

Transitive and Intransitive Verbs— What's the Difference?

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.

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.

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.

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.

The girls carry water to their village.

Juan threw the ball.

Could you phone the neighbours?

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; for example, *Lila conveyed*. Conveyed what?

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.

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.

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.

Transitive or Intransitive? Some Verbs Can Be Both

Many verbs can be classified as both transitive and intransitive depending on how they are used in a sentence.

Urged by the others, she sang.

She sang the national anthem at the hockey game.

After he cleaned up, he left.

He left the gift on the table.

To decide whether the verb is being used transitively or intransitively, all you need to do is determine whether **the verb has an object. Does she sing something? Does he leave something? The verb is only transitive when the answer is yes.**

When in doubt, look it up. In the dictionary, verbs will be listed as transitive, intransitive, or both right under the pronunciation key, and any possible differences in meaning between the two uses will be given as well.

Phrasal Verbs and Transitivity

Phrasal verbs can also be classified as transitive or intransitive.

Cindy has decided to give up sweets while she diets.

I hope Cindy doesn't give up.

Give up is just one of many phrasal verbs that can be transitive or intransitive.

Whether *give up* has an object or not will alter the meaning it conveys. The first sense of *give up* means "to forgo something," whereas the second sense means "to stop trying."

If we refuse to learn about transitivity, the Grammar Police will blow up our building.

When the Grammar Police confronted her about her verbs, she blew up.

The first sense of *to blow up* means *to explode*, whereas the second sense means *"to express rage."*

Transitive or intransitive is just one of the many classifications a verb can have.

Perhaps you will be inspired to read about more about the fascinating qualities of **verbs**.