



# In the Service of *Good Writing*

## Do Your Nouns Have Anything to Do with Your Verbs?

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Early in my career as an editor, I met a young woman who mentioned that she was teaching English at a fancy private school. Hopeful that I might have found a kindred spirit, I asked her whether she taught her students how to diagram sentences.

“Certainly not!” she sneered, peering down her nose at me. “We teach them to write good sentences.”

“I hope you reconsider,” I said, somewhat taken aback, “because I’ve been seeing a lot of manuscripts from people who have advanced degrees but still don’t know how to write sentences that are clear enough to express complicated scientific ideas.” I went on to describe some common error in syntax, but then I noticed that her facial expression had changed from contempt to fear. I suddenly realized that despite her expensive liberal arts education, she had no idea what I was talking about, even though it was something I had learned in public school in seventh grade. Yikes!

If you are a writer who wants to write good sentences, or an editor who wants to turn bad sentences into better sentences, I strongly recommend that you review seventh-grade English, including the parts of speech and the basic principles of Standard English syntax. The most important concept in Standard English, and probably in all human language, is the noun-verb transaction. Sentence diagramming is a valuable tool for helping you understand such transactions. You can gain a better understanding of this concept with AMWA’s workshop, “Sentence Diagramming for Clarity and Practicality.” You can also find help online: <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/diagrams/diagrams.htm>.

### Subjects, Verbs, and Objects

In my experience, the very worst writers are those who don’t think clearly about how their nouns relate to their verbs. I don’t just mean that their nouns don’t agree with the verbs in number; I mean that their nouns have nothing whatsoever

to do with their verbs, or that the verbs are incorrectly used in a transitive sense.

*Transitive* simply means that there’s a direct object, and *intransitive* means that there isn’t. Some verbs, such as *eat*, are *ambitransitive*, which means that they can be used either *intransitively* or *transitively*:

- ☺ I eat. (There’s no direct object. *Eat* is intransitive in this sentence.)
- ☺ I eat pie. (*Pie* is the direct object. *Eat* is transitive in this sentence.)

In contrast, some verbs are **never** transitive; and when people try to use them as transitive verbs, the result is ugly:

- ☹ The subjects were fasted for 10 hours.
- ☹ The subjects fasted for 10 hours.

*Fast* means to abstain from food, or from food and liquid. It’s an intransitive verb, so there’s never a direct object. Nothing and nobody were ever “fasted.” If you are talking about an animal or a baby, say that food and water were withheld for 10 hours. You can also say, “After a 10-hour fast....”

I strongly recommend that people make a habit of looking up even common verbs in *Merriam-Webster* ([www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)) to see whether the verb can be used in a transitive or intransitive sense and how that verb relates to various nouns. For example, in medicine, *remit* is an intransitive verb meaning to abate in force or intensity. Thus, a disease can *remit*, but patients cannot, unless you mean that they paid their bills, which is a completely different, transitive sense of *remit*.

- ☹ Several of the depressed patients remitted.
- ☺ Several patients’ depression remitted.

There are several special kinds of transitive verbs: ditransitive, factitive, and causative verbs. Ditransitive verbs involve a direct and an indirect object. A direct object answers the question *What?* or *Whom?* In contrast, the indirect object answers such questions as *To* or *for what?* or *To* or *for whom?*

- ☺ She gave Fred \$5.

To whom did she give \$5? To Fred. Therefore, *Fred* is the indirect object. What did she give Fred? \$5. Therefore, \$5 is the direct object. *Gave* is a ditransitive verb in this sentence.

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Some grammarians even argue that there are a few tritransitive verbs, which take two objects and a *that*-clause or prepositional phrase:

☺ I'll bet you \$10 that he can't diagram this sentence!

Factitive verbs seem to involve two direct objects, or rather a direct object and an objective complement:

☺ They elected Kathy president. (Kathy is the direct object, and president is the objective complement.)

Causative verbs are followed by an infinitive phrase that serves as a direct object. Notice that the subject of the infinitive is in the objective case (ie, *him*, not *he*):

☺ The emetic caused him to vomit.

There are three causative verbs (have, make, and let) that are followed by a noun/pronoun and the base form of the verb (the infinitive minus *to*):

☺ The emetic made him vomit.

### Subjects and Complements

Linking verbs, which are also called copulas or copulative verbs, are a special form of intransitive verb. They link the subject to a subjective complement, which can be another noun (predicate nominative) or an adjective (predicate adjective).

Theoretically, a linking verb connects two nouns that are in the same case, so it should be "I am I" instead of "I am me." You should write "It is she" instead of "It is her."

A linking verb can link a noun to an adjective but not to an adverb! Someone once asked me whether one should say *I feel bad* or *I feel badly*. I told him that it should be *bad*, because *to feel* is a copulative verb. He laughed, and he probably remembered the rule from that point forward.

### Unraveling Clauses and Sentences

By definition, every clause and every simple sentence contains some sort of noun-verb transaction. When you are reviewing your own writing, or editing someone else's writing, it helps to go through the piece sentence by sentence backward, so you can analyze each sentence individually, looking for the nouns and verbs. How do the nouns and verbs relate to each other? What noun is doing what verb? What direct and indirect objects is each verb

taking? Do the noun-verb transactions make literal sense? Are the verbs being used in a way that corresponds to a definition in *Merriam-Webster's*? This kind of analysis is time-consuming at first, but it quickly becomes second nature; this discipline will help you become a better editor and a better writer.

### For Further Reading

For a discussion of how failure to grasp the importance of the noun-verb transaction affects reading comprehension and writing ability, see David Mulroy's fascinating book *The War Against Grammar*. You can read the first chapter here: <http://www.snappletheatrecenter.info/intro/chapter1.pdf>.

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(Source: Paper Calculator, 2011 [<http://calculator.environmentalpaper.org/home>]; as noted in The State of the Paper Industry 2011 [<http://environmentalpaper.org>])