

Spotting Verbs, Subjects, and Objects

Verbs

Syntactically, verbs come in two primary types: finite and non-finite. Finite verbs are marked for tense (present, preterite), number (singular, plural), and person (first, second, third). They govern a clause each. Non-finite verbs divide into two subcategories: infinitives ('to see') and participles ('seeing', 'seen'). These don't govern their own clauses but are themselves governed by the finite verb that also governs the clause in which they are found.

Hē *wolde* mancyn lȳsan // He *wanted* to redeem mankind

Not every language has visible inflectional markers for all of the functions of the finite verb. In Old English, there is no distinction in form between the persons of a plural verb, but otherwise everything is visibly marked. Word endings are thus a powerful clue in the identification of verbs.

Most narratives employ the third person more frequently than the first and second. Most finite verbs you encounter will thus end in *-þ/ð*, *-eþ/eð*, or *-aþ/að* in the present tense — in short, they end in *-þ/ð*. In the past tense, regular verbs end in *-on* regardless of person. However, a large number of verbs are **subjunctive** in function, usually because they are found in a construction expressing some kind of unreality such as a reported statement or a wish. In these cases, singular verbs end in *-e* and plural verbs in *-en* regardless of person, and even regardless of tense if the verbs concerned are strong. Spotting a verb is step one; identifying whether it is singular or plural is an important step two because it helps you in your search for a subject. Note that *-aþ* is normally plural, but it is singular for one smaller group of verbs.

<i>present</i>	person	ind. sg.	ind. pl.	subj. sg.	subj. pl.
	1	-e	-aþ	-e	-en
	2	-st	-aþ	-e	-en
	3	-(e)þ(, -aþ)	-aþ	-e	-en
<i>weak pret.</i>	person	ind. sg.	ind. pl.	subj. sg.	subj. pl.
	1	-de	-don	-de	-den
	2	-dest	-don	-de	-den
	3	-de	-don	-de	-den
<i>strong pret.</i>	person	ind. sg.	ind. pl.	subj. sg.	subj. pl.
	1	-∅	-on	-e	-en
	2	-e	-on	-e	-en
	3	-∅	-on	-e	-en

Infinitives usually end in *-an*, but the inflected infinitive — corresponding to the ‘to-infinitive’ in PDE — ends in *-enne*. The inflected infinitive is easy to recognize because it is immediately preceded by *tō*, like in PDE (and cf. German *zu*).

Participles function as adjectives, so they take adjectival endings. First establish that they are participles: present participles always contain *-nd-* between stem and adjectival ending, while past participles have either *-d/t* or *-n-* in this position. Then identify whether they are here part of the verb phrase or serve as subject or object instead. The former means there is a finite verb, usually *bēon/wesan*, that governs them, so that the participle makes sense only in combination with that verb:

Swā ic him sylfum *ǣr secgende wæs*.
Ic *bēo geslāgen*.

Adjectival endings need a good deal of memorizing, since they occur in both strong and weak forms. But you can start by remembering that dative endings are *-um*, *-re* while the accusative singular masculine strong ending is *-ne*; nominative and accusative endings are not otherwise especially distinctive, so judge from context.

Subjects

A subject may consist of a noun, pronoun, or adjective on its own, or a combination of these. In fact, one clause can take a whole other clause as its subject, as in ‘[The apple I ate] was perfectly ripe.’ But you’ll want to start by being able to recognize nominatives, as subjects must always be in the nominative. Start also with the number of the verb in the back of your head: your subject will normally have the same number.

Nouns and adjectives in the nominative singular are often characterized by the absence of an ending, meaning it helps to know what the word looks like in its basic ‘dictionary form’. However, they are frequently accompanied by demonstrative pronouns such as *se* and *hēo* that always reveal their case; only neuter *þæt* is ambiguous between nominative and accusative. Plural forms of nouns are diverse, and all nominative nominals in the plural are more commonly identical with their accusative counterparts. In these cases, the context will help you determine whether you are looking at your subject: an adjacent verb can be a good indication, as well as ruling out other words in the clause and looking at the sense of your words. For instance, a word for ‘obey’ is more likely to have a servant than a king for its subject. But it still helps to know some common plural markers: for masculine nouns, *-as*; for feminine nouns, *-e*, *-a*; for neuter nouns, *-u* or no ending; for adjectives, *-e*, *-a*;

for the demonstrative pronouns, *þā*, *þissa*. And don't forget the dative ending *-um* and the genitive *-a*, which are reliable across all nominals.

Objects

As mentioned above, accusative objects can look a lot like nominative subjects. To spot accusatives, you will therefore want to train your eye to include not just the occasional inflectional clue (accusative singular masculine *-ne* in pronouns and adjectives) but also word order and sense.

Datives are another common form of the object, and these are much easier to spot. Pronouns and adjectives will typically end in *-um* in both numbers, or in *-re* if feminine singular. Dative plural nouns will end in *-um* as well, while masculine and neuter singular dative nouns commonly end in *-e*.