Subjects and Objects

“Subjects” and “objects” are defined structurally. In other words, you can’t tell whether a word or string of words is a subject or object without knowing its position in a sentence and its relationship to other words in the sentence.

A subject is generated as an extension of a finite verb; more metaphorically, it is “in a relationship” with a finite verb. (You can also say that a finite verb is generated as an extension of a subject.) Either way, a subject will not exist apart from a finite verb, and vice versa. What is doing or being the finite verb? That’s your subject. Typically, in English, the element to the left of the finite verb is the subject.

An object is also “in a relationship” with verbs; however, it is the element that the verb is doing something to. What is being affected by the verb? That’s your object.

The cat bites the dog

Subject   Verb   Object

An object in this post-verbal position is traditionally known as a direct object. But words that appear after prepositions are also objects.

The cat sits on the mat

Subject   Verb   Preposition   Object

When I submitted the technical documents.

Sbj.   Verb   Obj.

the systems engineers read them and returned them to me.

There are other positions in a sentence whose words can be labeled as objects: words appearing after an infinitive and after participles or gerunds are objects, as well.

Her only goal was to earn big bucks

Sbj. Verb Inf. Obj.

Earning big bucks all day long, she was very rich.

Partic. Obj.

Typically, subjects and objects are nouns; however, whole phrases and dependent clauses can also function as subjects and objects.

What I want to say will matter to whoever wants to listen.


To earn big bucks takes years of work

Inf. phrase/subj. Verb Obj.