

The Verb Phrase

Recognize a *verb phrase* when you see one.

Every sentence must have a verb. To depict doable activities, writers use action verbs. To describe conditions, writers choose linking verbs.

Sometimes an action or condition occurs just once—*pow!*—and it's over. Read these two short sentences:

Offering her license and registration, Selena **sobbed** in the driver's seat.

Officer Carson **was** unmoved.

Other times, the activity or condition continues over a long stretch of time, happens predictably, or occurs in relationship to other events. In these instances, a single-word verb like **sobbed** or **was** cannot accurately describe what happened, so writers use multipart verb phrases to communicate what they mean. As many as four words can comprise a verb phrase.

A main or base verb indicates the type of action or condition, and auxiliary—or *helping*—verbs convey the other nuances that writers want to express.

Read these three examples:

The tires **screeched** as Selena **mashed** the accelerator.

Selena **is** always **disobeying** the speed limit.

Selena **should have been driving** with more care, for then she **would not have gotten** her third ticket this year.

In the first sentence, **screeched** and **mashed**, single-word verbs, describe the quick actions of both the tires and Selena.

Since Selena has an inclination to speed, **is disobeying** [a two-word verb] communicates the frequency of her law breaking. The auxiliary verbs that comprise **should have been driving** [a four-word verb] and **would have gotten** [a three-word verb] express not only time relationships but also evaluation of Selena's actions.

Realize that an adverb is *not* part of the verb phrase.

Since a verb phrase might use up to four words, a short adverb—such as **also**, **never**, or **not**—might try to sneak in between the parts. When you find an adverb snuggled in a verb phrase, it is still an adverb, not part of the verb. Read these examples:

For her birthday, Selena would **also** like a radar detector.

Would like = verb; **also** = adverb.

To avoid another speeding ticket, Selena will **never again** take her eyes off the road to fiddle with the radio.

Will take = verb; **never, again** = adverbs.

Despite the stern warning from Officer Carson, Selena has **not** lightened her foot on the accelerator.

Has lightened = verb; **not** = adverb.



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