



## SENTENCE DIAGRAMMING 101

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### LESSON 1

#### The Main Line

#### Introduction

Welcome to The PEN Institute's online course, Sentence Diagramming 101.

Teaching editors the fundamentals of sentence diagramming makes me think of Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers. He began the first team meeting of every season the same way. Holding a football in his hands, he stated the obvious: "Gentlemen, this is a football."

As you read through Lesson 1, you may think I'm stating the obvious. I am. But by the time we cover compound/complex sentences in Lesson 6, you'll be glad the course began with the fundamentals of sentence structure.

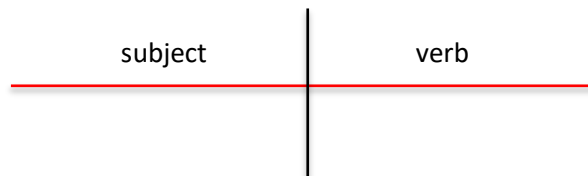
**NOTE:** I used PowerPoint to construct my diagrams. For assignments, you can use PowerPoint too. You can also draw your diagrams on paper, take photos of them, or scan them, and then send them to me.

## The Main Line: Subjects, Verbs, and Complements

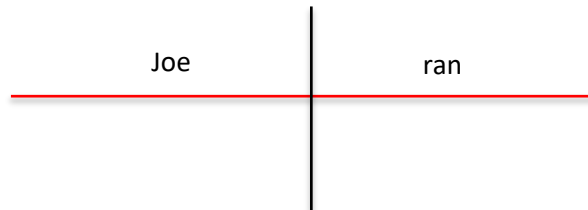
Knowing how a sentence fits together is a skill editors should master. The Reed-Kellogg system of diagramming enables editors to create a map so we can see how the words of any sentence are connected to one another. Sometimes we may not be able to pinpoint why a sentence sounds awkward. Diagramming it can help us to better understand how to increase a sentence's clarity and conciseness.

Some people like to use colored pencils to identify the parts of a diagram. I recommend red for what I label "The Main Line."

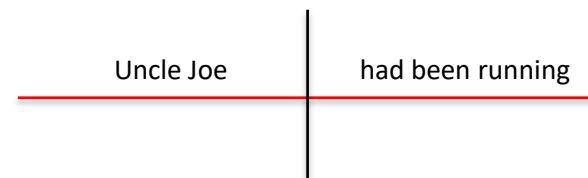
1. In R-K diagramming, the main line contains the heart of a sentence: the subject(s), the verb(s), and the complement(s). First, we'll look at subjects and verbs.



Joe ran.

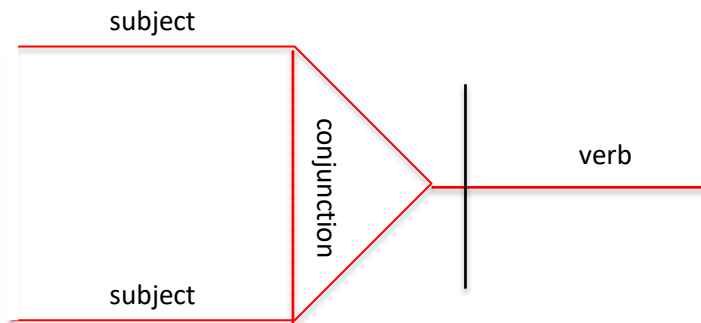


Uncle Joe had been running.

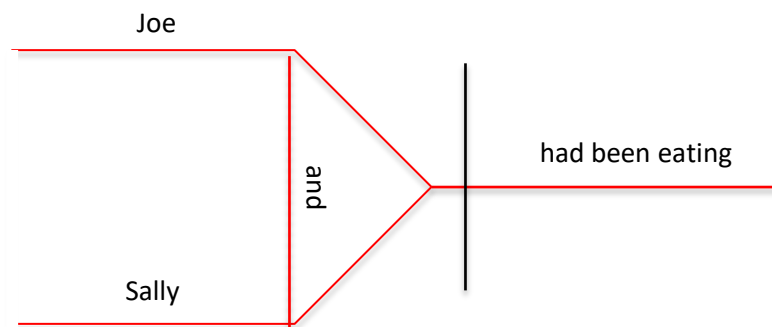


Note: No matter how many words are contained in the verb phrase, they're all written on the same section of the line. Proper nouns, such as *Uncle Joe*, are diagrammed on the same section of the line.

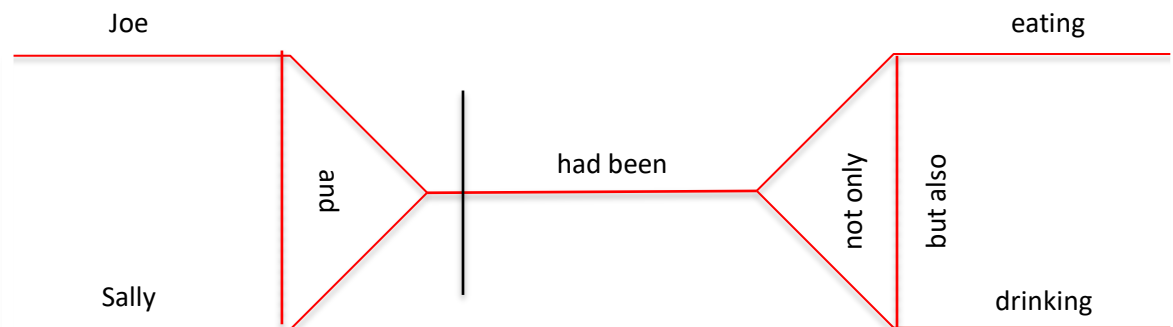
2. If there are multiple subjects and/or multiple verbs, you use what I call rockets. The coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet*) is written on the vertical line between the subjects. Correlative conjunctions (e.g., *not only/but also*) are written on both sides of that line.



Joe and Sally had been eating.



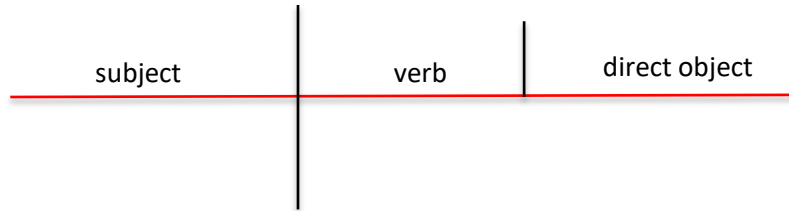
Joe and Sally had been not only eating but also drinking.



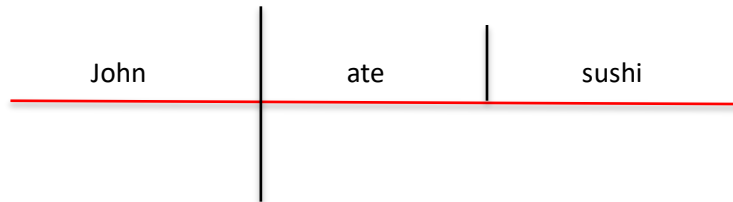
Note: The words in a verb phrase may be separated when conjunctions are part of the sentence, but we reunite them on the diagram.

3. Another sentence element that shares the main line with the subject and verb is the **complement**—a noun, pronoun, or adjective that completes the full meaning of the verb.

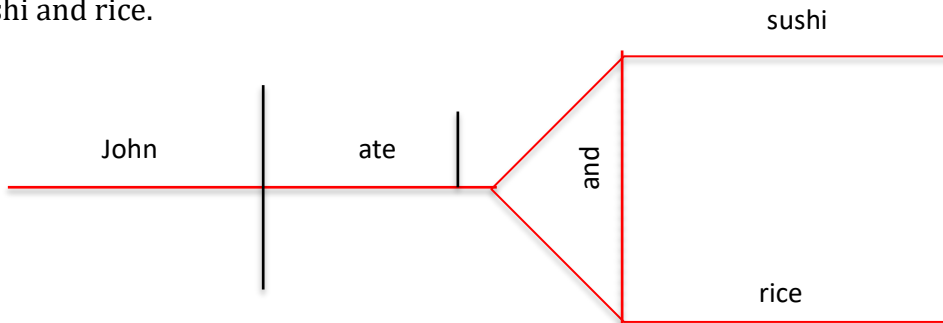
A **direct object** is a noun that completes the action of the verb. It answers the question *what* or *whom* after a transitive (action) verb. Use a straight line to separate the direct object from the verb.



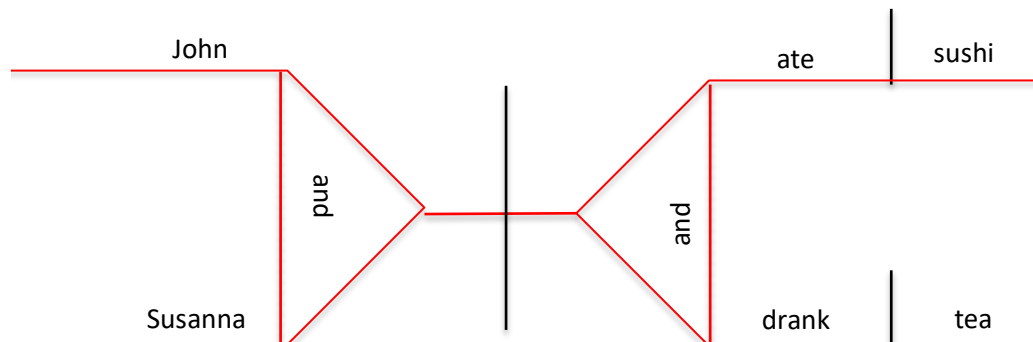
John ate sushi.



John ate sushi and rice.



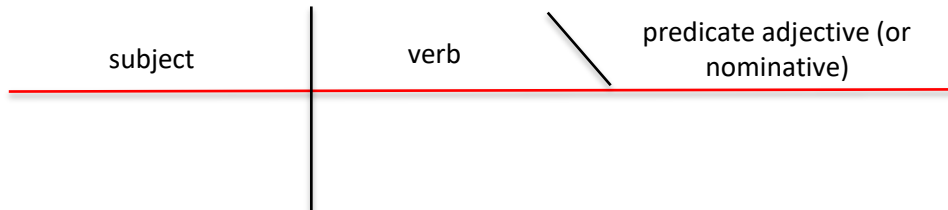
John and Susanna ate sushi and drank tea.



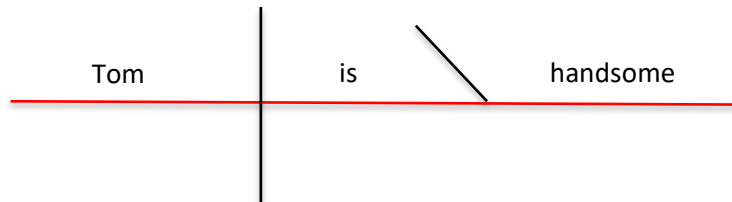
A **predicate adjective** follows a *be*-verb and describes the subject: Tom is handsome.

A **predicate nominative** (noun or pronoun) follows a *be*-verb and renames or identifies the subject: Tom and Terri are teachers.

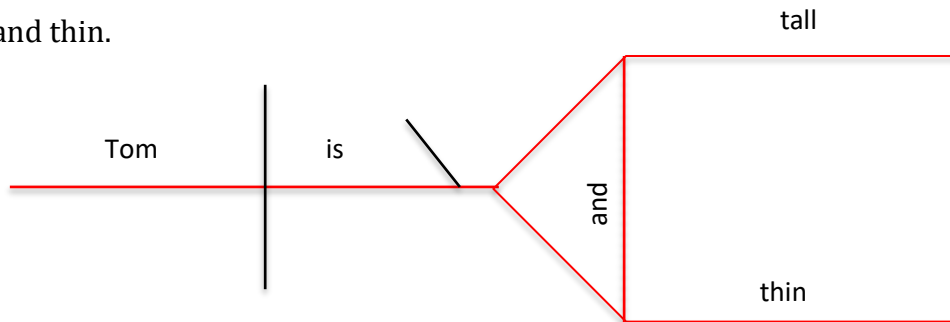
Use a slanted line, which points back to the subject, to separate a predicate adjective or nominative from the verb.



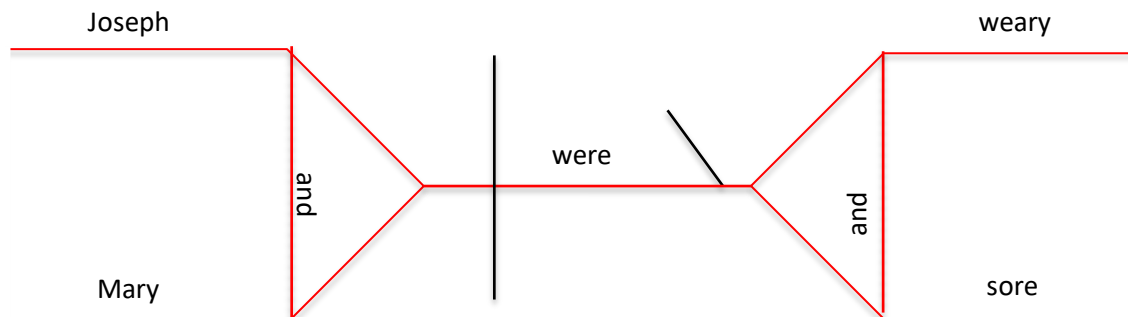
Tom is handsome.



Tom is tall and thin.

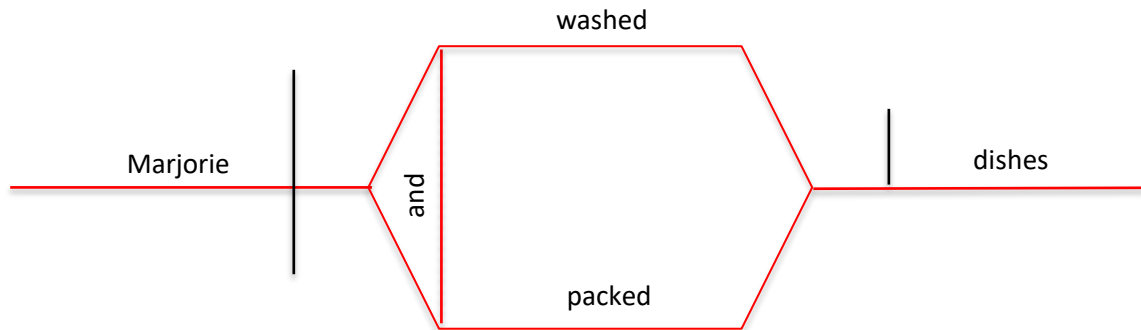


Joseph and Mary were weary and sore.



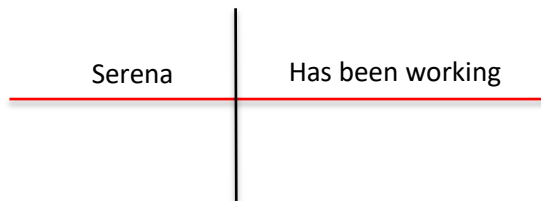
Occasionally, you may encounter a sentence with a compound verb and only one complement.

Marjorie washed and packed dishes.

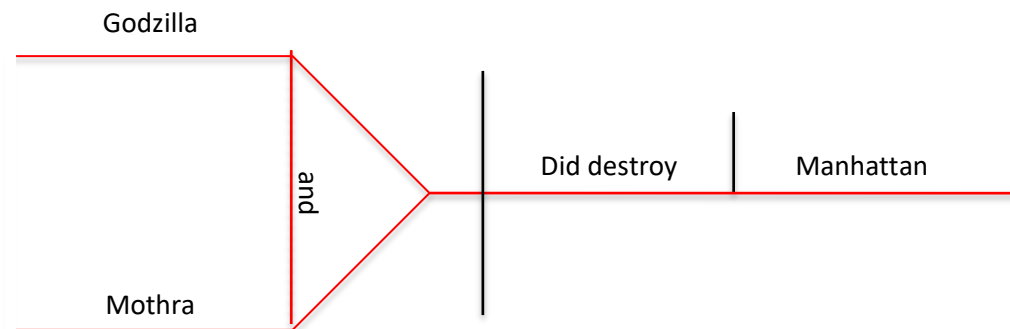


4. Questions are simply turned into statements and diagrammed accordingly. Punctuation marks aren't normally included in diagrams.

Has Serena been working?



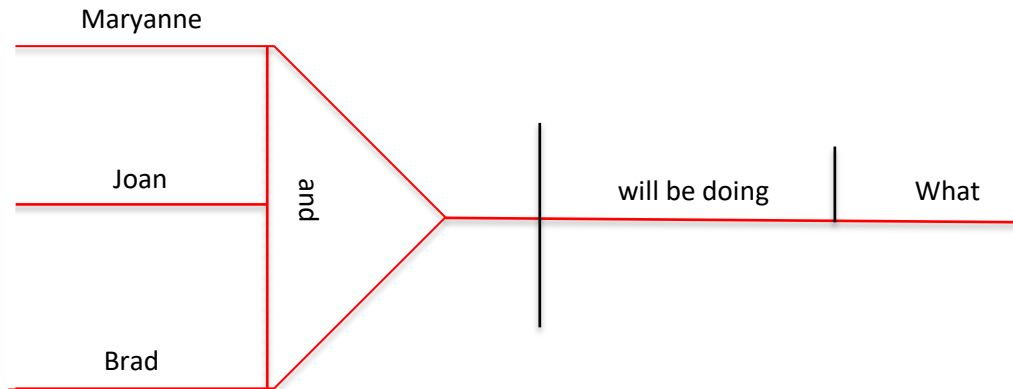
Did Godzilla and Mothra destroy Manhattan?



Note: In diagrams, the initial letter of the first word in the sentence should be uppercase, as a reminder of the way the sentence should be read.

If there are more than two subjects, verbs, or complements, add an extra line to the rocket.

What will Maryanne, Joan, and Brad be doing?



### Lesson Review:

- In most cases, only three kinds of words belong on the main line of a simple sentence: the subject, the complete verb phrase, and the complement.
- Rockets are used when a sentence has compound subjects, verbs, or complements.
- Coordinating conjunctions and correlative conjunctions are placed on the vertical line that connects the subjects.

Note: If you have trouble identifying a word's function in a sentence, consult a dictionary. I use the online version of the [Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary](#), which always gives a word's part of speech. The M-W also tells you whether a verb is transitive (carries action to a direct object) or intransitive (doesn't carry action to a direct object).

For editors, knowing whether a verb is transitive or intransitive is crucial. Sometimes writers use transitive verbs when they should use intransitive verbs, and thus a sentence sounds odd.

Example: Would John remember the torture he'd *wielded* against Janice in high school?

*Wield* is a transitive verb. It needs a direct object, as in *wielded a sword*. In this sentence, *wielded* is followed by two prepositional phrases. So the writer should use an intransitive verb, such as *inflicted*, instead: Would John remember the torture he'd *inflicted* on Janice in high school?

## **LESSON #1 ASSIGNMENTS**

*To receive a Certificate of Completion at the end of the course, you must successfully complete and submit two of the assignments for each lesson. However, to get the most from the course, I encourage you to complete all of the assignments.*

Note: The diagrams of the sentences in each week's assignments are provided in the Answer Key. Resist the urge to look at the answers before you attempt to diagram the sentences.

### **Assignment #1**

Diagram these sentences.

- A. Serena, Venita, and Marissa are sisters.
- B. You should eat vegetables and fruit.
- C. Who is bringing drinks and cups?
- D. Mark writes plays and directs them.
- E. Trees and flowers not only brighten but also beautify neighborhoods.

### **Assignment #2**

Most sentences, of course, are more complex than the ones I diagrammed in the lesson. Finding the subject, verb, and complement can be tricky. Study the sentences below. Find the subject, verb, and complement. Diagram those three parts of speech. (Don't attempt to place the other words on the diagram. We'll get to them eventually.)  
Hint: Not every sentence will have a complement.

- A. Into the woods, Hansel and Gretel walked.
- B. In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.
- C. Stubborn describes you perfectly.
- D. Is there something about Molly and Dan that bothers you?
- E. Should I eliminate chocolate and avocados from my diet or add them?

### **Assignment #3**

Choose one or two sentences from a manuscript you're editing. Find the subject, verb, and complement. Diagram them. If you find a challenging one, share it with the rest of the class.