

What do a clock and a verb have in common?

They both tell time.

Clocks tell time by the positions of the hands or the digital readouts on an LCD screen, while verbs tell time by their form.

Consider the following sentence:

*The cat walked across the street.*

When does the situation in the above sentence take place: in the past, in the present, or in the future?

Did you say, “in the past”? If you did, you answered correctly, but how did you know? The only indication of time comes from the -ed ending of the word **walked**. In the sentence “*The cat walked across the street,*” the verb is **walked**, which by its form tells us that the situation takes place in the past.

Suppose you wanted to express the same action taking place in the future. You would probably rewrite the sentence as follows:

*The cat will walk across the street.*

The only change needed is to replace the verb form **walked** with the verb form **will walk**. The form of the verb tells the time of the sentence: **walked** indicates a past action and **will walk** indicates a future action. All the other words stay the same. Therefore, a good way to find the verb or verbs in a sentence is to see which words change form when the time of the sentence is changed.

The time indicator function of verbs provides us with a useful clue when looking for verbs in a sentence.

Keep in mind that verbs have their own particular meaning (e.g. walk: use one’s legs to move) and tell time by their specific form in a sentence, whereas words like **yesterday**, which are **not** verbs, indicate time as part of their basic meaning.

## A Verb Can Be a Single Word

*The little plums **froze** in the unseasonably cold night.*

## A Verb Can Be Two Words

*Margot **has written** seven complaint letters so far.*

*Frolicsome faculty members **are distracting** the divinity students.*

*The top five hula-hoop contestants **will compete** in the nationals.*

*Nobody **can deny** that he is indeed a jolly good fellow.*

## A Verb Can Be Three Words

The glockenspiel players **will be performing** their latest composition at the Tin Ear Society Anniversary Dinner.

The nefarious bandits **should have checked** the weather report before going outside that morning.

## A Verb Can Be Four Words

Instead of gallivanting on the seashore all day long, the weary travelers **should have been hunting** for shelter.

## A Verb Can Be Compounded With “And”

We **put aside our differences and became** the best of friends.

-- Note that since the second verb word (became) does not have its own subject, it shares the subject (We) of the first verb word (put).

Exercise:

Circle the verb(s) in the following sentences. Does the action of the sentence occur in the past, the present, or the future?

1. Nabil is driving his car to school.
2. Tessy spent her vacation reading a novel.
3. When Jovita arrived home, she started dinner.
4. Antonio and Rosa will buy a car for their honeymoon.
5. The train departs on Tuesday at 8 o'clock.
6. Jamaal went for a blood test this morning.
7. We will travel to Italy by plane this Friday.