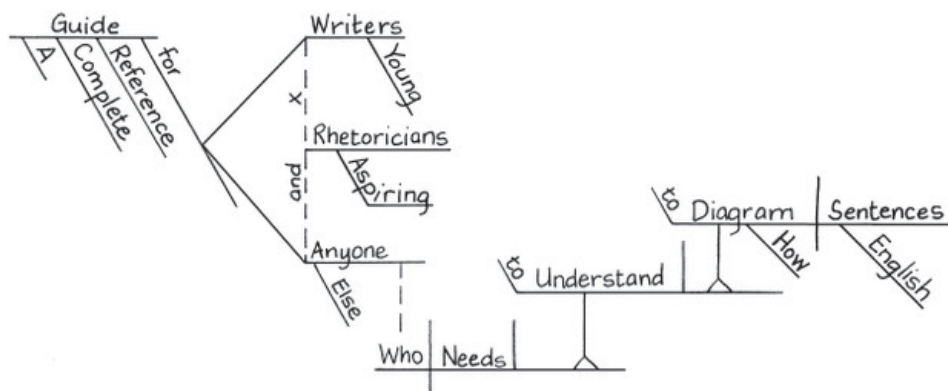


# THE DIAGRAMMING DICTIONARY



BY JESSICA OTTO AND SUSAN WISE BAUER

DIAGRAMS BY PATTY REBNE



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## FOREWORD

Once you learn how to diagram sentences, you'll *really* understand how English works.

To diagram a sentence, you have to know more than just memorized definitions of parts of speech. You have to know how those parts of speech work together to produce meaning. And that makes you a better writer.

Think of it this way: Anyone can walk into a building and point out the bathroom, hallway, stairs, or kitchen. But that doesn't explain how and why the building functions. Only a blueprint will reveal the true underlying structure—the structure that makes the building functional.

You can wander through a building without ever looking at the blueprint, and you can be a contented reader without ever sketching out a sentence diagram. But to design a useful building, or to put together an effective sentence, you need a deeper knowledge. You need to know how the parts all fit together.

Diagramming doesn't just deepen your understanding of the English language; it also gives you a diagnostic tool to figure out whether your own sentences are weak or strong, and why.

Consider the following balanced and beautiful sentence, from nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins:

*Our prayer and God's grace are like two buckets in a well; while the one ascends, the other descends.*

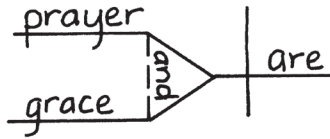
Read it out loud, and then read the following student sentence out loud. Listen to the difference.

*In Pride and Prejudice, her mother's bad manners and wishing to get married made Elizabeth discontent.*

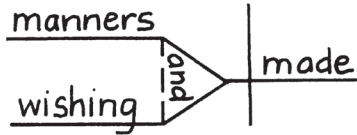
The second sentence makes sense—but it isn't a pretty sentence. It's weak and clunky. Why?

Time to diagram!

In the Hopkins sentence, the subject and verb of the first independent clause are diagrammed like this:



The second sentence also has a compound subject and single verb:



But in the second sentence, the two subjects are two different kinds of words. “Manners” is a noun, while “wishing” is a gerund—a verb form used as a noun. Words which occupy parallel places on a diagram should take the same form—as in the Hopkins sentence, where “prayer” and “grace” are both nouns.

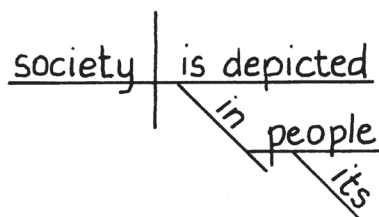
Now you know why the first sentence soars, and the second one thuds.

Here’s another example. Without diagramming, can you figure out why the following sentence doesn’t work?

*In addition to the city, Theodore Dreiser’s society is depicted in its people.*

It’s an awkward, ugly sentence. Diagramming it shows why.

Here are the subject (society) and verb (is depicted), diagrammed on a simple subject/verb line, with the prepositional phrase “in its people” diagrammed underneath the verb (it is acting as an adverb, because it answers the question “how”).



But where should “In addition to the city” go?

It doesn’t seem to fit anywhere. Are the society and city both depicted? (If so, what’s the difference?) Is the society depicted in its people or in its city? (Neither is particularly clear.)

If you can’t put it on the diagram, it doesn’t belong in the sentence. The author of this sentence doesn’t exactly know what Dreiser is depicting, and he’s hoping to sneak his fuzzy comprehension past the reader.

Here’s something important to keep in mind: The examples in this Dictionary are neat and tidy, but your diagrams don’t need to be. Successful diagramming takes a lot of erasing and rewriting and running off the edge of the paper. Good diagrams often have scribbled-out parts and corrections. Your diagrams don’t have to look like architectural plans. They can look like messy pencil sketches or works of art.

Here are a few suggestions:

Don’t diagram in pen! Your first approach to the sentence will probably need fixing as you progress on. Use a soft lead pencil, nice and sharp, and be sure to keep a separate eraser on hand, because you *will* need to erase and redraw as you go.

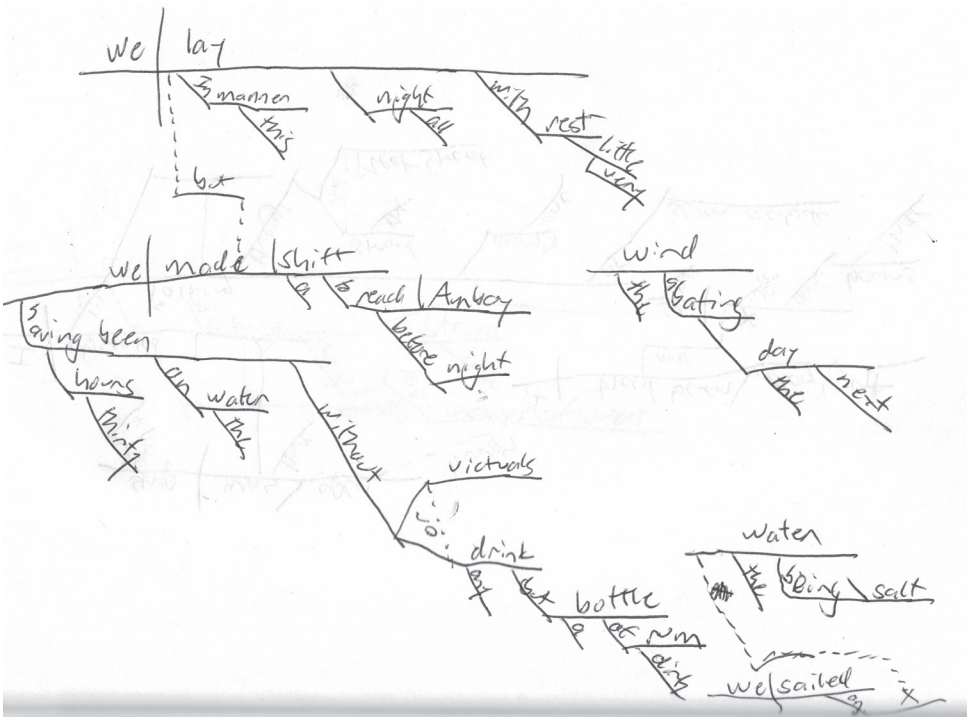
Don’t diagram on paper with regular ruled lines—use either plain sheets of paper, or else graph paper (that’s for diagrammers who really like all of their lines to be tidy). If you do use graph paper, blue lines are better than black, because you can see what is pencil and what is grid line.

If your diagram runs off the edge of the page, just tape another piece of paper to the first one. You don’t have to redo the whole thing!

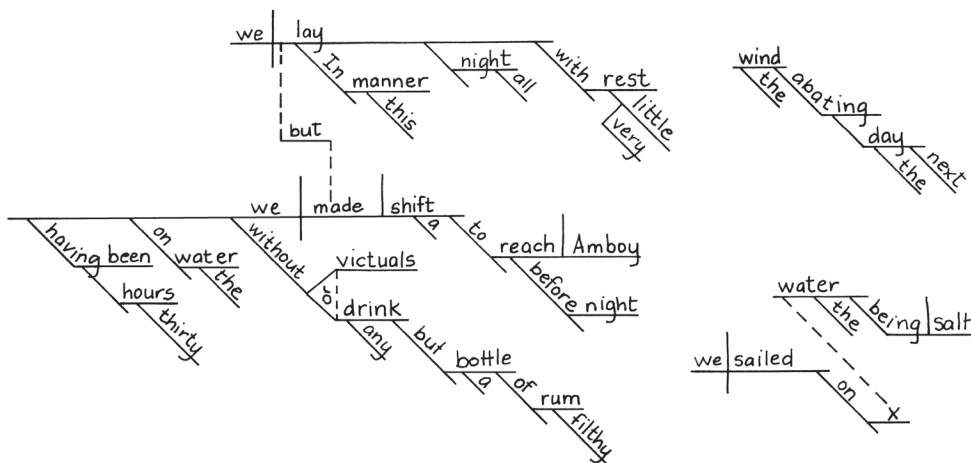
Lines don’t have to be perfectly straight! You can use a ruler or triangle if you *really* want to, but as long as the different parts of the diagram connect to each other in the right places, don’t worry about how much the lines twist and turn.

Here's Susan's original sketch of the following sentence (from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*):

*In this manner we lay all night, with very little rest; but the wind abating the next day, we made a shift to reach Amboy before night, having been thirty hours on the water, without victuals, or any drink but a bottle of filthy rum, the water we sailed on being salt.*



Those are definitely not straight lines. But now look how neat and tidy the graphic design version of this sentence is.

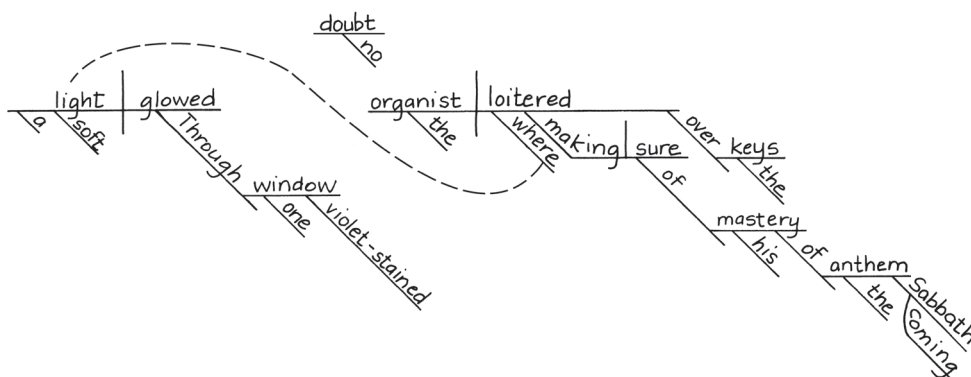


Both diagrams are correct! When you're diagramming, pay more attention to the functions and relationships shown, not the shape or tidiness of the diagram. As long as the lines are connecting the right words, the diagram is fine.

And those lines can connect the right words in different ways. Here's a sentence from the O. Henry short story "The Cop and the Anthem":

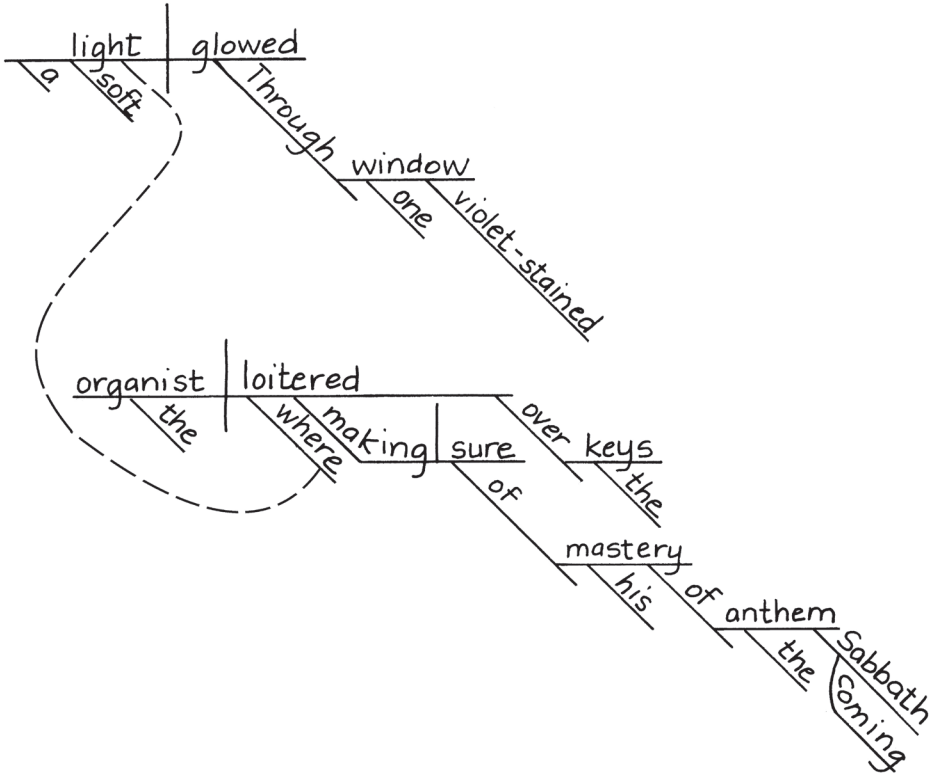
*Through one violet-stained window a soft light glowed, where, no doubt, the organist loitered over the keys, making sure of his mastery of the coming Sabbath anthem.*

When you diagram this, it's important that a dotted line connect "light" to "where" ("where" is a relative adverb linking the descriptive clause to the subject of the main clause). But that line can go in any direction. Here's one way to do it:



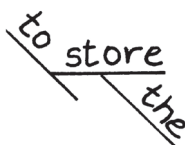


But a left-handed student would probably prefer to make the diagram up-and-down, rather than wide, so that she doesn't leave smudges on the independent clause.



Sometimes, small elements of diagrams are important. For example, prepositions are diagrammed on a slanting line, with their objects on a horizontal line that branches off the slant just before it ends, so that the slanting line has a little tail. But infinitives are diagrammed on a bending line with no tail. This is important because all infinitives begin with "to," but "to" can also be a preposition. The diagram shows you what kind of word "to" is.

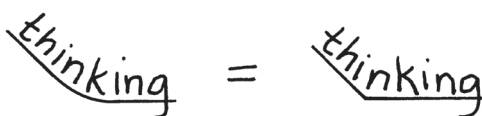
preposition

A diagram showing the word "to" written in a cursive hand. A line starts from the bottom of "to", goes down and to the left, then up and to the right to underline "store". From the bottom of "to", another line goes down and to the right, then up and to the right to underline "the".

part of an infinitive

A diagram showing the word "to" written in a cursive hand. A line starts from the bottom of "to", goes down and to the left, then up and to the right to underline "dream".

But does it matter whether the line you diagram your present participle on curves to the right or has a sharp angle? Absolutely not, because it's perfectly clear that the word is a present participle.

The word "thinking" is written in a cursive hand. To its right is an equals sign, followed by another "thinking" written in the same hand. The first "thinking" has a line starting from the bottom of the "i", going down and to the left, then up and to the right to underline the entire word. The second "thinking" has a line starting from the bottom of the "i", going down and to the right, then up and to the right to underline the entire word.

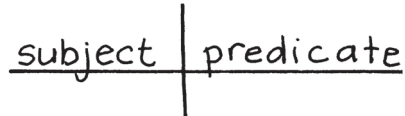
So don't get overwhelmed by making your diagrams somehow "perfect." Do your best to represent the relationship between the words in a way that's helpful to you. And remember: Diagramming isn't an arcane assignment designed to torture young writers. Instead, it forces them to clarify their thinking, fix their sentences, and put grammar to use in the service of writing—which is, after all, what grammar is for.



## BEFORE WE BEGIN

Before we begin, let's review the most basic skill in diagramming: how to diagram a subject and predicate!

First, draw a horizontal line. Next, divide the line in half with a vertical line. Make sure your vertical line goes all the way through the horizontal line. This vertical line divides everything in the subject from everything in the predicate.



The simple subject goes to the left of the vertical line. The simple predicate goes to the right of the vertical line. Everything in the complete subject will attach itself to the diagram on the left. Everything in the complete predicate will attach itself to the right. Keep that in mind for everything you diagram! In the examples that follow, every simple subject is underlined once, and every simple predicate is underlined twice. Some sentences contain more than one subject and predicate, especially if they are made up of multiple clauses.

In each sample sentence, you will see that some of the words are in **green**. That indicates the part of the sentence we are focusing on in that particular example.

Note: When you are diagramming, always keep the capitalization of the original! (So be sure to capitalize the first word of the sentence on your diagram.) Punctuation does not go on diagrams (although sometimes you may represent punctuation with an *x*).

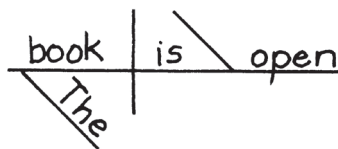


## PART I: HOW TO DIAGRAM THE SIMPLE SUBJECT AND SIMPLE PREDICATE OF A SENTENCE

### IA. Simple subjects

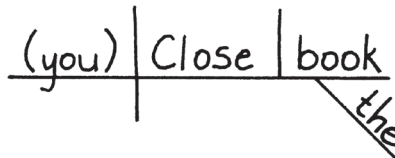
1. **Common nouns** as subjects: When a common noun is used as the subject of a sentence, put it on the subject line.

The book is open.



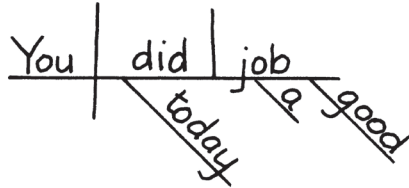
2. **The understood you** as subject: In a command (imperative) sentence, the subject is understood to be “you.” It is placed in parentheses on the subject line of the diagram to show that it does not appear in the sentence itself.

Close the book.



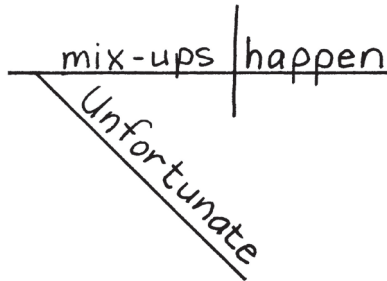
- 3. Pronouns** as subjects: A personal pronoun is often the subject of a sentence and is diagrammed exactly as the noun it is replacing would be diagrammed.

You did a good job today.

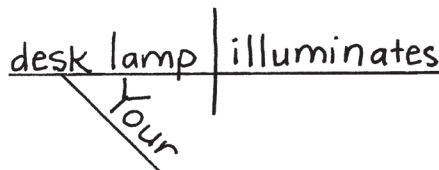


- 4. Compound nouns** as subjects: A compound noun can be two separate words, two words joined by a hyphen, or two words that have been combined into one. A compound noun is always kept together on the same space of the diagram.

Unfortunate mix-ups happen.

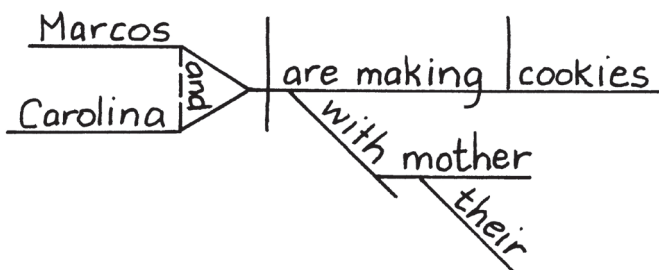


Your desk lamp illuminates.



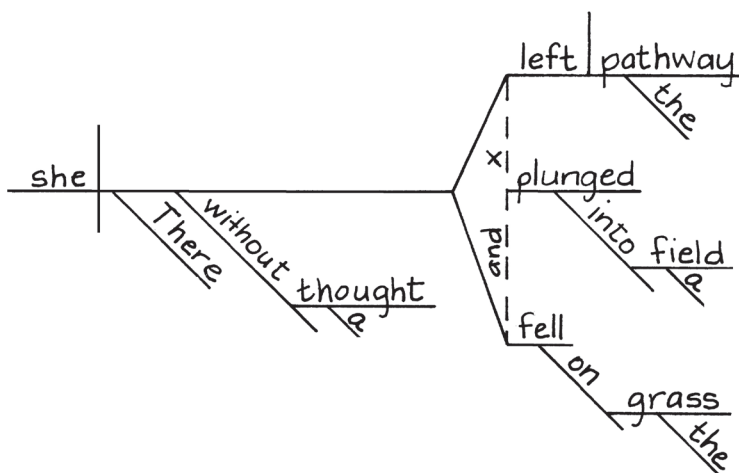
- 5. Compound subjects:** A compound subject consists of two or more subjects joined by a conjunction. A compound subject is diagrammed by splitting the subject line into a bracket and placing each individual subject on its own horizontal line of the bracket. Then, a vertical dotted line joins the horizontal lines, and the conjunction is placed on that dotted line.

Marcos and Carolina are making cookies with their mother.



You may use an x to show that a comma has replaced a coordinating conjunction, but this is optional.

There, without a thought, she left the pathway, plunged into a field, and fell on the grass.\*

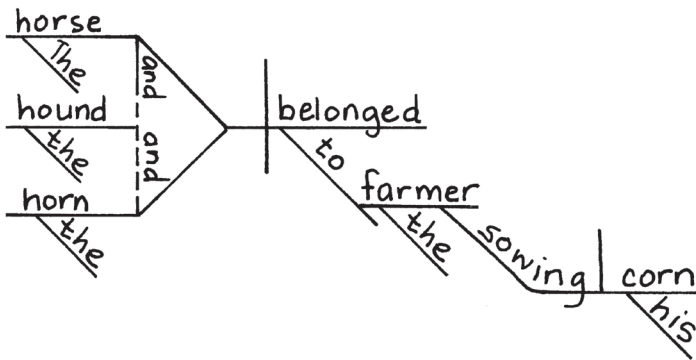


\*adapted from *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth George Speare

### 6. Compound subjects with more than one coordinating conjunction:

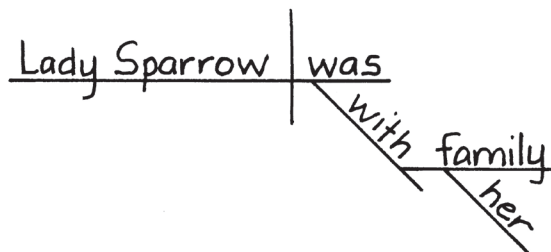
When a sentence contains more than two subjects joined by more than one coordinating conjunction, place both conjunctions inside the bracket on the dotted line.

The horse and the hound and the horn belonged to the farmer sowing his corn.



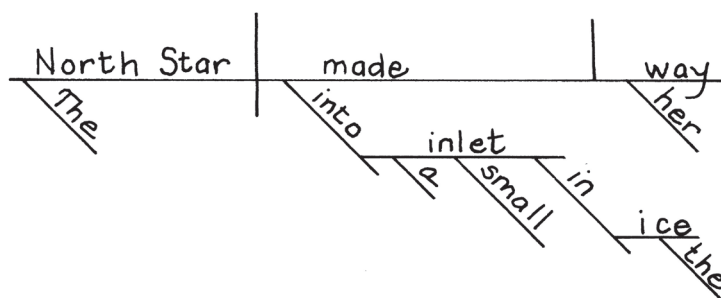
7. **Proper nouns** as subjects: When a proper noun with more than one word is a subject, whether it is a person's name, the title of a book, or the name of a ship or airplane, the words of the proper noun are not split up but are placed together on the subject line of the diagram.

Lady Sparrow was with her family.\*



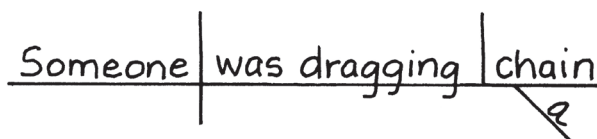
\*adapted from *Japanese Fairy Tales* by Yei Theodora Ozaki

The North Star made her way into a small inlet in the ice.



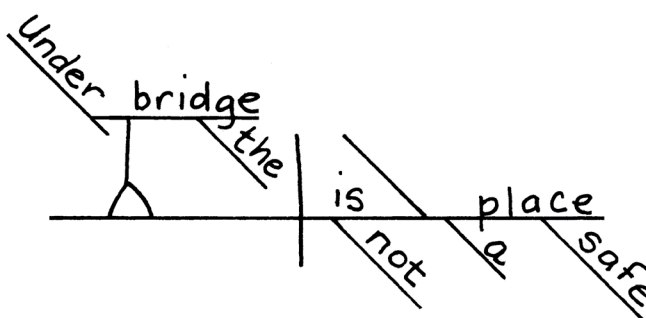
- 8. Indefinite pronouns** as subjects: An indefinite pronoun (a pronoun without an antecedent) can be a subject and is placed on the subject line of the diagram.

Someone was dragging a chain.\*



- 9. Prepositional phrases** as subjects: A subject can never be found inside of a prepositional phrase, but an entire prepositional phrase can serve as a subject. It is diagrammed on a pedestal on the subject line of the sentence, with any modifiers of the phrase attached to it.

Under the bridge is not a safe place.

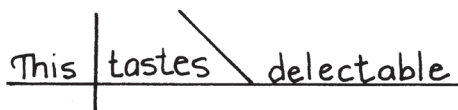


\*adapted from *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens



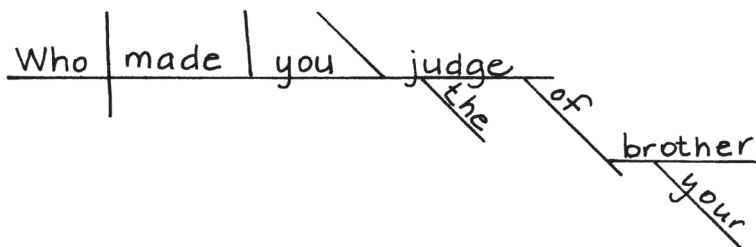
- 10. Demonstrative pronouns** as subjects: A demonstrative pronoun can act as the subject of a sentence, and if it is acting as the subject, it is placed on the subject line.

This tastes delectable.



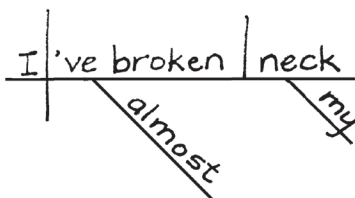
- 11. Interrogative pronouns** as subjects: An interrogative pronoun can act as the subject of a sentence, and if it is acting as the subject, it is placed on the subject line.

Who made you the judge of your brother?



- 12. Contractions** as subjects: When a subject is part of a contraction, put only the pronoun part of the contraction on the subject line.

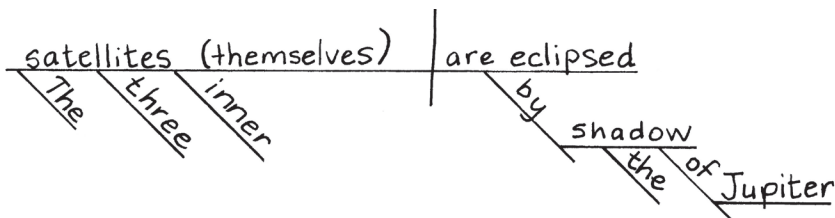
I've almost broken my neck.\*



\*adapted from *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* by Kate Douglas Wiggin

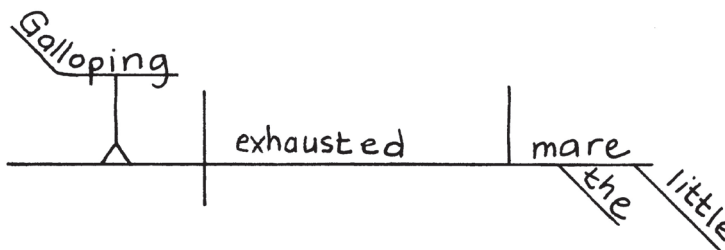
- 13. Intensive pronouns** with a subject: When an intensive pronoun is adding intensity to a subject, diagram it in parentheses after the subject to demonstrate that it is a non-essential element in the sentence.

The three inner satellites themselves are eclipsed by the shadow of Jupiter.



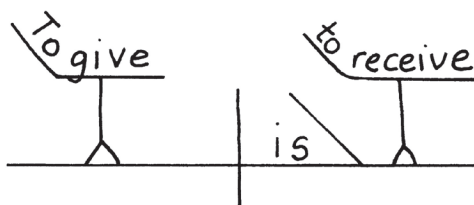
- 14. Gerunds** as subjects: A gerund acting as a subject is placed on a pedestal on the subject line. It is diagrammed on a broken line to show that it is both noun and verb.

Galloping exhausted the little mare.



- 15. Infinitives** as subjects: An infinitive acting as the subject is placed on a pedestal on the subject line. It is diagrammed on a broken line to show that it is both noun and verb.

To give is to receive.



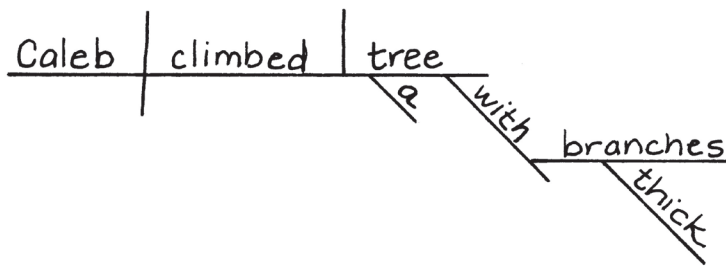


## PART III: HOW TO DIAGRAM PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

### IIIA. Prepositional phrases acting as modifiers

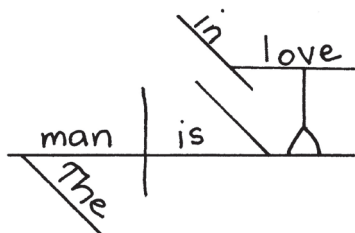
- 1. Prepositional phrases that act as adjectives:** Prepositional phrases that modify nouns or pronouns are diagrammed underneath the word or words they modify. The preposition is placed on a diagonal line, the object of the preposition is placed on a horizontal line, and any adjectives modifying the object go on diagonal lines underneath the object.

Caleb climbed a tree with thick branches.



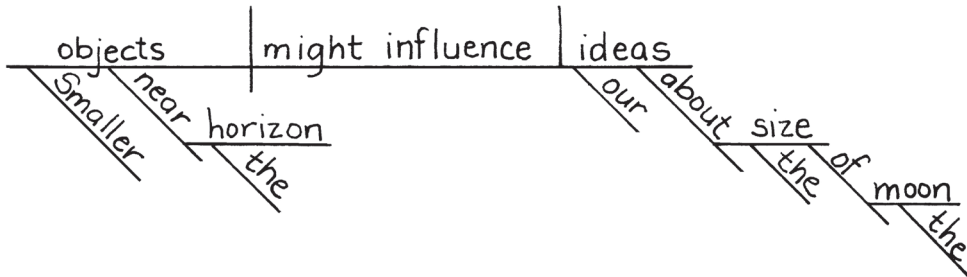
- 2. Prepositional phrases that act as predicate adjectives:** A prepositional phrase can act as an adjective describing the subject. It is diagrammed after the slanted line, following the linking verb, and it is placed on a pedestal. The preposition is put on a diagonal line, the object of the preposition is on a horizontal line, and any modifiers are placed on a diagonal line underneath the object.

The man is in love.



- 3. Prepositional phrases modifying other prepositional phrases:** When a prepositional phrase is acting as an adjective or adverb, it can sometimes be modified by another prepositional phrase. The second phrase is diagrammed below the first.

Smaller objects near the horizon might influence our ideas about the size of the moon.



- 4. Prepositional phrases that act as adverbs:** When a prepositional phrase answers one of the questions *how*, *when*, *where*, *how often*, *to what extent*, it is an adverb phrase. It is diagrammed under the verb, adjective, or adverb that it modifies. The preposition is placed on a diagonal line, the object of the preposition is placed on a horizontal line, and any adjectives modifying the object go on diagonal lines underneath the object.

Hank Aaron swung the bat through the air with great confidence.

