

# Unit One

## The Basic Sentence

Throughout this book, you will be combining sentences to practice ways to show logical relationships or to modify, or describe, words in sentences. This practice will help you to express your ideas in clear, concise, and varied sentences when you write college-level essays. But first it helps to know what makes a sentence a sentence. Look at the following groups of words; which do you think are complete sentences?

- (a) Teenagers work.
- (b) Many teenagers work after school.
- (c) Many teenagers work after school to earn spending money.

If you think that all three are sentences, you are correct, because all three contain a subject-verb unit—a subject and verb working together. Sentence (a) has a verb, the word *work*; it's a verb because it can change form to show the time or tense of an action. So we can say:

Teenagers worked.  
Teenagers will work.

Sentence (a) also has a subject, *teenagers*, a word that does the action in the verb. Because sentence (a) has a subject-verb unit, *teenagers work*, it is a complete sentence. Sentences (b) and (c) are also complete sentences; they have the same subject-verb unit as sentence (a) in addition to sentence modifiers that tell more about the subject and verb.

Take a look at the following groups of words; which do you think are complete sentences?

- (a) They are.
- (b) They are students.
- (c) They are students hoping to succeed in college.

Again, all three are complete sentences because they each contain a subject-verb unit—*they are*. But in these sentences, the verb doesn't name an action; the verb is a form of *be*. The common forms of *be* are *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *has been*, *have been*, and *will be*.

To write well, you don't need to know how to identify all of the parts of speech. But if you know how verbs and subjects work together in sentences, you'll find the upcoming work in this book easier, which in turn should help you grow as a writer as you work on focusing, joining, and developing your sentences. In some of the later units, you'll see references to "subjects," "verbs," and "verb forms," so you will benefit in a practical way from the overview of subjects and verbs in this unit.

### Recognizing Verbs

You probably know the common definition of verbs—*words that show action or existence*—but that definition is not always helpful when you need to find the subject-verb unit that makes a group of words a sentence. The most reliable way to identify subject-verb units in sentences is to find the verb first and then the subject. To locate the verbs in sentences, you must find the action words or forms of *be* that you can change the tense (time) of.

**Exercise One** On the Campaign Trail

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From each pair of sentences below, you can create one sentence by joining the verbs (with *and* or *or*) and eliminating repeated words.

**EXAMPLE:** The presidential candidate travels around the United States.  
The presidential candidate makes public appearances.

**SOLUTION:** The presidential candidate travels around the United States and makes public appearances.

1. The presidential candidate speaks.  
The presidential candidate makes promises.
  2. Some of the people cheer.  
Some of the people clap.
  3. Others in the crowd groan.  
Others in the crowd hiss.
  4. Secret Service agents watch the candidate.  
Secret Service agents worry about the crowd.
  5. The candidate finishes her speech.  
The candidate runs to her limo.
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## Exercise Two The Last Campaign Trail

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Now go back to the sentences in Exercise One and rewrite your combined sentences to show that the actions happened in a *past* election campaign. (You can begin the sentences with *last year*.) Then underline the words you changed to show past time, or tense.

**EXAMPLE:** The presidential candidate travels around the world and makes public appearances.

**SOLUTION:** (Last year) The presidential candidate traveled around the world and made public appearances.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

The words you changed and underlined are verbs—words that show the time, or tense, of an action, or a form of *be*, in a sentence.

Finding verbs can sometimes be difficult because we often use verb forms as other parts of speech. For example, one form of the word *swim* can be used as a verb, but with an *-ing* ending, it can also be used as a noun (a word naming a person, place, or thing) or an adjective (a word describing a noun).

Alicia swims a mile every lunch hour. (*swims* = verb)

Swimming is Alicia's favorite way to relax. (*swimming* = noun)

Alicia would like nothing better than to have her own swimming pool. (*swimming* = adjective describing *pool*)

The noun *swimming* and the adjective *swimming* do not change to show the time, or tense, of the sentence. If Alicia decided to give up swimming and start meditating for relaxation, we might write:

Swimming was Alicia's favorite way to relax.

The verb *is* changes to *was* to show past time, but the word *swimming* doesn't change because it isn't acting as a verb here. An *-ing* word can only be part of a verb if it follows a form of the verb *be*:

In her dreams, Alicia is swimming in her own pool.

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### **Exercise Three** Take Me Out to the Ball Game

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In each sentence, change each main verb to past time, or tense. Underline the verb; then put in parentheses any verb forms that *don't* change to show time.

EXAMPLE: Listening to the Giants game relaxes me.

SOLUTION: (Listening) to the Giants game relaxed me yesterday.

1. I listen to the Giants games on the radio.
  2. The announcer bores me by reading so many baseball statistics.
  3. His boring voice puts me to sleep.
  4. I follow the accomplishments of my favorite players.
  5. Barry Bonds is very good at hitting home runs.
  6. I often dream of eating hot dogs and peanuts while I listen to the games.
  7. But going to the ballpark costs more money than listening to the radio.
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