

The following tests help us to determine whether a string of words forms a constituent.

Key: Constituents are underlined. Non-constituents are wavy-lined.

Warning: Not all tests will work for all constituent types!

Fragment Answers

Only a constituent can **answer a question**, while retaining the meaning of the original sentence.

That is my brother. → Q: Who's that? A: My brother.

He is making a mess. → Q: What's he doing? A: Making a mess.

The keys are on the table. → Q: Where are the keys? A: On the table.

I want two of those apples. → Q: How many apples do you want? A: *Two of.

He's preserving in wax the earwigs I gave him. → Q: What's he doing with the earwigs?
A: *Preserving in wax.

I gave the dog the keys. → Q: What did you do with the keys? A: *Gave the dog.

Coordination

Only constituents (of the same type) can be **coordinated using conjunction words** like *and*, *or*, and *but*.

Her friends from Peru went to the show. → Mary and her friends from Peru went to the show.

We peeled the potatoes. → We peeled the potatoes and shucked the corn.

Should I go through the tunnel? → Should I go through the tunnel or over the bridge?

The doughnuts were full of jelly. → The doughnuts were full of jelly but slightly disappointing.

Her friends from Peru went to the movies. → *Her friends from and two guys interested in Peru went...

We peeled the potatoes. → *We peeled the and washed the potatoes.

Should I go through the tunnel? → *Should I go through or I go around the tunnel?

The doughnuts were full of jelly. → *The doughnuts were full but didn't smell of jelly.

Pro-Form Substitution

Only constituents can be **substituted with pro-forms** like *it*, *that*, *them*, *then*, *there*, *do that*, *that way*, ...

A man with dark glasses is following us. → He is following us.

We watched a movie about cheese-making last week. → We did that last week.

Annette went away to Brazil. → Annette went there.

Some of them seemed rather tall for their age. → Some of them seemed that way.

A man with dark glasses is following us. → *He with dark glasses is following us.

We watched a movie about cheese-making last week. → *We did that about cheese-making last week.

Annette gave away her last CD. → *Annette gave it/there/that.

Some of them seemed rather tall for their age. → *Some of them seemed that way for their age.

Topicalization

Only a constituent can be **relocated to the beginning of the sentence**.

(Note, topicalization sometimes requires a special type of supporting context.)

He sold the record player to the thrift store. → The record player, he sold to the thrift store.

We're going snowboarding over the break. → Over the break, we're going snowboarding.

I've always enjoyed going fishing with my dad. → Going fishing with my dad, I've always enjoyed.

He sold the record player to the thrift store. → *The record player to the thrift store, he sold __ .

We're going snowboarding over the break. → *Going snowboarding, we're over the break.

I've always enjoyed going fishing with my dad. → *Fishing with my dad, I've always enjoyed going.

Clefting

Only a constituent can appear in the frame “ **is/are who/what/where/when/why/how ...**”

They put the bodies in the basement. → In the basement is where they put the bodies.

We'll talk about the answers to the HW next. → The answers to the HW are what we'll talk about next.

They made us look like amateurs. → Made us look like amateurs is what they did.

She seemed incredibly lucky to me. → Incredibly lucky is how she seemed to me.

They put the bodies in the basement. → *Put the bodies is what they did in the basement.

We'll talk about the answers to the HW next. → *About the answers is what we'll talk to the HW next.

They made us look like amateurs. → *Made us is what they did look like amateurs.

She seemed incredibly lucky to me. → *Incredibly lucky to me is how she seemed.

Intuitive Unit

When all else fails, turn to your intuition. Does the string of words feel like it *goes together* as a complete unit, and *has some meaning* on its own, independent of the rest of the sentence? If so, it's probably a constituent. If not, it's probably not.