

Six Grammar Terms You Should Not Use

and what you should use instead

for *Writing Points* subscribers

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We shouldn't be surprised if our 21st century students have difficulty with grammar. The grammar terms we use are simply English translations of Latin terms of the 12th and 13th centuries. Although the words are still in use, many of them no longer have the same meanings they did 800 years ago.

Elementary school students are not experienced enough to realize that some common words can have different meanings in different contexts. They often misunderstand us because they interpret what they hear according to how they usually heard those words used. If his mother says she's been playing catch-up at work all week, Josh may react angrily when she tells him later not to play with his food. He cannot understand why it's OK for his mother to "play ketchup" and wrong for him.

If you want to make teaching and learning grammar as easy as possible for yourself and your students, replace these six antique terms with contemporary ones, particularly when teaching young children: *subject of a sentence*, *state of being*, *complete thought*, *run-on sentence*, *fused sentence*, and *verb tense*.

Subject of a sentence

The most common meaning of the word *subject* is a topic of thought or discussion. When children under 10 hear the phrase *subject of a sentence*, they will think you mean the topic of discussion. They may be able to function reasonably well even if they think the subject of the sentence "I really like that red car" is cars, but they will find it nearly impossible to do any work that requires using grammar and usage resources.

A more accurate and far less misleading phrase is *subject of the verb in the sentence*. If you give even elementary school students the sentence "I really like that red car" and asked them who or what likes, I'll bet most could correctly identify the subject of the verb.

As students get older, you can use the phrase *grammatical subject* interchangeably with *subject of the sentence's verb*.

State of being

The traditional definition of a *verb* is a word that shows *action* or *state of being*. The

only definition of the word state that children know today is the one that refers to a geopolitical unit, such as the state of Missouri or the state of New South Wales.

In 21st century terms, we'd say a *verb* is a word that says something about its subject or makes an assertion about its subject. Sometimes the asserting words work solo, as in

Elvis lives.

Other times the asserting words link the subject to other words that rename or describe the subject:

Skies appear overcast.

Fred is a good teacher.

The garbage smelled awful.

To help today's youngsters understand what grammarians meant by the phrase *state of being*, you can use the phrase *asserting verb* or *verb that says something about its subject*.

Complete thought

A sentence, as everyone knows, has a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. The problem with that definition is that almost nobody knows what a grammatically complete thought is. Students in my college classes seem to think that the longer the sentence, the more complete it is. This impression leads them to write very long fragments in the mistaken belief they are being grammatically correct.

Actually, in grammar, a *complete thought* is an *independent clause*. Oddly enough, the thought is complete because of what it lacks: a complete thought lacks a subordinating term.

In the first example below, the thought is complete because the words have a subject, a verb, but do not begin with a subordinating conjunction or relative pronoun.

Complete thought: Jim went to the store.

Incomplete thought: When Jim went to the store.

Incomplete thought: Because Jim went to the store.

In the second and third examples, the thoughts are incomplete because they begin respectively with a relative pronoun and subordinating conjunction.

You can help prevent misunderstandings by using avoiding the old-fashioned phrase *complete thought*; use the phrase *independent thought* instead. Even if students interpret such fragments as complete because they answers a question, student will see understand such fragments do not make sense independent of the question.

Run-on sentence

Another phrase that confuses students is *run-on sentence*. Most students are used to hearing the term *run on* used in constructions such as “I hope this meeting doesn't run on all afternoon.” Their impression is that the phrase *run-on sentence* means a long sentence.

You can clear up the confusion by a simple change of terminology. Instead of saying *run-on sentence* or *run-on sentences*, use the term *run-together sentences*.

You could even call them *stuck-together sentences* or *smashed together sentences* if that phrasing will help you to convey the idea that two complete sentences have been placed within the boundary markers of a single sentence.

Fused sentence

Fused sentence is a common English class term with multiple ways of misleading students.

First, many students are not familiar with the use of the word *fuse* to signify a joining of two elements. They are more likely to think of a fuse as something that sets off a bomb.

Students who are acquainted with the use of *fusion* to join two elements won't understand how one sentence could be fused.

Prevent all that head-scratching. Instead of the term *fused sentence(s)* use *run-together sentences*.

Verb tense

In our everyday conversation, the word *tense* refers to a state of anxiety. If a teacher talks about verb tense, students are apt to think she's talking about some kind of phobia induced by exposure to English courses.

It is much simpler to use the common contemporary word *time* instead of the Latin term *tense* when introducing students to grammar.

In their study of the English language, our students will find much to baffle them. We can make life simpler for ourselves and our students if we delay using medieval grammar terminology until students have learned the concepts to which the terms refer.

English Grammar Terms for 21st century learners

INSTEAD OF THIS PHRASE	USE THIS LANGUAGE
Subject of the sentence	Subject of the verb
Shows state of being	Says something about the subject Asserts something about the subject
Complete thought	Independent thought
Run-on sentence(s)	Run-together sentences
Fused sentence(s)	Run-together sentences
Verb tense	Verb time
Present tense verb	Present time verb
Past tense verb	Past time verb, or Verb showing past time
Future tense verb	Future time verb, or Verb showing future time

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