



When sentences get complicated, sometimes it's difficult to keep them clear. Understanding how complex verb phrases function will help you connect all the parts of your sentence.

Verb phrases are usually comprised of more than just one word. The action of a sentence will be composed of a main verb **and** supporting material. You must make the entire verb phrase clear for your sentence to make sense.

• Transitive Verbs •

Let's take a close look at the complex forms that verbs can take. For example:

The missing comma caused a breakdown in communication.

Actor: the missing comma. Action: causing a breakdown in communication.

The verb "caused" is acting as a link to the rest of the information in the sentence. Thus, the whole phrase is the action of the sentence.

This verb is called a **transitive verb**, meaning that it *must apply directly to an object* and can't stand on its own. For instance, take a look at the sentence:

Sally caused.

This phrase is meaningless unless we know WHAT Sally caused. Let's complete the sentence:

Sally caused *a commotion*.

This makes more sense because the verb is paired with an **object**—she had to have caused *something*, and now we know *what* Sally caused.

Now the verb phrase is more complex—Sally caused a commotion—as opposed to a simple verb that could stand on its own, like for instance:

Sally laughed.

This action can stand on its own, and so is a simple verb—an **intransitive verb**, one that doesn't have to be paired with an object.

• Verb Tense and Construction •

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Verb tense refers to when a sentence takes place relative to the time of writing.

The simplest tenses are **present** and **past** tense. These are the simple one-word verbs we use every day:

Sebastian's puppy barks. (present)

Sebastian's puppy barked. (past)

Things get a little trickier when we start constructing more complex verb tenses:

By the time Sebastian graduates, he will have been talking to his dog for seven years.

Actor: Sebastian. Action: will have been talking to his dog.

We can isolate the verb phrase: will have been talking. There's a lot going on here! Let's break it down and see why it's so complicated. The simplest form of the verb would be past tense:

Sebastian talked.

But what if he talks every day, and has done so for a long time? Then we need to add what are called **helping verbs** to indicate that Sebastian has talked in the past and continues to do so:

Sebastian has been talking.

Now let's say that we're discussing the fact that Sebastian talks to his dog, and we're telling his partner that he's been doing this for seven years—but the fact is, it hasn't been a full seven years yet, and we don't want to be inaccurate. So, the seven-year mark is coming in the future—when Sebastian graduates.

Sebastian will talk.

Or rather, since it's a future thing that Sebastian will have done in the past, we'd say:

Sebastian will have talked.

But no, since the talking *will still be going on* in the future, even though most of the talking was done in the past—since it's an ongoing past action, we'll say:

Sebastian will have been talking.

As we see, when there's a lot that goes into the timing of a sentence's action, verbs can get pretty wild. Adding all those helping verbs to the simple verb is called **verb construction**.