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.