

Verbs: Transitive and Intransitive

Verbs can be broken into two types: *transitive* and *intransitive*.

Transitive Verbs

In Latin, *trans* means *across*. Therefore, the subject transfers the action to the object. Most verbs in English are transitive.

- I → *took* → my car to the shop.
- We → *played* → basketball yesterday.

In the above examples, the verbs **took** and **played** are followed by the direct objects **car** and **basketball**, respectively.

Test for Transitive Verbs

If a verb is transitive, you will always be able to ask a question beginning with *what* or *whom*. For example, “To what shop did you take your car?” or “With whom did you play basketball?” By asking these questions, you are asking, “Who or what receives the action of the verb?”

Intransitive Verbs

In Latin, *intrans* means *not across*. Therefore, intransitive verbs do not take direct objects because there is no action to transfer.

- Pablo’s writing *improved*.
- We *walked* carefully.

Neither of the above examples has a direct object.

Test for Intransitive Verbs

You can recognize a sentence with an intransitive verb because it **cannot** be rewritten into passive voice. (See our handout on the passive voice.) For example, the sentence “Paul departed late last night” cannot be rewritten to say “Late last night was departed Paul.”

Special Cases

Verbs with Multiple Meanings

Some verbs can be either transitive or intransitive because they have multiple meanings. When used in the context of physical movement, *run* is intransitive.

- I *ran* every day when I was an athlete.
- I *run* every morning to stay in shape.

In the context of guiding or overseeing a company or other group of individuals, *run* is transitive.

- Joe *runs* his own restaurant.
- Martha *ran* her business efficiently.

Verbs in Different Contexts

Verbs can also be either transitive or intransitive depending on context. The verb *sing* is normally intransitive.

- I *sing* rather poorly.
- She *sings* quite beautifully.

Sing is only transitive if the sentence answers the question, “*What* did the subject sing?”

- I *sang* “Don’t Stop Believin’” rather poorly last night.
- She *sang* “I Will Always Love You” quite beautifully last week.

Activity

Determine if the italicized verb in each sentence is transitive or intransitive.

1. Ron Burgundy has been *gossiping* since early this morning.
2. Jack White *founded* The White Stripes.
3. I *lived* in Las Vegas for a very brief period.
4. I *make* an excellent shrimp stir-fry.
5. Michael Simon *gave* an outrageous speech yesterday.
6. Stephen Curry *slipped* on his way to the basket.

7. The prosecution *proved* the defendant's guilt.
8. George Lucas *rejected* the script under false pretenses.
9. I *worked* for ten hours yesterday.
10. The GOP *nominated* a questionable candidate.

Answer Key for Activity

1. intransitive
2. transitive
3. intransitive
4. transitive
5. transitive
6. intransitive
7. transitive
8. transitive
9. intransitive
10. transitive