non-gradable adjective eg: quite **hot**, very **tall**
grading adverb	adverb that can modify the intensity or grade of a gradable adjective eg: **quite** hot, **very** tall
hanging participle	another term for dangling participle
helping verb	another term for auxiliary verb
imperative	form of verb used when giving a command; formed with BASE VERB only eg: "**Brush** your teeth!"
indefinite pronoun	pronoun does not refer to any specific person, thing or amount. It is vague and "not definite". eg: **anything**, **each**, **many**, **somebody**
independent clause (also called "main clause")	group of words that expresses a complete thought and can stand alone as a sentence; see also dependent clause

	eg: "**Tara is eating curry.**", "**Tara likes oranges** and **Joe likes apples**."
indirect object	noun phrase representing the person or thing indirectly affected by the action of the verb; see also direct object eg: "She showed **me** her book collection", "Joey bought **his wife** a new car"
indirect question	another term for embedded question
indirect speech (also called "reported speech")	saying what someone said without using their exact words; see direct speech eg: "Lucy said that **she was tired**"
infinitive	base form of a verb preceded by "to"**; see also bare infinitive eg: "You need **to study** harder", "**To be**, or not **to be**: that is the question"
inflection	change in word form to indicate grammatical meaning eg: **dog**, **dogs** (two inflections); **take**, **takes**, **took**, **taking**, **taken** (five inflections)
interjection	common word that expresses emotion but has no grammatical value; can often be used alone and is often followed by an exclamation mark eg: "Hi!", "er", "Ouch!", "Dammit!"
interrogative	(formal) sentence type (typically inverted) normally used when asking a question eg: "Are you eating?", "What are you eating?"
interrogative pronoun	pronoun that asks a question. eg: **who**, **whom**, **which**
intransitive verb	verb that does not take a direct object; see also transitive verb e.g. "He is **working** hard", "Where do you **live**?"
inversion	any reversal of the normal word order, especially placing the auxiliary verb before the subject; used in a variety of ways, as in question formation, conditional clauses and agreement or disagreement eg: "Where are your keys?","Had we watched the weather report, we wouldn't have gone to the beach", "So did he", "Neither did she"
irregular verb see irregular verbs list	verb that has a different ending for past tense and past participle forms than the regular "-ed"; see also regular verb eg: buy, **bought**, **bought**; do, **did**, **done**
lexicon, lexis	all of the words and word forms in a language with meaning or function

lexical verb	another term for main verb
linking verb	verbs that connect the subject to more information (but do not indicate action), such as "be" or "seem"
main clause	another term for independent clause
main verb (also called "lexical verb")	any verb in a sentence that is not an auxiliary verb; a main verb has meaning on its own eg: "Does John **like** Mary?", "I will have **arrived** by 4pm"
modal verb (also called "modal")	auxiliary verb such as can, could, must, should etc; paired with the bare infinitive of a verb eg: "I **should** go for a jog"
modifier	word or phrase that modifies and limits the meaning of another word eg: the house => the **white** house, the house **over there**, the house **we sold last year**
mood	sentence type that indicates the speaker's view towards the degree of reality of what is being said, for example subjunctive, indicative, imperative
morpheme	unit of language with meaning; differs from "word" because some cannot stand alone e.g. **un**-, **predict** and -**able** in unpredictable
multi-word verb	verb that consists of a basic verb + another word or words (preposition and/or adverb) eg: **get up** (phrasal verb), **believe in** (prepositional verb), **get on with** (phrasal-prepositional verb)
negative	form which changes a "yes" meaning to a "no" meaning; opposite of affirmative eg: "She will **not** come", "I have **never** seen her"
nominative case	another term for subjective case
non-defining relative clause (also called "non-restrictive relative clause")	relative clause that adds information but is not completely necessary; set off from the sentence with a comma or commas; see defining relative clause eg: "The boy, **who had a chocolate bar in his hand**, was still hungry"
non-gradable adjective	adjective that has a fixed quality or intensity and cannot be paired with a grading adverb; see also gradable adjective eg: freezing, boiling, dead
non-restrictive relative	another term for non-defining relative clause

clause	
noun	part of speech that names a person, place, thing, quality, quantity or concept; see also proper noun and compound noun eg: "The **man** is waiting", "I was born in **London**", "Is that your **car**?", "Do you like **music**?"
noun clause	clause that takes the place of a noun and cannot stand on its own; often introduced with words such as "that, who or whoever" eg: "**What the president said** was surprising"
noun phrase (NP)	any word or group of words based on a noun or pronoun that can function in a sentence as a subject, object or prepositional object; can be one word or many words; can be very simple or very complex eg: "**She** is nice", "When is **the meeting**?", "**The car over there beside the lampost** is mine"
number	change of word form indicating one person or thing (singular) or more than one person or thing (plural) eg: one **dog**/three **dogs**, **she**/**they**
object	thing or person affected by the verb; see also direct object and indirect object eg: "The boy kicked **the ball**", "We chose **the house with the red door**"
objective case	case form of a pronoun indicating an object eg: "John married **her**", "I gave it to **him**"
part of speech	one of the classes into which words are divided according to their function in a sentence eg: verb, noun, adjective
participle	verb form that can be used as an adjective or a noun; see past participle, present participle
passive voice	one of two voices in English; an indirect form of expression in which the subject receives the action; see also active voice eg: "Rice **is eaten** by many people"
past tense (also called "simple past")	tense used to talk about an action, event or situation that occurred and was completed in the past eg: "I **lived** in Paris for 10 years", "Yesterday we **saw** a snake"
past continuous	tense often used to describe an interrupted action in the past; formed with WAS/WERE + VERB-ing eg: "I **was reading** when you called"
past perfect	tense that refers to the past in the past; formed with HAD + VERB-ed eg: "We **had stopped** the car"

past perfect continuous	tense that refers to action that happened in the past and continued to a certain point in the past; formed with HAD BEEN + VERB-ing eg: "I **had been waiting** for three hours when he arrived"
past participle	verb form (V3) - usually made by adding "-ed" to the base verb - typically used in perfect and passive tenses, and sometimes as an adjective eg: "I have **finished**", "It was **seen** by many people", "**boiled** eggs"
perfect	verb form (specifically an aspect); formed with HAVE/HAS + VERB-ed (present perfect) or HAD + VERB-ed (past perfect)
person	grammatical category that identifies people in a conversation; there are three persons: 1st person (pronouns I/me, we/us) is the speaker(s), 2nd person (pronoun you) is the listener(s), 3rd person (pronouns he/him, she/her, it, they/them) is everybody or everything else
personal pronoun	pronoun that indicates person eg: "**He** likes my dogs", "**They** like **him**"
phrasal verb	multi-word verb formed with a verb + adverb eg: **break up**, **turn off** (see phrasal verbs list) NB: many people and books call all multi-word verbs "phrasal verbs" (see multi-word verbs)
phrase	two or more words that have a single function and form part of a sentence; phrases can be noun, adjective, adverb, verb or prepositional
plural	of a noun or form indicating more than one person or thing; plural nouns are usually formed by adding "-s"; see also singular, number eg: **bananas**, **spoons**, **trees**
position	grammatically correct placement of a word form in a phrase or sentence in relation to other word forms eg: "The correct position for an article is at the beginning of the noun phrase that it describes"
positive	basic state of an adjective or adverb when it shows quality but not comparative or superlative eg: **nice**, **kind**, **quickly**
possessive adjective	adjective (also called "determiner") based on a pronoun: my, your, his, her, its, our, their eg: "I lost **my** keys", "She likes **your** car"
possessive case	case form of a pronoun indicating ownership or possession eg: "**Mine** are blue", "This car is **hers**"

possessive pronoun	pronoun that indicates ownership or possession eg: "Where is **mine**?", "These are **yours**"
predicate	one of the two main parts (subject and predicate) of a sentence; the predicate is the part that is not the subject eg: "My brother **is a doctor**", "**Who did** you **call**?", "The woman wearing a blue dress **helped me**"
prefix	affix that occurs before the root or stem of a word eg: **im**possible, **re**load
preposition	part of speech that typically comes before a noun phrase and shows some type of relationship between that noun phrase and another element (including relationships of time, location, purpose etc) eg: "We sleep **at** night", "I live **in** London", "This is **for** digging"
prepositional verb	multi-word verb that is formed with verb + preposition eg: **believe in**, **look after**
present participle	-ing form of a verb (except when it is a gerund or verbal noun) eg: "We were **eating**", "The man **shouting** at the back is rude", "I saw Tara **playing** tennis"
present simple (also called "simple present")	tense usually used to describe states and actions that are general, habitual or (with the verb "to be") true right now; formed with the basic verb (+ s for 3rd person singular) eg: "Canada **sounds** beautiful", "She **walks** to school", "I **am** very happy"
present continuous (also called "present progressive")	tense used to describe action that is in process now, or a plan for the future; formed with BE + VERB-ing eg: "We **are watching** TV", "I **am moving** to Canada next month"
present perfect	tense that connects the past and the present, typically used to express experience, change or a continuing situation; formed with HAVE + VERB-ed eg: "I **have worked** there", "John **has broken** his leg", "How long **have** you **been** in Canada?"
present perfect continuous	tense used to describe an action that has recently stopped or an action continuing up to now; formed with HAVE + BEEN + VERB-ing eg: "I'm tired because I**'ve been running**", "He **has been living** in Canada for two years"
progressive	another term for continuous
pronoun	word that replaces a noun or noun phrase; there are several types including personal pronouns, relative pronouns and indefinite pronouns eg: **you**, **he**, **him**; **who**, **which**; **somebody**, **anything**

proper noun	noun that is capitalized at all times and is the name of a person, place or thing eg: **Shakespeare**, **Tokyo**, **EnglishClub.com**
punctuation	standard marks such as commas, periods and question marks within a sentence eg: **, . ? ! - ; :**
quantifier	determiner or pronoun that indicates quantity eg: **some**, **many**, **all**
question tag	final part of a tag question; mini-question at end of a tag question eg: "Snow isn't black, **is it**?"
question word	another term for WH-word
reciprocal pronoun	pronoun that indicates that two or more subjects are acting mutually; there are two in English - each other, one another eg: "John and Mary were shouting at **each other**", "The students accused **one another** of cheating"
reduced relative clause (also called "participial relative clause")	construction similar to a relative clause, but containing a participle instead of a finite verb; this construction is possible only under certain circumstances eg: "The woman **sitting on the bench** is my sister", "The people **arrested by the police** have been released"
reflexive pronoun	pronoun ending in -self or -selves, used when the subject and object are the same, or when the subject needs emphasis eg: "She drove **herself**", "I'll phone her **myself**"
regular verb see regular verbs list	verb that has "-ed" as the ending for past tense and past participle forms; see also irregular verb eg: work, worked, worked
relative adverb	adverb that introduces a relative clause; there are four in English: **where**, **when**, **wherever**, **whenever**; see also relative pronoun
relative clause	dependent clause that usually starts with a relative pronoun such as who or which, or relative adverb such as where eg: "The person **who finishes first** can leave early" (defining), "Texas, **where my brother lives**, is big" (non-defining)
relative pronoun	pronoun that starts a relative clause; there are five in English: **who**, **whom**, **whose**, **which**, **that**; see also relative adverb
reported speech	another term for indirect speech

restrictive relative clause	another term for defining relative clause
second conditional	"if-then" conditional structure used to talk about an unlikely possibility in the future eg: "If we won the lottery we would buy a car"
sentence	largest grammatical unit; a sentence must always include a subject (except for imperatives) and predicate; a written sentence starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop/period (.), question mark (?) or exclamation mark (!); a sentence contains a complete thought such as a statement, question, request or command eg: "Stop!", "Do you like coffee?", "I work."
series	list of items in a sentence eg: "The children ate **popsicles, popcorn and chips**"
singular	of a noun or form indicating exactly one person or thing; singular nouns are usually the simplest form of the noun (as found in a dictionary); see also plural, number eg: **banana**, **spoon**, **tree**
split infinitive	situation where a word or phrase comes between the particle "to" and the verb in an infinitive; considered poor construction by some eg: "He promised **to never lie** again"
Standard English (S.E.)	"normal" spelling, pronunciation and grammar that is used by educated native speakers of English
structure word	word that has no real meaning in a sentence, such as a pronoun or auxiliary verb (as opposed to a content word, such as verb or noun); structure words are not normally stressed in speech eg: "**Could you** BRING **my** GLASSES **because I've** LEFT **them at** HOME"
subject	one of the two main parts (subject and predicate) of a sentence; the subject is the part that is not the predicate; typically, the subject is the first noun phrase in a sentence and is what the rest of the sentence "is about" eg: "**The rain water** was dirty", "**Mary** is beautiful", "**Who** saw you?"
subjective case also called "nominative"	case form of a pronoun indicating a subject eg: Did **she** tell you about her?
subjunctive	fairly rare verb form typically used to talk about events that are not certain to happen, usually something that someone wants, hopes or imagines will happen; formed with BARE INFINITIVE (except past of "be") eg: "The President requests that John **attend** the meeting"
subordinate clause	another term for dependent clause

suffix	affix that occurs after the root or stem of a word eg: happi**ness**, quick**ly**
superlative, superlative adjective	adjective or adverb that describes the extreme degree of something eg: **happiest**, **most quickly**
SVO	subject-verb-object; a common word order where the subject is followed by the verb and then the object eg: "The man crossed the street"
syntax	sentence structure; the rules about sentence structure
tag question	special construction with statement that ends in a mini-question; the whole sentence is a tag question; the mini-question is a question tag; usually used to obtain confirmation eg: "The Earth is round, isn't it?", "You don't eat meat, do you?"
tense	form of a verb that shows us when the action or state happens (past, present or future). Note that the name of a tense is not always a guide to when the action happens. The "present continuous tense", for example, can be used to talk about the present or the future.
third conditional	"if-then" conditional structure used to talk about a possible event in the past that did not happen (and is therefore now impossible) eg: "If we had won the lottery we would have bought a car"
transitive verb	action verb that has a direct object (receiver of the action); see also intransitive verb eg: "The kids always **eat** a snack while they watch TV"
uncountable nouns (also called "mass nouns" or "non-count")	thing that you cannot count, such as substances or concepts; see also countable nouns eg: **water**, **furniture**, **music**
usage	way in which words and constructions are normally used in any particular language
V1, V2, V3	referring to Verb 1, Verb 2, Verb 3 - being the base, past and past participle that students typically learn for irregular verbs eg: speak, spoke, spoken
verb	word that describes the subject's action or state and that we can change or conjugate based on tense and person eg: (to) work, (to) love, (to) begin
voice	form of a verb that shows the relation of the subject to the action; there are two voices in

	English: active, passive
WH-question	question using a WH-word and expecting an answer that is not "yes" or "no"; WH-questions are "open" questions; see also yes-no question eg: Where are you going?
WH-word (also called "question word")	word that asks a WH-question; there are 7 WH-words: who, what, where, when, which, why, how
word order	order or sequence in which words occur within a sentence; basic word order for English is subject-verb-object or SVO
yes-no question	question to which the answer is yes or no; yes-no questions are "closed" questions; see also WH-question eg: "Do you like coffee?"
zero conditional	"if-then" conditional structure used when the result of the condition is always true (based on fact) eg: "If you dial O, the operator comes on"

* note that technically English does not have a real future tense
** some authorities consider the base form of the verb without "to" to be the true infinitive

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