Chapter 1

Verbs: The Heart of the Sentence

In This Chapter
- Knowing the difference between linking verbs and action verbs
- Finding the verb
- Using helping verbs correctly and understanding how infinitives differ from verbs

Every sentence needs a verb, and verbs are the heart of the sentence because you start with the verb when you want to do anything to your sentence — including correct it. And verbs come in all shapes and sizes: linking and action; helping verb and main verb, regular and irregular; singular and plural; and present, past, and future. In this chapter, I unravel the first two categories — linking and action, helping verb and main verb — and show you how to choose the right verb for each sentence.

Linking Verbs: The Giant Equal Sign

Linking verbs are also called being verbs because they express states of being — what is, will be, or was. Here’s where algebra intersects with English. You can think of linking verbs as giant equal signs plopped into the middle of your sentence. For example, you can think of the sentence
Legghorn’s uncle is a cannibal with a taste for finger food.

as

Legghorn’s uncle = a cannibal with a taste for finger food.

Or, in shortened form,

Legghorn’s uncle = a cannibal

Just as in an algebra equation, the verb is links two ideas and says that they are the same. Thus, is is a linking verb. All linking verbs do the exact same thing: They link ideas; they don’t show action.

Here is a list of the most common linking verbs:

- Forms of to be: am, are, is, was, were, will be, shall be, has been, have been, had been, could be, should be, would be, might have been, could have been, should have been, shall have been, will have been, must have been, must be.
- Sensory verbs: look, sound, taste, smell, feel.
- Words that express shades of meaning in reference to a state of being: appear, seem, grow, remain, stay.

“Being” verbs

In the preceding section, you may have noticed that the two linking verbs in the sample sentences are forms of the verb to be, which is (surprise, surprise) how they got the name being verbs. Here are more linking verbs formed from the verb to be:

Lulu will be angry when she hears about the missing bronze tooth.

Lulu = angry (will be is a linking verb)

Lochness was the last surfer to leave the water when the tidal wave approached.

Lochness = last surfer (was is a linking verb)
Even in the dark, Lucrezia’s red hair and orange eyes were completely visible.

Ludwig has been depressed ever since the fall of the House of Usher.

Earwigs are a constant problem for that pink elephant.

**Being with shades of meaning:**

Appears, seems, and other linking verbs

Some equal-sign verbs express states of being, but they aren’t forms of the verb *to be*. Check out these examples:

With his foot-long fingernails and sly smile, Lochinvar seemed threatening.

A jail sentence for the unauthorized use of a comma appears harsh.

Lochness stays silent whenever monsters are mentioned.

Seemed, appears, remains, and stays are similar to forms of the verb *to be* in that they express states of being. They simply add shades of meaning to the basic concept. You may, for example, say that

With his foot-long fingernails and sly smile, Lochinvar was threatening.
But now the statement is more definite. *Seemed* leaves room for doubt. Similarly, *remains* (in the third sample sentence) adds a time dimension to the basic expression of being. The sentence implies that the penalty was and still is severe.

No matter how you name it, any verb that places an equal sign in the sentence is a *being, or linking verb*.

### Savoring sensory verbs

*Sensory verbs* — verbs that express information you receive through the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and so forth — may also be linking verbs:

Two minutes after shaving, all of Legghorn’s three chins *feel* scratchy.

all of Legghorn’s three chins = scratchy (*feel* is a linking verb)
Lola’s piano solo *sounds* horrible, like barking inside a paint can.

piano solo = horrible (*sounds* is a linking verb)

The ten-year-old lasagna in your refrigerator *smells* disgusting.

lasagna = disgusting (*smells* is a linking verb)

Needless to say, the ten-year-old lasagna in your refrigerator *tastes* great!

lasagna = great (*tastes* is a linking verb)

Some verbs, especially those that refer to the five senses, may be linking verbs, but only if they act as an equal sign in the sentence. If they aren’t equating two ideas, they aren’t linking verbs. In the preceding example sentence about Legghorn’s chins, *feel* is a linking verb. Here’s a different sentence with the same verb:

With their delicate fingers, Lulu and Lochness *feel* Legghorn’s chins.

In this sentence, *feel* is not a linking verb because you’re not saying that

Lulu and Lochness = chins.

Instead, you’re saying that Lulu and Lochness don’t believe that Legghorn shaved, so they went stubble hunting.

**Completing Linking Verb Sentences Correctly**

A linking verb begins a thought, but it needs another word to complete the thought. Unless all your friends have ESP (extrasensory perception), you can’t walk around saying things like
President Murgatroyd is

or

The best day for the party will be

and expect people to know what you mean.

You have three possible completions for a linking verb. You can use a description, a noun, or a pronoun.

**Descriptions**

Consider these examples, which use descriptions to complete linking verb sentences:

After running 15 miles in high heels, Ludmilla’s thigh muscles are *tired*.

thigh muscles = tired (tired is a description, an adjective in grammatical terms)

Ludmilla’s high heels are *stunning*, especially when they land on your foot.

high heels = stunning (*stunning* is a description, also called an adjective)

Oscar’s foot, wounded by Ludmilla’s heels, seems particularly *painful*.

foot = painful (*painful* is a description, an adjective)

**Nouns**

You may also complete a linking verb equation with a person, place, or thing — a noun, in grammatical terms. Here are some examples:

The most important part of a balanced diet is *popcorn*.

part of a balanced diet = popcorn (*popcorn* is a thing, and therefore a noun)
Lulu will be *president* of the Popcorn Club someday.

Lulu = *president* (*president* is a noun)

Legghorn’s nutritional consultant has always been a complete *fraud*.

Legghorn’s nutritional consultant = *fraud* (*fraud* is a noun)

**Pronouns**

Similarly, sometimes you complete a linking verb sentence with a *pronoun*, a word that substitutes for the name of a person, place, or thing. For example:

The winner of the all-state spitball contest is *you*!

winner = *you* (*you* is a substitute for the name of the winner, and therefore a pronoun)

Whoever put glue in the teapot is *someone* with a very bad sense of humor.

Whoever put glue in the teapot = *someone* (*someone* is a substitute for the name of the unknown prankster and therefore a pronoun)

You can’t do much wrong when you complete linking verb sentences with descriptions or with nouns. However, you can do a lot wrong when you complete a linking verb sentence with a pronoun.

How do you choose the correct pronoun for a sentence with a linking verb? Think of a linking verb sentence as reversible. That is, the pronoun you put after a linking verb should be the same kind of pronoun that you put before a linking verb. First, however, I give you an example with a noun, where you can’t make a mistake. Read these sentence pairs:

*Ruggles* is a *resident* of Red Gap.

A *resident* of Red Gap is *Ruggles*.

Lulu was a resident of Beige Gap.

A resident of Beige Gap was Lulu.
Both sentences in each pair mean the same thing, and both are correct. Now look at pronouns:

The winner of the election is him!

Him is the winner of the election!

Uh oh. Something’s wrong. You don’t say him is, unless you’re in an old Tarzan movie. You say he is. Because you have a linking verb (is), you must put the same word after the linking verb that you would put before the linking verb. Try it again:

The winner of the election is he!

He is the winner of the election!

Now you’ve got the correct ending for your sentence.

If you pay attention to linking verbs, you’ll choose the right pronouns for your sentence. Subject pronouns are I, you, he, she, it, we, they, who, and whoever. Pronouns that are not allowed to be subjects include me, him, her, us, them, whom, and whomever.

**Lights! Camera! Action Verb!**

Linking verbs are important, but unless you’re in some sort of hippie commune left over from the Sixties, you just can’t sit around being all the time. You have to do something. It is here that action verbs come into the picture. Everything that is not being is action, at least in the verb world. Unlike the giant equal sign associated with linking verbs (see “Linking Verbs: The Giant Equal Sign,” earlier in the chapter), something happens with an action verb:

Drusilla slapped the offending pig right on the snout. *(Slapped is an action verb.)*

Wynfred will steal third base as soon as his sneezing fit ends. *(Will steal and ends are action verbs.)*

According to the teacher, Ruggles has shot at least 16 spitballs in the last ten minutes. *(Has shot is an action verb.)*
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Due to a grammar error

The picnic has been cancelled due to? because of? the arrival of killer sparrows from their southern nesting grounds.

Okay, which one is correct — due to or because of? The answer is because of. According to a rule that people ignore more and more every day:

✔ Due to describes nouns or pronouns. It may follow a linking verb if it gives information about the subject. (See “Linking Verbs: The Giant Equal Sign,” earlier in the chapter, for more information.)

✔ Because of is a description of an action. (See “Lights! Camera! Action Verb!” in this chapter for information on action verbs.)

The semi-logical reasoning that underlies this rule draws you deep into grammatical trivia, so keep reading only if you’re daring (or bored). Due to, by definition, means “owing to.” Owing is an adjective, and an adjective is a description of nouns and pronouns. In a linking verb sentence, the subject (always a noun or pronoun) may be linked to a description following the verb. An example:

Lola’s mania for fashion is due to her deprived upbringing in an all-polyester household.

Due to her deprived upbringing in an all-polyester household describes mania.

Because of and on account of describe an action, usually answering the question why. An example:

The bubble-gum gun that Ratrug likes to carry is no longer being manufactured because of protests from the dental association.

Why is the gun no longer being manufactured? Because of protests from the dental association.

In real life (that is to say, in everyday conversational English), due to and because of are interchangeable. When you need your most formal, most correct language, be careful with this pair! One easy solution (easier than remembering which phrase is which) is to avoid them entirely and simply add because with a subject-verb pair.

You can define action verbs as all the verbs that don’t express being. Don’t let the name action fool you. Some action verbs aren’t particularly energetic: think, sit, stay, have, sleep, dream, and so forth. Besides describing my ideal vacation, these words are also action verbs! Think of the definition this way: If the verb is not a giant equal sign (a linking verb), it’s an action verb.
Helping Verbs

You’ve probably noticed that some of the verbs I’ve identified throughout this chapter are single words and others are made up of several words. The extra words are called helping verbs. They don’t carry out the trash or dust the living room, but they do help the main verb express meaning, usually changing the time, or tense, of the action. (For more on tense, see Chapter 2.)

Here are some sentences with helping verbs:

Allergia will have sung five arias from that opera by the time her recorder runs out of tape and her listeners run out of patience.

(In will have sung, sung is the main verb; will and have are helping verbs; runs and run are both main verbs without helping verbs.)

Legghorn should have refused to play the part of the villain, but his ego simply would not be denied.

(In should have refused, refused is the main verb; should and have are helping verbs; in would be denied, denied is the main verb; would and be are helping verbs.)

Distinguishing between helping verbs and main verbs isn’t particularly important, as long as you get the whole thing when you’re identifying the verb in a sentence. If you find only part of the verb, you may confuse action verbs with linking verbs. You want to keep these two types of verbs straight when you choose an ending for your sentence, as I explain in “Pronouns,” earlier in the chapter.

To decide whether you have an action verb or a linking verb, look at the main verb, not at the helping verbs. If the main verb expresses action, the whole verb is action, even if one of the helpers is a form of to be.
A scientific study by a blue-ribbon panel of experts found that 90 percent of all the errors in a sentence occurred because the verb was misidentified. Okay, there was no study. I made it up! But it is true that when you try to crack a sentence, you should always start by identifying the verb. To find the verb, read the sentence and ask two questions:

What’s happening?
What is? (or, What word is a “giant equal sign”?)

If you get an answer to the first question, you have an action verb. If you get an answer to the second question, you have a linking verb.

For example, in the sentence

Archie flew around the room and then swooped into his cage for a birdseed snack.

you ask “What’s happening?” and your answer is flew and swooped. Flew and swooped are action verbs.

If you ask, “What is?” you get no answer, because there’s no linking verb in the sentence.

Try another:

Ludmilla’s new tattoo will be larger than her previous 15 tattoos.

What’s happening? Nothing. You have no action verb. What is? Will be. Will be is a linking verb.
Forget to be or not to be: Infinitives are not verbs

Here and there in this chapter I say “all forms of the verb to be.” But to be is not actually a verb. In fact, it’s an infinitive. An infinitive is to + a verb (yet another mixing of math and English). Here are some examples:

- to laugh
- to burp
- to be

Infinitives are the great-grandparents of verb families. Everything in the verb family descends from the infinitive, but like the retired, elderly relative who sits on the porch all day, infinitives don’t perform any verb jobs in a sentence. In fact, if they do show up in the sentence, they take on a different job. (Sort of like a retired postmaster who refuses to carry a letter anywhere but plays racquetball all afternoon.) Infinitives may act as subjects or objects. They may also describe other words in the sentence.

The most important thing to know about infinitives is this: When you pop the question to find the verb, don’t choose an infinitive as your answer. If you do, you’ll miss the real verb or verbs in the sentence. Other than that, forget about infinitives!