This dictionary provides brief explanations and examples of all the main grammar terms that the average teacher of ESOL is likely to need to understand.

It does not include a comprehensive list of all terms related to English grammar, nor is it intended to replace a full grammar reference. If you want the latter, I would recommend “Practical English Usage” by Michael Swann.

---

**A**

active (voice) → passive (voice)

**adjective**

Adjectives are words used to describe nouns.

Examples: *It’s a big house. The water was cold.*

**adverb**

Adverbs are used to add information about a verb, an adjective or another adverb.

Example: *He ran slowly.* (with a verb)

Example: *She was very tall.* (with a noun)

Example: *He ran very slowly.* (with another adverb)

**adverbial**

Adverbials are words, phrases or clauses that add information to clauses and sentences.

Example: *Amazingly, it turned out well.*

Example: *He left this afternoon.*

Example: *He told me when he found out.*
agent  The agent is the person or thing causing the action or event in a passive sentence.
Example: “Hamlet” was written by Shakespeare.
Example: They’re bought mainly by tourists.

agreement  Agreement occurs when the form of a subject requires a corresponding form of the verb that follows it.
Examples: I am / You are. I go / She goes.

article  An article goes in front of a noun and is a type of determiner. English has one definite article (the) and two indefinite ones (a, an).
Examples: He bought a pear and an apple. The apple is red.

We use articles only with countable nouns, such as problem or banana. We do not use articles with uncountable / non-count nouns or when plural countable nouns are general rather than specific in reference. Some people refer to this absence of an article as the zero article.
Example: Salt is not good for you. (uncountable noun)
Example: Apples are good for you. (plural countable noun)

aspect  There are two aspects in English: the progressive (or continuous) and the perfect. The progressive aspect is formed by using part of the auxiliary verb be and the present participle of a lexical verb. The perfect aspect is formed by using part of the auxiliary verb have and the past participle of a lexical verb.
Example: They are walking. (Present Progressive)
Example: She has written. (Present Perfect)

Note: The perfect and progressive forms are often referred to as tenses, although this is not strictly accurate.

auxiliary (verb)  Auxiliary (or helping) verbs are verbs used with other verbs.
Example: They are arriving.
Example: The bus has left.
Example: *When does it get here?*
Example: *He can drive.*
Example: *You shouldn’t worry.*

The auxiliaries *be*, *have* and *do* can also function as main verbs.
Examples: *She is thin. They have a big yard. It does the job.*

---

**B**

**base form → infinitive**

---

**C**

causative

This is a type of *passive* construction formed using *have/get + noun phrase + past participle* verb.
Example: *He has had the contract rewritten.*
Example: *They’re getting their house repaired.*

clause

A clause is any group of words which contains a verb. One clause may form a complete sentence, or a sentence may contain several clauses.
Example: *He went home.*
Example: *He went home and got into bed.*
Example: *He went home when it was late.*

**common noun → noun**
comparatives
There are comparative forms of both adjectives and adverbs. These forms are often followed by a phrase or clause starting with than.
Example: Their car is bigger than ours. (adjective)
Example: This hat is more expensive than that one. (adjective)
Example: That one is less expensive. (adjective)
Example: A cheetah runs faster than a leopard. (adverb)
Example: A moose moves more slowly than a deer. (adverb)

To make an equal comparison, we use as … as.
Example: It was as big as a house! (adjective)
Example: He works as quickly as I do. (adverb)

complement
The complement of a clause or sentence is the section which follows certain verbs (notably be) and gives more information about the subject.
Examples: He’s a teacher. She’s beautiful.
Example: It seems right.

complex sentence
A sentence with a main clause and one or more subordinate clauses.
Example: I went to see my brother, who lives in Houston.
Example: Is this the book that you mentioned?

compound sentence
A sentence with two or more co-ordinate clauses.
Example: She drove and he walked.

conditional
Conditional sentences express imaginary or hypothetical situations. They usually contain the word if or unless. They are often divided into four categories as shown below.
Zero Conditional (Example: If you heat water, it boils.)
First Conditional (Example: I’ll go unless it rains.)
Second Conditional (Example: If I knew, I’d tell you.)
Third Conditional (Example: She’d have been upset if she had seen him.)
There are also other conditional forms, often referred to as mixed conditionals.
Example: If you see her, say hello.
Example: If I’d bought those shares, I’d be rich now.

**conjunction**
Conjunctions are used to join words, phrases, clauses and/or sentences.
Example: Cats and dogs are the most common pets.
Example: The meat was good but the salad was terrible.
Example: Let me know when he gets here.

**continuous → progressive**

**contraction**
A contraction occurs when one word is reduced and attached to another word.
Examples: They’re here. Let’s go. It isn’t ready.

**copula → linking verb**

**count (noun) → noun**

**countable (noun) → noun**

---

**D**

**declarative**
A declarative sentence is one that expresses a statement rather than a question or an imperative.
Examples: It rains a lot. It doesn’t snow much.
defining → relative clause

demonstrative A demonstrative adjective or a demonstrative pronoun shows which person or thing you are talking or writing about.
Examples: He wants that. What about these?

dependent clause → subordinate clause

determiner A determiner is a word that come before a noun and specifies or restricts the noun’s meaning. Determiners include articles, demonstratives, possessives, quantifiers and numbers.
Examples: It’s a chair. These are the people I met. It’s her book.
Examples: I saw two planes. There is some doubt about that.

dynamic (verb) → stative (verb)

direct object → object

direct speech → reported speech

function Functions are the communicative purposes for which we use language items or forms: asking for help, giving advice, etc.

future progressive → progressive

future simple Strictly speaking, there is no future tense in English. However, many people refer to the construction of will + infinitive as the
“future simple tense”.
Examples: They will start tomorrow. It won’t rain any time soon.

---

**G**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>genitive</th>
<th>The genitive (or Saxon genitive) is the form of a noun when an s and an apostrophe is added to indicate possession. Examples: It’s John’s car. They’re the teachers’ books.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>gerund</th>
<th>This is a noun formed by adding <em>ing</em> to the base form of a verb. Examples: Walking is good for you. I like swimming.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>→ -ing form</strong></td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘going to’ future</th>
<th>When talking about future events, we often use the construction of <em>be</em> + <em>going to</em> + <em>infinitive</em>. Examples: I’m going to leave early today. They aren’t going to like that.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

---

**H**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>head → noun phrase</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>helping verb → auxiliary (verb)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
imperative

An imperative is the base form of a verb when this is used to tell someone to do something. Examples: Sit, Be quiet, Stop!

indefinite → article

indicative → subjunctive

indirect object → object

indirect speech → reported speech

infinitive

The infinitive is the base form of a verb (e.g., be) or to + the base form of a verb (e.g., to be). It does not show person or tense. Examples: To err is human. They should go. The infinitive without to is also called the bare infinitive.

inflection

In the context of grammar, inflection refers to the way a word changes its form to show a difference in meaning or use. Example: We go by car but he goes by foot. Example: I could stay late but I stayed late yesterday.

ing form

This is formed by adding ing to the base form of a verb, as in: go + ing → going. The ing form has many uses. Example: Shopping is fun. (noun; also called gerund) Example: He was working. (present participle) Example: It's an interesting theory. (adjective)

irregular (verb)

An irregular verb is one whose past simple and past participle
are not formed by adding *ed* to the infinitive.

Examples: *go/went/gone, see/saw/seen, cut/cut/cut*

⇒ regular (verb)

**intensifier**

An intensifier is a word that modifies (i.e., increases or decreases) the intensity of the meaning of an adjective, an adverb or a verb.

Example: *It was absolutely fantastic.*
Example: *They played pretty well.*
Example: *I really hated that movie.*

**intransitive ⇒ transitivity**

**inversion**

Inversion is when two grammatical elements such as subject and verb are reversed from their normal order.

Examples: *Were you late? Have you eaten? “Hello,” said Tom.*

**inverted question ⇒ question**

**interrogative ⇒ question**

**lexical (verb)**

All verbs are either lexical or auxiliary. A lexical verb is one that has a dictionary meaning in and of itself (whereas auxiliary verb simply serves a grammatical function).

Examples: *I have a car. He has seen her. She knows.*
linking verb  
Linking verbs, or copulas, are verbs that can only appear with a complement, which is normally either a noun phrase or an adjective phrase.
Example: *This is my house.* (with noun phrase)
Example: *He seems nice.* (with adjective phrase)
Example: *It smells good.* (with adjective phrase)

modal auxiliary  ➔  modal verb

modal verb  
Modal verbs are auxiliary verbs used to express degrees of likelihood/possibility or desirability/obligation. Modal verbs do not have an infinitive form with *to*, do not have participle forms, and do not add *s* in the third person singular of the present tense. There are nine “true” modal verbs: *can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should, must.*
Examples: *It may rain. You mustn’t smoke here.*

Note: In addition to the “true” modals, several other verbs can express modality and so are referred to as semi-modals.
Example: *She needs to leave soon.*
Example: *They have to work late.*
Example: *I ought to stop now.*

modality  
This refers to the ways in which we express our attitude regarding what we are saying or writing. Our attitude may reflect how likely we think something is or how desirable we think it is.
Example: *Perhaps he’ll come.* (likelihood)
Example: *He might come.* (likelihood)
Example: *I wish he would come.* (desirability)
Example: *He ought to come.* (desirability)
Modifiers are words or groups of words that add information about another word. **Adjectives** and **adverbs** are modifiers.

Example: *It's an impressive book.* (adjective)
Example: *She writes beautifully.* (adverb)

This is the study of the structure of words. It involves, for example, the way that the **past simple** of a **regular verb** is constructed by adding *ed* to the **base form** of the verb.

multi-word verb  ➔  phrasal verb

There are many ways of expressing negative statements or contradicting positive ones but perhaps the most common is by using *not*. The latter is often contracted in speech.

Example: *You cannot be serious. It wasn't in. I don't believe it.*

negative  ➔  negation

non-count noun  ➔  noun

non-defining  ➔  relative clause

Nouns are words which refer to people, animals, objects and abstract concepts. The most common types of word in English, they can function as subjects or objects of verbs and can also appear in other grammatical contexts.

Proper nouns are the names of specific people etc. and are capitalized.
Examples: *John, Houston, Yellowstone, January*  
Common nouns are not capitalized.  
Examples: *cat, water, woman*  

Most nouns have a singular and a plural form; these are referred to as countable (or count) nouns.  
Examples: *(a) bird / birds, (a) child / children*  

Some nouns do not have a plural form; they are referred to as uncountable (or non-count) nouns.  
Examples: *Try living without money. I need more information.*

**noun phrase**  
A noun phrase normally forms the **subject**, **object** or **complement** of a clause. The basic unit or “head” of a noun phrase is a noun or pronoun. This head can be modified by adjectives, prepositional phrases etc.  
Example: *People are really excited.*  
Example: *Older people are really excited.*  
Example: *People in Europe are really excited.*  
Example: *He’s bought a new car.*  
Example: *They’re crooks.*

**number**  
Number refers to the grammatical distinction between singular and plural. English countable **nouns** can be singular or plural, and some **pronouns** and **determiners** also are marked for number.  
Examples: *I bought a shirt. He bought two shirts.*  
Examples: *It’s beautiful. They’re ugly.*

**o**

**object**  
The object of a sentence or clause is the person or thing affected by the action of the **verb**. Objects are most often **noun phrases** or **pronouns**.
Example: *Could I have your pen?* (noun phrase)
Example: *You could borrow it.* (pronoun)

Objects can be direct or indirect. The underlined words or phrases below are indirect objects.

Example: *Could you lend me your pen?*
Example: *Sorry, but I already lent it to Anne.*

Note: Only **transitive** verbs can take objects.

---

**P**

**participle**

A participle is the form of a **verb** which is used to make complex verb forms, such as the **progressive** and **perfect aspects**.

The present participle of all verbs is formed by adding *ing* to the base form of a verb (sometimes with minor spelling changes).

**Examples:** *He’s running. She has been working.*

The past participle of **regular** verbs is formed by adding *ed* to the base form of the verb (sometimes with minor spelling changes). So it is the same as the **Past Simple** form of such verbs.

**Examples:** *He’s finished his run. She’ll have phoned him.*

**Irregular** verbs form their past participle in many different ways.

**Examples:** *Have you seen him? He has gone. If I’d known that, I wouldn’t have set a place for him.*

**particle**

A word, generally short, that does not belong to one of the main word classes (such as nouns or verbs). **Conjunctions** and **prepositions** are types of particles.

**Examples:** *He’s in trouble now. And he knows it.*

**passive (voice)**

The passive and the active form the system called **voice**, which
enables us to change the relationship between the subject and the object of a verb. In the sentence “Edison invented the light bulb,” the focus is on Edison, and the sentence probably comes from a text about the inventor. However, in “The light bulb was invented by Edison,” the focus is on the light bulb; it may come from a text about the history of the light bulb or a text looking at important inventions.

The passive, which is much more common in writing than in speech, is formed by combining a form of be with the past participle of the main verb. If an agent is included, it is preceded by the word by.
Examples: It was written by Dickens. I've been robbed.

**past progressive ➔ progressive**

**past simple**
The past simple is the past tense. In regular verbs, it is formed by adding ed to the base form of the verb (sometimes with minor spelling changes). In irregular verbs, it is formed in many different ways.
Examples: We walked. They hurried. I went. She cut it.

The question and negative forms of verbs are constructed with did and the base form of the verb.
Examples: Did he walk? Where did she go? They didn't leave.

**perfect**
The perfect and the progressive are the two verb aspects in English.

The present, past and future perfect simple forms are constructed by using a form of have with the past participle of a main verb.
Examples: He has gone. I had left. She will have arrived.

The present, past and future perfect progressive forms are constructed by using a form of have + been + the present participle of a main verb.
Examples: I have been working. They had been resting. She will have been reading.
person

Person refers to the way some verbs and pronouns take different forms to indicate the speaker (first person), the person being spoken to (second person), or some other person (third person).
Example: *I/We* are first person singular/plural pronouns.
Example: *You* is the second person singular and plural pronoun.
Example: *(I)* am and *(I)* go are first person singular verbs.
Example: *(She)* is and *(He)* goes are third person singular verbs.

phrasal verb

A phrasal verb (or multi-word) verb is a combination of a main verb and one or two particles. If there is one particle, it may be either an **adverb** or a **preposition**; if there are two, they may be an adverb and a preposition.
Example: *She took off her coat.* (verb + adverb)
Example: *He takes after his mother.* (verb + preposition)
Example: *The police took off after him.* (verb + adverb + prep.)

The meaning of many phrasal verbs is not the same as that of their component parts: In *He looked up the word*, the meaning of *look up* is clearly not the same as in, *He looked up the tree.*

phrase

*Phrase* may refer to a group of words without a main verb. However, it normally refers to a word or group of words that forms one part of a clause or sentence. There are five types: *noun* phrase (NP), *verb* phrase (VP), *adjective* phrase (AdjP), *adverb* phrase (AdvP) and *prepositional* phrase (PP).
Examples: *John, my wife, her friend who died* (NP)
Examples: *went, is reading, started to eat* (VP)
Examples: *happy, very sad, big as a house* (AdjP)
Examples: *slowly, very often, when I left* (AdvP)
Examples: *at times, in Italy, for lunch* (AdjP)

plural → number

positive → declarative

preposition

Prepositions clarify relationships between different elements in
sentences and they show time, manner, place, etc. They normally precede **noun phrases**. Most prepositions are single words but some consist of more than one word.  
**Examples:** *It’s on the table. It happened out of the blue.*

**present progressive** \(\rightarrow\) **progressive**

**present simple**  
The present simple is the present **tense**. It is formed from the base (infinitive without *to*) form of the verb. The third **person singular** adds an *s* (sometimes with minor spelling changes).  
**Examples:** *I know. They think so. He goes. It rains a lot.*

Questions and negative statements are formed with *do/does* and the base form of the verb.  
**Examples:** *Do we know? What does he want? She doesn’t see.*

**present perfect** \(\rightarrow\) **perfect**

**present progressive** \(\rightarrow\) **progressive**

**progressive**  
The progressive and the **perfect** are the two verb **aspects**.

The present, past and future progressive forms are constructed using a form of *be* with the present **participle** of a main verb.  
**Examples:** *He is working. She was helping. I’ll be resting.*

The present, past and future perfect progressive forms are constructed by using a form of *have + been + the present participle* of a main verb.  
**Examples:** *I have been working. They had been resting. She will have been reading.*

**pronoun**  
A pronoun is a word that can be used in place of a **noun** or **noun phrase**.
The main types are personal, possessive, demonstrative, interrogative and relative pronouns.

Examples: *She likes eggs. Stop them!* (personal)
Examples: *It isn’t yours. It’s mine.* (possessive)
Examples: *I don’t like this. Those look better.* (demonstrative)
Examples: *Who’s there? What did he want?* (interrogative)
Examples: *She’s definitely the person who did it. She’s the one that I saw.* (relative)

---

proper noun → noun

---

Q

quantifier

Quantifiers are words or phrases that specify number or quantity. They can be determiners or pronouns.

Examples: *one, fifty, all, every, few, a few, a few of*

question

Questions (or interrogative forms) are used to ask rather than tell someone something. The two most important types are probably Yes/No questions and so-called Wh- questions.

Examples: *Are you sure? Did she go?* (Yes/No)
Examples: *Where was he? Who did it? Why is that? How long have you been here?* (Wh-)

Other types of question forms include question tags, alternative (either/or) questions and embedded questions.

Example: *It’s hot, isn’t it?* (question tag)
Example: *Is it hot or is it cold?* (either/or)
Example: *Do you know who he is?* (embedded)

question tag

A question tag is an inverted question, consisting of a subject pronoun and auxiliary verb, that is added to a statement. The subject pronoun in the tag agrees with the subject of the
statement. If the verb in the statement is positive, the auxiliary verb in the tag is usually negative, and vice-versa.
Example: You’re Italian, aren’t you?
Example: They aren’t doctors, are they?
Example: She arrived yesterday, didn’t she?
Example: It didn’t rain this morning, did it?

When we use a tag, we expect a response. However, the function of the tag depends upon the intonation we use. When our voice falls on the tag, we are merely asking the other person to confirm what we already believe. When our voice rises on the tag, we are uncertain of something and are asking a real question about it.

R

regular (verb)  A regular verb is one whose past simple and past participle end in ed.
Examples: walk/walked/walked, jump/jumped/jumped

⇒ irregular (verb)

relative clause  A relative clause modifies a noun or noun phrase and adds information about the noun or noun phrase. In the case of a defining relative clause, the clause defines or specifies the noun or phrase that they qualify. A non-defining clause simply adds extra information about the noun or noun phrase.
Example: That’s the car (that) I sold. (defining)
Example: The car (that) I sold was a Toyota. (defining)
Example: The car, which was a Toyota, ran well. (non-defining)

reported speech  Reported speech occurs when you report what someone said but without repeating the exact words that they used.
Example: She said (that) she was going home.
Example: The papers said (that) he was stabbed.
Example: *They told me not to come before 9:00.*
Example: *I asked you if you knew the answer.*

Direct speech is when you report what someone says and use the exact words that they used. In written English, these words are enclosed in speech marks.
Example: *She said, “I’m tired.”*

---

S

semi-modal  →  modal verb

sentence  A group of words, containing a verb, that expresses a complete thought. If written, an English sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a period, a question mark or an exclamation mark.
Examples: *He went home. Are you sure? Buy it!*

simple future  →  future simple

simple past  →  past simple

simple present  →  present simple

singular  →  number

stative (verb)  Verbs can be categorized as either *stative* or *dynamic.*
Stative verbs refer to states, feelings and thought processes.
Examples: *I am sick. He likes tea. I understand that.*

Dynamic verbs refer to actions or events.
Examples: *He talks* a lot. *She left. They’ll argue.*

In normal usage, stative verbs have no progressive forms: We do not say, *I’m liking tea* or *He was understanding you.*

Many verbs have both stative and dynamic uses.  
Example: *I think so. / Shh. I’m thinking.* (stative / dynamic)

**subject**

The subject of a *verb* is the person or other thing that causes the event or action described by the verb.  
Example: *The bus arrived late.*  
Example: *Jim and Anna want to come, too.*

Note: In a *passive* sentence, the subject is the person or thing affected by the event or action.  
Example: *“Hamlet” was written by Shakespeare.*

**subjunctive**

This is the form of a verb used to express uncertainty, wishes, suggestions and requirements. It contrasts with the indicative, used to describe real states or events, and the *imperative*, used for giving commands.

English has no special form to mark the subjunctive, and so the latter is expressed through a variety of existing verb forms.  
Example: *If need be, I’ll do it.*  
Example: *If I were you, I’d go.*  
Example: *He insists that she leave now.*

**subordinate**

Subordinate (or dependent) clauses cannot stand alone but rather depend on another clause (called a main clause). They are introduced by subordinating *conjunctions*, such as *when, while, if, because,* and *although.* The most common types are *relative clauses* and *adverbial* clauses.  
Example: *That’s the man that I saw take the scarf.*  
Example: *When he arrives, ask him to wait.*

**superlative**

This form of an *adjective* or *adverb* is used when we compare more than two people or things.
Example: That’s the longest of all his movies.
Example: This is the most enormous burger I’ve ever seen.

SVO → syntax

Syntax describes the rules for sequencing words. For example, the basic order in English clauses is subject-verb-object (SVO).

T

tag question tense → question tag

A tense is a form of a verb that is marked to indicate a time relationship. According to this definition, there are only two tenses in English: the Present (Simple) and the Past (Simple).

However, most ESOL teachers and materials treat aspects as tenses, producing the following list of twelve “tenses”:

Present Simple
Present Progressive
Present Perfect Simple
Present Perfect Progressive
Future Simple
Future Progressive
Future Perfect Simple
Future Perfect Progressive
Past Simple
Past Progressive
Past Perfect Simple
Past Perfect Progressive

transitivity

This refers to whether or not a verb can take an object. Transitive verbs can take an object; intransitive ones cannot. Some verbs may be used both transitively and intransitively.
Example: *Shakespeare wrote* "Hamlet".  (transitive)
Example: *The bus is arriving*.  (intransitive)
Example: *I can smell those flowers*.  (transitive)
Example: *The flowers smell good*.  (intransitive)

Only transitive verbs can be used in **passive** constructions.
Example: "Hamlet" *was written* by Shakespeare.

---

**U**

**uncountable (noun) \(\rightarrow\) noun**

---

**V**

**verb**  
Verbs express actions, processes or states. They have different forms to mark **tense**, **aspect**, **person** and **number**. They may be **lexical** or **auxiliary**. They may be **regular** or irregular in their past simple and past participle forms.

Example: *He works really hard*.  (lexical)
Example: *He isn't working now*.  (auxiliary / lexical)
Example: *He has gone home*.  (auxiliary / lexical)

Verbs may be **transitive** or **intransitive**.

Verbs may be **stative** or **dynamic**.

**verb phrase**  
This is made up of the main **verb** and any **auxiliaries** that come before it.

Example: *He can't have gone home*.
Example: *He hasn't finished yet*.
Example: *Well, he hasn't been seen for hours*.  

---
W
wh-question \rightarrow question

word class

Y
Yes/No question \rightarrow question

Z
zero article \rightarrow article

zero conditional \rightarrow conditional