

What is Sentence Diagramming?

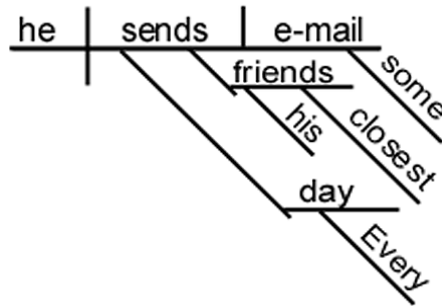
Sentence diagramming is a valuable tool that enables a person to accurately understand the structure - and hence the meaning - of a sentence.

Few people today are very familiar with the formal concept of diagramming, which is sometimes taught in English classes. This method is very instructive - but also very cumbersome.

Take, for instance, the sentence:

"Each day he sends his closest friends some e-mail."

In English class, this would have been diagrammed in the following way:



In this diagram, each modifying word (or phrase) is lined-up beneath the word it modifies - and this takes-up much space. You also have to know whether the word is a noun, verb, adjective, preposition, infinitive, etc., for each type of word has a specific way of being placed on the "tree." This goes beyond what most people today know how to do.

Here, we are suggesting a *modified* form of diagramming. This method is easier to use, for it doesn't require as much understanding of the language terminology. Also, it is a lot less cumbersome.

In this modified method of diagramming, the same sentence used above might look like this:

He sends - some e-mail
- each day
- (to) his closest friends.

Here, we see the main things we need to know: (1) what he sends, (2) when he sends it, (3) and to whom he sends it. (The word "to" is understood, though not actually part of the sentence. Also, we have taken the liberty to rearrange the sentence - which is perfectly acceptable with this technique, as long as we don't change its meaning.)

Another example, using John 3:16 (KJV) would be:

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For
God so loved - the world,
      - that he gave - his only begotten Son,
                - that whosoever believeth
                          - in him
                          - should not perish,
                            |
                            but have everlasting life.
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Though this example uses mainly hyphens to connect the phrases (an easy way to work with a keyboard), you could use other methods of aligning phrases and showing where they connect to the rest of the sentence.

Since there are no rigid rules (unlike the English-class method), you could diagram the same sentence with a slightly different format, and still reach the same conclusions and the same understanding of the sentence. For instance, the above verse could be diagrammed this way, with equally acceptable results:

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For
God ... loved - so [= "in this way," in some translations]
              - the world,
              - that he gave ...

[he gave...]
  - his only begotten Son,
  - that whosoever believeth - in him [the Son]
                              - should not perish,
                                |
                                but have everlasting life.
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In this second illustration, the word "so" was moved to a different location. Also, the diagram was broken at the word "gave," so it wouldn't take as wide an area.

Though simpler, there are some similarities between this method and the more complex method used in English classes. Either method requires an ability to analyze a sentence (though the modified method is easier). You still have to pay attention to connecting words, modifying words, and the like, for such words show us how the different phrases go together to communicate an intended message.

On the other hand, you don't have to be able to identify what each word is classified as, such as a "verb," a "gerund," or a "predicate nominative" - though knowing these things may be helpful - and you don't have to use as much paper to write it out. You can also be more flexible in the way you use this modified diagramming method - such as using it for a word-for-word analysis, or for a quick general evaluation of the "flow of thought" through a passage.

As you learn this diagramming technique, feel free to adapt it to your needs. You can draw lines or arrows to help illustrate the flow of thought. You can underline or highlight various words or concepts, that parallel each other, modify the same word, contrast with each other, or have some other type of connection with each other. You can use symbols or color. Remember, this is a *flexible* tool. You can use it in any way you wish, to help you to better understand what you are studying. If it succeeds in doing this, it will have accomplished its purpose.