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P A R T I

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GRAMMAR

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BASIC SENTENCE STRUCTURE

NOUN PHRASES

VERB PHRASES

MODIFIERS

AGREEMENT

VERBALS

CONNECTING SENTENCES

COMBINING SENTENCES

PRINCIPLES OF WRITTEN DISCOURSE

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# Basic Sentence Structure

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- b. The verb phrase
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# Subject and Predicate

# 1

## READ

Read the following excerpt from “Room with View— and No People.” The complete selection, with vocabulary glosses, appears on p. 334.

We talk a lot about the fact that no one ever sits in the living room. It makes us all sad. The living room is the prettiest room in the apartment. It has a fireplace and moldings. It has a slice of a view of the river. It is a cheerful room furnished in light colors. The couches in it were  
5 recently cleaned by men with small machines. It always looks neat and tidy.

## ANALYZE

1. Underline the words *talk* and *sits* (the verbs) in the first sentence. Now follow this lead, and continue underlining all the verbs throughout the passage. (One of them consists of more than one word.)

2. Now circle *we* and *no one* in the first sentence. These are the subjects of the verbs. They tell us who or what is *talking* and *sitting*. Again, follow this lead and continue circling all the subjects throughout the rest of the passage. (Some of the subjects consist of more than one word.)

3. In each sentence, use a slash to separate the subject you have circled from the rest of the sentence, like this:

(We) / talk a lot . . .

What you are doing here is separating the subject from the predicate. The predicate in a simple sentence consists of the verb and what comes after it.

4. The reading passage at the beginning of this chapter consists of eight sentences. Look at them closely and, with other students, make a list of the features that are common to all these sentences and also to all sentences in general (for example, one feature is that each sentence begins with a capital letter).

## SUBJECT AND PREDICATE

**STUDY****1a. The independent clause: subject + verb**

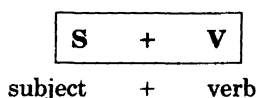
A complete sentence in standard written English must have its own subject and verb. That is enough to make a sentence. The box shows that a verb is a necessary part of the predicate.

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Predicate</i>	
Babies	VERB cry.	REST OF PREDICATE
Children	like	ice cream.
The children in the park	are eating	some delicious ice cream.

This basic unit of meaning—the subject and the predicate—along with its attachments, is called an *independent clause*. So every sentence you write must have at least one independent clause with a subject and a verb. It can have more than one independent clause, provided that the clauses are connected with words like *and* or *but* (see Chapter 22). Only commands regularly omit the subject:

Go away!  
 [You] go away.

You can always check that you have written complete sentences by identifying the independent clause and then underlining the verb and circling the subject. Remember that the core of any sentence is this structure:

**EXERCISE 1**

In the following passages from students' descriptions of a room, indicate which passages contain well-constructed, correctly punctuated sentences (OK) and which ones have problems (X).

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. There were not too many things in the room. Everything nice and clean.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The person who lives in the apartment needed something from his drawer, and I have never seen such an organized drawer in my life. He had made small wooden boxes for everything.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. From the first look, I realized that the person who lived there was very neat and clean and also interested in art and antiques. The colorful furniture, the marble table with antique look.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. In the living room, there are portraits hanging everywhere. A tea set with lion decoration that looks so gorgeous.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Although the walls and the ceiling are plain white and the furniture is white too and very simple, the floor is covered with a rug, which has an exotic blue and red pattern on it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The table is covered with books and papers. A big desk in front of the window.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. The main thing about the room is that it has a lot of chairs. Very big and comfortable chairs.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. She wanted only bright colors. To make her room a more exciting place to be.

**EXERCISE 2**

Look at the painter van Gogh's painting of his own room in Arles, France, on p. 6. Write a description of it. Imagine that someone will have to draw the room according to your description, so make your description as full and accurate as you can. When you have done that, exchange papers with another student; tell each other about any details you have left out. On your partner's paper, draw a slash to separate the subject from the predicate in each independent clause.

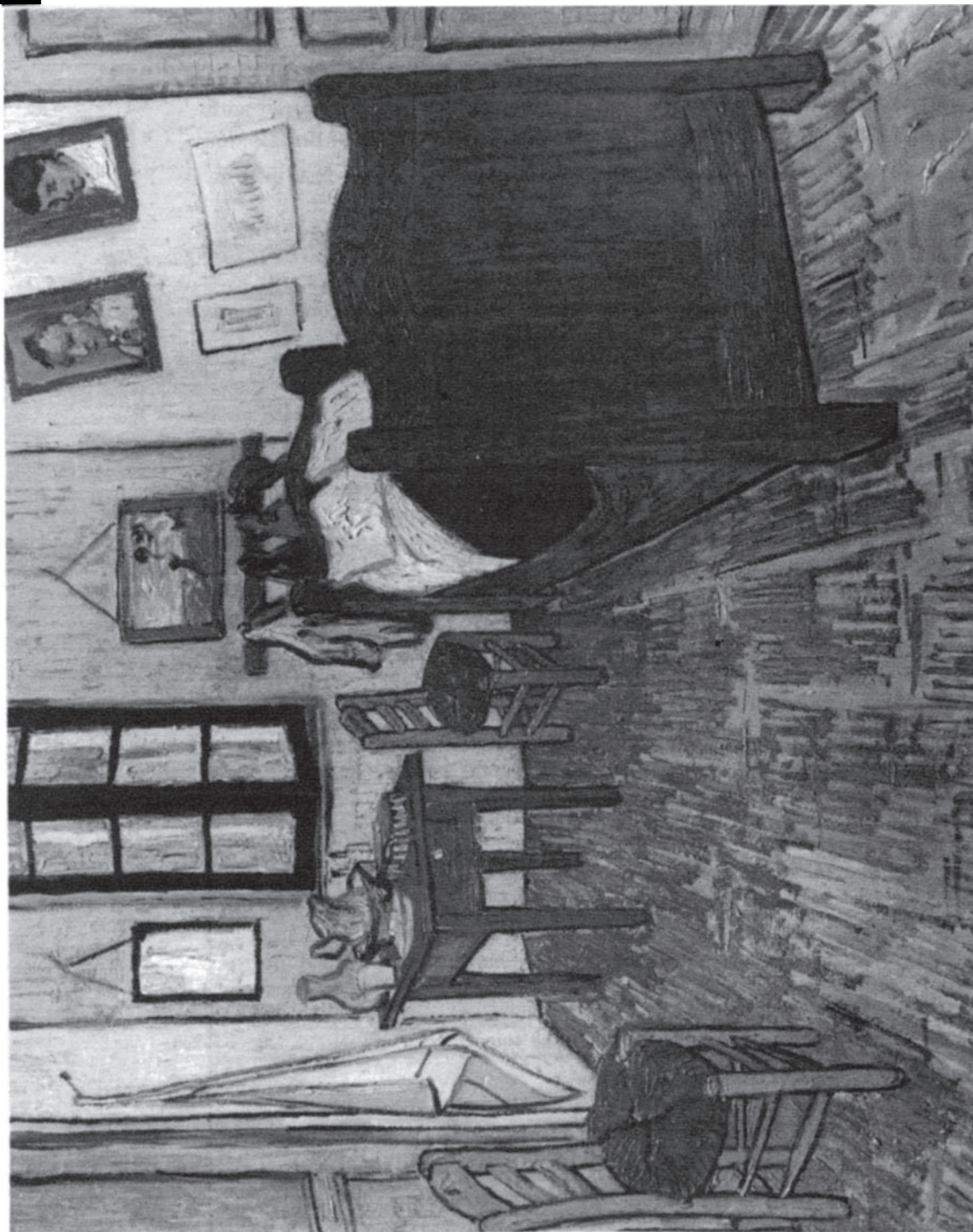
**1b. The verb phrase**

An independent clause in standard written English needs a verb or, more accurately (since verbs can consist of more than one word), a complete verb phrase.

<b>VERB PHRASES IN INDEPENDENT CLAUSES</b>	
<b>Subject</b>	<b>Verb Phrase</b>
It We	<i>Verb in present (one word)</i>
	makes talk
It We	<i>Verb in past (one word)</i>
	made talked
The couches The couches	<i>auxiliaries (one or more) + main verb</i>
	were cleaned might have been cleaned

**1b**

## SUBJECT AND PREDICATE



*The Artist's Room in Arles, VINCENT VAN GOGH (1889)*

A complete verb phrase can be a one-word phrase, with the main verb indicating past or present time:

**She waited for an hour.**  
**He works for a big company.**

The verbs here are *wait* and *work*. The form of the verb shows past tense (*-ed*) and present tense (*-s*), respectively.

A complete verb phrase can also be composed of one or more auxiliary verbs + the corresponding form of the main verb following them (see Chapter 13 for a summary of verb forms). In the following examples, the main verbs used are *waiting*, *worked*, and *decorated*, but note that they are accompanied by auxiliaries to add more—and necessary—information:

**She was waiting for two hours.**  
**He has worked for that company for two years.**  
**They should have decorated their living room.**

In some languages, it is possible to mention a topic and then to make a comment about it without using a verb phrase. A speaker of Mandarin, for example, could write

他很高

which translates literally as \*‘‘He very tall.’’<sup>†</sup> In English, such topic-comment constructions are not acceptable in expository writing. When you read, though, you might sometimes find such structures used consciously by the writer as a stylistic device:

**My sister became a doctor. My brother, a lawyer.**

Some more examples of topic-comment structures used in specific circumstances occur in Exercise 3.

### ☆EXERCISE 3<sup>‡</sup>

The artist Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother, Theo, to explain his intentions in the painting of his room. Read what he wrote.

I had a new idea in my head and here is the sketch to it. . . . This time it's just simply my bedroom, only here color must do everything, and, as it gives a grander style to things when it is simple, it will be suggestive here of rest or of sleep in general. In a word, to look at the picture ought to rest the brain or rather the imagination.

The walls are pale violet. The ground is of red tiles. The wood of the bed and chairs is the yellow of fresh butter, the sheets and pillows

<sup>†</sup>An asterisk (\*) indicates incorrect usage.

<sup>‡</sup>A star (☆) indicates a linguistically challenging exercise.

## SUBJECT AND PREDICATE

very light greenish lemon. The coverlet scarlet. The window green. The toilet-table orange, the basin blue. The doors lilac.

And that is all—there is nothing in this room with closed shutters. The broad lines of the furniture, again, must express absolute rest.

Adapted from a translation quoted in E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1978), p. 438.

Because Vincent van Gogh was writing to his brother, he could write in his own personal and stylized way. He did not keep on repeating a form of the verb *be*, but he left out the verb phrase in some of the basic sentence structures. Where did he do that? How would those structures be written in an academic description of the painting?

**EXERCISE 4**

For Exercise 2, you wrote a description of van Gogh's room and a partner indicated the division between the subject and predicate in each sentence. Underline the verb phrase you used in each independent clause, and then underline the main verb (not the auxiliaries) twice.

Note that a form of *be*, *do*, or *have* can serve as either a main verb or an auxiliary.

**1c. The position of the subject**

The subject of a sentence is frequently a noun phrase: either a noun + determiners (words like *a*, *an*, *the*, *this*, etc.) or a pronoun (*he*, *they*, etc.). The usual and common sentence order in English is this:

S-V-O: subject-verb-object ("The boy ate the cake.")

Or

S-V-C: subject-linking verb-complement ("The boy was hungry.")

Linking verbs are verbs like *be*, *seem*, *appear*, *look*, and *feel*.

A speaker of English tends to watch out for the subject when reading in order to determine what the sentence will be about. Very often, the subject appears in first position in the sentence. But when a phrase or clause precedes the subject, a comma is usually—though not always—used to signal this (as in this very sentence!) and to prepare the reader for the appearance of the subject:

~~~~~ , S + V



**EXERCISE 5**

In the following sentences from the passage by Nora Ephron, the author includes information in the sentence before the subject. Underline the part of the sentence that precedes the subject.

1. Last year, I came to believe that the main reason was the lamps.
2. Also, they make the room much brighter.
3. Years ago, when I lived in a two-room apartment, I never used the living room either.
4. Sometimes I think about moving the bed into the living room.
5. Every time I walk from the bedroom or the study to the kitchen I pass the living room and take a long, fond look at it.
6. When I was growing up, I had a friend named Lillian.

**1d. What not to do with the subject of the sentence**

There are three important things to remember about the subject.

- The subject should not be omitted. (“My town is pretty; \*is big, too.”)
- The subject should not be repeated. (\*“My town Kafarselwan it is marvelous and exciting.”)
- The subject should not be buried inside a prepositional phrase. (\*“In my town Kafarselwan is marvelous and exciting.” What is the subject of *is*? The student can rewrite this as “My town Kafarselwan is marvelous and exciting” or “In my town Kafarselwan, everything is marvelous and exciting.”)

In some languages—Spanish or Japanese, for example—the subject of the sentence does not have to be stated when it is a pronoun like *I*, *we*, *he*, or *they*:

**SPANISH**

Tengo muchos libros. (I have a lot of books.)

tengo = I have

**JAPANESE**

Hon wo kaimashita. (*X* bought a book—the pronoun is inferred from the context.)

kaimashita = I bought, you bought, he/she bought, etc.

In English, however, both in speech and writing, a pronoun subject may never be omitted.

## SUBJECT AND PREDICATE

**EXERCISE 6 (oral)**

The following students' sentences contain errors. Can you identify the errors and fix them?

1. The big chair it is very comfortable.
2. The bedroom is extremely pretty; has a lot of antique furniture.
3. The pictures that are on the walls around the room, they are mostly landscapes.
4. By buying expensive furniture has made the room look like a museum.
5. My mother wanted a new carpet. Then wanted a new table, too.
6. The lamp on the table next to the window it belonged to my grandmother.

**1e. Filler subjects *it* and *there***

Both *it* and *there* can be used to fill the subject position in an English sentence. Some languages can omit the subject. Since the subject is obligatory in an English sentence, *it* and *there* are often used to fill that position. They occur in different contexts, however, and should not be confused:

- *It* is used with time, distance, weather, temperature, and the environment:

*It* is 8 o'clock.

*It's* 200 miles away.

*It's* raining and soon *it* will be snowing.

*It* was hot yesterday.

*It* got too crowded at the party, so I left.

The filler subject *it* is always singular, followed by a third-person singular verb form (see Chapter 17).

Note that the uses of *it* as a subject in the reading passage introducing this chapter do not represent a filler subject. These uses are referential: each *it* refers to something previously mentioned in the text.

- *There* postpones the logical subject and indicates position or existence:

*There* are 20 people in the room.

*There* was once a school on that corner.

*There* is a reason for my absence.

*There* is a God.