THE SECRET LIFE OF ENGLISH VERBS

How do you find a verb in a sentence?

The idea of finding the verb seems as if it would be easy—just find the action, right? Wrong! English is a language full of pesky things that look like one part of speech, but are really something else. Verb forms can act like nouns, adjectives, or even adverbs! These verb forms look like verbs because they are derived from verbs, and hence, are called *verbals*. Verbals can act like nouns and be the subject of a sentence, the object of a verb, or, they can modify a noun, in essence, acting like an adjective. Lots of other languages have these verb-like creatures in them too, but usually have endings on them that immediately tell the reader or listener that they are really a noun, adjective, or even an adverb. English is tricky about this. Hah! The Secret Life of the English Verb emerges!

Take this sentence: *Swimming is fun*. Or this one: *Looking out the window, I spot an owl*. What about this one: *Eating popcorn is an enjoyable experience while going to the movies*. Or this one: *To write a novel is my dream*. Or this famous quote (Hamlet) “To be or not to be: that is the question.” Finding the true verb of the sentence is indeed quite tricky.

Where is the verb?

Here is a verb test that works every time! With a little practice, you will be able to ferret out the verb in no time in almost any sentence. A way to distinguish the verb from a verbal is to change the time that the sentence happened. In other words, change the tense of the sentence. For example, if we take the sentence, *Swimming is fun*, and put it into the past tense, we then re-write the sentence as *Swimming was fun*. Similarly, if we put it into the future, we then re-write the sentence as *Swimming will be fun*. Note that *swimming*, a verbal acting as the subject (noun) of the sentence did not change, hence, it is not the verb of the sentence!

When you use this test, strip out all of the helper words, such as *may, might, do, did, would, should*, etc., because they complicate matters. You can always stick these helper words back in after you have discovered the true verb. Once you change the tense, *only one word in the sentence changes, and that is the verb*. This is the test you will use to ferret out that verb—make it come out of hiding!

Verb Exercise

Working in groups of three:

1. On a clean sheet of piece of paper, each person in the group should write a complete sentence. Make it simple. All of you should do this at the same time. *Write the sentence in the present tense.* Don’t use helping verbs, such as “do,” “can, “would,” “might,” “should,” etc. I will go around to each group and check your sentences.
2. Then, each person should pass the sentence to the person on his or her left. This person will change the sentence to the future tense. Use *will* or *shall*.
3. Then, pass the sentence to the next person who will change the tense to the past tense. Again, do not use helping verbs, such as “do,” “did,” etc.

Finally, pass the sentence back to the original author. Then, for all three original sentences, as a group you should all examine the sentences and come to an agreement which word in the original sentence was the verb. Circle the verbs.

Repeat this exercise three times, each time making the sentence a little more complex than the previous one. Have fun! If you want to make your sentences fun, funny, or entertaining, go ahead! Just keep it clean!