

Major verb classes

- 3.1 The function of the V element in English clause structure, as outlined in 2.13–24, is realized by the VERB PHRASE, which consists of one or more verb constituents, *eg*:

<i>She left yesterday.</i>	<i>She won't leave tomorrow.</i>
<i>Has she not left yet?</i>	<i>She will leave tomorrow.</i>
<i>Did she leave yesterday?</i>	<i>She might be leaving next week.</i>

Verbs, as a class of words, can be divided into three major categories, according to their function within the verb phrase; we distinguish the open class of FULL VERBS (or lexical verbs) such as LEAVE (*cf* 3.2*ff*) from the closed classes of PRIMARY VERBS (BE, HAVE, and DO; *cf* 3.31*ff*) and of MODAL AUXILIARY VERBS (*will, might, etc*; *cf* 3.39). Of these three classes, the full verbs can act only as main verbs (*cf* 2.28), the modal auxiliaries can act only as auxiliary verbs, and the primary verbs can act either as main verbs or as auxiliary verbs.

- Note [a] Some verbs (variously termed marginal modals, semi-auxiliaries, catenative verbs, etc) have a status intermediate between that of main verbs and that of auxiliary verbs. (These are discussed in 3.40 – 3.51.)
 [b] SMALL CAPITALS are generally used in this chapter in citing a verb as a lexical item (*cf* 2.35) instead of as a grammatical form. We will cite the modal auxiliaries, however, in *italics*, since it is often more appropriate to regard *can* and *could* (for example) as invariable words, than as forms of the same lexical item (*cf* 4.49*ff*, where special uses of the past modal forms *could, might, would, and should* are discussed).

Full verbs

The morphology of regular verbs

Verb forms and the verb phrase

- 3.2 Regular full verbs, *eg* CALL, have four morphological forms. Irregular full verbs vary in this respect; a verb like SPEAK has five, whereas CUT has only three forms (note, however, that the primary verb BE (*cf* 3.32) has as many as eight forms).

	REGULAR VERBS	IRREGULAR VERBS
(1) BASE FORM	<i>call</i> <i>want</i>	<i>speak</i> <i>cut</i> <i>win</i>
(2) -S FORM	<i>calls</i> <i>wants</i>	<i>speaks</i> <i>cuts</i> <i>wins</i>
(3) -ING PARTICIPLE	<i>calling</i> <i>wanting</i>	<i>speaking</i> <i>cutting</i> <i>winning</i>
(4) PAST FORM	<i>called</i> <i>wanted</i>	<i>spoke</i> <i>cut</i> <i>won</i>
(5) -ED PARTICIPLE	<i>called</i> <i>wanted</i>	<i>spoken</i> <i>cut</i> <i>won</i>

These verb forms have different functions in finite and nonfinite verb phrases (*cf* 3.52*ff*). On this basis, the -s form and the past form are called FINITE, whereas the -ing participle and the -ed participle are called NONFINITE. The

BASE form (the form which has no inflection) is sometimes finite, and sometimes nonfinite (see below). In a finite verb phrase (the kind of verb phrase which normally occurs in simple sentences), only the first verb word (in bold face below) is finite:

She **calls** him every day.
 She **is calling** him now.
 She **has called** twice today.

and the subsequent verbs, if any, are nonfinite. In a nonfinite verb phrase, on the other hand, all verbs are nonfinite; eg:

Calling early, she found him at home.
Called early, he ate a quick breakfast.
Having been called early, he felt sleepy all day.

The difference between finite and nonfinite phrases is discussed in greater detail in 3.52ff. Here we confine our attention to the syntactic deployment of the verb forms of which verb phrases are composed:

- (1) The BASE FORM (*call, speak, cut*, etc) occurs as (a) a FINITE form in:
 - (i) the present tense in all persons and numbers except 3rd person singular (which has the *-s* form): *I/you/we/they call regularly*. (cf 3.54, 4.3ff)
 - (ii) the imperative: *Call at once!* (cf 3.54, 11.24ff)
 - (iii) the present subjunctive: *They demanded that she call and see them*. (cf 3.59–61)
 It also occurs as (b) a NONFINITE form in:
 - (i) the bare infinitive: *He may call tonight*.
 - (ii) the *to*-infinitive: *We want her to call*. (cf 3.53, 14.6ff)
- (2) The *-s* FORM (*calls, speaks, cuts*, etc) occurs as a FINITE form in: 3rd person singular present tense: *He/She calls every day*.
- (3) The *-ING* PARTICIPLE (*calling, speaking, cutting*, etc) occurs as a NONFINITE form in:
 - (i) the progressive aspect following BE: *He's calling her now*. (cf 4.25ff)
 - (ii) *-ing* participle clauses: *Calling early, I found her at home*. (cf 3.53, 14.6ff)
- (4) The PAST FORM (*called, spoke, cut*, etc) occurs as a FINITE form in the past tense: *Someone called yesterday*. (cf 4.11ff)
- (5) The *-ED* PARTICIPLE (*called, spoken, cut*, etc) occurs as a NONFINITE form in:
 - (i) the perfective aspect following HAVE: *He has called twice today*. (cf 4.18ff)
 - (ii) the passive voice following BE: *Her brother is called John*. (cf 3.63ff)
 - (iii) *-ed* participle clauses: *Called early, he ate a quick breakfast*. (cf 3.53, 14.6ff)

As will become clearer when we discuss the structure of the verb phrase (3.52ff), the nonfinite forms of the verb occur not only in nonfinite verb phrases, but also in noninitial positions in finite verb phrases.

- Note The *-ing* participle is sometimes called the 'present participle', and the *-ed* participle is sometimes called the 'past participle' or, with transitive verbs, the 'passive participle'. Since these terms are potentially misleading, we prefer to use terms which are descriptive only of morphological form. Note, however, that the *-ed* participle owes its name to the form this participle takes in regular verbs; some irregular verbs (eg: *taken*) have a more distinctive ending in *-en*, and some grammarians for this reason have preferred the term '*-en* participle'.

The morphology of regular full verbs

- 3.3 Morphologically, full verbs are considered under two heads: REGULAR verbs (such as CALL) and IRREGULAR verbs (such as DRINK). In both types, the *-s* form and the *-ing* participle form are almost invariably predictable from the base. Irregular verbs differ from the regular verbs, however, in that the past form and the *-ed* participle of irregular verbs cannot be predicted by general rule from the base.

- 3.4 Regular full verbs have only four different forms:

BASE	<i>call</i>	<i>like</i>	<i>try</i>
<i>-ing</i> PARTICIPLE	<i>calling</i>	<i>liking</i>	<i>trying</i>
<i>-s</i> FORM	<i>calls</i>	<i>likes</i>	<i>tries</i>
PAST FORM OR <i>-ed</i> PARTICIPLE	<i>called</i>	<i>liked</i>	<i>tried</i>

These verbs are called regular because if we know the base form (ie the dictionary entry form; cf 2.35) of such a verb, we can predict all its other forms by rule. This is a very powerful generalization, since the vast majority of English verbs belong to the regular class. Furthermore, new verbs that are coined or borrowed from other languages adopt this pattern; eg: *xerox* ~ *xeroxing* ~ *xeroxes* ~ *xeroxed*. As the past form and the *-ed* participle form are identical for all regular verbs, it will be convenient to refer to them both as the *-ed* form, distinguishing where necessary between the *V-ed₁* (past tense) and *V-ed₂* (*-ed* participle) forms.

- Note [a] The process of assimilating foreign words to the regular pattern is more marked in verbs than in nouns, where foreign plurals are often kept in English, sometimes with an alternative native ending (cf 5.82ff): *antenna* ~ *antennae*/*antennas*.

[b] Some archaic 2nd person and 3rd person singular present-tense verb forms survive in very restricted use: chiefly in traditional liturgical language. The 2nd person forms with *thou* as subject (cf 6.12 Note [c]) end in *-est* /ɪst/, /est/, whereas the even rarer 3rd person forms end in *-eth* /ɪθ/, /eθ/:

(thou)	<i>callest</i>	<i>givest</i>	<i>hearest</i>
(he/she)	<i>calleth</i>	<i>giveth</i>	<i>heareth</i>

Contracted nonsyllabic endings *-st* and *-th* occur with the primary verbs HAVE and DO: *hast*, *hath*; *dost* /dɒst/, *doth* /dɒθ/. (Similar forms *saist*, *saieth* /seθ/ occur with the verb SAY, which also, however, has the regular forms *sayest* and *sayeth*.) The primary verb BE, here as elsewhere, is highly irregular: it has no *-st* or *-th* forms, but it has the archaic 2nd person form *art* and an analogous past tense form *wert*: *thou art/wert*. Other verbs have *-(e)st* 'thou-forms' in the past tense: *hadst*, *didst*, *gavest*, *camest*, etc. The spelling of the *-est* forms of *see* and *lie* is irregular: *seest* /siː-ɪst/; *liest* /laɪ-ɪst/.

All the modal auxiliaries except those ending in *-t* have special 'thou-forms': *will* ~ *wilt*, *shall* ~ *shalt*, *can* ~ *canst*, *may* ~ *mays*, *would* ~ *wouldst*, *should* ~ *shouldst*, *could* ~ *couldst*.

The *-ing* participle and the *-s* form

- 3.5 The *-ing* form of both regular and irregular verbs is formed by adding *-ing* /ɪŋ/ to the base:

walk ~ walking agree ~ agreeing push ~ pushing
sing ~ singing pass ~ passing weep ~ weeping

(On the spelling of the *-ing* participle, cf 3.7ff.) The *-s* form of both regular and irregular verbs (sometimes spelled *-es*; cf 3.9) is also predictable from the base. It has three pronunciations /ɪz/, /z/, and /s/, which occur under the following phonological conditions:

(a) /ɪz/ after bases ending in voiced or voiceless sibilants; eg:

Table 3.5a

BASE	-S FORM	BASE	-S FORM
/-s/	<i>pass ~ passes</i>	/-dʒ/	<i>budge ~ budges</i>
/-z/	<i>buzz ~ buzzes</i>	/-ʃ/	<i>push ~ pushes</i>
/-tʃ/	<i>catch ~ catches</i>	/-ʒ/	<i>camouflage ~ camouflages</i>

For these cases, the *-s* form always ends in *-es*.

(b) /z/ after bases ending in voiced sounds other than sibilants, including vowels; eg:

Table 3.5b

/-l/	<i>call ~ calls</i>	/-b/	<i>rob ~ robs</i>
/-i:/	<i>flee ~ flees</i>	/-aɪ/	<i>try ~ tries</i>

(c) /s/ after bases ending in voiceless sounds other than sibilants, eg:

Table 3.5c

/-t/	<i>cut ~ cuts</i>	/-k/	<i>lock ~ locks</i>
/-p/	<i>hop ~ hops</i>	/-f/	<i>cough ~ coughs</i>

The rules on the spelling *-es* (*go/goes*), the changing of *-y* to *-i* (*try/tries*), etc are the same as for the regular plural of nouns (cf 5.81).

- Note [a] Apart from the three primary verbs BE, HAVE, and DO (cf 3.3 [ff]), the only verbs which have an irregular *-s* form are *say* /seɪ/ ~ *says* /sez/, and derivatives of DO, eg: *outdo* /-du:/ ~ *outdoes* /-dɒz/; *overdo* /-du:/ ~ *overdoes* /-dɒz/. In the *-s* form, SAY is irregular in pronunciation, but not in spelling. GAINSAY, historically a derivative of SAY, may have a regular or an irregular pronunciation in the *-s* form: *gainsays* /-seɪz/ or /-sez/.
- [b] In some varieties of English (eg South African English and many varieties of AmE) the pronunciation of the syllabic ending of the *-s* form is /əz/ rather than /z/. Similarly, the syllabic *-ed* form (cf 3.6) is pronounced in such varieties as /əd/ rather than /ɪd/.
- [c] A common (especially nonstandard) pronunciation of the *-ing* inflection is /ɪn/, conventionally spelt *-in'*; eg: *gettin'* /'getɪn/.
- [d] The verb *lightning* ~ *lightnings* ~ *lightning* ~ *lightninged* is a sole exception to the rule for forming the *-ing* participle. Since the base form of the verb already ends in an *-ing* suffix, no further *-ing* is added: *It is lightning*/**lightninging*. The *-ing* participle of this verb is avoided probably because of the awkwardness of this irregularity.

The past form and the -ed participle

3.6 Like the -s form, the past and the -ed participle forms (both termed the -ed form) of regular verbs have three pronunciations:

(a) /ɪd/ after bases ending in /d/ and /t/, eg:

pad ~ *padded* /-ɪd/ *pat* ~ *patted* /-tɪd/

(b) /d/ after bases ending in voiced sounds other than /d/, including vowels, eg:

buzz ~ *buzzed* /-zɪd/ *budge* ~ *budged* /-dʒɪd/
call ~ *called* /-ɪd/ *tow* ~ *towed* /-əʊd/

(c) /t/ after bases ending in voiceless sounds other than /t/, eg:

pass ~ *passed* /-st/ *pack* ~ *packed* /-kt/

Note Some exceptions to the second rule above are verbs like *dwelt* ~ *dwelled/dwelt*, which (esp in BrE) may end in /t/ rather than /d/. The devoicing may also be reflected in an irregular spelling: *dwelt*. These verbs are classed as irregular verbs (cf 3.13).

The spelling of regular verb inflections

3.7 The rules in 3.5 – 6 apply to pronunciation, but certain additional rules have to be stated to account for the spellings of verbs with regular verb inflections. First, however, we note the general spelling rules:

The -s form is written -s: *look* ~ *looks*

The -ing form is written -ing: *look* ~ *looking*

The -ed form is written -ed: *look* ~ *looked*

These rules apply except where one of the following additional changes applies: doubling of the final consonant of the base (cf 3.8); deletion or addition of a final -e (cf 3.9); substitution of -i- for a final -y or vice versa (cf 3.10).

These additional rules are necessary in order to account for such apparent anomalies as are illustrated in the following distinctions:

{ *die* ~ *dying* ~ *died*
 { *dye* ~ *dyeing* ~ *dyed*

{ *bar* ~ *barring* ~ *barred*
 { *bare* ~ *baring* ~ *bared*

{ *sing* ~ *singing* ~ *sang/sung* (cf 3.19)
 { *singe* ~ *singeing* ~ *singed*

{ *hop* ~ *hopping* ~ *hopped*
 { *hope* ~ *hoping* ~ *hoped*

{ *stop* ~ *stopping* ~ *stopped*
 { *stoop* ~ *stooping* ~ *stooped*

{ *star* ~ *starring* ~ *starred*
 { *stare* ~ *staring* ~ *stared*

As we see above, final -e can be preserved to avoid confusion in pairs like *dying* and *dyeing* (cf 3.9).

Doubling of consonant before -ing and -ed

3.8 A single consonant letter at the end of the base is doubled before -ing and -ed when the preceding vowel is stressed and spelt with a single letter:

bar ~ 'barring ~ barred
beg ~ 'begging ~ begged