



**MODULE 4:**

**GRAMMAR**

**BEYOND**

**NAMING,**

**DOING,**

**DESCRIBING**

**INTRODUCTION**

How parts of speech can be taught memorably and logically so that an accurate, reliable metalanguage can be established for study, feedback and correction.

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## THE LEXICON: A BUSY TOWN

Though teaching parts of speech in depth has somewhat fallen out of favour in schools, there is no getting away from the fact that words fall into categories. Teaching the names of and expectations around these categories helps teachers establish useful meta-language with their students, so that instruction, correction and guidance draws on a common and clear set of terms.

The parts of speech, e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and so on, interact with one another to form phrases and sentences.

One way to look at it, is that words are like citizens of a town. They all have jobs and relationships and behave in certain ways according to rules. Those rules differ from town to town, just like the rules differ between languages, even though the word categories remain the same. For instance, in English, a verb usually precedes its object: *The cat sat on the mat*, as opposed to *\*The cat on the mat sat*.

A sentence or thought is deemed *complete* only if it contains a noun and a verb. That is why these two parts of speech are taught most successfully. They are universal to language, in that when humans communicate, at the bare minimum, they talk about things and they talk about what those things do, are or have.

To extend the town analogy further, nouns are like a royal family. They have servants who are used exclusively to perform duties for them.

Their fuel is the verbs. Verbs help nouns to express their state of being, what they're doing and what they have. Verbs can be moulded to suit the time these things take place (tense) and to even agree with which noun they're fuelling (agreement).

Nouns have servants whose job it is to communicate more about them. They're like PR consultants, always adding colour and depth to them. Those are the adjectives.

There is another category of words also involved in modifying or describing the other parts of speech. Those are the adverbs.

Nouns also have servants whose job it is to connect them to all the other citizens of the town. Those are the prepositions.

There is another category of words also involved in connecting, but they can connect any of the other parts of speech. Those are the conjunctions.

So in summary, there are three main categories:


The universals (nouns and verbs)

The describers (adjectives and adverbs)

The connectors (prepositions and conjunctions)

The table below is a visual guide to this idea:

Parts of speech		What they are
Nouns (+ pronouns + determiners)	Verbs	The universals
Adjectives describe...	Adverbs	The describers
Prepositions connect to...	Conjunctions	The connectors



In the language arts approach, a working knowledge of the parts of speech and syntax is essential. This is the first scope and sequence part of a knowledge rich curriculum.

Just as in the word analysis process in Language Arts, sentence analysis also has a marking system. There are some resources that use a colour-coded system to classify parts of speech, and while this is laudable, I have preferred to use a diagrammatic, dynamic system. Colours are abstract and arbitrary, whereas lines showing relationships contain more readily comprehended information. Lines are also easier to replicate, in that they don't require students to have coloured pens or pencils at their disposal.

As each concept is introduced, this marking system shows how the words are connected. The system is not intended to be an exercise in parsing large spans of text, but as an overview of how words interrelate.

Language for Life offers deeper insight into grammar and syntax, but the lessons that follow constitute a toolkit of definitions, vital to understanding and getting the most out of the writing system.

The marking system for syntax:

Nouns, their determiners and pronouns are circled and  
determiners are connected to nouns with superscript lines.

Verbs are underlined.

Subscript arrows connect verbs to subjects and objects.

(All) adjectives are bracketed.

Adverbs are (similarly) bracketed.

Modifiers are connected to (other) words with (superscript) arrows.

Prepositions have a two-headed arrow on top and so do conjunctions.

## NOUNS: THE ROYAL FAMILY

### Definition

Nouns name people, places, things, feelings or ideas.

### Etymology

Latin *nomen* 'name'. This is why when you *nominate* someone, you say their *name*.

In our examples, nouns will be circled.

### Important information about nouns

Nouns, being linguistic royals, can have quite an entourage. In some cases they have advance troops sent ahead to signal their arrival and to announce certain limited things about them. The words in this set are called *determiners*.

Though somewhat descriptive, determiners are distinct from adjectives like *big* or *green* in that they limit their noun by telling us whether it is:

- singular or plural (*this/these*)
- definite or indefinite (*the/a*)
- belonging to someone or something (*my, your, their*).

Determiners fall into certain categories, including:

- articles (*the, a, an*)
- demonstratives (*this, that, these*)
- quantifiers (*one, more, many*)
- possessives (*my, your, their*)

There is much scope for argument regarding determiners. Some would call them pronouns, some would call them adjectives. Some say they are not a word-class at all but are structural rather than functional words.

Which arguments are acceptable to you is a personal decision.

What we can agree on about determiners is that they usually come before adjectives in grammatical sentences:

The silly dog ate a blanket.

\*Silly the dog ate a blanket.

Also, certain nouns don't need determiners at all. These are:

- Nouns referring to generic things:

*Biologists enjoy life.*

- Nouns referring to a single group of things:

*Dave teaches children*, which has a different sense from *Dave teaches the children*.

- Proper nouns:

*Tony shucked the oysters*, not *\*the Tony shucked the oysters*. Putting articles before proper nouns denotes a special kind of egotism:

*The Todd is happy.*

A note on pronouns

Since the royals are the lexical figureheads, ceremoniously naming all the thoughts, feelings, ideas and suchlike in the universe, they do need to have servants carry on their tiring work. This is the job of the pronouns. They come in place of nouns so that the work can carry on, but doesn't have to be done by the noun itself. Once a subject and/or an object has been established, pronouns can then jump in and free the noun of its tedious duties.

## VERBS: THE MOVERS AND SHAKERS

Etymology: Latin *verb*, “word”

Just talking about things without talking about what they do, are or have is not a great idea. That's where verbs come in. There are two major things that get missed a lot when teaching verbs:

1. Verbs are not just "doing words". This will get you 1/3 over the line if you want a full, conceptual understanding of verbs. The other 2/3 of their job is to express being and having.
2. For the nouns to have good relationships with their verbs, there has to be something called 'agreement'. It's a bit like life. People work better together if they agree. Sentences work better if their noun and verb agree.

List of being verbs:

be (and all its forms), , feels, smells, sounds, tastes, looks, appears, seems

List of having verbs:

possess, own, retain, hold, exhibit, keep, lack (the opposite of *have* in this sense, but still not expressing action or state of being)

The problem with the verbs *is* and *has* is that sometimes, forms of those words are recycled to indicate tense. For example, contrast:

Mary Queen of Scots **was** a 16<sup>th</sup> century monarch.

with

Mary Queen of Scots **was crowned** in 1542.

or

Mary Queen of Scots **had** two children.

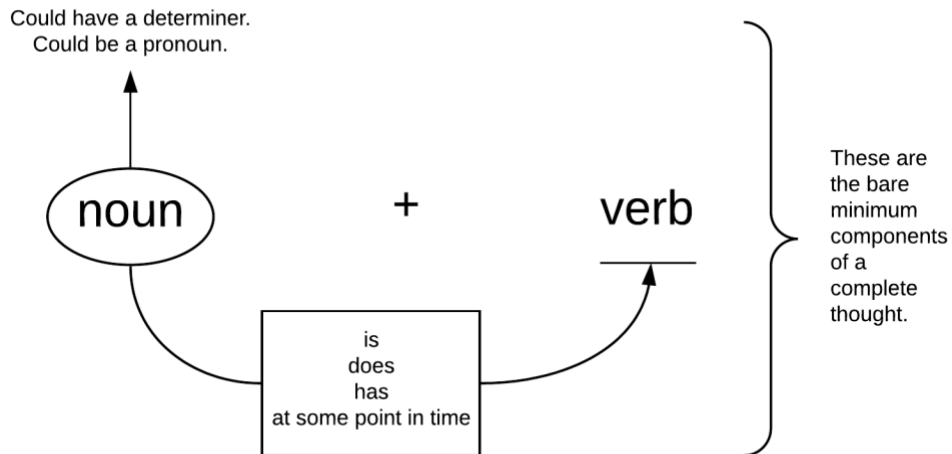
with

Mary Queen of Scots **had seen** trouble brewing.

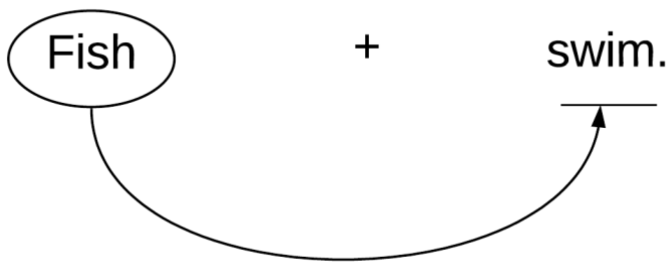
Here are some noun + be, do, have sentence frames to help you and your students practice. In our examples, nouns will be circled, and the verb that they are connected to will be underlined, with a subscript arrow going from the noun to the verb.



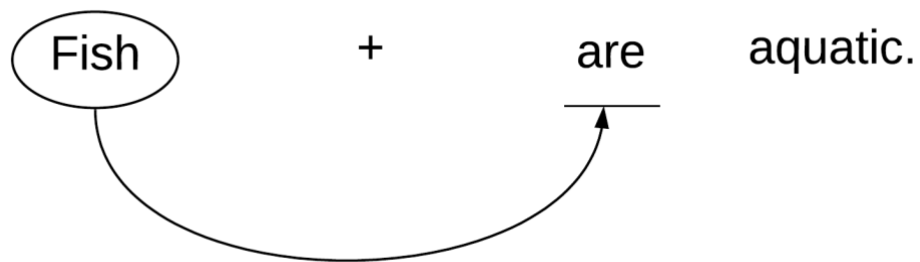
1. Bare minimum sentence frame



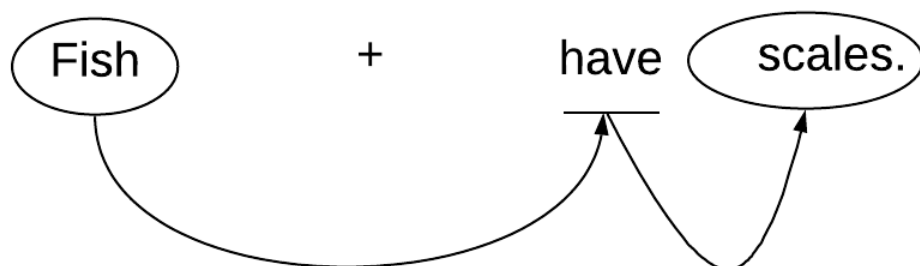
2. Sentence frame for a *do* verb



3. Sentence frame for a *be* verb



4. Sentence frame for a *have* verb



## HOW TO USE THESE FRAMES

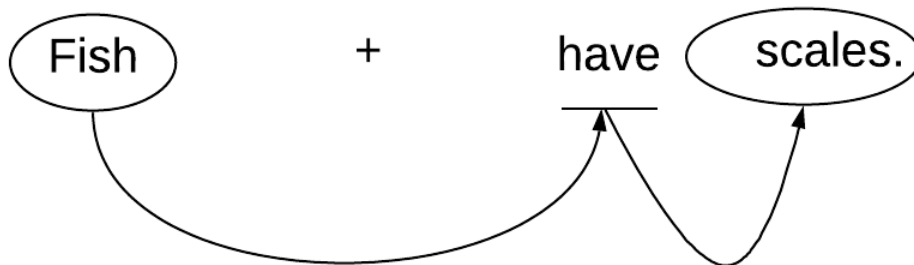
- You can use these sentence frames at any year level to generate high quality sentences on any subject.
- You can add modifiers to the elements in these frames.
- You can take these frames and extend them to include appositives and conjunctions.

## ADJECTIVES: DESCRIPTIVE NOUN-SERVANTS

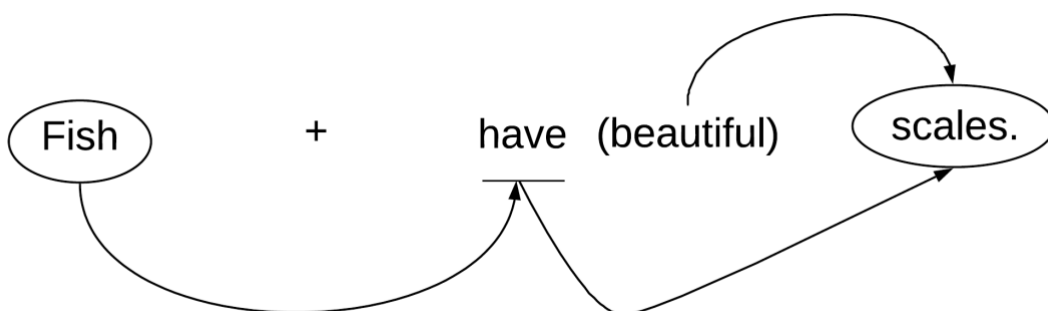
In grammar, we talk about subjects and objects. Have you heard those terms?

The base of those words is -ject-, which comes from a Latin word meaning *throw*. What has any of that got to do with grammar?

Using the analogy of nouns being royalty, consider that verbs too have equal status, in that without them, complete communication cannot take place. So if we were to hold verbs up as powerful citizens in this town (prime ministers or presidents perhaps), we can get closer to the original meaning of the subject of a verb: that which is thrown beneath the verb, subjected to its power. Not only that, but verbs can exert power over two nouns in a sentence: the subject *and* the object. The meaning of object here being something thrown in the path of the verb. For example:



It's no coincidence that adjectives, then, also contain the base -ject-. This time, with the prefix ad-, meaning towards. When we throw information towards the subject or object, we have adjectives. They are the exclusive servants of nouns, born to modify them in countless ways. There are other modifiers, but they are not for nouns. Only adjectives modify nouns and only nouns are modified by adjectives. In our examples, adjectives will be enclosed in brackets.



So yes, you can teach "an adjective is a describing word", but you lose a whole lot of richness if you don't mention they're exclusively for nouns.

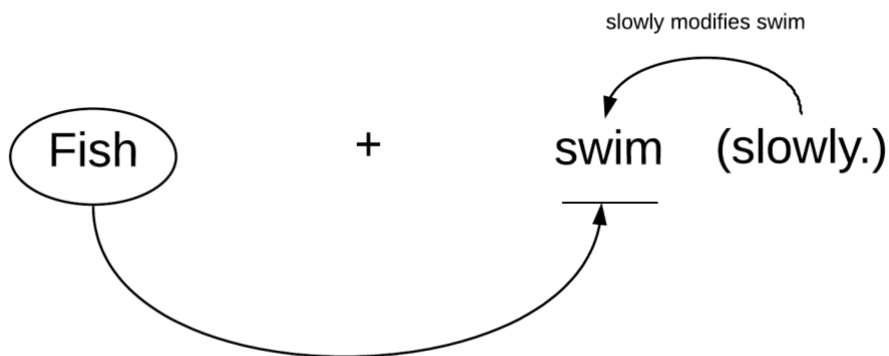
## ADVERBS: FOR OTHER WORDS

Adverbs: don't be fooled by the fact that the base -verb- is in the word (verb in Latin just means 'word'). Adverbs are NOT simply words which modify verbs. At least, that's not *all* they are.

And they're not just words that end in -ly, although this suffix is a pretty clear indicator that you *could* have an adverb there.

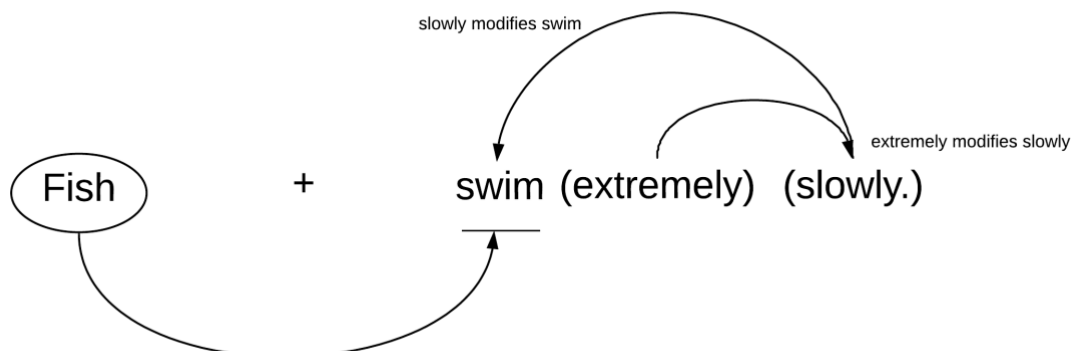
Adverbs are modifiers for sure, but they do so much more than describe verbs. They also modify other adverbs, adjectives and, of course, verbs. In our examples, adverbs will be enclosed in brackets, just like adjectives.

Let's take a worked example:



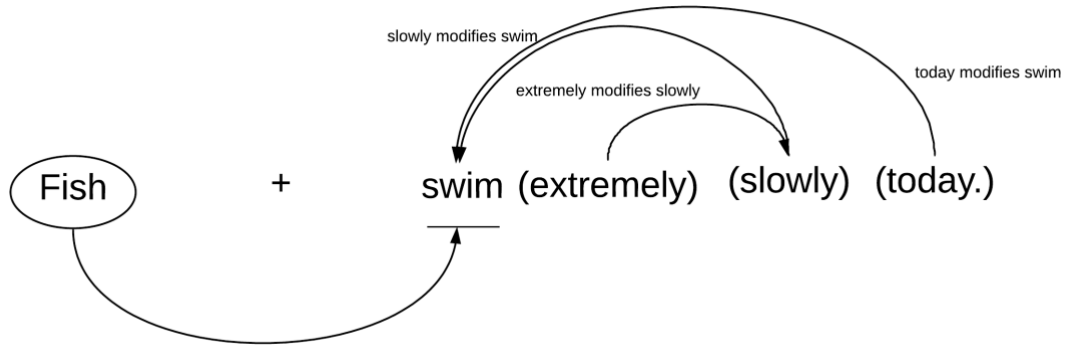
Easy, right? *Slowly* has got the classic -ly suffix and it's clearly modifying the verb *swim*.

Let's add another adverb:

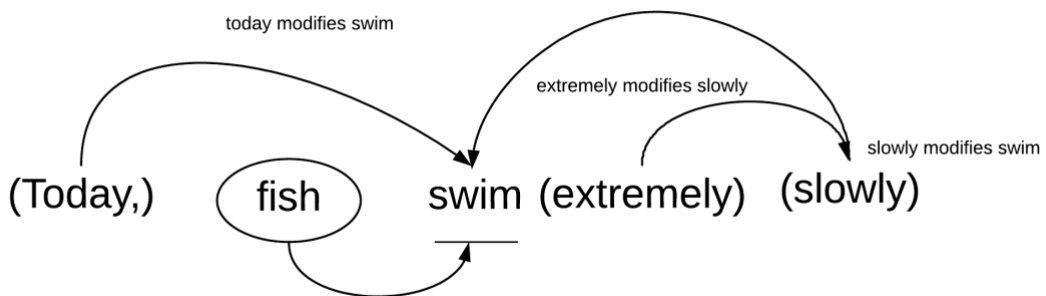


This time, we modified *slowly*. How would you like your dinner served in a restaurant? Slowly or *extremely* slowly?

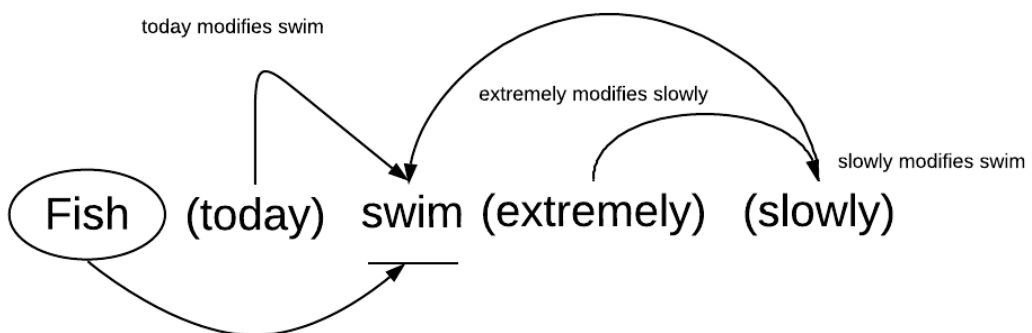
Let's add another one:



We just modified that whole thing by placing *today* at the end of the sentence. It modified *swim*, of course, but isn't it interesting that with adverbs, you can place them in many different parts of the sentence?



or even:



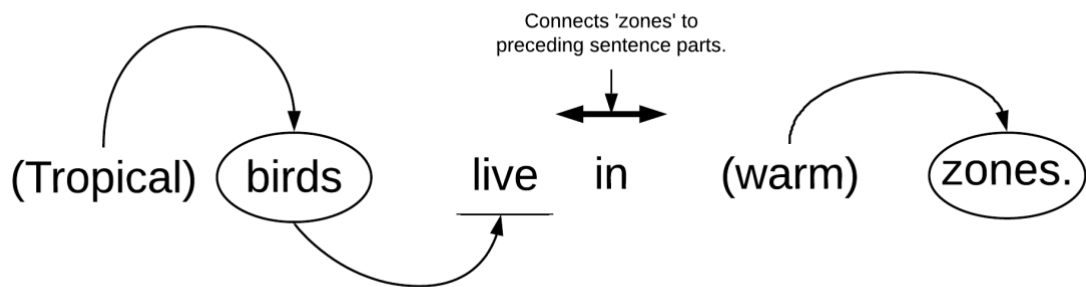
## PREPOSITIONS: NOUN CONNECTORS

The last set of noun-servants are the prepositions.

Again, the name is misleading, in that they don't necessarily communicate the *position* of a noun, not in a literal sense anyway. What they do, is show how nouns are related to other elements in the sentence.

The easy ones to spot are the ones clearly stating location, like *behind*, *above*, *below* etc. The hard ones are the ones indicating other kinds of relationships, such as *of*, *to*, *for* etc.

Where there's a preposition, however, there will always be a noun that it's plugging into the grid somewhere. In our example sentences, prepositions will be marked with a two-headed, superscript arrow to show the bidirectional nature of its job.



How a preposition links nouns to other parts of sentences

## CONJUNCTIONS: CONNECTING EVERYTHING ELSE

As it was with adjectives and adverbs, so it is with prepositions and conjunctions:

Adjectives modify nouns, adverbs modify other parts of speech.

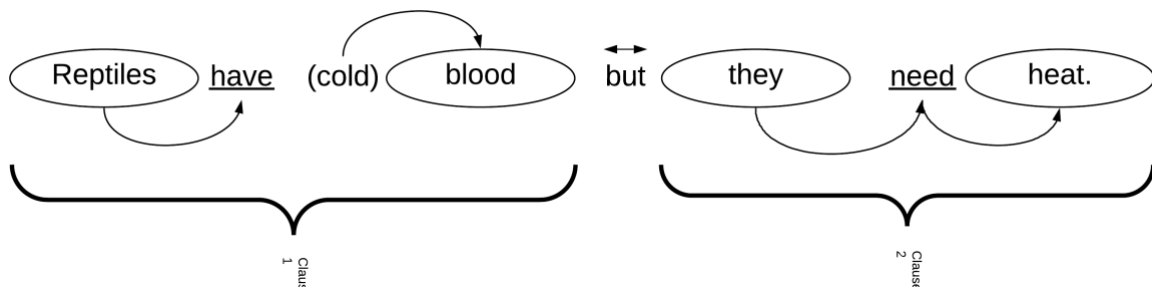
Prepositions connect nouns, conjunctions connect other parts of speech.

There are three main conjunction types:

- coordinating conjunctions (e.g. *or, and, but*) - joining elements that have equal status in a sentence
- subordinating conjunctions (e.g. *until, because, whether*) - connecting subordinate clauses to main clauses.
- correlative conjunctions (e.g. *not only...but also, neither...nor, whether...or*) - combining with other words to form a pair

In our practical guide to writing in Module 6, we will look at some lessons using conjunctions in written work.

In our examples, conjunctions will be marked with superscript arrows.



## WHAT ABOUT ALL THE OTHER PARTS OF SPEECH?

You may be wondering why we haven't mentioned the other parts of speech. After all, word categories are not limited to nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions, right?

Indeed they aren't, but this course is about what teachers *need* to know at the very baseline if they are to understand the scope of a rich language arts curriculum. You may have already known the definition of the categories above, plus other categories to boot, but our goal is to think about what is *not* well known *and* vital.

If further study into grammatical categories and functions, such as determiners, pronouns, interjections, agreement and tense is on your desired knowledge list, there are several recommendations for further study, both written and not written by me, on the Open Learning 'Grammar Resources' page.