



LINKING VERBS

This handout reviews the difference between **ACTIVE** and **LINKING** verbs.

ACTIVE VERBS—Every English sentence contains a subject and verb. In many cases, the verb is an *active* verb. That is, the verb **TELLS WHAT ACTION IS BEING PERFORMED**:

Jean *HIT* the ball.
The class *READ* three books.
Beth *BOUGHT* a new car.

These simple sentences contain an active verb (italicized). In each instance, the active verb tells what action the subject does: Jean hits something. The class reads something. Beth buys something. Remember that 99 percent of the time, an action verb is one which can be demonstrated (*run, walk, sing, talk, cry, laugh*).

LINKING VERBS--These are sometimes harder to recognize than active verbs because they simply **SHOW THAT THE SUBJECT EXISTS**. These verbs usually can't be demonstrated. Linking verbs include the following:

- **forms of the verb “to be”**: *am, is, was, were, will be, had been, etc.*
- **verbs of “sense”**: *seem, appear, look, smell, taste, sound, etc.*

Read the following sentences with linking verbs (italicized):

Susie *IS* the head cheerleader.
George *IS* a good father.
Chris *IS* the captain of the team.

Tracy *SEEMED* very excited.
This fish *SMELLS* rancid.
Vicks NyQuil *TASTES* awful.
Pete *APPEARED* sulky and unhappy.
I *FELT* very foolish.
My new stereo *SOUNDS* wonderful.

You'll notice that in each sentence, the **subject complement** (the word which completes the meaning of the sentence) is either a **noun** or an **adjective**. For example, *cheerleader* is a noun renaming who Susie is. *Excited* is an adjective describing Tracy.

Two important points to remember:

- When a sentence contains a linking verb, **THE COMPLEMENT MAY BE EITHER A NOUN OR AN ADJECTIVE**.

- When the main verb in a sentence is a linking verb and the complement is a noun, **THE SUBJECT AND THE COMPLEMENT ARE EQUAL.**

Look at this sentence:

Susie is head cheerleader.

We can **CHANGE THE POSITION** of the subject and the complement in this sentence, making the complement the subject and the subject the complement:

The head cheerleader is Susie.

In other words, Susie = cheerleader.

Here's another sentence:

Chris is the captain of the team.

Again, we can change the position of the subject and complement:

The captain of the team is Chris.

In other words, Chris = captain.

You can see that both terms are interchangeable, so that SUBJECT = COMPLEMENT.

Notice that sentences with **ACTIVE VERBS** will not allow any changing of positions, without ruining or changing the sense of the sentence:

Jean hit the ball.
The ball hit Jean.

The class read three books.
Three books read the class.

Beth bought a new car.
A new car bought Beth.

Remember that in many cases, the **LINKING VERB** works like an **EQUAL SIGN** to show that the subject and the subject complement are equal.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES ALL THIS MAKE?

Students who aren't aware of the difference between active and linking verbs have

difficulty using adverbs or adjectives correctly.

I felt **BAD** about hurting his feelings.
I felt **BADLY** about hurting his feelings.

Which of these sentences is correct? If you've studied this worksheet carefully, you know that the first sentence is correct because

- *feel* is a linking verb
- the complement of the verb has to be an **ADJECTIVE**

so **BAD** is the correct choice.

If you guessed that the correct sentence was the second one (I felt **BADLY**), notice that the adverb (badly) indicates something is wrong with the person's sense of touch.

A HINT: If you can't decide whether a verb is active or linking, try to substitute one of these words--*am, is, was, were*--in the sentence.

Mary **APPEARS** snobbish.
Mary **IS** snobbish.

Mr. Smith **LOOKED** unhappy yesterday.
Mr. Smith **WAS** unhappy yesterday.

The speaker **SEEMED** nervous before the crowd.
The speaker **WAS** nervous before the crowd.

In the sentences above, *appears, looked, and seemed* are linking verbs, based on this substitution.

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