

1. Semantics, Syntax, Generation

Semantics is about the meanings, while syntax is the rules that have to be followed, regardless of meanings. There are well known syntax rules about end and beginning markings of a sentence, like period, question mark, capital letters, and so on.

Beside these truly pure syntax rules, we can have rules that only depend on some categorization of the words. These categorizations may be semantical, that is determined by meanings. If some rules that govern sentences only depend on the category groups, but not on the individual meanings of the words, then we could still call these rules syntactical. The simplest form of such rules would be to tell the word order of sentences. This tells what word groups follow each other in what order.

The classical rule of simple sentences was:

Subject + Predicate + Circumstances

The subject tells who or what is doing the action or goes through the changes.

The predicate tells the action or change. The circumstances tell all other details.

Besides this natural naming of the parts in a sentence, the words themselves were categorized as nouns for objects or persons, verbs for action or change, adjectives for qualities of objects or persons and adverbs for conditions of the actions or changes.

For example, in: That red car goes really fast.

The three words, “that red car,” is the subject. It contains the obvious “red” adjective and “car” noun. The “that” pointing word is more than a quality of the car, it narrows it down completely, but similar in function to an adjective. The predicate is the single verb “goes”. The circumstance is “really fast”. The “fast” is an obvious adverb because it answers to the question, how? But the “really” is a secondary adverb too because it answers, how fast?

Besides such minor ambiguities in the word types, a more important sentence problem is that we could include some circumstances in the predicate. Then of course, we could make examples with more and more circumstances, so where should we draw the line. An other counter argument could be, that only the “goes” is a verb, so that should be the predicate only. But then, why should we have the category of predicate at all? If always the verb is the predicate, then they are the same. A counter argument to this argument could be if some sentences have more verbs, because then the predicate would simply be all the verbs together. In a sense, this is the case, but not exactly. The more verbs are not actually different verbs, that is different actions or changes that we claim together for the same subject. So they are not independent, rather they are only one verb plus some verb derivatives to express more details about the single action or change. So in a sense, the verb combinations already express circumstances too. But these belong to the predicate more intimately.

All these complications lead some grammar “smart alics” to drop the predicate as category at all and just use subject + verb + . . . as the fix form of simple sentences.

In English, this is a usable way, because there always has to be a verb. In Russian for example, we can claim something about the subject, without using verb at all.

The sentence, “Peter is smart”, has the strange verb “is”, which only means existence, the weakest form of change or condition. In Russian, where it is missing, obviously the “smart” should be the predicate. And of course, most English grammar also accepts “smart” as part of the predicate, rather than being an adjective circumstance, as I prefer it. To my logic, “Peter is smart in maths”, is almost the same sentence, so why should the “in math” be a circumstance, but “smart” not?

But enough of all this nonsense, because it will not matter what we call what.

The task is to tell how English sentences are formed. One thing is already clear from the above, namely that the verb or verb derivative sequence is the crucial.

The title of this article expresses this very point.

The other major goal is how to change the simple sentences into “not”, that is negative, and “?”, that is into questions. These two are intricately related by a very simple and easy rule. This is the “heart” of English.

The “block” word order of English also means that such blocks can be replaced easily and so practically we can generate all possible English sentences. This is important not just theoretically. It actually provides the best way to learn English too.

Theoretically, it resembles Noam Chomsky’s generation of abstract languages. There, arbitrary strings of letters are generated by replacing consecutive segments with others. Clearly, every human language is generable by replacing the letters to form new words. But this would require rules for all words. Replacing blocks of words is much better. This replacement sometimes still requires additional minor changes to other blocks too. For example, changing the sentence, “That car goes fast”, into plural, we get, “Those cars go fast”. As we see, it was not enough to change “that” for “those”, but we also had to change “goes” to “go”. Luckily for English, it not only has the strictest sentence order, but also the minimal word endings. These two features, probably helped each other by evolving to the remarkable simplicity in English.

Observe for example, the following sentences:

The beautiful girl saw me.

I saw the beautiful girl.

I walked with the beautiful girl.

I spoke to the beautiful girl.

In Russian, all these would require alternative endings, not only for the “girl”, but for the “beautiful” too. Plus, different endings for a “boy” or for “girls” or “boys”.

The simplicity of English is beyond question, once we accept, that ease of generability in a language, is the real measure of simplicity, not how many strangely pronounced or spelt words are in its vocabulary.

2. Verb Classifications

By meanings as we said, verbs can be actions or changes. The first is wilful, the second happens from outside or inside. Thus, the first is used only for humans or animals, but sometimes we transfer the wilful meaning to an object. For example, a statue can look up at the sky. Or in physics, we might say that the body wants to move. Some action verbs are:

learn, teach, go, come, look, lie, hide, work, give.

Some changes are:

grow, think, feel (sorry), fall, float, sink, shine, slip, get, forget, remember.

A third group could be some conditions that are more a result of changes:

live, own, shine, appear = look = seem.

There are three main verbs that in some sense represent the three groups:

We might think that “act” should represent the first group of actions, but it is actually the “do”. The second could be “exist” as the purest least form of change, but it is better said by the “be”. Finally, the special resultant condition is “have”.

These three main verbs “do”, “be”, “have” can be syntactically defined too:

Namely, these are the only three verbs that have exceptional endings or forms, already in present. As we saw above, in third person, a verb gets an “s” ending.

Also, in that example, the “goes” was not an exceptional “es”, because:

After “o” there is always such silent “e”. Even “y” changes to “ie”: try → tries

The “do” main verb gets “e” too, so becomes “does” but its pronunciation changes.

The “have” is more drastic, it loses the “ve”, so simply becomes “has”.

The “be” becomes “is”. But “be” also has special first person “I” as “am” .

For all other persons, “you”, “we”, “they” the present is “are”.

The verbs themselves are the first form.

The added “s” for third person is the second form. This includes the usual “e” for “o” and “y” ending verbs and also the special presents for the main verbs “do , have , be”.

Finally, the past is the third form. So the three forms:

go	→	goes	→	went
1		2		3
present		present		past
		third person		
do	→	does	→	did
have	→	has	→	had
be	↙	am , is	→	was
	↘	are	→	were

As we see, only the “be” has two third forms.

After the three groups, the three main verbs and the three forms, we now will have three derivatives as well. These will be used in the verb sequences.

Here too, just like at the three forms, the first two are easy, but the third can be totally new word:

to go	→	going	→	gone
1		2		3
future		present		past
(goal)		(process)		(result)

The three time oriented names are better explained by the words in parenthesis.

“to go” is the future derivative, meaning a goal “to go”.

“going” is the present derivative, meaning the process of “going”.

“gone” is the past derivative, meaning the result of “gone”.

The third form = past and the third derivative = past derivative are given in all dictionaries after the basic verb.

After these repeated trios, we have eight “meta-verbs”.

These are only used with other verbs and these have no forms or derivatives.

So no third person gets “s” and they have no past either.

Best to learn them by pairs, because of their similar soundings:

will = future	would = conditional
can = ability, permission	could = conditional ability or permission
may = possibility, permission	might = conditional possibility or permission
must = outer expectation	should = inner expectation

The shades of meanings don’t concern us here, rather the forms.

Peter will go with you.

So as we see, the meta-verb is the first and is followed by an other verb’s basic form.

There are three rarely used meta-verbs that I didn’t list: shall , needn’t , ought to.

3. Main Compositions

The eight meta-verbs can only be used combined with other verbs.

The three main verbs “do”, “have”, “be” were meaningful in themselves, but these can also be combined, namely as:

			example
do	+	1 form	go
have	+	1 derivative	to go
		3 derivative	gone
be	+	1 derivative	to go
		2 derivative	going
		3 derivative	gone

If these main verbs are at the beginning of the verb sequence, then they will be in their present or past, that is 1, 2, 3 forms:

I	do	}	go
Peter	does		
I } Peter }	did		

I	have	}	to go gone
Peter	has		
I } Peter }	had		

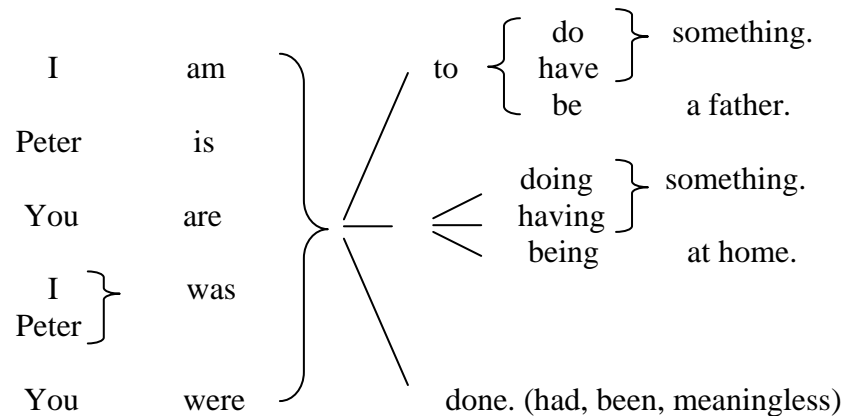
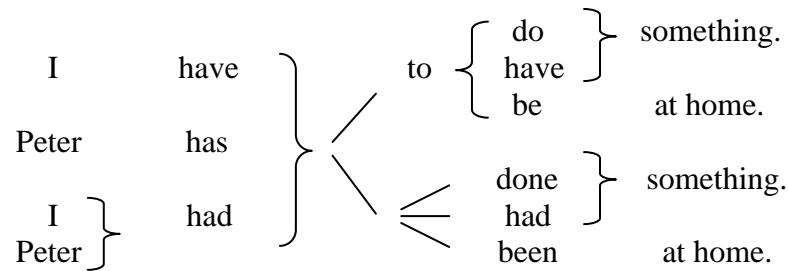
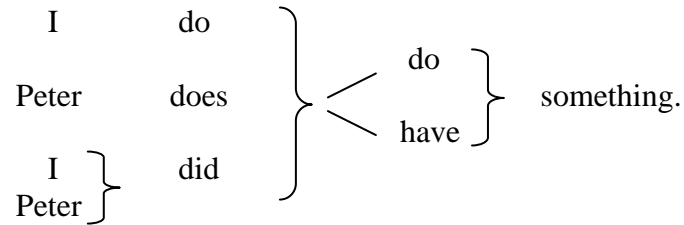
I	am	}	to go going gone
Peter	is		
You	are		
I } Peter }	was		
You	were		

Before telling the meanings, a more important syntactical rule:

In place of “go” we can use all verbs except the meta-verbs, because they don’t have derivatives. Also, with “do” we can’t use the “be” main verb:

~~do be~~

Quite surprisingly, all other combinations with each other are okay, except:
 be + 3 derivative of “have” and “be” for reasons of meaning (lack of meaning).
 So the usable self combinations of the main verbs are:



I listed these “self combinations” because they sound strange for foreign learners.
 Now the meanings and names:

do + 1 form = “stressed” = emphasizing a claim: I (really) did try everything.

have + 1 der. = same as “must” meta-verb: I must work. = I have to work.
(to) Unlike “must” this can be used in past too: I had to work.

have + 3 der. = “perfect” = a new form of past: I have seen it. = present perfect
I had seen it = past perfect.

be + 1 der. = “about to happen”: I was (just about) to enter, when it collapsed.
(to)

be + 2 der. = “continuous”: I am working, leave me alone.
(ing) I was working when she came. I was working all day.

be + 3 der. = “passive”: I am done. = “fake passive” = I finished.
I am seen by some people as a hero. = “real passive”
I was seen (by someone). = “real passive with omissible subject”

4. Helpers

Besides the six compositions of the eight meta-verbs and the six main compositions, some normal verbs can be used with derivatives too:

want to = wanna I want to see you tomorrow.

need to I need to see you tomorrow.

like $\begin{cases} \text{to} \\ \text{ing} \end{cases}$ I like to fly at night.
I like flying at night.

hate $\begin{cases} \text{to} \\ \text{ing} \end{cases}$ I hate to fly at night.
I hate flying at night.

get to I got to know him better last year.

In fact, the main verb compositions of some verbs can also be continued to form new compositions. These can replace or refine some meanings of the meta verbs:

have got to = have gotta = have to I’ve gotta go. = I have to go. = I must go.

be going to = be gonna = will I’m gonna go. = I will go. = I’ll go.

be $\begin{cases} \text{supposed to} = \text{should} \\ \text{allowed to} = \text{permission} \end{cases}$ I’m supposed to be there. = I should be there.
I’m allowed to be here. Replaces “may”.

The already listed *be + to* and *have + to* compositions from the main verbs, could also be regarded more belonging to the helpers. And indeed, in our later generated examples, we don't include these in the main compositions.

So, we'll only use the four remaining main compositions:

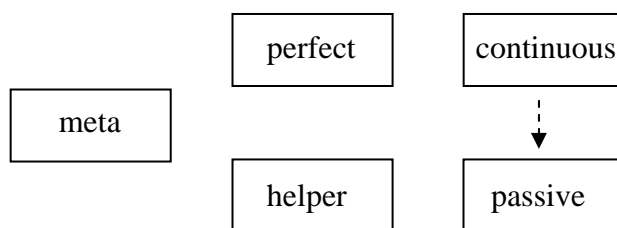
do + 1 form = stressed

be + ing = continuous

be + 3 der. = passive

have + 3 der. = perfect

5. Composition Chain



Each column can be jumped over and only the members in the second column can be combined in the order that the dotted arrow shows. But if this *continuous + passive* is applied, then we can't use the previous two columns at all.

The starting column must be applied in present or past form, except for meta-verbs, which have no forms. Thus, the possible combinations are:

Using one column:

meta :	I will see you.
present perfect:	I have seen that film.
past perfect:	I had seen that film before the war.
present helper:	I want to see you.
past helper:	I wanted to see that film.
present continuous:	I am seeing a girl now.
past continuous:	I was seeing everything right there.
present passive:	I am seen as a here.
past passive:	I was seen.

Using two columns:

meta perfect:	I would have seen it.
meta helper:	I would like to see it.
meta continuous:	I would be seeing something.
meta passive:	I would be seen.
present perfect continuous:	I have seen it.
past perfect continuous:	I had seen it.
present perfect passive:	I have been seen. I have been told.
past perfect passive:	I had been seen. I had been told.
present helper continuous:	I want to be working at night.
past helper continuous:	I wanted to be working at night.
present helper passive:	I want to be seen.
past helper passive:	I wanted to be seen.
present continuous passive:	I'm being seen.
past continuous passive:	I was being seen.

Using three columns:

meta perfect continuous:	I would have been working there for five years.
meta perfect passive:	I would have been told to leave.
meta helper continuous:	I would like to be working at night.
meta helper passive:	I would like to be seen.

6. Stress

We already told the composition for this: do + 1 form.

But the meta-verbs and “be” is not usable.

“have” is allowed, except in its composition for perfect = have + 3 der.

Thus, the eight meta-verbs, the five forms of “be” (am , are , is , was , were) and the three forms of “have , has , had” + 3 der. must be stressed by themselves.

Only these $8 + 5 + 3 = 16$ verbs can be stressed by themselves.

will	} 1 form, go	am	} + anything	have	} 3 der., gone
would		are		has	
can		is		had	
could		was			
may		were			
might					
must					
should					

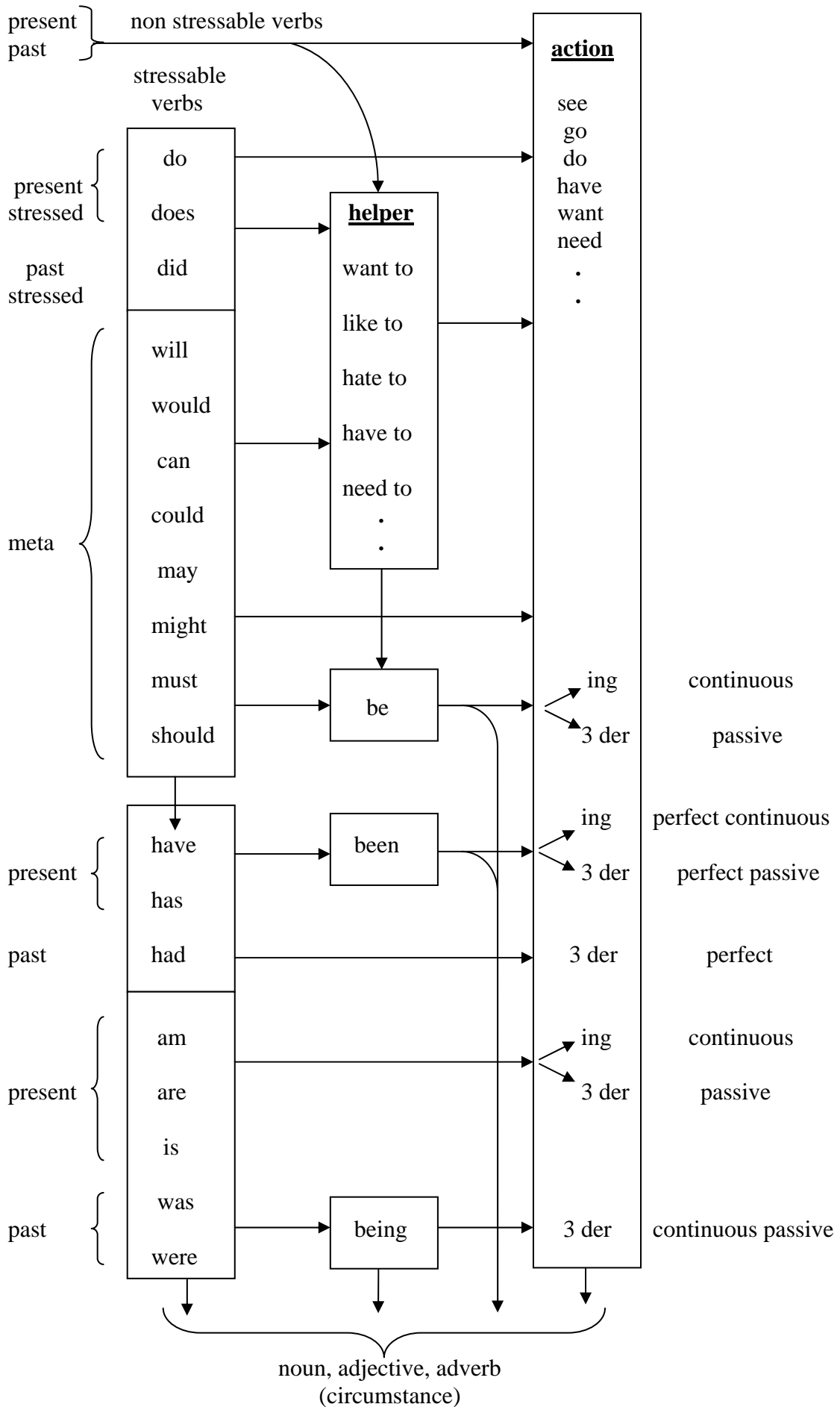
All other verbs must be stressed with do , does , did.

Thus, only nineteen possible verbs can be stressed all together.

Putting them all in a single column, we can mark all mixing combinations as well, and thus, get a “super table” of English Verb Compositions:

grammatical name

grammatical name



This table is the essence of the whole article, so it's crucial to see how it works.

All boxes contain the actual verbs that must be used.

Only two boxes contain potentially infinite many verbs. Namely, the last big box, headed with **action**, that contains all the verbs of the actual actions or changes, except the verb "be". And the inner top box, headed with **helper**. These two boxes contain only a few examples and the dots denote all the other possible ones.

You start with a subject on the left, like Peter. Then you go through either the top most arrow, which starts with present or past, and written above says, non stressable verbs. Or, you go into the first two boxes on the left, which contain the 19 stressable verbs. The non stressable line has two directions. One straight ahead into the third, **action** box, the other down into the **helper** box.

The grammatical names can be simply obtained by reading together what we find, in the beginning or the end of the table, under the grammatical name headings. The only exception is the middle **helper** box, which means "helper" if we went through it.

Since the grammatical names are on the right end, and also there are boxes in the middle, thus, the exit from the verb combinations, is towards down to the bottom of the table. That's where the sentence ends up in the circumstance, with a noun, adjective or adverb.

So for example, "Peter works hard", is going on the top most arrow, straight into the last box, to use the verb, "work", and from there we go down to the "hard" adverb.

The entry on the left is always present or past, except for the meta-verbs that have no forms. In our previous sentence, the entry was present, because we used "works".

Thus, the grammatical naming:

present: Peter works hard.

If we had started from the past, then we obtained the sentence:

past: Peter worked hard.

If we want to stress these sentences, then we have to go through the stressable verbs.

Since, the sentence does not use any meta-verb meanings, and we didn't want to use other stressable combinations either, thus, the simplest is to use the first box, which is purely for stressing, with "do, does or did". In present, for Peter, as a third person, it means using "does". In past, using "did". After these, we can go straight ahead through the arrow to the last box again, to use the verb "work", and then from that box, go down again. So:

present stressed: Peter does work.

past stressed: Peter did work.

Instead of stressing, we could have departed from the top arrow down to some helpers and through them into the last box, to use the "work". This can only apply if the sentence has a helper, like "want to". Thus for example:

present helper: Peter wants to work.

past helper: Peter wanted to work.

The combinations are huge, but the arrows clearly tell where to go. For example:

meta helper continuous: Peter would have to be working harder.

A much simpler combination is:

present continuous: Peter is working hard.

Now a more complicated one again:

meta perfect continuous: Peter could have been working harder.

Observe, we used the little arrow going from the meta box into "have", which was not a present now, rather the first form used after the meta-verb "could".

The only minor inconsistency in the use of the table is that the missing "be" from the **action** box must be used from the first column, lowest box, and all simple sentences with "be" as "action" must go from here directly down. present: Peter is smart.

Meta, perfect or continuous combinations of “be” can be done with the “be , been , being” boxes, and directly going down to the circumstance:

meta: Peter would be perfect for this job.

present perfect: Peter has been in London.

present continuous: Peter is being smart again.

As we see, the grammatical names of these special “be” applications are not readable, but obvious from the earlier ones.

The real beauty of this table, of course, is that it produces **all** possible combinations.

The additional beauty of it follows in the next section.

7. Negation & Question

Negation is done with the “not” word or “-n’t” ending. However, both of these can only be applied to the 19 stressable verbs. Thus, all sentences must be stressed before we can negate them:

Peter works hard. This can not be negated directly, it has to be stressed:

Peter does work hard. → Peter does not work hard = Peter doesn’t work hard.

The other compositions with the remaining 16 stressable verbs negate directly too:

Peter would work hard. → Peter would not work hard. = Peter wouldn’t work hard.

Peter has worked hard. → Peter has not worked hard. = Peter hasn’t worked hard.

Peter is working hard. → Peter is not working hard. = Peter isn’t working hard.

Peter is gone. → Peter is not gone. = Peter isn’t gone.

These were meta, perfect, continuous, passive combinations. But, we can use all the middle boxes too and get more complex combinations, with same direct negating if we started from the 19 stressable verbs .

Peter would be working hard. → Peter would not be working hard = Peter wouldn’t . . .

Peter has been working hard. → Peter has not been working hard. = Peter hasn’t . . .

And so on.

The “be” negates directly always, even if we go down to the circumstances:

Peter is smart. → Peter is not smart. = Peter isn’t smart. And so on.

Observe that quite oppositely, the **helpers** can only be negated with “do, does, did”:

Peter wants to work hard. This can only be stressed with “does”:

Peter does want to work hard. → Peter does not want to work hard. = Peter doesn’t . . .

Questions also have to be formed from the 19 stressable verbs only. Namely:

We take this first stressable verb and bring it all the way in front of the subject:

That red car does go fast. → Does that red car go fast?

That red car is going fast. → Is that red car going fast? And so on.

“That red car goes fast.” can not be questioned directly, it has to be stressed first:

That red car goes fast. → That red car does go fast. → Does that red car go fast?

Especially interesting is, the negative question, because we had two ways of negating, namely with “not” and “-n’t”. The rule of dragging the first verb to front, is totally mechanical and thus, in the second case “-n’t” must go with the verb:

That red car does not go fast. → Does that red car not go fast? But:

That red car doesn’t go fast. → Doesn’t that red car go fast?

Peter does not work hard. → Does Peter not work hard? But:

Peter doesn’t work hard. → Doesn’t Peter work hard? And so on,

The question words “why, what, when, where” and so on, of course, must be placed in the beginning, even before the dragged verb:

You saw. → You did see. → Did you see? → What did you see?

8. Non Reversed Questions

The only exception from the reverse ordered question, that is from bringing the verb in front of the subject is if there is no subject at all, because we are asking who or what is the subject. In these cases, we don't have to stress, and the questioning word is behaving as if it were the subject itself:

Who goes there? It sounds exactly as if "who" was the person, who goes.

But, "who" is not the only way to ask the subject:

What comes next?

How many people came?

What kind of person would do that?

These all ask "for" the subject not merely "about" a given one.

So the best rule is looking for the subject. If we can't find it outside the questioning words too, then we are only asking it, so we can use direct question. For example, above in the "How many people" we might think that the "people" is a given subject. But we can only ask this together. The "people" can't be separated.

People came. → People did come. → How many did people come?

Would be a correct line of generation but it would make the "how many" ambiguous. Indeed it can ask about the number of objects too:

You saw. → You did see. → How many did you see?

So, this meaning is the assumed one for "How many" on its own. Of course,

"How many cars" is perfect question for the object too: How many cars did you see?

The crucial is the matching of the subject and the verb! The "see" is done by "you".

Who told you that? Is perfect, because the "you" and the "that" are objects but none of them is the subject. Indeed, the verb decides that, the "told". Who did the telling?

We don't know, that's why we ask it. The "who" did the telling.

Finally, rarely a question for a subject can be done in a stressed form too, so

"do, does, did" can be used in the beginning of the verbs:

Who does go there anyway?

What does come next for sure?

How many people did come finally?

Who did tell you that exactly?

In these, of course there was no subject that separates the verbs as normally:

What does it tell you? Here "It" is the subject.

How many people did you see? Here "you" is the subject.

Who did you tell that? Here "you" is the subject.

9. Conditional sentences

For possible or future conditions there is no problem in using "if" without "would" :

If you will see him, tell him that. = If you see him, tell him that.

But if we talk about a non true condition of the present or the past, then:

If Peter would work harder, he would make more money.

If Peter would have worked harder, he would have made more money.

These sound a bit repetitive, so the "would" can be avoided in the "if" part with past:

If Peter worked harder, he would make more money.

If Peter had worked harder, he would have made more money.

Both the "worked" and the "had" here are not really past forms rather old conditional forms that melted into the past and got replaced by "would", except in these "if" parts.

Strangely, even the "If + had" can be avoided with reverse word order:

If I would have known this,.... → If I had known this,..... → Had I known this,...

10. Exception from a fundamental rule, Imperative

One of our rules was that “be” always stresses by its forms and never with “do”.

That’s why “be” was excepted from the **action** box.

This is absolute for all basic sentences and negatives or questions obtained from them.

Imperative sentences tell what to do for fix subjects and thus use no subjects.

The two possible fix subjects are the “you” in all of its meanings, or “we”.

The imperative sentence or order can be positive or negative.

So we have four possible scenarios:

“you” positive = 1 form : Go home! Do something! Have a piece! Be good!

“you” negative = Don’t + 1 form : Don’t go home yet! Don’t be bad!

So here we have “do” with “be” as possibility and thus as an exception of our rule.

“we” positive = Let’s + 1 form : Let’s go home! Let’s do something!
 Let’s have fun! Let’s be honest!

“we” negative = Let’s not + 1 form : Let’s not go home yet! Let’s not be hasty!