In order to write well, you need to understand how elements within a clause fit together. This handout will help you understand how to craft basic clause structures.

**Concepts and Definitions**

**Clause, Subject, and Predicate**

A clause is a grammatical unit consisting of phrases. Most clauses contain a subject and a predicate. The **subject** is usually a noun phrase. The **predicate** is the part of the clause that says something about the subject. The predicate is the main verb phrase of the clause, complete with all of its dependents.

**Subject/Predicate**:

The book fell.

*Note: For more information on clauses, please see our handout on this topic.*

**Complements**

As a verb phrase, the predicate has two types of dependents: complements and modifiers. Remember complements are dependents that a head (the verb in this case) needs in order for the phrase to be grammatical.

**With Complement (Complement in Brackets)**: He suggests [buying a kitten].

**Without Complement (Complement in Brackets) (Ungrammatical)**: He suggests [].

*Note: For more information on dependents, please see our “Phrases” handout.*

**Objects** are a special type of complement. They are usually noun phrases and come in two varieties: direct and indirect. **Direct objects** are the most involved in the situation or action of the verb. **Indirect objects** are less involved, usually servings as recipients of the action.

**Direct Object**:

She loves the kitten.

**Indirect Object/Direct Object**:

She gave him the kitten.

**Predicative complements** are complements in the verb phrase (i.e., the predicate) that provide more information about the subject or object. They are usually adjective phrases or noun phrases.

**Predicative Complement of Subject (AdjP)**: She is cute.

**Predicative Complement of Object (NP)**: I named the kitten Ginger.
Transitivity
Transitivity describes how many objects a verb can take. Intransitive verbs do not take objects. Transitive verbs take one (a direct object). Ditransitive verbs take two (a direct and an indirect object).

Modifiers
Modifiers are dependents that can be removed without making the clause incomplete.

*With Modifier (Modifier in Brackets):* She gave him a kitten [on Tuesday].
*Without Modifier (Modifier in Brackets) (Still Grammatical):* She gave him a kitten [ ].

Intransitive Verbs

**Ordinary**
The most basic clause pattern consists of a subject and a predicate containing an intransitive verb.

![Diagram of an intransitive verb]

*Subject/Predicate:* The book fell.
*Subject/Predicate:* The cat died.

This is the pattern at its most basic. It can be amplified using modifiers within the subject and predicate.

*Subject/Predicate (Modifiers in Predicate):* The book fell off of the shelf and onto the floor.
*Subject/Predicate (Modifiers in Subject):* The big, angry cat from across the street died.

**Complex**
Complex intransitive constructions contain a predicative complement, usually an adjective phrase or a noun phrase. The most common complex intransitive construction will have a form of “be” as main verb. Other common verbs include “seem,” “feels,” “sounds,” and “looks.”

![Diagram of a complex intransitive verb]

*Predicative Complement (AdjP):* The cat seems sick.
Predicative Complement (NP): Pet owners are my heroes.

You can also expand this construction through the use of modifiers.

Modifiers in Subject NP and Complement AdjP: People who don’t pick up pet waste are guilty of littering.

### Transitive Verbs

#### Ordinary

Ordinary transitive clauses contain a direct object.

![Diagram of transitive verb structure](image)

Usually the direct object is a noun phrase, but it can also be a subordinate clause. You know that a particular complement is a direct object if you can replace it with “it.”

- **Direct Object (NP)** The cat ate the mouse.
- **Direct Object (Subordinate Content Clause):** I forgot that you don’t like cats.
  
  *Note:* You could replace the subordinate clause “that you don’t like cats” with “it.”

Like intransitive constructions, you can expand this transitive construction with modifiers.

- **Modifiers in Subject NP:** The dark gray cats that only come out at night hunt mice.
- **Modifiers in Object NP:** The cats eat too many rats from the polluted sewers.
- **Modifiers in VP:** The cats caught the rats the day before yesterday.

#### Complex

A complex transitive clause has a direct object and a predicative complement. In this case, the predicative complement provides more information about the object, not the subject.
The predicative complement comes after the object.

**Predicative Complement after Object (Correct):** John painted the cat green.

**Predicative Complement before Object (Incorrect):** John painted green the cat.

The predicative complement is usually an adjective phrase or a noun phrase.

**Predicative Complement (AdjP):** They made the cat mad.

**Predicative Complement (NP):** They made him their pet.

This construction can also be expanded with modifiers.

**Modifiers in Predicative Complement:** They proclaimed the cat king of all cats in Baltimore City.

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**Ditransitive Verbs**

**Ordinary**

In an ordinary ditransitive clause, there is both a direct object and an indirect object.

The indirect object comes before the direct object.

**Indirect Object before Direct Object (Correct):** John fed the cat a pie.

**Indirect Object after Direct Object (Incorrect):** John fed a pie the cat.
Often, writers convert the indirect object into a preposition phrase. In this case, it comes after the direct object.

**PP Serving as Indirect Object before Direct Object (Incorrect):** John fed **to the cat a pie**.

**PP serving as Indirect Object after Direct Object (Correct):** John fed **a pie to the cat**.

As with all of these constructions, you can create an infinite variety of constructions using modifiers.

**Modifiers in Indirect Object:** She gave **the noisy, hungry cats** some food.

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**References**
