

Section 6: what is a verb?

Welcome to the easiest part of this worksheet! Here's a very, very useful rule about verbs:

No sentence in formal, academic English is complete without a verb.

In some literary English, verbless (and even subjectless) sentences are used by some writers for effect, but do *not* use these in formal essays, assignments, or even more personalised forms of reflective writing.

We identified the verb in our first example sentence as “opened”:

The reigning monarch **opened** formally the new Palace of Westminster in 1852.

Take a look at a similar sentence:

The reigning monarch formally **opens** parliament every autumn.

In the first sentence, the past form of open describes what the British reigning monarch in 1852 (Queen Victoria) did. In the second sentence, the present form of open describes what every reigning monarch does every year. At the moment that's the current queen, Elizabeth II, but it could later refer to her successor or to her father King George VI.

Here is another version:

The reigning monarch **is opening** parliament formally.

This form of the verb – the present continuous – means Queen Elizabeth is in Parliament, right now, giving her speech. Don't worry about “formally” (the adverb) moving about: this is covered in the next section.

These different forms of verbs are known as **tenses**, a topic we cover extensively in our worksheets on sentence fragments and sentence structure. As you can see, using different tenses radically changes meaning, but don't worry about that for the moment: let's just focus on recognising verbs. Here are two final examples:

The reigning monarch **must open** parliament formally.

The reigning monarch **has opened** parliament formally.

Other words have now appeared before the verb. Putting “must”, a modal verb, in front of open, means the present monarch is obliged to open parliament, as a duty. “Has” combined with opened creates a tense called the present perfect, which is often used to describe recently completed actions. Many verbs or verb forms in English are made like this, with modal auxiliary verbs or particles added.

For the moment, don't worry about identifying tenses. Let's return to one of our earlier texts. This time, go through it and circle anything you think is a verb or a verb form. If you are not sure of the words attached to the verb, just circle the main verb itself.

Exercise 6.1 – finding verbs

Big Ben has become a symbol of the United Kingdom and London, particularly in the visual media. When a television or film-maker wishes to indicate a generic location in Britain, a popular way to do so is to show an image of the clock tower, often with a red double-decker bus or black cab in the foreground. Big Ben is a focus of New Year celebrations, with radio and TV stations tuning to its chimes to welcome the start of the year.

If you want to explore further using verbs, try Richard Palmer's [The Good Grammar Guide](#). It has plenty of exercises, including some on the parts of speech we are looking at. It's a UWIC library e-book so you can easily download and print off just the pages you need.



7. What is an adverb?

Now you understand the concept of an adjective describing a noun, adverbs are easy: their main function is to describe verbs:

The hare ran **quickly** and the tortoise waddled **slowly**.

The reigning monarch **formally** opened the Palace of Westminster in 1852.

Both examples are interesting examples of **redundancy**: the three adverbs contribute little to their sentences. The comparative speed of tortoises and hares is common knowledge, and it is pretty hard to imagine Queen Victoria doing anything *informally*. If you want to edit the flab out of writing, adverbs are a good first candidate for the bin. Like adjectives, they are very easy to add on thoughtlessly ☺, and are too easy to make: most of them are just adjectives with *-ly* on the end.

Watch out for the exceptions, and the temptations of ‘cool’, but non-standard English. It’s all very well for Andy Murray to produce “*I played good” in a triumphant post-match interview, but the tennis correspondent should be writing “He played well” in *The Daily Telegraph*.

Placement of adverbs is also a contentious issue. The *general* rule is that they follow the verb, but notice that in the second sentence above, the adverb is before the verb.

Our example about Queen Victoria could be written several ways:

The reigning monarch **formally** opened the Palace of Westminster in 1852.

The reigning monarch opened **formally** the Palace of Westminster in 1852.

The reigning monarch opened the Palace of Westminster in 1852, **formally**.

The reigning monarch opened the Palace of Westminster **formally** in 1852.

Placing adverbs is partly about where they are most comfortable in the sentence. The second and third examples above feel awkward, but are not wrong. But, what about this well known ‘mission’ statement?

To **boldly** go where no man has gone before².

This commits what many traditional grammarians see as the cardinal sin of ‘splitting the infinitive’ (an infinitive structure is ‘to’ plus the root verb e.g. to go, to eat) where an adverb comes between “to” and the verb. There’s even a whole [website](http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/385400.html) devoted to this famous example. We recommend avoiding splitting the infinitive, but this is a minor issue. Concentrate on the important bigger picture.

Circle the adverbs in this passage about damage to Big Ben. Careful: there are some words which *look* like adverbs, but do not act like them. See if you can find the one split infinitive too.

Exercise 7.1 – finding adverbs

From 1939, the chimes rang on the quarter hours continuously, but the clock face was darkened at night to prevent attack by the heavily armed Zeppelins. Though the clock functioned perfectly during the war and up to 1962, heavy snow and ice that New Year’s Eve caused the pendulum to abruptly detach from the clockwork to avoid damaging seriously the sensitively-tuned mechanism. The 1963 New Year was ten minutes late. Not often silent, the Great Clock shut down for 26 separate days in 1976 and 1977 due to ‘torsional fatigue’; however popular myth has it that the clock got fed up with the exceptionally hot summer of 1976 and gave itself a holiday too. May 2005 briefly saw a shut-down, also attributable to hot weather.

² This is one of the spoken opening titles in the *Star Trek* TV series.

For more practice on adverbs, the [BBC Skillswise](http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/grammar/interestsentences/adverbs/index.shtml) site has some excellent online quizzes, and the site as a whole is a good extended introduction to grammar and parts of speech.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/grammar/interestsentences/adverbs/index.shtml>

Section 8: what is a preposition?

The commonest English **prepositions** are "of", "to", "in", "for", "with" and "on"³ but they are a large group of words, including rarities such as underneath and belowstairs. The purpose of prepositions is to indicate how things are connected in a sentence. Generally, a preposition introduces, or is contained within, a **prepositional phrase**. Look at our familiar example again:

The reigning monarch opened formally the **Palace of Westminster** **in 1852**.

Here are two prepositional phrases. In "Palace of Westminster", of indicates possession (the palace belonging to Westminster) and "in 1852" the in shows that the event occurs within a time. Here's a couple more:

Victoria's giraffe magnet is **on the fridge**. The giraffe is **from Africa**.

Here the prepositions indicate location (on) and origin (from). Prepositions can have more than one meaning. Consider this somewhat literary sentence:

Of Victoria's eldest princeling, I had not heard.

"Of" here is broadly similar in meaning to "about".

Prepositions can often combine with verbs to become **phrasal verbs**. These are very common in English, and it is useful to understand them, because many should be avoided in formal academic writing. Compare:

Ronnie Biggs **got out** of jail. Ronnie Biggs **escaped** from jail.

Prepositions are easy words, and easy to get wrong. Let's remind you of this frequent occurrence:

CAREFUL!

The following example is an alarmingly common mistake, but it is *not* correct English:

*Cardiff could of become the capital of the United Kingdom.

It may sound like "could of", especially in its contracted form "could've", but the correct form is

Cardiff could have become the capital of the United Kingdom.

Even the limited grammar checker in Microsoft Office detects this problem!

Here's a text about Big Ben's reliability. We have taken out 20 prepositions. Put them back. There are in some cases two or more alternatives, and we have indicated these in the key. Just guess the one with the ? sign – the key explains further.

Exercise 8.1 – putting prepositions back

The clock is famous ____ its reliability, which can be attributed to one ____ its designers, the horologist Edmund Beckett Denison. The tower was completed ____ 1859, so Denison had time to experiment and invented the double three-legged gravity escapement which provided the best separation ____ pendulum and clock mechanism. The pendulum is installed ____ an enclosed windproof box sunk ____ the clockroom. It is 3.9m long, weighs 300 kg and beats every two seconds. The clockwork mechanism ____ the room below weighs five tons.

³ Information from Wikipedia article: 'Preposition and postposition' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preposition>

The idiom of putting a penny? _____, with the meaning _____ slowing down, sprang _____ the method _____ fine-tuning the clock's pendulum. _____ top _____ the pendulum is a small stack _____ old penny coins; these are to adjust the time _____ the clock. Adding or subtracting coins has the effect of minutely altering the position _____ the pendulum's centre _____ mass: adding or removing a penny changes the clock's speed _____ 0.4 seconds _____ day.

Conclusion and revision

That was a long journey through one short sentence, but we hope you are not confident in being able to identify the principal elements of a standard English sentence. We have *not* covered complex sentences and there are one or two very simple parts of speech we have not covered either because their usage is well understood. One category is **conjunctions**. Common ones are

for and nor but or yet so

There are a lot of phrasal versions too e.g. "as well as". These are covered more extensively in later worksheets. After the references and further resources section, you can find additional revision exercises challenging you to extend the knowledge you have so far gained.

References and further resources

This is only a small selection. Go back to our website for a huge range of language resources: student.uwic.ac.uk/academicsskills.

BBC Skillswise <http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/grammar/>

- This is a good online source of quick quizzes and some basic grammar explanation. It's regularly updated.

Palmer, R (2003) *The Good Grammar Guide* London: Taylor & Francis (available as an e-book from Cardiff Met libraries)

- Palmer writes for those who want to get to grips seriously with English grammar: however, his approachable, witty, style and short, but ingenious, exercises will draw you in very quickly. It looks at broad areas so it is not a good "quick fix" for a small problem, unlike the next two sources.

Purdue University Online Writing Lab 'Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling'
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

- This is a long-established website with online grammar lessons covering most of the essentials. The grammar exercises are often quite tedious rote-style practice compared to the writing style exercises elsewhere on the site, but it's a good source if you ever need to get to know American English.

Swan, M (2005) *Practical English Usage* Oxford: Oxford University Press

- Swan originally intended this for learners of English as a foreign language, but his spectacular organisation and indexing is terrific for looking up answers to usage problems. There is also a list of grammatical terminology at the front, defining everything from the adverb to the 'weak form'. A chapter on the 130 most common grammatical mistakes is very useful too.

Section 9: revision exercises

Do the first exercise again, labelling the various words in the sentence, and see how well you do this time.

Exercise 9.1 – naming parts of speech

The		Palace	
reigning		of	
monarch		Westminster	
opened		in	
formally		1852.	
the			

Here are two exercise texts about the great bell and chimes of Big Ben, practising what you have learned.

This text about the great bell of Big Ben contains 20 errors or ambiguities. Correct them, and try to identify the misunderstandings about parts of speech which may have caused the problems.

Exercise 9.2 – the Great Bell

<p>A main bell, officially known as the Great Bell, is the largest Bell in the tower and part of the Great Clock of Westminster. The bell is better known from the nickname Big Ben.</p> <p>The originally bell was a 16.3-tonne (16 ton) hour bell, cast on 6th August 1856 in Stockton-on-Tees by John Warner & Sons. To accurately pinpoint the origin of the name is difficult, but it could of been named after a contemporary heavy weight boxer, Benjamin Caunt.</p> <p>The first bell was transported to the tower on trolley drawn by sixteen horse, with crowds cheering its progress. Unfortunately, it cracked beyond repair while being tested and a replacement had to be made. This was pulled slowly up the two hundred foot belfry, a feat that took 18 hours. This new 2.2 metres tall and 2.9 metres wide bell first chimed initially in July 1859. That September, it too cracked. According to the manager of the foundrys, George Mears, the bell caster had used a hammer more than twice the maximum weight specified.</p> <p>For three years Big Ben was decommissioned and the hours were struck into the lowest of the ¼ bells until the main bell was reinstalled. To make the repair, the square piece of metal was chipped out from the rim around the crack, and the bell given an eighth of a turn so the new hammer strike in a different place. Big Ben has chimed with a odd twang ever since, and is still in use today completely with the crack.</p>	1.

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Imagine the following 270-word text is for an information website. You need to edit the text down to 100-150 words and remove the ambiguities caused by misunderstanding of parts of speech. We have not changed the text much from the Wikipedia original, just edited out some sentences. You may want to research Big Ben's history for clarification! If you are online, you can hear the chimes by using the link.

Exercise 9.3 – the chimes

Click to hear BBC World Service announce itself, then play [Westminster Chimes](#) and then the 12 strikes of Big Ben as broadcast at exactly midnight on New Year 1 January 2009.

Along with the Great Bell, the belfry houses four quarter bells which play the Westminster Quarters on the quarter hours. The four quarter bells are the musical notes of G #, F #, E, and B. They were cast by John Warner & Sons at their Crescent Foundry in 1857 (G #, F # and B) and 1858 (E). The Foundry was in Jewin Crescent, in what is now known as The Barbican, in the City of London.

The Quarter Bells plays a 20-chime sequence, 1–4 at quarter past, 5–12 at half past, 13–20 and 1–4 at quarter to, and 5–20 on the hour (which sounds 25 seconds before the main bell tolls the hour). Because the low bell (B) is struck twice in quick succession, there is not enough time to pull a hammer back, and it is supplied with two wrench hammers on opposite sides of the bell.

The tune is that of the Cambridge Chimes, first used for the chimes of Great St Mary's church, Cambridge, and supposedly a variation, attributed to William Crotch, on a phrase from Handel's Messiah. The notional words of the chime, again derived from Great St Mary's and in turn an allusion to Psalm 37, are: "All through this hour/Lord be my guide/And by Thy power/No foot shall slide". They are written on a plaque on the wall of the clock room.

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Answers to exercises

1.1 – naming parts of speech

The	article	Palace	noun	} a proper, phrasal noun
reigning	adjective	of	preposition	
monarch	concrete noun	Westminster	proper noun	
opened	adverb	in	preposition	
formally	verb (past tense)	1852.	abstract noun	
the	article			

2.1 – finding the nouns

Big Ben is the **nickname** for the great **bell** of the **clock** at the north-eastern **end** of the **Palace of Westminster** in **London**, and is often extended to refer to the **clock** or the clock **tower** as well. It is the largest four-faced chiming **clock** and the third-tallest free-standing clock **tower** in the **world**. It celebrated its 150th **anniversary** in **May 2009**, during which celebratory **events** took place. The nearest London Underground **station** is **Westminster** on the Circle, District and Jubilee **lines**.

3.1 – putting the articles back

Big Ben has become **a(the)** symbol of **the** United Kingdom and London, particularly in **the(0)** visual media. When **a(the)** television or film-maker wishes to indicate **a** generic location in Britain, **a(the)** popular way to do so is to show **an(the)** image of **the** clock tower, often with **a** red double-decker bus or black cab in **the** foreground. Big Ben is **a(the)** focus of New Year celebrations, with radio and TV stations tuning to its chimes to welcome **the** start of **the(a)** year.

() indicates alternatives. (0) indicates that you can choose not to use an article here.

4.1 – using pronouns

1. The Palace of Westminster site was strategically important during the Middle Ages, as **it** was located on the banks of the River Thames.
2. The Royal Commissioners chose Charles Barry's plan for a Gothic-style palace in 1840. **They** asked Charles Barry to complete **it** by 1847, though **he** did not actually satisfy **them** until 1860.
3. Sir Charles Barry's design for the Palace of Westminster uses the Perpendicular Gothic style. **This/it** was popular during the 15th century and returned during the Gothic revival of the 19th century. Barry was a classical architect, but he was aided by the Gothic architect Augustus Pugin. Famously, **they** fought over the symmetrical layout designed by Barry. Pugin commented to **him**: "All Grecian, sir; Tudor details on a classic body".

4.2 – using pronouns avoid repetition

This answer is a suggestion only: yours may be different. For more exercises like this, see our worksheet on proofreading and editing.

The building was originally constructed from Anston, a sand-coloured magnesian limestone quarried in the village of Anston in South Yorkshire: this, however, soon began to decay due to pollution and the poor quality of some of material used.

5.1 – finding adjectives

Big Ben has become a symbol of the United Kingdom and London, particularly in the **visual** media. When a **television** or **film** maker wishes to indicate a **generic** location in Britain, a **popular** way to do so is to show an image of the **clock** tower, often with a **red double-decker** bus or **black** cab in the foreground. Big Ben is a focus of **New Year** celebrations, with **radio** and **TV** stations tuning to its chimes to welcome the start of the year.

6.1 – finding verbs

Big Ben **has become** a symbol of the United Kingdom and London, particularly in the visual media. When a television or film-maker **wishes to indicate** a generic location in Britain, a popular way **to do** so is **to show** an image of the clock tower, often with a red double-decker bus or black cab in the foreground. Big Ben **is** a focus of New Year celebrations, with radio and TV stations **tuning** its chimes **to welcome** the start of the year.

7.1 – finding adverbs

From 1939, the chimes rang on the quarter hours **continuously**, but the clock face was darkened at night to prevent attack by the **heavily** armed Zeppelins. Though the clock functioned **perfectly** during the war and up to 1962, heavy snow and ice that New Year's Eve caused the pendulum **to abruptly detach** ← split infinitive from the clockwork to avoid damaging **seriously** the **sensitively**-tuned mechanism. The 1963 New Year was ten minutes late. Not **often** silent, the Great Clock shut down for 26 separate days in 1976 and 1977 due to 'torsional fatigue'; however popular myth has it that the clock got fed up with the **exceptionally** hot summer of 1976 and gave itself a holiday too. May 2005 **briefly** saw a shut-down, also attributable to hot weather.

Note: **boxed** words look like adverbs but in fact they are adjectival modifiers, or words which change adjectives. As you can see, the split infinitive "to abruptly detach" does not affect the meaning at all.

8.1 – putting the prepositions back

The clock is famous **for** its reliability, which can be attributed to one **of** its designers, the horologist Edmund Beckett Denison. The tower was completed **in** 1859, so Denison had time to experiment and invented the double three-legged gravity escapement which provided the best separation **between** pendulum and clock mechanism. The pendulum is installed **in/inside** an enclosed windproof box sunk **beneath/underneath** the clockroom. It is 3.9m long, weighs 300 kg and beats every two seconds. The clockwork mechanism **in** the room below weighs five tons.

The idiom of putting a penny **on**, with the meaning **of** slowing down, sprang **from/out of** the method **of** fine-tuning the clock's pendulum. **On** top **of** the pendulum is a small stack **of** old penny coins; these are to adjust the time **of** the clock. Adding or subtracting coins has the effect of minutely altering the position **of** the pendulum's centre **of** mass: adding or removing a penny changes the clock's speed **by** 0.4 seconds **per** day.

Notes: you can see that “of” has the most prepositional meanings. Prepositions often form part of idiomatic phrases and phrasal verbs, so you could probably guess “sprang from” even if you did not fully understand the meaning. Similarly you probably guessed right the idiomatic phrase “putting a penny on” because “put on” is a common verb.

9.2 – the Great Bell

1. A main bell, officially known as the Great Bell, is the largest 2. Bell in the tower and part of the Great Clock of Westminster. The bell is better known 3. from the nickname Big Ben.

The 4. originally bell was a 16.3-tonne (16 ton) hour bell, cast on 6th August 1856 in Stockton-on-Tees by John Warner & Sons. 5. To accurately pinpoint the origin of the name is difficult, but it 6. could of been named after a contemporary 7. heavy weight boxer, Benjamin Caunt.

The first bell was transported to the tower 8. on trolley drawn by sixteen 9. horse, with crowds cheering its progress. Unfortunately, 10. it cracked beyond repair while being tested and a replacement had to be made. This was pulled 11. slowly up the two hundred foot belfry, a feat that took 18 hours. This new 12. 2.2 metres tall and 2.9 metres wide bell first chimed 13. initially in July 1859. That September it too cracked. According to the manager of the 14. foundries, George Mears, the bell caster had used a hammer more than twice the maximum weight specified.

For three years Big Ben was decommissioned and the hours were struck 15. into the lowest of the 16. ¼ bells until the main bell was reinstalled. To make the repair, 17. the square piece of metal was chipped out from the rim around the crack, and the bell given an eighth of a turn so the new hammer 18. strike in a different place. Big Ben has chimed with 19. a odd twang ever since, and is still in use today 20. completely with the crack.

1. The – *definite article*. There is only one Great Bell.
2. bell – no capital needed as this is not a *proper noun*.
3. known by – by is a *preposition* which is part of a *phrasal verb*.
4. original – this is an *adjective*, not an *adverb* ending with -ly.
5. to pinpoint accurately – *split infinitive*, here it is better not split.
6. could have – could of is not an accepted written English structure!
7. heavyweight – all one word (it is a *compound adjective*)
8. by trolley, or on a trolley.
9. horses – the *plural* has been forgotten.
10. it = the bell. It is very unclear here what the ‘it’ refers to e.g. the trolley, the bell, the tower, possibly even the crowds and horses. The ‘it’ further down between 13. and 14. also merits attention.
11. slowly is *redundant* – we already know it takes 18 hours to go 200 feet!
12. 2.2 metre tall and 2.9 metre wide – here we have to drop the *plural* as this is an *adjective*, not a *noun*.
13. initially is *redundant* as we have already said “first chimed”
14. foundries – this *plural* changes y to ies.
15. on – strike on if you want to make a noise!
16. quarter – do not use numbers instead of words, especially when the number is expressed as a common word.
17. a not the – we have not met this metal before so it is indefinite article.
18. struck – the rest of the sentence is in the *past tense*.
19. an – before odd we need an, as odd starts with a vowel.
20. complete – this is not an *adverb*!

9.2 – the chimes

This is just a suggestion – yours will be different

Click to hear the Westminster Chimes from the World Service on 1 January 2009.

With the Great Bell, the belfry houses four quarter bells which play the Westminster Quarters (the musical notes of G#, F#, E, and B) on the quarter hours. The bells were cast from 1857-58 by John Warner & Sons at the Crescent Foundry in Jewin Crescent, now the Barbican in the City of London.

The 20-chime sequence runs: 1–4 at quarter past, 5–12 at half past, 13–20 and 1–4 at quarter to, and 5–20 on the hour (which sounds 25 seconds before the main bell tolls the hour). The low bell (B) has two opposite wrench hammers is struck twice quickly.

The tune is the Cambridge Chimes, first used for the chimes of Great St Mary's church, Cambridge, and supposedly a variation, attributed to William Crotch, on a phrase from Handel's Messiah. The notional words of the chime, again derived from Great St Mary's and in turn an allusion to Psalm 37, are: "All through this hour/Lord be my guide/And by Thy power/No foot shall slide". They are written on a plaque on the wall of the clock room. (146 words)