

How to Write
Long,
COMPLICATED,
Beautiful
English Sentences



An English with Lee Guide



ENGLISH WITH LEE

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. The Basics.....	3
2.1 Parts of Speech.....	3
2.2 Grammar Terms.....	4
3. Now...Let’s Make Long Sentences!.....	6
4. Modifying Nouns.....	7
4.1 Adjectives.....	7
4.2 Participial Adjectives.....	7
4.3 Nouns as Adjectives.....	8
4.4 Appositional Phrases.....	8
4.5 Adjective Phrases.....	8
4.5.1 Participial Phrases.....	8
4.5.2 Prepositional Adjective Phrases.....	9
4.5.3 Infinitive Adjectives and Infinitive Adjective Phrases.....	9
4.6 Adjective Clauses (or Relative Clauses).....	9
5. Modifying Verbs.....	10
5.1 Adverbs.....	10
5.1.2 Sentence Adverbs.....	11
5.2 Adverb Phrases.....	11
5.2.1 Prepositional Adverb phrases.....	11
5.2.2 Infinitive Adverb Phrases.....	12
5.3 Adverb Clauses.....	12
6. Compound Sentences.....	13
6.1 How to Make Compound Sentences.....	13
6.2 Conjunctive Adverbs.....	14
7. Practice on Your Own.....	14
7.1 Exercise 1.....	14
7.2 Exercise 2.....	15

1. Introduction

My students often remark how English is full of long, rich, complex sentences. In almost any example of written English, you'll find multi-word subjects and objects, stacks of phrases, clauses modifying nouns and verbs, and surprise twists and turns creating intricate, compelling sentences with lots of information.

Reading long sentences can be difficult, and writing them can be very intimidating. This guide is to help demystify the process.

We'll start with a basic, simple sentence—the kind that anyone can write. Then we'll expand it by adding words, phrases, and clauses to its basic nouns and verbs. Once you learn a few basic structures, I hope you'll find that writing long, beautiful, complicated English sentences is a lot easier than you think!

Disclaimer: This isn't a comprehensive guide, and there are a lot more ways to make sentences interesting than I outline here. I hope that this will get you started though, and outline a few clear, easy ways to build interesting sentences.

2. The Basics

First, let's start by reviewing the basic parts of speech and grammar terms that we'll use later in this guide.

2.1 Parts of Speech

Nouns - words for people, places, objects, and ideas.

Examples: *pizza, dinosaur, Barack Obama, love, sister, India, light*

Verbs - words for actions, both external and internal

Examples: *jump, find, cook, believe, doubt, realize, run*

Pronouns - words that take the place of a noun

Examples: *he, she, him, her, that, this, these, those*

Adjectives - words that modify nouns

Examples: *funny, strange, purple, exciting, disappointed, happy*

Adverbs - words that modify verbs or adjectives

Examples: *quickly, very, arrogantly, strangely, happily*

Prepositions - words that connect words to each other in a sentence

Examples: *in, at, on, by, through, for, to, towards, along*

Conjunctions - words that join together words and phrases

Examples: *and, or, but, so*

Determiners - words that indicate more information about a noun

Examples: *a, an, the, my, his, these, some*

Interjections - words to express emotions and surprise

Examples: *oops, hey, oh, darn, whoa*

2.2 Grammar Terms

Subject - The part of a sentence, always a **noun** or **noun phrase**, that is what the sentence is mainly about, and which performs the main action (verb) of the sentence. A **noun phrase** is a noun and all the **modifiers** (including individual words, phrases, and clauses) that describe it.

Examples: **The clock** struck midnight.

My wonderful grandmother always makes me chicken soup when I have a cold.

The fact that you forgot your key is no excuse to wake me up in the middle of the night.

Object - The part of a sentence which **receives the action of the verb**.

Examples: I met **Lola** at the cafe.
Jeremy found **ten dollars** in the park.

Phrase - A small group of words that make up a “chunk of meaning,” but don’t have a subject and a conjugated* verb. (The phrase types next to the examples will be discussed in more detail later.)

Examples: walking to school (participial phrase)
in a daze (prepositional phrase)
the well-designed bicycle (noun phrase)

Note: “**Conjugated**” means that the verb has a **tense**. The **tense** alters the verb’s form to reflect the nature of its noun, and the time at which the action takes place. For example: “walks,” “walked,” and “will walk” are all **conjugated**, meaning that they can receive a subject before them, and describe when the action takes place. But the **infinitive** form—“to walk”—and the **present participle**—“walking”—are **not conjugated**; a subject can’t be placed before them, and they don’t convey when an action takes place.

Clause - A clause is usually a group of words that contains a subject and a conjugated verb. A special type of clause, called an *infinitive clause*, contains an infinitive verb (a verb in its “to” form, such as “to walk,” and “to speak”) and other words.

An independent clause can stand on its own as a sentence:

Examples: You did an amazing thing.
I’ll see you next week.

A dependent clause cannot stand on its own as a sentence; it contains words that indicate it needs to be attached to an *independent clause* in order to be complete.

Examples: that it needs to be fixed
after I finish lunch
which showed up last week
to ask her to dance

3. Now...Let's Make Long Sentences!

Every long, complicated sentence is made up of small, simple parts. Let's begin with one of the simplest sentence structures in English: subject + verb + object.

The girl bought a book.

Very simple, and rather boring. It has two nouns (a subject and an object), a verb, and two articles. Now let's look at different ways we can modify the nouns and verbs, until we have a long, twisty, complicated sentence like:

The girl **in the purple cape** bought a **suspicious** book **about magic from a magician who didn't trust her**.

Now it's a very interesting sentence! And all we did was add words, phrases, and clauses to the basic sentence. Let's look at how we did that.

Word, Phrase, or Clause	Grammar Term	Function
"in the purple cape"	prepositional phrase	acts as an adjective to modify "the girl"
"suspicious"	adjective	modifies "book"
"about magic"	prepositional phrase	acts as an adjective to modify "book"
"from a magician"	prepositional phrase	acts as an adverb to modify "bought"
"who didn't trust her"	relative clause	acts as an adjective to modify "magician"

In the rest of this guide, we will explore different ways to modify nouns and verbs to create interesting sentences.

4. Modifying Nouns

Nouns are modified by adjectives, adjective phrases, and adjective clauses.

4.1 Adjectives

Adjectives are easy! Try adding some adjectives to the nouns in the simple sentence:

The **evil** girl bought an **orange** book.

The **wonderful, crazy** girl bought an **amazing** book.

The **intelligent** girl bought a **foreign** book.

4.2 Participial Adjectives

Some adjectives, called **participial adjectives**, are made from the past and present participle forms of verbs.

Examples: *focused, dripping, interesting, bored, exhausted, relaxing.*

The **focused** girl bought an **interesting** book.

The **interesting** girl bought a **relaxing** book.

Note: Generally, the **past participle** form of an adjective describes **how the noun that it modifies feels** (interested, appalled, relaxed). The **present participle** form of an adjective describes **how the noun that it modifies will make other people feel** (interesting, appalling, relaxing).

4.3 Nouns as Adjectives

Sometimes nouns can be used as adjectives to modify other nouns. Not all nouns can be used as adjectives.

Examples: California, science fiction, poetry, office.

The **California** girl bought a **poetry** book.

The **office** girl bought a **science fiction** book.

4.4 Appositional Phrases

Appositional phrases are noun phrases that rephrase or identify the noun.

Examples: a student at the university, a history of Japan, a big fan of reading, a dictionary, *Pride and Prejudice*

The girl, **a student at the university**, bought a book.

The girl bought a book, ***Pride and Prejudice***.

4.5 Adjective Phrases

When a few words do the job of an adjective and modify a noun, this is an adjective phrase. The following are examples of different kinds of adjective phrases.

4.5.1 Participial Phrases

Participial phrases are adjective phrases that start with a participial adjective.

Examples: *wishing for a miracle*, *written by a ghost*, *running from zombies*, *drinking a glass of wine*

The girl **running from zombies** bought a book.

The girl bought a book **written by a ghost**.

4.5.2 Prepositional Adjective Phrases

Prepositional phrases start with a preposition (in, on, about, by, of, from, like, at) followed by a noun, and the articles and adjectives that come before it.

Examples: *in the red hat, of poetry, on Sunday, from the North Pole, like that*

The girl **from the North Pole** bought a book.

The girl **in the red hat** bought a book **of poetry**.

The girl bought a book **like that on Sunday**.

4.5.3 Infinitive Adjectives and Infinitive Adjective Phrases

Infinitives are verbs in their “to” form (i.e. “to go,” “to play”), which can be used like adjectives to modify nouns. They usually talk about the **purpose for which the noun will be used**. **Infinitive phrases** are made up of the infinitive verbs and the words that come after them.

Examples are: *to read, to translate into Mandarin, to use as a doorstep*

The girl bought a book **to read**.

The girl bought a book **to translate into Mandarin**.

4.6 Adjective Clauses (or Relative Clauses)

Adjective clauses start with a relative pronoun (who, which, that, whose, etc.) and modify a noun. They are also known as **relative clauses**.

Examples: *who needed a good meal, that exploded as soon as she touched it, who wore a blue hat, which she found in a tiny bookshop*

The girl **who needed a good meal** bought a book.

The girl bought a book, **which she found in a tiny bookshop**.

Note on Commas: There's a lot of confusion about when to set an adjective clause apart with commas. If the clause is **restrictive**, meaning it's necessary in order to understand the noun it modifies, then you **don't add commas**. If the clause is **nonrestrictive**, meaning that it adds extra information to the noun it modifies (i.e. you could remove it and the sentence would still make sense), then you **do add commas**; this function is similar to that of parentheses.

Example:

- The children, who had been playing outside all afternoon, slept very well.

The adjective clause **is set apart by commas** because it adds **extra information** to the noun. Without it, you still understand that the subject is some specific children.

- Children who play outside all day will probably sleep well.

The adjective clause **is not separated by commas** because it is **necessary to understand the subject**. Without it, you might think this sentence means "all children," when in fact it means *only* children who play outside all day.

5. Modifying Verbs

Verbs are modified by adverbs, adverb phrases, and adverb clauses.

5.1 Adverbs

Adverbs, like adjectives, are also fairly straightforward.

The girl bought a **very** good book.

The girl **nervously** bought a **terribly** pretty book.

5.1.2 Sentence Adverbs

Most adverbs modify verbs and adjectives, but in some cases, adverbs can modify the whole sentence. They express the speaker or writer's opinion about the sentence, or put it in context. Sentence adverbs usually come at the beginning of a sentence, and are separated by a comma.

Examples: *unfortunately, obviously, technically, basically, hopefully, ironically, thankfully, luckily*

Unfortunately, the girl bought a book.

Technically, the girl bought a book.

5.2 Adverb Phrases

Adverb phrases are groups of words that describe **when, where, how, and why** the action happened.

5.2.1 Prepositional Adverb Phrases

Prepositional phrases can act as adverbs as well as adjectives. If it comes at the beginning of a sentence, use a comma after it.

Examples: *at nine o'clock, in a tiny bookstore, like everyone else, for some reason, for her best friend*

The girl bought a book **at nine o'clock**.

The girl bought a book **in a tiny bookstore**.

The girl bought a book **for her best friend**.

Like everyone else, the girl bought a book.

5.2.2 Infinitive Adverb Phrases

Infinitive phrases describe the **purpose of the verb**.

Examples: *to pass her exams, to learn about dragons, to prove she cared about studying*

The girl bought a book **to pass her exams**.

The girl bought a book **to learn about dragons**.

Hint: If you're wondering whether an infinitive phrase is an adverb, try substituting "in order to" for "to." If the meaning is the same, it's an adverb phrase. For instance, these two sentences have the same meaning:

The girl bought a book **to** prove she cared about studying.

The girl bought a book **in order to** prove she cared about studying.

5.3 Adverb Clauses

Adverb clauses are clauses that answer the main "adverb questions:" **how, when, where, and why**. Adverb clauses begin with **subordinating conjunctions**. There are a lot of subordinating conjunctions, but some of the common ones are: *because, since, until, unless, even though, when, where, although, like, as if, as though*

Examples: *although her sister didn't want her to, unless she didn't, because she wanted to learn about robots, when it went on sale, as if it would save her life, before someone else bought it*

The girl bought a book **when it went on sale**.

The girl bought a book **although her sister didn't want her to**.

The girl bought a book **because she wanted to learn about robots**.

The girl bought a book **as if it would save her life**.

6. Compound Sentences

Now that you know how to write more interesting complicated sentences, you can also combine them in **compound sentences**. Compound sentences are made out of two independent clauses that are equally important. The two independent clauses could remain as separate sentences, but if you want to combine them, you can do so in several ways.

6.1 How to Make Compound Sentences

1. Use **coordinating conjunctions** like *and*, *or*, or *but*.

The girl bought a book, **and** her brother bought a violin.

The girl bought a book, **but** she forgot to take it out of the store.

2. Use a semicolon to connect two related independent clauses.

The girl bought a book; her brother bought a violin.

The girl bought a book; she needed it for school.

3. Use an dash. It's just like a semicolon, but more dramatic. It's more suited to fiction or opinion pieces than academic or business writing.

The girl bought a book—it was the only item she brought with her to boarding school.

4. Use a colon when the second independent clause illustrates the first. This is not very common, but it is an option.

The polls are in: she's definitely in the lead.

Note: It's more common to use a colon to give more information about something mentioned in the sentence.

The girl bought a book: *Pride and Prejudice*.

The girl bought several books: *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Shining*, and *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*.

6.2 Conjunctive Adverbs

You can also connect independent clauses using **conjunctive adverbs**, which illustrate sequence, cause and effect, contrast, or other relationships between clauses. Use a **period** or **semicolon** between independent clauses connected with a conjunctive adverb, and **always put a comma after it**.

Examples: *thus*, *therefore*, *consequently*, *on the other hand*, *again*, *likewise*, *however*, *instead*

The girl bought a book; **therefore**, she didn't have any money for ice cream.

The girl bought a book. **However**, she didn't plan on reading it.

7. Practice on your Own

7.1 Exercise 1

Begin with a simple sentence of your own. You can make up your own, or use one of these:

My brother drove his car.

The children ate ice cream.

The girl found a kitten.

Make them into long, beautiful, complex sentences using adverbs, adjectives, phrases and clauses. If you make a sentence you particularly like, I'd love to hear from you! I'll give you feedback, and let you know if it's grammatically correct.

Share it with me on Facebook: www.facebook.com/ESLwithLee

Or email it to me: Lee@englishwithlee.com

7.2 Exercise 2

Read the following famous quotes from literature. In each, the author has used phrases and clauses to make long, interesting sentences. See if you can identify the different phrases and clauses used below, and what nouns and verbs they modify in the sentence.

"He stepped down, trying not to look long at her, as if she were the sun, yet he saw her, like the sun, even without looking."

- Leo Tolstoy, "Anna Karenina"

"How wonderful it is that nobody needs to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

- Anne Frank, her diary

"Finally, from so little sleeping and so much reading, his brain dried up and he went completely out of his mind."

- Miguel de Cervantes, "Don Quixote"

"It was times like these when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived."

- Harper Lee, "To Kill a Mockingbird"

"The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars."

- Jack Kerouac, "On the Road"

Thank you!