The Auxiliary Verb

Recognize an auxiliary verb 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—bang!—and it's over.

Nate *stubbed* his toe.

He *is* miserable with pain.

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 *stubbed* or *is* 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:

Sherylee *smacked* her lips as raspberry jelly *dripped* from the donut onto her white shirt.

Sherylee *is* always *dripping* something.

Since Sherylee is such a klutz, she *should have been eating* a cake donut, which *would not have stained* her shirt.

In the first sentence, *smacked* and *dripped*, single-word verbs, describe the quick actions of both Sherylee and the raspberry jelly.

Since Sherylee has a pattern of messiness, *is dripping* communicates the frequency of her clumsiness. The auxiliary verbs that comprise *should have been eating* and *would have stained* express not only time relationships but also criticism of Sherylee’s actions.
Below are the auxiliary verbs. You can conjugate *be*, *do*, and *have*; the modal auxiliaries, however, never change form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Be</th>
<th>Do</th>
<th>Have</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>am</td>
<td>does</td>
<td>has</td>
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<tr>
<td>is</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>have</td>
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**Modal Auxiliaries [Never Change Form]**

can, could, may, might, must, ought to, shall, should, will, would

**Understand the dual nature of *be*, *do*, and *have*.**

*Be*, *do*, and *have* are both stand-alone verbs and auxiliary verbs. When these verbs are auxiliary, you will find them teamed with other verbs to complete the verb phrase.

Compare these sentences:

Freddy *is* envious of Beatrice’s steaming bowl of squid eyeball stew.

*Is* = linking verb.

Freddy *is studying* Beatrice’s steaming bowl of squid eyeball stew with envy in his eyes.
**Is** = auxiliary verb; **studying** = present **participle** completing the verb phrase.

We *did* our homework for Mrs. Long.

**Did** = action verb.

We’re not slackers! We *did prepare* our homework for Mrs. Long.

**Did** = auxiliary verb; **prepare** = main verb completing the verb phrase.

Selena *has* twelve orange goldfish in her aquarium.

**Has** = action verb.

Selena *has bought* a catfish to help keep the tank clean.

**Has** = auxiliary verb; **bought** = past participle completing the verb phrase.

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**Form progressive tenses with the auxiliary verb be.**

All progressive tenses use a form of **be**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of Be</th>
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<tr>
<td>am, is, are, was, were, being, been</td>
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</table>

**Present Progressive**

Present progressive follows this pattern:

```
Am, Is, or Are + Present Participle
```

Use the present progressive tense to convey an action or condition happening **right now** or frequently.

I *am baking* chocolate-broccoli muffins today.

**Am** = auxiliary verb; **baking** = present **participle** completing the **verb phrase**.

Alex *is sitting* at the kitchen table, anticipating his first bite.
*Is* = auxiliary verb; *sitting* = present participle completing the verb phrase.

Alex must wait a while longer because the muffins *are cooling* by the window.

*Are* = auxiliary verb; *cooling* = present participle completing the verb phrase.

Impatient Alex *is* always *waiting* to taste whatever I cook.

*Is* = auxiliary verb; *waiting* = present participle completing the verb phrase.

**Past Progressive**

Past progressive follows this pattern:

```
Was or Were + Present Participle
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Use the past progressive tense to show either 1) an action or condition that continued in the past or 2) an action or condition interrupted by another.

Naomi *was hoping* for an A in her organic chemistry class.

*Was* = auxiliary verb; *hoping* = present participle completing the verb phrase.

Unfortunately, Naomi's lab reports *were missing* the nutritional data on chocolate-broccoli muffins.

*Were* = auxiliary verb; *missing* = present participle completing the verb phrase.

While Naomi *was obsessing* about her grade, Jason shared the data that she needed.

*Was* = auxiliary verb; *obsessing* = present participle completing the verb phrase.

**Future Progressive**

Future progressive looks like this:
WILL + BE + PRESENT PARTICIPLE

Use the future progressive tense to indicate an action that will continue in the future.

I will be growing broccoli in the backyard this spring.

*Will, be = auxiliary verbs; growing = present participle completing the verb phrase.*

Soon, Alex will be eating organic chocolate-broccoli muffins!

*Will, be = auxiliary verbs; eating = present participle completing the verb phrase.*

**Form passive voice with the auxiliary verb be.**

You can make any transitive verb—an action verb that can take a direct object—passive with the auxiliary verb be.

Active voice looks like this:

**SUBJECT + VERB + DIRECT OBJECT**

Here are some samples:

- We licked our lips.
- Frank devoured a bacon double cheeseburger.
- Everyone envied his enjoyment.

Passive voice makes these changes:

**DIRECT OBJECT AS SUBJECT + FORM OF BE + PAST PARTICIPLE + BY + SUBJECT AS OBJECT OF THE PREPOSITION**

Now read these revisions:

- Our lips were licked by us.
The double bacon cheeseburger *was being devoured* by Frank.

His enjoyment *was envied* by everyone.

Notice how wordy and clunky passive voice is! Now you know why English teachers tell you to avoid it!

**Form perfect tenses with the auxiliary verb have.**

All perfect tenses use a form of *have*.

<table>
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<th>FORMS OF HAVE</th>
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<td>has, have, had, having</td>
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**Present Perfect**

Present perfect follows this pattern:

![Has or Have + Past Participle](image)

Use the present perfect tense to convey an action or condition that began in the past but continues [or is finished] in the present.

Marge *has bought* earplugs to drown out her husband's snoring.

*Has* = auxiliary verb; *bought* = past *participle* completing the *verb phrase*.

The earplugs *have saved* Marge's marriage to George.

*Have* = auxiliary verb; *saved* = past participle completing the *verb phrase*.

**Past Perfect**

Past perfect follows this pattern:

![Had + Past Participle](image)
Use the past perfect tense to show that one action in the past occurred before another.

Because Marge *had purchased* the earplugs, she no longer fantasized about smothering George with a pillow.

*Had* = auxiliary verb; *purchased* = past participle completing the verb phrase.

**Future Perfect**

Future perfect follows this pattern:

[**Will** + **Have** + **Past Participle**]

Use the future perfect tense to indicate that an action will be finished in the future.

This Sunday, Marge *will have gotten* an entire week of uninterrupted sleep.

*Will, have* = auxiliary verbs; *gotten* = past participle completing the verb phrase.

**Form emphatic tenses with do.**

When you use a form of *do* as an auxiliary verb, you form the emphatic tense. This tense is useful for asking questions or emphasizing an action.

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The patterns look like these:

[**Form of Do** + **Main Verb**]
Read these samples:

I did not eat your leftover pizza!

Did = auxiliary verb; eat = main verb completing the verb phrase.

Do you always accuse the first person you see?

Do = auxiliary verb; accuse = main verb completing the verb phrase.

Doesn't the evidence point to Samuel, who still has a bit of black olive stuck to his front tooth?

Does = auxiliary verb; point = main verb completing the verb phrase.

**Understand the job of modal auxiliary verbs.**

Modal auxiliary verbs never change form. You cannot add an ed, ing, or s ending to these words. They have only one form.

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You can use modal auxiliary verbs in these patterns:

- **Modal + Main Verb**
- **Modal + Be + Present Participle**
- **Modal + Have + Past Participle**

With modal auxiliaries, you can indicate necessity or obligation:

To lose her orange glow, Yvonne should eat fewer carrots.
John *must remember* his wife's birthday this year.

If Cecilia wants a nice lawn, she *ought to be raking* the leaves.

Or you can show *possibility*:

Fred *might share* his calculus homework if you offer him a slice of pizza.

Ann *could have run* the half marathon if she had started to train four months ago.

Modal auxiliaries also show *willingness* or *ability*:

Nicole *will babysit* your pet iguana for a reasonable fee.

Jason *can pass* chemistry this semester if he stops spending his study time at the arcade.