

Transitive and Intransitive Verbs—What's the Difference?



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· Basics

A verb can be described as *transitive* or *intransitive* based on whether it requires an object to express a complete thought or not. A **transitive verb** is one that only makes sense if it exerts its action on an object. An **intransitive verb** will make sense without one. Some verbs may be used both ways.

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The word *transitive* often makes people think of *transit*, which leads to the mistaken assumption that the terms *transitive* and *intransitive* are just fancy ways of describing action and nonaction. But these terms have nothing to do with whether a verb is active or not. A better word to associate when you see *transitive* is *transfer*. A **transitive verb** needs to *transfer* its action to something or someone—an object. In essence, transitive means “to affect something else.”

Once you have this concept committed to memory, spotting the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs is quite easy.

How to Identify a Transitive Verb

Transitive verbs are not just verbs that can take an object; they demand objects. Without an object to affect, the sentence that a **transitive verb** inhabits will not seem complete.

Example

Please bring coffee.

In this sentence, the verb *bring* is transitive; its object is *coffee*, the thing that is being brought. Without an object of some kind, this verb cannot function.

Example

Please bring.

Bring what, or who? The question begs itself because the meaning of *bring* demands it.

Here are some more examples of **transitive verbs** and their objects.

Example

The girls carry water to their village.

Juan threw the ball.

Could you phone the neighbors?

I caught a cold.

She loves rainbows.

Lila conveyed the message.

Each of the verbs in these sentences have objects that complete the verbs' actions. If the objects were taken out, the results would be illogical and questions would be raised in the mind of the reader

How to Identify an Intransitive Verb

An **intransitive verb** is the opposite of a **transitive verb**: it does not require an object to act upon.

Example

They jumped.

The dog ran.

She sang.

A light was shining.

None of these verbs require an object for the sentence to make sense, and all of them can end a sentence. Some imperative forms of verbs can even make comprehensible one-word sentences.

Example

Run!

Sing!

A number of English verbs can only be intransitive; that is, they will never make sense paired with an object. Two examples of intransitive-only verbs are *arrive* and *die*. You can't *arrive* something, and you certainly can't *die* something; it is impossible for an object to follow these verbs.