

UNIT 7: SIMPLE SENTENCES

In this unit we begin to deal with the **sentence** as a whole. It is very difficult -- both in English and Chinese -- to define what a 'sentence' is, because it can be extremely complex, as well as extremely simple. So we focus on the **clause** instead, because a sentence can be made up of one or more clauses. A sentence which consists of just one clause is a 'simple sentence', and this unit is about the parts that make up a clause or simple sentence.

We can distinguish five main **clause patterns** in English (following Quirk et al.'s *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*). There is one thing that all clauses have in common: they all have a **subject** and a **verb**. In Unit 9, when we talk about non-finite subordinate clauses, you will find that the subject is omitted under certain conditions. But the **verb** is always there. So, remember this, if you have a clause, or a simple sentence, you must have a verb. In Chinese, you may not realise the importance of the verb, because it is possible to have a sentence in Chinese which does not have a verb, but an adjective instead, e.g.:

他很窮。(He very poor.)

我的朋友還在對我生氣。(My friend still angry with me.)

But such sentences are ungrammatical in English. You need at least a 'linking verb' like *is/are*.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS

QUESTION 1:

The words or phrases which cannot be the Subject of the sentence are marked by *, with comments:

1. *Poor are always with us. – an adjective alone cannot be a subject.
2. The poor are always with us. – an adjective phrase with the definite article 'the' can function like a plural noun phrase, and therefore can serve as a subject.
3. *Loudly are here. – an adverb cannot be a subject.
4. *The loudly are here. – an adverb phrase cannot be a subject
5. Some are here. – 'some' is a pronoun here, and pronouns can be subjects
6. *On the table is tiring. – a preposition phrase cannot be a subject

7. Standing on the table is tiring.
8. That oil floats on water is well-known.
9. What he does is well-known. – (7-9) show that subordinate clauses can be subjects.

The generalisation is that, besides nouns and noun phrases, adjective phrases with a definite article, and subordinate clauses, can also be subjects.

QUESTION 2:

Only the sentences that really need to be completed with an object are given below (the following answers are only some examples):

1. My friend repaired my car.
3. He caught the thief.
7. The building of Disneyland will stimulate the economy.
8. The earthquake destroyed several towns.

QUESTION 3:

The sentences which can be re-written in the pattern Verb-Indirect Object-Direct Object are given below (notice that no preposition is used before the indirect object).

Those sentences which cannot are marked by *:

I sent a letter to my best friend. – *I sent my best friend a letter.*

I sent a letter to Japan. - *

She baked a cake for her boyfriend. – *She baked her boyfriend a cake.*

She baked a cake for the party. - *

He bought a car for his parents. – *He bought his parents a car*

He bought a car for transportation. - *

He gave a thousand dollars to everyone - *He gave everyone a thousand dollars.*

He gave a thousand dollars to charity. - *

Generally, indirect objects refer to humans who receive an object and come to possess it. So in ‘I sent my best friend a letter’, he/she receives and possesses the letter, but we can’t say *‘I sent Japan a letter’, because Japan is not a person who can receive something.

QUESTION 4:

Some examples of subject complements:

My neighbour is a witch doctor.

In the 1950's, Hong Kong was relatively backward.

China will be the world's biggest economy.

He became a Christian.

These apples are very sour.

The students seem nervous.

All of the above underlined phrases are subject complements which tell us something about the subject. None of them are objects, and they cannot be made into passive sentences.

A NOTE ON COMPLEMENTS

The term 'complement' is widely used in grammar, and may therefore seem a bit confusing to some of you. Remember that the general meaning of the term **complement** is: something which is needed to 'complete' something else. Therefore, a complement is compulsory and it would be ungrammatical to leave it out, which is why we're paying so much attention to it. Strictly speaking, objects are 'complements' too, since they are needed to complete a clause with a transitive verb.

QUESTION 5:

Linking verbs are marked by [L], and transitive verbs by [T], in the examples below. Both are given if both are possible.

1. He became [L] / saw [T] a doctor.
2. The driver was [L] / injured [T] a man.
3. My classmates are [L] very hard-working.
4. During the trip, he became [L] ill.
5. During the trip, he caught [T] a fever.
6. My teacher wrote [T] a book.
7. My teacher is [L] / married [T] a singer.
8. The truth is [L] that he had an affair with the intern.

A NOTE ON THE LINKING VERB

The linking verb *be* is a very important verb in English. [We're not speaking of the **auxiliary** verb *be* (as in 'He is reading'), but the **main verb** *be*, which **links** the subject with the subject complement, as in 'He is a teacher'.] Many mistakes are made because students leave it out in sentences like *'Education very important'. A linking verb, like *be* or *seem*, is needed here, even if it doesn't say very much, because English requires a verb in every clause or sentence.

QUESTION 6:

Only those sentences which need to be completed by object complements are given below ([O] = Object, [OC] = Object Complement):

1. The committee appointed him [O] the new liaison officer [OC].
3. The students voted Professor Lee [O] Best Teacher of the Year [OC].
5. His war experience made him [O] a pessimist [OC].

A NOTE ON OBJECT COMPLEMENTS

Object complements are much less common than subject complements, and are different from them in the sense that they complete what we want to say about the **object** (rather than subject). There are certain verbs, like *make* (in the sense of changing someone or something), which require us to say what we ‘make’ or change the object into – e.g. ‘We made John the leader of our group’. The object complement ‘the leader of our group’ says something about the object ‘John’, not about the subject ‘we’. The sentence * ‘We made John’ would be incomplete.

QUESTION 7:

Sentences 2, 4, 5 contain adverbials – i.e. [from the university bookshop], [all the time] and [all of a sudden]. Adverbials are a large group that includes many different things (and not just adverbs alone), including the phrases that you saw above.

Adverbials have a few characteristics in common:

They are optional rather than compulsory, which means they can be left out if you wish; They usually tell us something about the circumstances of the event – e.g. the time, place, manner, reason, cause, result, etc.;

Their position in the sentence is relatively flexible, and they can usually be moved around a bit (e.g. ‘Suddenly it started to rain’, ‘It suddenly started to rain’, ‘It started to rain suddenly’, etc.)

QUESTION 8:

A coordinating conjunction is needed to join the second clause to the first:

1. Vitamin A is also called retinol, **and** occurs naturally in carrots.
2. The lower part was vegetation, **and** this vegetation was very thick. [or start a new sentence with ‘This...’]
3. Coal is the most important fuel in our daily life, **and** it has been used for a long time. [or start a new sentence with ‘It...’]
4. The baby was very clean, **and** did not need a bath.
5. The giant plants died many years later. **Thus** the plants decomposed gradually. [start a new sentence]

A NOTE ON COORDINATION

It is very hard to compare sentences in English and Chinese. Part of the reason is punctuation, which works differently in the two languages. In Chinese, it is possible to keep writing sentence after sentence, separated only by commas, with nothing connecting them. In English, sentences are separated by full stops. A **main clause** (that is, a clause capable of standing alone as a complete sentence) cannot occur with another main clause in the same sentence, unless they are connected by some sort of **coordinating conjunction** (typically *and, or, but*).

Be careful with *therefore, thus, so*, and such words. They do not join main clauses into a sentence. You should not write: 'He has no money, therefore/thus/so he cannot pay his fees.' You'll need to start a new sentence with *therefore, thus* or *so*. (Alternatively you may use the conjunction *and* before *so*).

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

TEXT1:

I have read with amusement about the attempts of the Hong Kong government to control the littering public by imposing \$600 on-the-spot fines.

As we have all seen by recent reports about beach littering, this system is completely useless as it is.

I would like to propose a new three-phase scheme which would surely deter littering. Phase one remains the same, an on-the-spot fine, but increased to \$1,000. Phase two would be to use the money to purchase a new refuse container to be placed on or near the spot of the crime. On this container would be a small plaque bearing the name of the offender with wording such as "This bin was paid for by (offender's name) as a result of littering." Phase three of this plan would be to make the offender work for one day cleaning the streets in the area where the offence took place. Surely this would deter littering in view of the punishment and I am sure that it would also severely reduce the likelihood of a repeat offence.

Such a plan would demonstrate just how serious the government is about trying to make Hong Kong into a clean city, if indeed it is serious about a cleaner Hong Kong.

TEXT 2:

The Chinese government will not let just anybody gather **together** 30,000 people, mostly students, in one place for an **hour** or two for often emotional motivational speeches. Li Yang **is** clearly an exceptional case.

Mr Li is the inventor **of** Crazy English, a language learning method that requires students **to** shout in order to overcome their inhibitions, and he **is** more of a proselytizer than a teacher.

He once **spoke** to 100,000 people in a single day, at three **consecutive** seminars in Chengdu, and to date as many as **20** million people are believed to have heard him speak **in** person or on tape. In perhaps the ultimate official **endorsement**, he was granted the privilege of holding a seminar **in** the hallowed grounds of the Forbidden City.

But it **should** not be surprising that government officials would support Mr. Li, China's **premier** English-learning guru. He is singing their song, and it **goes** something like this: learn English because it is necessary **for** your life and your country, and in return you **will** be rewarded with a higher salary, a stronger China **and** eventually a future in which people around the world **will** be required to learn Putonghua just as they need **to** learn English today.

TEXT 3:

I hope that I am not the **only** Hong Kong citizen to feel profound shame **at** the reaction, or rather lack of it, **of** our community to the bomb disaster **in** Bali.

The island is a popular tourist **destination** for Hong Kong people, so it was **likely** from the outset that some of the **victims** would be SAR residents. Yet the only **response** from our city when the news was **broadcast** was a rather bland announcement on the **part** of Cathay Pacific that it would send **a** larger plane than usual to accommodate residents **who** wanted to return early. While the Australians **were** sending in medical teams and supplies, we **did** not even bother to donate as much **as** a box of bandages.

Are we so **wrapped** up in the never-ending debates on **the** economy and negative equity that we have **lost** all sense of our moral and social **obligations**? Even when it became apparent that a **number** of fellow residents were missing, no member **of** our accountable government was dispatched to the **scene** to represent our community and to ensure **that** everything possible was being done to find **them**.

The Hong Kong community seems to have sunk **into** a spiritual vacuum. We must examine the **reasons** for this and try to recover our **sense** of humanity and compassion for others.