

The Well Bred Sentence

Chapter 3: The Simple Sentence

Copyright: Sophie Johnson
Contact: sophie_johnson@englishgrammartutor.com

The structure

The simple sentence is the basic sentence with or without brief embeddings. In the following examples of them, the verb, copula and copular verb are rendered in bold italics, and basic sentences are underlined:

We ***talked*** at length with the enemy.

VERB BASIC SENTENCE

John ***teaches*** Mathematics.

VERB + SUBJECT BASIC SENTENCE

Umbrellas ***are*** indispensable on wet days.

COPULA BASIC SENTENCE

It ***is*** true that he was the fabled thief.

COPULA BASIC SENTENCE

They ***complained*** about the noise in the room.

COPULAR-VERB BASIC SENTENCE

The problems of the simple, or basic, sentence

Constructing a simple or a basic sentence is easy. Being simple, neither poses the structural problems of the other sentence styles. This is not to say that getting them right is problem free. Their characteristic problems must be faced. Simple sentences are also the bases of complex sentences, and of the parts of compound and composite sentences. Badly constructed, they can destroy any sentence.

Nouns in the basic or the simple sentence

Misnaming often happens when the writer does not know the expressions he uses. This one, for instance, really had nothing against the police. In fact, he was writing to bemoan the closure of local police stations:

Everyone knows the cause-and-effect relationship between police and crime. [DEFECTIVE SENTENCE]

Crime does not produce police, and police do not produce crime. So even if there is a relationship between police and crime, it cannot be

called *a cause-and-effect relationship*. This writer probably meant something like:

There is less crime in areas that have police stations than in ones that do not.

He was in need of a comparison, thus of a compound sentence. His *everyone knows* is particularly unfortunate. The copular verb *knows* is specified by a noun phrase that is the product of fallacious reasoning: *the cause-and-effect relationship between police and crime*. Doing this, the sentence really shoots itself in the foot.

Misused nouns can do much mischief to the statement a writer intends to make. It can even cause him to say something he does not mean:

Lynne's letter lacks the intellectual rigor she accuses the unions of. [DEFECTIVE SENTENCE]

In this sentence the noun phrase *the intellectual rigor she accuses the unions of* specifies the copular verb *lacks*. But the sentence reads oddly. Did this writer really intend to say that Lynne accused the unions of intellectual rigor? ('Intellectual rigor' is not something we usually 'accuse' people of. Rather, we praise them for it.) Intending it or not, his noun phrase has the writer saying that Lynne did accuse of intellectual rigor. A fair guess is that the writer mis-worded his noun phrase. He did not mean to say that Lynne accused the unions of intellectual rigor. He meant that she had accused them of the lack of it. He could have said so:

Lynne's letter *lacks* the intellectual rigor she accuses the unions of lacking.

Numerical consistency and the verb, copular and copular verb

Logically, the ratio between a subject and its act (denoted by the verb or copular verb) is equal. So when there is one actor named as the perpetrator (i.e., the noun subject) of the act denoted by the verb copula or copular verb, that verbial is rendered in its singular form. When several actors are named as subject, the verbial that denotes their act is rendered in plural form. This consistency between subject and verb is called agreement in number:

Mary goes to school.

Mary and the boys go to school.

Agreement in number obtains also between the subject and the copula:

John is happy.

The boys are happy.

Every competent English speaker knows this item of syntax, and none has a quarrel with it. Yet we hear ‘*Aren’t I?*’ (‘Are not I!’) and fail even to flinch. In fact it is the syntactically correct ‘Am I not?’ that draws our attention as if it were an oddity. How on earth have we come to tolerate this plural copula ‘are’ with the singular subject ‘I’? And tolerating it, why do we continue to frown upon, say, ‘Is you’? People who review this situation and feel like laying about them sternly should indulge themselves.

The collective noun

Traditionally, the noun that names a collective is considered to be singular. Being singular, the verb or copular verb that denotes its act is also singular:

The family prays every evening.

Brazil is playing against Portugal in the final round.

The government is going to propose tough legislation in this matter.

Yet we regularly hear and read ‘the government are’, ‘the family are’, and in sports commentaries, even ‘Australia are’. What, one might well ask, is going on?

This state of things is particularly bemusing for learners of English. That is little wonder, for the equivalent in their native tongues of ‘my government are’ is impossibly ungrammatical, so probably never used. The English, they tend to conclude, are disturbingly sloppy with their grammar.

But are we? Or is it that we are left free to use our language as we think reasonable, while everyone else is constrained to toe a pedant line? Unlike most other language areas, ours is not presided over by guardians who legislate upon its use. And that’s just as well, in our estimate. For what, to take the case to hand, would be the good in our being ordered to respect the singular-noun status of the collective noun? Would respecting it add even a scrap to the lucidity of the meanings we make? Besides, when we talk about a family

that is doing something, or about a government that is doing something, we envisage several people engaged in an activity. So why a singular verb that pretends that only one person is doing it?

Such a line of argument is handy. But it won't explain all. There is still this sort of thing: We treat 'nation' as a collective noun:

A nation *is* valiant when it defends itself.

But we treat 'people' as a plural noun:

A people *are* valiant when they defend themselves.

We do this even though the two expressions are equi-meaning. We just do, that's all!

Nevertheless, what is 'a', the indefinite article that normally goes with singular nouns (a dog, a shovel) doing before the plural noun 'people'? At this stage we might explain kindly to anyone who wants to know that the English article is something we use as we do because we know how to use it. Everyone else, sadly, does not.

Other oddities assail us even as we wriggle out of the sticky mire that 'a people are' landed us in. In this business, no news is good news. Now, hold it right there! 'News', apparently a plural noun, and *is*? Oh dear. There's no making light of this one.

As if this were not vexation enough, there is the prissy business of 'the media are'. Why not 'the media is'? The fact that 'media' is the plural form of 'medium' should surely not deter us from using the singular copula with it. The plural form of 'news' does not. But then, 'news' does not have a singular form: We always hear the latest bit of news, never the latest bit of new. 'Media' has a singular form: 'medium'. But that is a spiritist sort of person, not newspapers and radio and television.

Are we getting somewhere, willy-nilly, having so far decided upon a policy of concluding nothing much? We probably are: into another mire: 'Constabulary' is a group noun, has a singular form and its act is denoted by the singular verb or copular verb:

The constabulary *needs* to be free of political control.

'A true collective noun!' one might celebrate it. But not for long. Its synonym, 'the police', is a plural noun:

The police *need* to be free of political control.

So why is one name a collective noun and its synonym a plural noun? All is lost!

What? What's this? 'All *is*'? 'All *are*', surely? 'All' is a plural noun! But wait:

All is lost if the cause is lost.

All are lost if everyone (or everything) is lost.

'All' both *is* and *is not* a collective noun, and it *is* and *is not* a plural noun. Where are we now in the collective noun/singular verb showdown?

This sort of perambulation leaves us in no doubt that the collective noun/singular verb usage is in disarray in English. Can it be rationalised, or is it now too late? In any case, how would we rationalise? What would happen, for instance, if a rule such as: 'Any noun that names a group as an abstraction (e.g., sentence (i) below) is a collective noun and must take a singular verb' were forced upon English usage? Under such a regime, we could say both that:

(i) A government *is* good only as a democratic construct,

and

(ii) This government *are* doing a good job,

and be grammatically proper, for *This government* does not name an abstraction. But then, we can do this anyway, if we want. Legislation, on the other hand, would deny us this alternative. We, being English speakers, do not take kindly to legislation on usage. Nor should we. For once it begins, where does it stop?

Sensible after-thought on a stand in support of the contemporary open-season on the collective noun is this: Tradition always has respectability. It also has clout, because traditionalists tend to outnumber rebels (and the slobs), and because traditional behaviour always has connotations of refinement. To hazard an analogy: One can make meaning creditably without respecting the collective noun/singular verb convention, just as one can eschew knife and fork yet dine well on steak. But doing either, what does one lose in polish? Writers should consider respecting collective nouns for

reason alone that failure to do so is not appreciated universally. Indeed, many see that failure an ignorance.

There follows a representative list of nouns that are unequivocally collective nouns. It is a good idea to practise using them with singular verbs, if only to cultivate one's awareness of them.

Collective nouns and reference

The peculiarity of collective nouns, other than their singular-noun status, is that they are referred to by the neuter pronouns 'it', 'its' and 'itself'. This does not hold for the universals: *none*, *either*, *neither*, because universals by nature are nouns that do not have referents. Nor does it hold for the personal universals: *everyone*, *someone*, *somebody*. They are referred to by the singular personal pronouns she/he, hers/his and herself/himself.

Representative sample of 'group' collective nouns

government, the executive, family, mankind, audience, choir, team, judiciary, administration, legislature, couple, pair, duet, trio, quartet, crowd, gang, gaggle (of geese), coven (of witches) school (of whales or fish)

The duet is coming on stage now. It will shortly begin its performance.

This coven needs to be investigated. It has earned itself a bad name.

Representative sample of names of repositories of information

the news, public opinion, the press

Public opinion has condemned the new tax on food. It considers the tax unfair.

The press insists on *its* independence. It is responsible for itself to itself.

Representative sample of names of universals

none, either, neither, each, every, everything, everyman everyone, everybody, anybody, nobody, somebody, whoever, whomever

None is keener than she/he.

Each tries as hard as the other.

Everyone is welcome if he/she comes in good faith.
Whoever comes must behave himself/herself .

Representative sample of names of disciplines

politics, mathematics, carpentry, photography, art

Mathematics demands exactitude. It is a discipline known for its rigor.

Art is what an artist does. It justifies itself thus.

Representative sample of product-category names

footwear, clothing, furniture, glassware, tableware, cutlery, hosiery, Manchester

Good footwear is always expensive. It is worth the money for it pays for itself in foot health.

An array of silver cutlery is impressive on its owner's dinner table.

Representative sample of names of abstractions

justice, hospitality, truth, love, inspiration, cowardice, bravery, the good

The good that people do lives after them. Some, however, claim it dies with them.

Inspiration is every writer's hope. It is in itself the Muses' gift.

Incidentally ...

On the eve of the inception of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), erstwhile British Prime Minister Harold McMillan was at a gathering of fellow statesmen. In skittish mood, he mused aloud about what collective noun might be suitable for naming a gathering of heads of state: a *gaggle* of principals? a *babble* of principals? a *lack* of principals?

Personal pronouns and common use

When a sentence raises a subject that is a person and represents it instead of naming it, the representation is done by the subjective cases forms: I, she, he, you, we, they. These pronouns are always the subjects of the verb, copular verb and copula sentences:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE	
	VERB	OBJECT
My friends and <u>I</u>	like	beer.
He/she/we/you/they	like	skiing
	COPULA	COMPLEMENT
He/she	is	happy.
	COPULAR VERB	COMPLEMENT
He/she/we/you/they	served	dinner.

The pronoun objects of verb sentences are always the objective case forms: ‘me’, ‘you’, ‘her’, ‘him’, ‘us’, ‘them’:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE	
	VERB	OBJECT
Mary	calls	him/her/us/you/them/me.
Mary	spoke	to her and me.

The subjective case forms – I, you, she, he, we, they – are both the subject and complement of copula sentences:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE	
	COPULA	COMPLEMENT
It	was	I/you/she/he/we/they who called.
I	am	here.
She/he/	is	here.
You/they	are	here.

The foregoing use of personal pronouns is beyond doubt the syntactically correct use. It is, however, often not the common use. For instance, one rarely hears ‘It is I’ in response to ‘Who is it?’ Far more common answer is ‘It’s me’. It is said in defence of common use that the personal pronoun in copula sentences has changed, so we no longer have to say ‘It is I/she/he/they/we’. We can say ‘It is me/her/him/them’. In fact, it is a trifle stuffy not to. Well, fine, if you believe that such a change has indeed happened. If not, feel free to use the syntactically correct personal pronoun forms.

There is also that pointless abuse of the reflexive pronoun, particularly of ‘myself’, that sets one’s teeth on edge. A common television spectacle is the self-important person giving an interview. He sets a dignified visage, then proceeds in measured tones: ‘Myself and my staff waited for the police ...’. ‘Myself’, in his unfortunate estimate, is more prestigious than ‘I’.

It is revealing to discuss this outrageous abuse of the reflexive pronoun, which is necessarily the object in a sentence, with people

who speak an Indo-European language other than English. It inevitably transpires that the silly construction where the reflexive pronoun is used as the subject in the sentence ('Myself and my staff waited ...') is impossible in any language except English.

Then there is the 'I myself' nonsense. It is supposed to work as emphasis. But then, 'I myself' is more than a little unnecessary, since it is unlikely that anyone would think that 'I' might be someone else's self. Why oh why use the reflexive pronoun in any context except the proper one, where the subject perpetrates an act upon himself: 'I cut myself', or 'I shall do that job myself', where the subject makes it known that he will not leave 'that job' to anyone else?

Also prominent is the type who masticates words to speak them well and would not be caught dead using a common word like 'me'. She, superior and self-assured, will inform you: 'The mayor tells Susan and *I* everything. He has tea with Susan and *I* regularly'. ('I', of course, is a *much better class* word than 'me', in her way of looking at it.) This superior lady suffers badly whenever she catches herself uttering a common word like 'me'. But even she is unlikely to say 'He spoke to I'. (What's the betting she would also say 'He spoke to myself'?)

The kinds of abuse just discussed happen regularly. They are defended as 'common use', and are legitimised on the basis of that defence. Against this, it is just as well to keep in mind that giving right of way to common use just because it is common is not obligatory, nor is it safe. If we allow the demolition of our basic-sentence structures, the very cornerstones of our language discipline, what will remain to us that we can call 'English syntax'? That we have not allowed their complete dismantling is obvious. For although many are happy enough to accommodate 'it's me', most of us tend to raise eyebrows when someone flouts the verb basic sentence and says 'John spoke to I'.

Why are we complacent about one abuse of syntax ('It is me/her/him/them') and indignant about another ('John spoke to I')? Both are abuses of the same canon of syntax: that pronouns have subjective (I, she, he, we, they) and objective (me, him, her, them) case forms. No doubt part of the reason is that we are so often faced with objective-pronoun forms where subjective ones should be that they have become familiar there: indeed, more familiar than the rightful subjective ones. The other reason is the Liberal Linguist (LL) factor.

The LL falls upon any abuse of syntax and splutters in goggle-eyed rapture that this is idiom and blest evidence that the wheels of change are churning up the language. ‘Language changes!’ he gurgles, salivating with champion-of-the-people glee. Yet this LL will bare teeth and spit chips of derision at anyone who dares suggest that abused syntax is less change than decadence, less idiomatic than dog rough, and as dynamic as any unseemly practice caught in the moribund grip of habit.

Writers, given their special relationship to language, should not defer to the promoters of anti-syntax, not even when the latter are dressed to the nines in the robes of democracy. They should unfurl their irredentist flags and hail a new and glorious syntax-respecting age. ‘Don’t mess with syntax’ T-shirts will also do.

Personal pronouns and gender consistency

The personal pronoun refers to a person already named in a sentence or in the one that precedes it. Feminine pronouns refer to females persons and masculine pronouns to male persons:

Mary is **her** own worst enemy.

John is **his** own worst enemy.

Category, reference and gender

When a sentence raises a subject and names it as the category ‘doctor’ or ‘employer’ or ‘child’ or ‘person’, that category is neuter (neither masculine nor feminine). Reference to category is done with the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him’:

When you get a job you must tell your **employer** that **he** is not entitled to exploit you.

The ‘he’ that refers to the category ‘employer’ is not referring to any particular employer who is a man, nor is it implying that the category ‘employer’ contains only men. As a gender-free referent to category, ‘he’ is the English neuter.

A strong collective voice in contemporary culture has mounted a very successful campaign to deny the English language the use of its neuter personal pronoun. This has seen writers reluctant to make statements of this sort:

If **a person** has good grounds for **his** belief, **he** should fight for it.

They are likely to word the foregoing statements in a way that avoids 'his' and 'he':

If **people** have good grounds for **their** beliefs, **they** must fight for them.

The plural pronoun diplomatically side-steps the neuter 'he' issue. But when a category is named by the collective nouns 'somebody', 'anybody', 'anyone', it is difficult to duck for this cover. These nouns are so pointedly singular that nobody would even consider using the plural form of the copula with them: 'Somebody have arrived'. So if their singularity commands the singular copula 'is', then surely it is also preemptory to refer to them with singular pronouns:

If **somebody** stops you, tell **him** you are my daughter.

Some writers get around this politically fraught issue by using the distributive 'he or she' or 'him or her':

If **somebody** stops you, tell **him or her** you are my daughter.

It is, however, awkward to be so accommodating when a sentence names a category and refers to it several times:

If you don't tell your employer, then you are giving **him or her** a defence against you, because **he or she** can say that **he or she** would have modified your working environment if **he or she** had known of your discomfort.

To avoid such a cumbersome and unsightly way of going about reference, an increasing number of writers resort to using the plural form of a pronouns as the referents to category:

If you don't tell your **employer**, then you are giving **them** a defence against you.

At the same time, many writers' and readers' sensibilities recoil at such offence against logic. Why refer to a category as if it were naming several people instead of itself? That is illogical.

Enterprising linguists have suggested that 's/he' should replace the neuter 'he', and 'shim' the neuter 'him'. Until that or some other ingenious idea finds uptake, writers who wish to use the neuter 'he' should do so confidently. Those who prefer to see it expunged might consider confronting the English-speaking world with the advent of

the neuter 'she'. That at least will not wreak havoc on sense in pronoun reference, nor force upon us an illogical syntax upon usage. Indeed, we should rebel against any pressure group that dares to legislate in matters of language use. And we should laugh them out of court when they seek to force illogical syntax on us.

The genitive pronoun and *-ing* nouns

There is a genitive relationship between two nouns when one names the performer and the other the performance. In the next sentence 'John' is the performer and 'decision' his performance:

John's decision to go upset us.

The same genitive relationship holds when the performer is named by a pronoun. The naming is done by one of the genitive pronoun forms: my, your, his, her, their:

My/Your/His/Her/Their decision to go upset us.

Writers have no difficulty with this item of syntax. But it is remarkable how things go off the rails when the noun with which a pronoun is in genitive relationship is an *-ing* ending noun. It is all too often that one hears and reads expressions like: 'Him leaving made things difficult for us', and 'Us leaving made things difficult for him'. Once the *-ing* noun appears, people seem to forget that there is a genitive relationship between performer and performance. Or, not realising that words ending in *-ing* can be nouns, they do not know they are dealing with a genitive relationship of pronoun and noun. That *-ing* nouns exist should be clear in every writer's mind:

His leaving [or *Jim's leaving*] made things difficult.

She insisted on **their eating** [not *them eating*] regularly.

Our inviting him [not *us inviting him*] pleased his mother.

No reasonable case can be made for avoiding the genitive noun or pronoun. This is so because a notable power of making meaning would be lost to our language if we were to abuse the genitive pronoun out of existence. For example, we say something significantly different in:

John, leaving, annoyed us.

As he was leaving, did something that annoyed us

and:

John's/his leaving annoyed us.
The fact that John/he left annoyed us.

The illiteracy 'John leaving annoyed us', used in an attempt to say that 'John's leaving annoyed us', is just that: an illiteracy. Given the foregoing point, it follows that the appropriate pronoun to represent the genitive construction *John's* is the genitive pronoun *his*, not the objective pronoun 'him', nor the subjective pronoun 'he'. No writer can afford to be cavalier about this item of syntax. Shortfalls in its application are eyesores that repel esteem.

The relative personal pronouns 'who' and 'whom'

Whether or not the syntax of *who/whom* is respectable, it is worth while to come to terms with it. Knowledge is prestigious and unembarrassed. Most people avoid using 'whom' for fear of misusing it. (They do not seem to mind misusing 'who'.) An amusing few will venture 'whom' tentatively, then appear to regret it, uncomfortably aware that they may have got it wrong. (Quite often they had.) A superior few use 'whom' relentlessly, thinking it 'better' than 'who'. This is probably the most embarrassed item in contemporary usage. Fortunately, this embarrassment is wonderfully easy to cast off.

The burning question is: why 'whom' and not 'who'? This following comparison of structures will determine the reason. In:

(i) the man **who married Mary**,

the adjective phrase *who married Mary* describes *the man* in terms of his own doing: *he* married Mary. But in:

(ii) the man **whom Mary married**,

the adjective phrase 'whom Mary married' describes *the man* relatively, in terms of Mary's doing: *Mary* married him.

Traditional Grammar has sought to describe the *who/whom* usage in terms of 'subject or object of the verb'. That was not at all a clever thing to do. Please note that in the noun-phrases (i) and (ii) above, *who* and *whom* are each a part of a noun phrase. We do not know yet whether those noun phrases will be the subjects or objects of a verb, or the subjects or complements of a copula or copular verb! So the 'subject or object of the verb' criterion is no use at all when we have to decide when to use 'who' and 'whom'. Watch how these

noun phrases can be either the subject or the object/complement of a verbial, or in a verb+subject sentence:

SUBJECT	VERB	OBJECT
John	does not like	the man who married Mary
My mother	met	the man whom Mary married.
SUBJECT	COPULA	COMPLEMENT
The man who married Mary	is	a doctor.
SUBJECT + VERB SENTENCE	ADVERB	
The man whom Mary married	<i>works</i>	independently.

Before the above grid showed that ‘who’ and ‘whom’ can both be a part of the subject or object/complement, we already knew from (i) and (ii) above that both appear in relative adjective phrases. These two informants make it clear that the criterion ‘subject or object of the verb’ is useless for determining when to use ‘whom’, and when to use ‘who’. So how do we work out when to use one or the other? Quite easily, as you are about to see. You will not even have to contend with the syntax of it all:

It’s no big deal!

Quite simply, when the relative phrase describes a person without reference to another person’s activity (or being), that sequence is always headed by ‘who’:

*The lady **who** addressed the meeting has returned.*

We invited *Susan, **who** did a wonderful job.*

When a sequence describes a person and it does include reference to someone else’s activity or being, that sequence is headed by ‘whom’:

*The lady **whom** you met addressed the meeting.*

*Mary, **about whom** they know something, will not raise an objection.*

Much the same principle obtains in questions: When the question refers only to the person whom it addresses, ‘who’ heads the sequence:

Who are you?

When the question is addressed to someone about someone else, ‘whom’ heads the sequence:

Whom will you invite?

‘Whoever’ is used to address specific but unidentified people:

Come in, **whoever** you are.

Whoever wants to can do it.

‘Whomever’ refers to notional people who are potentially specified by someone else’s action:

Support **whomever** they want.

Invite **whomever** you please.

Whomever the headmaster pats on the head will be the person elected.

‘Which’ the relative-adjective phrase header, and ‘that’ the adjective-phrase header:

It is a mistake to think of ‘which’ and ‘that’ as the interchangeable heads of all adjective phrases. In fact, relative-adjective phrases do more than describe. They also make distinct meanings. This pair of sentences will illustrate the point:

The explosion that caused the fire was the result of accumulated gas. [ADJECTIVE PHRASE]

There was more than one explosions, and the one that caused the fire was the result of accumulated gas.

The explosion, which caused the fire, was the result of accumulated gas. [RELATIVE-ADJECTIVE PHRASE]

There was one explosion, and it caused the fire.

The phrase *which caused the fire* is demarcated by commas, and that makes an exclusive relative-adjective phrase. That in itself is significant. (There is further discussion of this meaning-making comma in Chapter 8, ‘The Comma’) Equally significant is the fact that the demarcated *which*-headed phrase describes *the explosion* by

singularising it: the resultant description tells us that there was only one explosion, and it caused the fire.

The other significant thing is that we cannot possibly make this construction:

The explosion, that caused the fire, was the result of accumulated gas. [DEFECTIVE SENTENCE]

‘That’ simply cannot function as the head of an adjective phrase that describes by singularising. That is, ‘that’ cannot head an exclusive relative-adjective phrase.

Now, people often ask when they should use ‘that’ and ‘which’. Just as often, unfortunately, they are ridiculed for their question. This happens because there is a prevalent belief that the two headers are interchangeable. Not so, as the foregoing discussion pointed out. Admittedly, it is not a hanging offence to use the construction:

The explosion *which caused the fire* was the result of accumulated gas,

so long as *which caused the fire* is not turned into a relative-adjective phrase by demarcating commas, for, as we noted above, the demarcation brings about a specific meaning. But why use ‘which’ to head an adjective phrase that does not mean to be an exclusive relative-adjective phrase when ‘that’ is available as the header of the ordinary adjective phrase?

‘What’, the noun-phrase header, cannot head an adjective phrase

‘What’ cannot head an adjective phrase. Using ‘what as the adjective-phrase header is the classic bad-grammar usage:

The things what *I like* **are** expensive. [DEFECTIVE SENTENCE]

The adjective phrase must be headed by ‘that’, or by ‘where’ if the phrase is describing a place:

The things *that I like* are expensive.
Albury, *where John spent his holidays*, is on the Murray River.

‘What’ can head only a noun phrase:

*What I like about you is that you smile discerningly.
That is what I was trying to say.*
[NOUN PHRASES]

Troublesome spellings: to practise, to advise, to devise, to license, to prophesy

(This discussion is for users of English. American English has long done away with the *-ise*-ended infinitive, and hence with the spelling issue that will be discussed here. All verbs and many nouns are derived from the infinitive.)

In the case of the *-ise*-ended infinitives: to practise, to advise, to devise, and the infinitives to license and to prophesy, the nouns formed from them acquire a *c* to replace the *s* in *-ise*.

Noun form

Hers is an excellent medical *practice*.
We have a *licence* to operate these premises.
Take our *advice*.
The astrologer's *prophecy* came true.
A hammer is a useful *device*.

Verb form

The verb forms of all five spelling-problem infinitives retain the *s*. So also do all the *-ed* and *-ing* forms that function as nouns (gerunds) and as adjectives (gerundives):

They *practise* what they preach, *license* only moral behaviours, *advise* everyone to emulate them, and *prophesy/prophesise* the sad fates of those who do not share their views.

Mary *practised* medicine. She hopes to *practise* psychology.
John *is practising* his French.

The council *had been licensing* such activity for some time.
He *had advised* you. They *tried to advise* us. We *will be advising* them.

We *need to devise* a good story. They *devised* some ingenious ones.

He was asked to *prophesy* the events of the looming war. He *prophesises* willingly. He *has prophesied/prophesised* for some time.

Noun form (gerund)

Practising is the best way to master a skill.
To practise an act is to become its master.
The practised had no difficulty in negotiating the river.
Licensing is done by the council.
Their *advising* you as they do has dubious merit.
To advise as you do is a thankless task.
The well *advised* gained their objectives.
Devising plans is their strength.
Prophesying/prophesising is a practice of astrologers.
To prophesy is to foretell the future.
The *prophesied/prophesised* came true.

Adjective form (gerundives)

A *practised* surgeon, Mary baulks at no task.
No longer a *practising* teacher, Susan has time to paint.
Licensing officers are overworked by this council.
Only *licensed* dealers can operate on these premises.
He was the *advising* solicitor on the case.
The *prophesied* event actually did occur.
The *prophesying/prophesising* sages were admired for their skill.

Two deviations:

(i) 'Prophecy' has an adjective form that derives from the noun 'prophet':

His utterance proved *prophetic*.

(ii) 'To' precedes 'practice' when 'to practice' is a locative-noun phrase. That is, 'to practice' locates the direction (geographic) of the activity denoted by a copular verb. That 'to practice' should not be mistaken for a verb:

I am on my way to [piano/hockey/football/dance] *practice*.

‘Affect’ and ‘Effect’

‘Effect’ can function either as a noun or as a verb. With one specialist exception, ‘affect’ always functions as a verb. Many writers have difficulty with distinguishing when their sentences need ‘affect’, and when they need ‘effect’. It is well worth everyone’s while to reflect upon the difference between these words.

‘Effect’ as a noun

As a noun, ‘effect’ is synonymous with ‘result’, ‘impact’ and ‘outcome’:

The effect of the lecture was obvious in the way the students clapped.

The outcome of the lecture, the student’s clapping, made it known that they thought highly of it.

That was an effect we sought.

That was one result we wanted to obtain.

‘Effect’ as a verb

As a verb, ‘effect’ is synonymous with ‘bring about’, ‘bring into being’, ‘cause’:

We tried to *effect* a friendship between them.

We tried to bring about friendship between them.

That will *effect* the result.

That will produce the result.

‘Affect’ is always a verb (with one Jungian exception)

‘Affect’ is synonymous with ‘influence’, ‘have an impact upon’, ‘interfere with’:

That will *affect* the result.

That will impact upon/influence the result.

We *affected* the friendship between them.

We influenced/modified/interfered with the friendship between them.

The Jungian exception

A concept advanced by Karl Jung, the celebrated founder of the influential Jungian school of psychology, was translated into

English as 'affect'. So 'affect' is the name given to a highly sensitised state of mind. It is therefore a noun. This is how it is used:

In the grip of *the affect*, he forgot his problems. That *affective state* of his was a protracted one.

Outside Jungian contexts we can be confident that 'affect' is verb.

'Effective' is an adjective

'Effective' means 'productive of an effect'.

This is an *effective* strategy.

This strategy produces results; gets the job done.

His was an *effective* way of going about the job.

His was a productive way of going about the job.

'Affective' is an adjective in Jungian contexts

'Affective' is a Jungian usage that has seeped into ordinary language. It is completely different in meaning from 'effective'. Something 'affective' produces an 'affect': a highly sensitised, emotional, transported state.

The film was certainly an *affective* one.

The film was able to produce heightened mental and emotional states.

The 'affective' version of the adjective occurs only in Jungian contexts. Otherwise, we can be confident that the adjective is always 'effective'.

The subjunctives

The subjunctive is neither a tense nor an aspect of verbals. It is a mood that posits *supra*-time, that is, a time concept that is not chronological.

The 'be' construction of the subjunctive

Demanding of the writer's attention is the 'be' construction that makes a distinct meaning. What, for instance, did the Prime Minister mean to say when he uttered the words:

'I insist that all voters are informed!'

Technically, he insisted that all voters *are* already informed people. That is fine, if indeed that is what he meant. If, however, he meant to say that he insists upon all voters *becoming* informed, he should have said:

I insist that all voters *be* informed!

There are other issues of meaning that make the use of the subjunctive obligatory. In such cases, the form of the subjunctive is taken directly from that of the infinitive (to drink, to speak, to bathe, to report, *etc.*). Their contexts are noun phrases that name provisions:

He was given bail on condition that he *report* daily at the police station.

It is not logical to use the present tense of a verb, copula or copular verb unless the activity it denotes is taking place in the present time. In the statement:

The proposal is that an Australian president *replaces* the Queen as head of state [defective sentence],

the present tense *replaces* declares that an Australian president is presently replacing the Queen as head of state. Were that true, there would be no point in proposing that it become true. A proposal for a change to the present condition necessarily locates itself outside time:

The proposal is that an Australian president *replace* the Queen as head of state.

The ‘were’ construction of the subjunctive

It pays to be careful with the ‘were’ construction. Its sequence:

were + infinitive + would ...+ verb in indicative mood

is inviolate:

At a recent film premiere, she declined the host’s offer of chocolate, saying if she were to indulge, the press would write that she is pregnant.

The writer who produced the original construction of the foregoing sentence had muffed the necessary sequences thus:

At the film premiere she declined the host's offer of chocolate, saying if she indulged the press would write that she were pregnant. [defective sentence]

She declined the offer of chocolate in real time. It is her 'indulge' that locates in a hypothetical time. 'Indulge' is therefore the verb that has to be given the subjunctive mood. It is the one that should have had the subjunctive 'were' construction: 'if she **were to indulge**'. Were she to indulge, there would be a real-time consequence: 'the press would write that she **is** pregnant'.

Antics with the subjunctive

It is very common to hear people construct a sentence like this one:

I'd love you to come home. [defective sentence]

Yet this is a very odd structure. No doubt the meaning the writer sought is this:

I should love it [*that existential state*] if you were to come home.

Clearly enough, the activity of the subject *I*, denoted by the verb *should love*, is not perpetrated upon *you*; *you* is therefore not the object of *should love*. This structure is worth examining on a grid:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE	
	VERB	OBJECT
I	should love	it

if

SUBJECT	PREDICATE	
	COPULAR VERB	COMPLEMENT
you	were to come	home.

The sequence *if you were to come home* reveals the hidden subjunctive mood in the structure *I should love you to come home*. This structure also suppresses the object *it*, and the compounding operator *if*. No wonder the colloquial 'I'd love you to come home' appears at first to defy analysis!

Sense and syntax

The syntax of a sentence, or its grammaticality, is the logical relationship of words that enable a sensible statement. When writers and speakers construct sentences, they take care to choose words that 'fit' one another logically. Bad choice can rebound mercilessly. One prominent British statesman who is remembered for his many significant achievements would probably prefer to be forgotten for this one:

I will not go down to posterity talking bad grammar.
Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, while correcting the
proofs of his last parliamentary speech, 31/3/1881

Disraeli did come down to us in history, but not *to posterity*: Predictably enough, he had predeceased it. He could not have gone down to it *talking*, therefore, let alone *bad grammar*, whatever language that is.

* * *