

Shoebox

GRAMMAR



**The Main Clause Content
(Introductory version)**

The Main Clause is the central unit of the entire English language. It is the grammatical sun around which all the planets revolve, the central building block in every sentence, every paragraph, every essay, every story, every novel. It controls the punctuation around and inside itself. Every bit of English communication starts with it and is centred around it. Nothing escapes. It makes sense, then, that we should therefore teach it first, and that everything we teach should be centred around it. You should view and print the **Main Clause** card on the ESL Teachers page of the Shoebox website.

You might already know the Main Clause as *Subject - Verb - Object* or a *Simple Sentence*, and your students might too. That's fine. Those names have lasted for a long time and will continue into the future. It is doubtful that these Shoebox terms will supplant them. However, the main problem with the words *Subject - Verb - Object* is that they are just names. They don't actually tell us what those things *are* or indeed what they *do*. It is like being able to name a car, dishwasher or phone without knowing how to use them.

So let's change our strategy. Instead of *Subject - Verb - Object*, let's change our way of way of thinking and leave out grammar altogether. Instead, let's talk about *life*.

The whole concept of a Main Clause, so central to the entire English language, is much easier if we use words that all our students understand. So, instead of *subjects, verbs* and *objects*, let's instead refer to these concepts with the simple metaphors of **houses, people** and their **friends**, the verbs **live** and **visit**, the numbers **one, two** and **three**, and the concepts of **holidays, always** and **sometimes**. It would be fairly safe to assume that every single student who steps into your classroom would share their understanding of these words with their fellow students and you, the teacher.

The key ideas here are

- People always live in their houses
- Their friends sometimes visit.
- People and their friends sometimes visit other houses on holidays.

Let's put all these together and give our Main Clause a new name. Let's call it Main Clause Avenue, and on this avenue, there are Three Houses. Students aged from five to seventy-five all understand these terms.



The Noun House is the first property on Main Clause Avenue. In traditional grammar language, it is called the *Subject*. It is always painted yellow, although this colour has no reference to traffic lights. The Noun always lives there, which means that the Noun House is never empty. In more technical terms, this means that every single complete English sentence must contain a noun in the subject position.

If there is one person at home in the Noun House, it **must** be a noun. If there are other words there, they could be some of his friends, and you can learn about these in the **Noun's Friends** document. There could also be other nouns, who are the Noun's brothers that have come to visit. They could also be Conjunctions like *and*, where two nouns are both in the Noun House at the same time.

The Noun and his friends like to travel, so they sometimes visit the Holiday House, the third house on Main Clause Avenue, and we'll visit this House later.

Before we get into the five different Noun types, let's ask an important question.



The Noun House can hold quite a few people who can work together to do the job of the Noun. These are the four groups of people who can be in the Noun House at the same time.

The Noun alone

In some sentences, only the Noun might be at home in the Noun House. **Jude** *laughed* is such a sentence.

The Pronoun

In some sentences, the Noun might be home, but out of the room for a moment. **She** *laughed* is such a sentence, where the Pronoun **She** takes the place of the Noun **Jude**. We often use the Pronoun when we have already met the Noun and we don't need to be reminded of his name a second time.

The Noun, his friends and/or brothers

In others, the Noun House might be rather full with the Noun's friends and even his brothers coming to visit. Check the **Noun's Friends** document for more information.

The Noun sleeping

And in some curious sentences, the Noun is sleeping and doesn't appear to be home at all. When you knock on the door or ring the bell, no-one answers. The sentence **Go!** (which is, by the way, the shortest complete English sentence in existence) is one such, where the Noun **You** is actually there, but not directly visible. We really mean **You go!** but we don't say **You**. The Noun in such sentences is implied. Most command sentences follow this pattern. *(You) stop!*



When you were in school, you might have heard books and teachers define a Noun by asking the question *What is a Noun?* and answering it with *A Noun is a naming word*, or a *person, place, thing, or proper and common*, or *noun and pronoun*. This definition is fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't really tell us everything we need to know.

The Shoebox definition of a noun is wonderfully much simpler, and always makes students laugh in delighted amazement when they realise how simple it is. They look me as if to say *It can't be that simple, can it?* and I nod and say, *Yes, it is*. It's a simple matter of changing our question **What?** and asking two new ones. Our first question is

Where is the noun?

The answer, of course, is quite simple. It is in the Noun House, and everything in the Noun House must either be a Noun or the friend of a Noun. It really has no choice in the matter.

If there is a single word in the Noun House, it must be a Noun.

If we find more than one word in the Noun House, we can eliminate the Noun's friends, who are just visiting anyway. Everything that is left must be a Noun, whether it looks like one or not.

The second question is more specific. If a word is in the Noun House and must therefore be a Noun, we should ask

What does it do?

Simply put,

A Noun House noun names things.

For more on this, check out the **Five Types of Noun** document.



In the **Five Types of Noun** document, we met the five different types of Noun. The noun always lives in the Noun House, so it is only fair that we look at him first. However, sometimes his friends visit and these friends are incredibly loyal, helpful and punctual, the sort of friends we would all want.

What do the friends do?

For all his importance at the start of the sentence, the Noun only does one job. He lives in the Noun House and he names things. Sometimes, though, the sentence calls for him to do much more than just this, and he simply can't. When this happens, the Noun calls his seven friends in to help, and he does this by asking questions. You can meet these friends, see their questions, and see what they do in the **Noun's Friends** document and card.



The Verb House is the second property on Main Clause Avenue. In traditional grammar language, it is called the *Verb*. It is always painted green because the colour green symbolises growth and action. Green for *grow* and green for *go*, the same as the traffic lights. The Verb House is where all the action happens on Main Clause Avenue. The Verb always lives there, which means that the Verb House is never empty. If there is one person at home in the Verb House, it must be a verb. In more technical terms, this means that every single complete English sentence must contain a verb in the Verb House.

The Verb's friends sometimes come to visit as well to help the Verb. Whereas the Noun has seven friends to the jobs that he is not able to do by himself, the Verb only has four friends since she is considerably more powerful.

The Verb and her friends are quite happy to stay at home, so they almost never travel to the Holiday House. There are some strange exceptions to this, which we will come to later.

Before we look at the Verb's jobs, let's establish who is at home in the Verb House.



The Verb House can hold the Verb by herself, or some of the Verb's friends who can work together to do the job of the Verb. These are the three situations.

Verb alone

In some sentences, the Verb might be at home by herself in the Verb House. *Murray **left*** is such a sentence.

Auxiliary

In some sentences, the Verb might be home, but out of the room for a moment. *Murray **did*** is such a sentence, where the Auxiliary *did* takes the place of the Verb *left*. Just like the Pronoun, we use the Auxiliary when we have already met the Verb and we don't need to be reminded of her name a second time.

Verb, friends and/or sisters

In others, the Verb House might be rather full with the Verb's friends and even her Verb sisters coming to visit.

Before we do that, though, we need to look at the question *What is a Verb?*



Many of us were taught at school that *a verb is a doing word*, a definition that is unfortunately sadly lacking. For example, in the sentence *Chocolate is sweet*, the Verb is that tiny word *is*, which baffles some students because it isn't doing anything at all and therefore does not obey their old definition. This *doing word* definition is easy to say but unfortunately, only a part of the truth.

Just as we defined a Noun by where he lives and what he does, let's do the same with a Verb.

Just as the Noun always lives in the Noun House, the Verb always lives in the Verb House. That's the easy part. However, whereas the Noun does one job - name things - every single Verb House verb in the English language does *three* things at the same time. She is an amazing multi-tasker, and there is always a lot of action going on in the Verb House. That is why it is green. *Green for go* and *green for grow*.

The Verb tells us the *time* of the sentence. She tells the *action* of the sentence, and she tells us how the action *finishes*.

So let's refine our definition of a Verb.

**A Verb is the word/s in the Verb House that tells us
the time, the action and the finish of the Main Clause.**

If a word or group of words can't do all three, it's not a Verb and is not allowed into the Verb House. Indeed, some word/s can only do one, and we'll meet them later.

For more information on these three tasks, check out the **Three Verb Tasks** document and card.



The Verb House

What does the Verb do? - the Three Tasks

As we have just seen, the Verb has three Tasks that she does at the same time. Every English verb, without exception, is the same. Every English verb in existence tells us the **Time** of the Main Clause, the **Action** of the Main Clause and the **Finish** of the verb in the Main Clause.

For more information on these Tasks, check out the following documents and cards:

- **The Three Verb Tasks**
- **The Three Verb Finishes**



The Verb House

What does the Verb look like? - the Five Shapes

The Verb is quite the multi-tasker, with a lot of information packed into one or a few words. Unlike the Noun, the Verb has five different shapes, all of which have different jobs and which also align quite neatly with the three Finishes. Some of these shapes have names which look rather technical, but that shouldn't deter you from teaching and using them regularly and encouraging students to do the same. The word *participle*, for example, has just as many syllables as *geography*, a far more complex school subject.

These five shapes are the base verb, the present simple, the past simple, the present participle and the past participle. Apart from the base verb, there is a rather nice symmetry, with two *simples* and two *participles*, and two *presents* and two *pasts*.

It is easy for students to get confused with names so it is worth telling them very early on that the name *present* has nothing at all with the time idea of the present - the present participle is not limited to the Present, for example, and neither is the name *past* limited to past time. Check the **Five Verb Shapes** card for more information on this.



In the same way that the Noun's friends sometimes help him out with things he cannot do alone, the Verb's equally loyal four friends sometimes visit to help her out because, sometimes, for all her multi-tasking brilliance, the Verb sometimes needs help and she's not afraid to ask. When this happens, the Verb calls her friends in, the Adverb, Auxiliary, Modal and Particle.

For more information on these Friends, check out the **Four Verb Friends** document and card.



The Holiday House is the third and final property on Main Clause Avenue. In traditional grammar language, it is called the *Object*. The Holiday House is always painted red because red is the traffic light colour that tells us to stop. In Australia, the punctuation mark that shows the end of the sentence is called a *fullstop* because we come to a full stop. In America, it is called a *period* because the ancient Greek punctuation device, invented by Aristophanes in the 3rd century BC, was called a *peridos* by the Old English writer Ælfric of Eynsham in about 1000AD.

No-one always lives in the Holiday House, which means that the Holiday House is often empty. It's a *holiday* house, after all! In more technical terms, this means that not every single complete English sentence must contain a word in the object position.

If there is anyone at home in the Holiday House, it might be one of three words. It could be a Noun, as in the sentence *Casey left **home***, or an Infinitive noun as in *Peter loves **to dance***. It might also be a Noun friend, such as an Adjective, Article, Possessive, Preposition, Counter (quantifier), Pointer (determiner) or Pronoun, as in the sentence *This dinner is **good!***

Or it could also be one of the three curious Verb friends, the Adverb - *She loves him **dearly*** - or the Particle - *Daniel cleaned his room **up** later*.

There is another odd word that we use in the Holiday House that looks very much like a verb but isn't. We find it in this sentence *He **watched** Emily **leave***. Here, *He* is the Noun in the Noun House, *watched* is the Verb in the Verb House and *Emily* is the Noun in the Holiday House. But we also have *leave*, which looks suspiciously like a verb.

However, here are two reasons why it is not.

Firstly, remember our definition of a Verb? *A Verb is the word/s that tells is the time, the action and the finish of the verb*. In this sentence, that job has already been done by *watched*, which means that *leave* is abandoned in the Holiday House as a strange kind of half-verb.

Secondly, if *leave* were a Verb, we should be able to put it quite happily into the Verb House. However, we can't. We can't say *He go*. For that matter, we can't even say *Emily go*.



The Main Clause and all its fine detail is almost done. However, what happens next?

At the end of the Holiday House, we need to do one of three things.

- Finish the Main Clause with a fullstop / period.
- Join it to another Main Clause with a conjunction or a comma + conjunction. Check out the **Compound Sentence** document and card for more detail on this.
- Join it to a Dependent Clause with or without a comma. Check out the **Complex Sentence** document and card for more on this.

Note

The colours of the Three Houses are constant in printed and online Shoebox materials.

