

# SOAS LANGUAGE CENTRE

## Grammar Terms Explained

This help sheet provides a definition of some of the most commonly used grammar terms in language learning. These are terms that are used in English, as well as widely across many languages. All definitions are followed by examples.

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### **Active voice**

In an **active** sentence, the subject of the verb usually does or causes the action, e.g. *The car hit the tree.* See **passive voice**.

### **Adjective**

An adjective describes or gives more information about a noun, pronoun or clause, e.g. *a cold day.*

A **comparative adjective** compares two things, e.g. *He is taller than she is.*

A **demonstrative adjective** shows how physically close the speaker or writer is to the object, e.g. *this (for something near), that (for something far).*

An **-ing/ed adjective** changes in different situations, e.g. *The book is very interesting; I am very interested in the book.*

A **possessive adjective** shows who something belongs to, e.g. *my, our.*

A **superlative adjective** compares more than two things, e.g. *He is the tallest boy in the class.*

### **Adverb**

An adverb describes or gives more information about how, when, where or to what degree something is done, e.g. *he worked quickly and well.*

### **Article**

An article can be definite (*the*), indefinite (*a*) or zero (-), e.g. *I was at (-) home in the sitting room when I heard a noise.*

### **Conditional**

A possible or imagined situation usually with 'if', e.g. *If it rains, I will get wet.* (but it's not raining now)

**Conditional forms:** A **verb** form that refers to a possible or imagined situation. Grammar books often mention three kinds of conditionals:

**First conditional**, e.g. *I will come if I can.*    **Second conditional**, e.g. *I would go if they asked me.*

**Third conditional**, e.g. *I would have seen her if I had arrived earlier.*

### **Conjunction**

A conjunction (or connector) is used to connect words, phrases, clauses or sentences, e.g. *I like tea but I don't like coffee because it's too strong for me.*

### **Direct speech**

The actual words someone says, e.g. *He said, 'My name is Ron.'*

### **Gerund, -ing form**

A noun which is made from the present participle form of a verb, e.g. *I hate shopping.*

### **Imperative**

The form of a **verb** that gives an order or instruction, e.g. *Turn to page 10.*

### **Interrogative**

A question form.

### **Noun**

A person, place or thing, e.g. *elephant, girl, grass, school.*

A **compound noun** is a combination of two or more words which are used as a single word, e.g. *a flower shop, a headache.*

A **countable** noun has a singular and plural form, e.g. *book - books.*

An **uncountable** noun does not have a plural form, e.g. *information.*

A **proper noun** is the name of a person or place, e.g. *Robert, London.*

A **singular noun** is one person, place or thing.

A **plural noun** is more than one person, place or thing and can be regular or irregular, e.g. *boys, women.*

### **Object**

This is a noun or phrase that describes the thing or person that is affected by the action of a verb, e.g. *I saw Mary in the classroom.* See **subject**.

### **Participle (past and present)**

The form of the verb that is used to make tenses or adjectives, e.g. *an interesting film* (*interesting* = present participle); *I haven't seen him today.* (*seen* = past participle)

### **Passive voice**

In a **passive** sentence, something is done to or happens to the subject of the verb, e.g. *The tree was hit by the car.* See **active voice**.

### **Preposition**

A word used before a noun, noun phrase or pronoun to connect it to another word, e.g. *He was in the garden.*  
A **dependent preposition** is a word that is always used with a particular noun, verb or adjective, e.g. *interested in, depend on, bored with.*

### **Pronoun**

A word that replaces or refers to a noun or noun phrase just mentioned.

**Demonstrative pronoun**, e.g. *this, that.*

**Personal pronoun**, e.g. *I* (subject pronoun), *me* (object pronoun)

**Reflexive pronoun**, e.g. *myself*

**Object pronoun**, e.g. *him.*

**Possessive pronoun**, e.g. *mine*

**Relative pronoun**, e.g. *which*

### **Reported statement**

When someone's words are reported by another person, e.g. *She said she was sorry.* See **direct speech**.

### **Subject**

This is the noun or phrase that goes before the verb in a sentence to show who is doing the action, e.g. *John plays tennis every Saturday.* See **object**.

### **Tense**

A form of the verb that shows whether something happens in the past, present or future, e.g.

**Past perfect simple and continuous/progressive** *After I had phoned Mary, I went out.* (past perfect simple)

*I had been studying for three hours, so I felt quite tired.* (past perfect continuous/progressive)

**Past simple and past continuous/progressive** *I was talking (past continuous/progressive) to my friend when the taxi came.* (past simple)

**Present continuous/progressive for future** *What are you doing at the weekend?*

**Present perfect simple and continuous/progressive** *I have known him for a long time* (present perfect simple).

*I have been studying for three years* (present perfect continuous/progressive).

**Present simple and continuous/progressive**

*I work at a school* (present simple) and *I am working in London now* (present continuous/progressive).

### **Verb**

The word which follows the subject of a sentence, and is sometimes described as the 'action' word, e.g. *I like cheese; He speaks Italian.*

An **auxiliary verb** is a verb used with other verbs to make questions, negatives and tenses, e.g. *be, do, have.*

The **base form of the verb** is the infinitive form of a verb without 'to', e.g. *go.*

The **infinitive** form is the **base form of a verb** with 'to'. It is used after another verb, after an adjective or noun or as the subject or object of a sentence, e.g. *'I want to study', 'It's difficult to understand'.*

An **irregular verb** does not follow the same rule as regular verbs. Each irregular verb has its own way of forming the past simple and past participle, e.g. *go - went* (past simple) - *gone* (past participle).

A **modal verb** is a verb used with other verbs to show ideas such as ability or obligation or possibility. They include *can, must, will, should*, e.g. *I can speak French, but I should study even harder.*

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