

How to Explain Grammar

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The main points

Remember: If your ear and your logic disagree, it's probably your logic that's wrong.

1. **Analyze it.** Zero in on the problem. Take it apart and identify the relevant parts and their arrangement.
2. **Look it up.** Use *Fowler's*, the *Oxford Guide*, the *NYPL Guide*, *Chicago*, what have you.
3. **Play with it.** Swap things in. Change tense and number in verbs. Change number in nouns, and swap and change pronouns. Do some tests on it (see below).
4. **Come up with parallel cases and counterexamples.** See if you can argue yourself down first; there's no harm in changing your mind, as long as you do it before rendering your judgment to your client. When giving examples to the client, so much the better if you can use a famous example, or at least an example by someone famous. Otherwise, judge your audience, but generally use innocuous things like food. Use humour if you think it will work. Linguists have a bad habit of coming up with violent examples. Avoid this.

Verb inflection

Non-finite forms

infinitive: be, cook, see (*to* is often used with it, but not always; it is not an essential part of the infinitive, but rather belongs with the construction)

present participle: being, cooking, seeing

past participle: been, cooked, seen

Finite forms

indicative (realis) past: he was, he cooked, he saw

indicative (realis) non-past: he is, he cooks, he sees (can be used for stative or habitual)

(future is indicated with simple present, present progressive, or auxiliary)

(past can also be indicated without past tense if we're using the narrative past, but that requires special framing)

subjunctive (irrealis) present: he be, he cook, he see

subjunctive (irrealis) past: he were, he cooked, he saw

imperative: be, cook, see (second person present tense only)

Auxiliaries

is (be)/was, has (have)/had, will/would, can/could, may/might, shall/should...

Noun inflection

Number

singular: cake

plural: cakes

Cases (nom/acc affects pronouns only)

nominative (subject): we

accusative (direct object): us (also functions as dative (indirect object): Give us the cake)

genitive (possessive): our

How to identify sentence parts

Identify the heads of phrases

Strip away all the modifiers. This includes all dependent phrases (notably prepositional phrases and dependent clauses), adjectives, and attributive nouns.

Some tests

Identify what's part of a phrase

The movement test: They ran up the stairs. Up the stairs they ran. They ran up the flag. The flag, they ran up. / *Up the flag they ran.

Identify what's part of the noun phrase, e.g., They beat the guys with sticks.

The pronoun test: They beat them with sticks. / They beat them.

The echo question test: They beat who with sticks? The guys. / They beat who? The guys with sticks.

The cleft construction test: It was the guys with sticks they beat. / It was the guys they beat with sticks.

Identify whether a noun phrase is subject or object

The pronoun test: swap in I/me, he/him, she/her, we/us, or they/them: Sarah told me about William chasing Susie. / She told me about him chasing her.

Identify the main verb

The conjugation test: change the subject to third-person singular present or change the tense to past: They will make do. They made do.

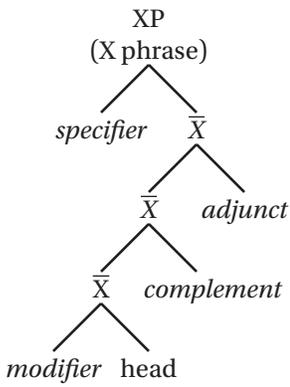
The do so test: Run out the door. Do so out the door. Run out the banner. Do so to the banner. *Do so out the banner.

Identify the main clause

The inversion test: turn it into a question and see if the order inverts or an auxiliary appears: If you build it, they will come. If you build it, will they come? *If do you build it, they will come?

The tag question test: If you build it, they will come, will they? *If you build it, they will come, do you?

Phrase structure

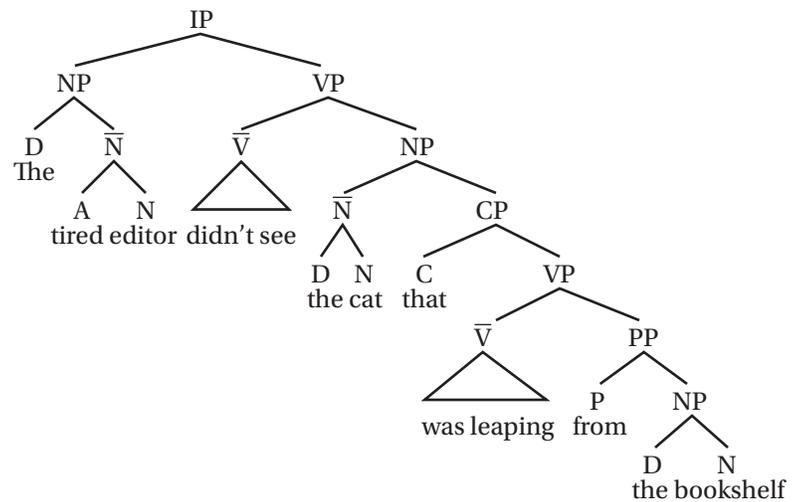
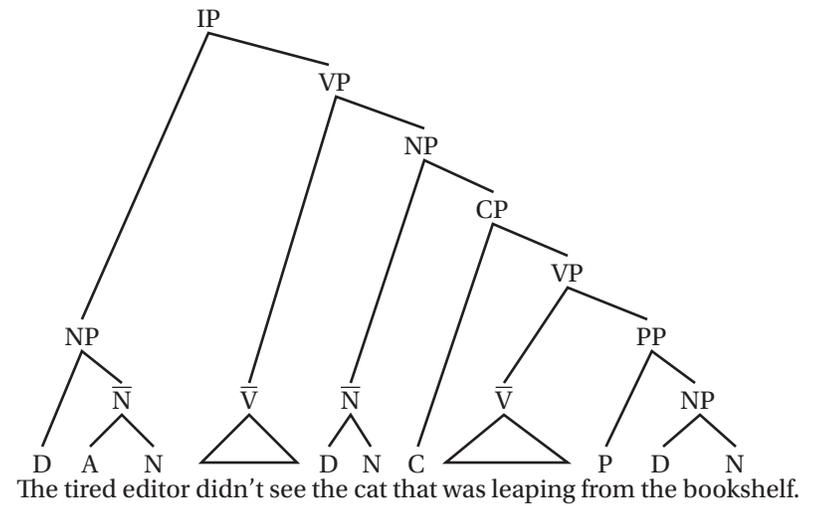


- Bits*
- inflectional phrase (IP) – a.k.a sentence (S) or clause
 - complement phrase (CP)
 - noun phrase (NP)
 - verb phrase (VP)
 - prepositional phrase (PP)
 - adjectival phrase (AP) – attributive, predicative
 - adverbial phrase (AdvP)
 - N-bar (\bar{N} or N'), V-bar (\bar{V} or V'), etc.
 - head (compulsory)
 - dependents:
 - specifier (determiner (N), adverb (V), degree word (A, P))
 - modifier
 - complement
 - adjunct

More terminology

- clause: subject + predicate
- embedded clause (I thought that you knew.)
- complement clause: required grammatically (I want you to want me.)
- complementizer: introduces an embedded clause (I thought that you knew.)
- coordination (He got down and got back up again.)
- nominalization (Starting a bit late is par for the course.)
- clausal subject (That we started a bit late was predictable.)
- finite clause (I think that he did it.)
- infinitival clause (I want you to want me.)
- relative clause (This is the house that Jack built.)

Three ways to diagram a sentence (with simplifications)



$[_{IP}[_{NP}\text{The tired editor}]] [_{VP}\text{didn't see} [_{NP}\text{the cat} [_{CP}\text{that} [_{VP}\text{was leaping} [_{PP}\text{from} [_{NP}\text{the bookshelf}]]]]]]]]]$

Movement in a relative clause

the cake that you ruined the cake that you ruined [it]

↑

Movement in a question

Whom are you kissing? whom are you [are] kissing [her]

↑ ↑

Some cases

Adding the ingredients in this order ensures failed chiffon cakes made at home is not an option.

It's very important for you and I to stay in touch.

I must agree with whomever wrote this.

Comments on YouTube are generally written by adolescents, most of who are grossly immature and barely coherent.

Let she who is without error make the first correction.

The Green Party and the Bloc Québécois each has nine percent.

The aim is for each waffle and every pancake to taste as though they were made of dreams.

The majority of those asked says they prefer pancakes.

I guess free tickets for all of them on the Eurostar was out of the question.

What you need to do to live right everyday.

It's hard to describe politely what durian – and, for that matter, some other tropical fruits – taste like.

Either you're with us or the tourists.

He felt as if he was on Mars.

I have a basket of berries that are mouldy and another that are not.

Implementing personnel policies is the only real delegation left to make, which requires involvement at all executive levels.

It wasn't as though it wasn't something you wouldn't hear at any dinner party.