

Review: Parts of Speech

The ACT English section tests your ability to recognize errors and make editing decisions; it never asks you to identify what part of speech a particular word is. Despite this, you're going to have to know words' parts of speech in order to understand how they are interacting grammatically, so a brief review can be helpful.

There are eight parts of speech—

Nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, and interjections.

Nouns

Nouns are the concrete or abstract “things” in language. Nouns directly represent people, places, things, and abstract concepts like ideas and emotions.

Examples: “Bill,” “San Diego,” “trees,” “improvement,” “embarrassment”

Proper nouns, including names and titles, are always capitalized.

Examples: “President Washington,” “*Alice in Wonderland*,” “the Statue of Liberty”

Pronouns

If you repeat someone's name every time you referred to him or her in a typical paragraph, it can get pretty tiring:

✗ *Sarah went to the grocery store, where Sarah found a good deal on sliced bread. Sarah decided to go home and make toast in Sarah's new toaster. Sarah's new toaster improved greatly upon Sarah's old toaster, which always set off Sarah's fire alarm when Sarah tried to make Sarah's toast.*

Exhausting to read, right? Pronouns solve this problem. Pronouns are placeholders for nouns that represent them so that we don't have to repeat a noun (e.g. “Sarah”) every time we want to refer to that noun.

The meaning of a particular pronoun is determined by the context in which it is used. (After all, pronouns would be a lot less useful if “it” only meant one thing!) A pronoun only refers to one noun at a time—the last noun used in a sentence that agrees with the pronoun. The noun to which a pronoun refers is called its **antecedent**. In the above paragraph, “Sarah” is the antecedent of both the pronouns “she” and “her.”

In modern English, pronouns can be subjective (“I”), objective (“me”), or possessive (“my”) in case, as well as singular (“him”) or plural (“them”) and gendered (“she” and “him”) or neuter (“it”).

Verbs

Verbs convey action or being. Action verbs convey actions, and linking verbs (also called “helping verbs”) work along action verbs to form various tenses and convey being.

Examples of Action Verbs: “run,” “wonder,” “flap,” “focus”

Examples of Linking Verbs: “am,” “is,” “are,” “was,” “were,” “be,” “being,” “been”

Case Studies

Having a hard time telling subjective and objective pronouns apart, as in the common head-scratcher of deciding whether “who” or “whom” is correct in a sentence? [Click here](#) to check out our section on pronoun case errors to get a jump on this error and be ready for it on the exam.



Verbs have three main characteristics: tense, mood, and voice.

Tense

The tense of a verb tells you when that verb's action is occurring, has occurred, or will occur.

On the ACT English section, you will never be required to name a tense, merely to identify errors. Tense errors primarily focus on situations in which a verb's tense does not agree with or make sense in the context of the rest of the sentence.

Tenses in Action

Present:	"I write a letter."
Present Progressive:	"I am writing a letter."
Simple Past:	"I wrote a letter."
Past Progressive:	"I was writing a letter."
Pluperfect:	"I had written a letter."
Future:	"I will write a letter."
Future Progressive:	"I will be writing a letter."
Future Perfect:	"I will have written a letter."

Mood

The mood of a verb tells you what the verb is doing:

- **Indicative** verbs tell you about the state of something
"I ate the cookies."
- **Imperative** verbs form commands
"Eat the cookies!"
- **Subjunctive** verbs are perhaps the trickiest for most people to grasp; the subjunctive mood describes a state that is recognized as not being reality—a hypothetical situation.
"If I were to eat those cookies, I bet they'd taste really good!"
- **Infinitive** verbs convey an abstract notion of an action and are always formed with "to"
"I want to eat the cookies."

Voice

Verbs (and the sentences that contain them) have two options for voice: active voice or passive voice. Which of these a given verb demonstrates is wrapped up in the concept of **transitivity**. You can think of transitivity as involving an actor and something or someone being acted upon. The order in which the actor and the acted-upon appear in a sentence determine its voice and the voice

Active Voice: Subject-Verb-Object (SVO)

In active voice sentences, the actor is the subject of the verb and the acted-upon is the object.

"The cat chases the mouse."

Subject Verb Object

"The man ate the sandwich."

Subject Verb Object

"The coach will encourage her team."

Subject Verb Object

of its verb(s).

Passive Voice: Object-Verb-Subject (OVS)

In passive voice sentences, the acted-upon is the subject of the verb and the actor is the object.

"The mouse is being chased by the cat."

Object Verb Subject

"The sandwich was eaten by the man."

Object Verb Subject

"The coach's team will be encouraged by her."

Object Verb Subject

While the passive voice certainly has its uses and is not grammatically incorrect, ACT English section can include problems where the correct answer is to rearrange the sentence to avoid the use of the passive voice. If a problem comes down to the decision of picking between two options that only differ in voice, pick the active voice option! The test-writers prefer it.



Special Case: Verbals

Certain words can act as nouns or verbs depending on the context, and identifying these can present a challenge in that they might fall into a special case of word somewhere between nouns and verbs: verbals. Verbals can be described as certain types of words “acting like nouns.”

Gerunds

Gerunds are verbs, usually ending in “-ing,” that act as nouns in a given sentence.

Painting is fun, but my favorite hobby is knitting.

Participles

Participles are verbs that act as adjectives in a given sentence.

The laughing campers overcooked the burnt marshmallow over the roaring fire.

Infinitives

Infinitives may seem familiar, but they are technically verbals.

To get to the point, “To be or not to be” is a line used to open a very famous monologue in *Hamlet*.

Adjectives

Adjectives are descriptors—they provide descriptive details about nouns or other adjectives.

The bright blue songbird flew into its stable nest in the tall strong oak tree.

Multiple words can combine to form compound adjectives, which are hyphenated:

The twenty-year-old architect’s self-designed studio is in a six-story building.

Adverbs

Adverbs, like adjectives, are descriptors, but adverbs describe verbs or adjectives.

The very speedy car zoomed by at a blindingly fast pace, and the onlookers cheered loudly.

Prepositions

Prepositions convey the temporal or spatial relationship between two objects, providing information about what is happening where.

The squirrel ran over the porch, under the chair, around the fence, through the tire swing, up the tree, across the branch, and into its nest, from where it could keep an eye on the dog.

Quick Tip

Can’t tell if a word is a preposition? Prepositions are anything you can be in relation to a cloud. In a cloud, above a cloud, beside a cloud, near a cloud, beneath a cloud . . .

Conjunctions

Conjunctions link phrases, clauses, and sentences together.

Coordinating conjunctions are single words that do this:

Cakes and cookies usually need some sugar or sweetener, but I forgot that when cooking.

Subordinate conjunctions are pairs of words that always work together to do this. You can’t use one without the other or your sentence will be grammatically incorrect! Three common subordinate conjunctions are “either . . . or,” “neither . . . nor,” “if . . . then,” and “not only . . . but also.”

Diners can enjoy either tea or coffee after their meals, but we offer neither milk nor sugar for those drinks; however, we offer not only regular tea and coffee, but also decaf.

Articles

Articles are words like “a,” “an,” and “the” that convey varying levels of specificity. Technically, articles can be categorized as adjectives, but the ACT English section will never ask you about that!

Interjections

Interjections convey sudden bursts of emotion and usually mimic things people say.

Examples: “wow,” “whoa,” “um”

“Wow, that was way easier than I thought it would be!”

