

Auxiliary (or Helping) Verbs

Auxiliary (or Helping) verbs are used together with a main [verb](#) to show the verb's tense or to form a negative or question. The most common auxiliary verbs are have, be, and do.

1. **Does** Sam write all his own reports?
2. The secretaries **haven't** written all the letters yet.
3. Terry **is** writing an e-mail to a client at the moment.

Auxiliary verbs, also known as helping verbs, add functional or grammatical meaning to the clauses in which they appear. They perform their functions in several different ways:

- By expressing tense (providing a time reference, i.e. past, present, or future)
- Grammatical aspect (expresses how verb relates to the flow of time)
- Modality (quantifies verbs)
- Voice (describes the relationship between the action expressed by the verb and the participants identified by the verb's subject, object, etc.)
- Adds emphasis to a sentence

Auxiliary verbs almost always appear together with a main verb, and though there are only a few of them, they are among the most frequently occurring verbs in the English language.

How to Identify an Auxiliary Verb

You probably know that every sentence has at least one verb in it. There are two main types of verbs. Action verbs are used to depict activities that are doable, and linking verbs are used to describe conditions. Both action verbs and linking verbs can accompany auxiliary verbs including the three main ones: **do**, **be**, and **have**.

Sometimes actions or conditions occur only one time and then they're over. It's at times like these that some of the same verbs that are used as auxiliary verbs are instead used as action or linking verbs. In this example, we see the word "is". This is one of the most common auxiliary verbs, but because it stands alone here, it is not functioning as an auxiliary verb.

*Jerry slammed the car door on his thumb. He **is** in horrible pain.*

"Is" is a linking verb in this sentence. Because it stands alone, it is not an auxiliary verb.

At other times, an action or condition is ongoing, happening predictably, or occurring in relationship to another event or set of events. In these cases, single-word verbs like is are not accurately capable

of describing what happened, so phrases that include auxiliary verbs are used instead. These can be made up of anywhere from two to four words.

A main verb, also known as a base verb, indicates the kind of action or condition taking place. An auxiliary or helping verb accompanies the main verb and conveys other nuances that help the reader gain specific insight into the event that is taking place.

Read the following sentences and explanations to gain greater insight into how auxiliary verbs work.

1. Jerry **caught** his thumb in the car door as coffee **spilled** from his cup onto his favorite shirt.
2. Jerry is always **spilling** things.
3. Since Jerry is also accident prone, he **should have been drinking** coffee from a mug with a lid, which **would not have spilled** on his favorite shirt.

In sentence one, **caught** and **spilled**, single-word verbs, describe quick, one-time actions of both Jerry and his messy coffee. This sentence does not contain an auxiliary verb.

Since Jerry often has unfortunate accidents, **is spilling** communicates the frequency of his clumsy actions in sentence two. In sentence three, the auxiliary verbs that make up **should have been drinking** and **would have stained** express time relationships as well as an evaluation of Jerry's actions.

Three Common Auxiliary Verbs

There are just three common auxiliary verbs:

- Have
- [Do](#)
- Be

In this section, we'll take a closer look at how these common verbs work, plus you'll see some examples.

[Have](#)

"Have" is a very important verb that can stand alone in all its tenses, including **has, have, having, had, and hadn't or had not**. It is usually used to denote ownership, and it can also be used to discuss ability or describe appearance. "Have" is also a very popular substitute for the verbs "eat" and "drink." For example: "Let's have dinner."

When used as an auxiliary verb, **have** is always teamed up with another verb to create a complete verb phrase, making it easy to differentiate between uses. You can see the difference in the sentences below:

- Jerry **has** a large coffee stain on his shirt. → Has = action verb
- Jerry **has bought** a new shirt to replace the one that was ruined earlier. → Has = auxiliary verb; bought is a past participle that completes the verb phrase.
- Jerry **should have been** more careful! → Have = auxiliary verb; phrase “should have been” expresses time and evaluates Jerry’s actions.

Do

“Do” can be used as an action verb that stands alone in all its tenses, including **to do, do, does, done, did** and **didn’t, doesn’t** or **did not** .

When used as an auxiliary verb, **do** is always paired up with another verb to create a complete verb phrase. In some cases, it is used to add emphasis: “*I **did** put the garbage out!*” **Do** is often used to form questions and negated clauses. It is also used in elliptical sentences, where the main verb is understood and is omitted as a result. For example: “*He plays piano well, **doesn’t** he?*” or “They all had dinner, but I didn’t.”

- Because he spills things so often, Jerry does more laundry than most people. ◇ Does = action verb
- Jerry didn’t put his coffee in a cup with a lid. ◇ Didn’t = auxiliary verb
- Jerry doesn’t always spill things, but it happens a lot. ◇ Doesn’t = auxiliary verb

Be

“Be” or “to be” is an important verb that has a multitude of uses in English. It can be used as an action verb that stands alone in all its tenses including **be, to be, been, am, are, is, was, were, wasn’t, was not aren’t, are not, weren’t** and **were not**.

When used as an auxiliary verb, **be** is always paired with another verb to create a complete verb phrase. It can be singular or plural, present or past. Negative sentences are formed by adding the word “not”.

- Jerry is messy. ◇ Is = action verb
- Although he is always complaining about his accidents, Jerry fails to pay attention. ◇ is = auxiliary verb
- Jerry is going to be doing extra laundry for the rest of his life. ◇ to be = auxiliary verb

Modal Auxiliary Verbs

In addition to the three main auxiliary verbs, **have**, **do**, and **be**, there are additional auxiliary verbs. These are called modal auxiliary verbs, and they never change form. A complete list of modal auxiliary verbs follows:

- Can
- Could
- May
- Might
- Must
- Ought to
- Shall
- Should
- Will
- Would

Auxiliary Verb Examples

Here are some examples of auxiliary verbs and verb phrases. In the examples below, the verb phrase is italicized and the auxiliary verb is in bold.

1. Jessica **is** taking John to the airport.
2. If he **doesn't** arrive on time, he'll have to take a later flight.
3. Unfortunately, our dinner **has been** eaten by the dog.
4. I **have** purchased a new pair of shoes to replace the ones that were lost in my luggage.
5. We hope you **don't** have an accident on your way to school.
6. She **was** baking a pie for dessert.
7. Dad **has been** working hard all day.
8. The bed **was** made as soon as I got up.
9. Sarah **doesn't** ski or roller skate.
10. **Did** Matthew bring coffee?