This handout is designed to give you a very brief (and, of necessity, incomplete) overview of the different types of sentence structure and how the elements of sentences can fit together syntactically. First, we need a few definitions.

I. Definitions and explanations

*Constituent:* an element within the hierarchy of the sentence, filling a grammatical function slot.

*Function slot:* The various grammatical ways that nouns (or nominals—anything that can function as a noun) and verbs can function in a sentence. For ex., in the sentences “Boy meets girl” and “Jeremiah wows us,” the words *Boy* and *Jeremiah* are filling the Subject (S) function slot. *Girl* and *us* are filling the Direct Object (DO) function slot. *Meets* and *wows* are filling the Verb (V) function slot.

*Transitive:* A characteristic of verbs indicating that they take a direct object.

*Intransitive:* A characteristic of verbs indicating that they take cannot take a direct object. Consider the two sentences “Jack killed the giant” and “The giant died.” The verb *killed* takes a DO and so is transitive. The verb *died*, on the other hand, cannot take a DO and is intransitive. [Note: sometimes a verb can either transitive or intransitive, depending on its use and conception. In “I ate a bear,” *ate* is transitive. But in the question “Have you eaten?” the verb *have eaten* is intransitive (no DO) and is not concerned with what has been eaten as much as whether the situation of having a full tummy is achieved.

*Linking Verb (also called “copular” verb, or a copulative):* Linking verbs are neither transitive nor intransitive; rather, they predicate (assert) something about the subject—a quality of the subject, a classification of the subject, the location of the subject, etc. The most common linking verb in English is the verb “to be”: “Carl is quirky” and “Bess was a cow.” However, many other verbs are linking verbs and serve to predicate something about the subject (usually verbs of perception): *to be, to appear, to seem, to become, to look, to sound.* The following sentences are saying something roughly like “Carl is quirky”: “Carl appears quirky”; “Carl seems quirky”; “Carl becomes quirky”; “Carl looks quirky”; “Carl sounds quirky.”

*Obligatory:* Constituents can be obligatory in particular sentences. That means that you can’t remove one of the constituents and still retain a grammatical sentence. For ex., if a verb is transitive, then the DO must be present for the sentence to be grammatical. The
sentence “I viewed” is missing the DO and would be ungrammatical, if “to view” is conceived as transitive. Thus the DO is obligatory. Likewise, if a sentence contains an indirect object (IO), the DO would be an obligatory constituent. For ex., in “I gave John a wedgie,” the DO wedgie is obligatory since the sentence contains an IO, John. What happens if we omit the DO? *I gave John.*1 This renders the sentence ungrammatical.

**Phrases:** Sentence constituents can be individual words, but they can also be larger units like phrases (or even whole clauses). For ex., in “John stole a kiss” the Subject (S) slot is filled by John, an individual noun. However, S could be a larger *noun phrase* (NP) like “the black knight,” as in “The black knight stole a kiss.” Or, S could be an even longer noun phrase a noun modified by both adjectives and prepositional phrases: “The pathetic, poor black knight of the round table of King Arthur stole a kiss.” Single nouns or whole noun phrases can fill any noun function slot of the sentence. Consider the chart as an ex.:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function Slot</th>
<th>Single Noun (men)</th>
<th>Noun Phrase (the men in black)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Men killed aliens.</td>
<td>The men in black killed aliens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Object</td>
<td>Aliens killed men.</td>
<td>Aliens killed the men in black.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object of the Preposition</td>
<td>The sons of men killed aliens.</td>
<td>The sons of the men in black killed aliens.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II. Main Sentence Types  
[NOTE: the sample diagrams will be in Hebrew order, from right-to-left. If you were diagramming in English or Greek, you’d go from left-to-right.]

**A. S V**

Such sentences will contain intransitive verbs. Exx.:

Jesus wept.

Peter slept.

The leper leapt.

1The asterisk is conventionally used in linguistics to indicate a sentence that is not grammatically well-formed.
B. S V DO

Such sentences will contain transitive verbs. Exx.:

I eat butter.
\[
\text{S } \rightarrow \text{ V } \rightarrow \text{ DO } \hspace{1cm} \text{butter} \rightarrow \text{ eat } \rightarrow \text{ I}
\]

Jesus healed sinners.
\[
\text{S } \rightarrow \text{ V } \rightarrow \text{ DO } \hspace{1cm} \text{butter} \rightarrow \text{ eat } \rightarrow \text{ I}
\]

Martha burned the soup.
\[
\text{S } \rightarrow \text{ V } \rightarrow \text{ DO } \hspace{1cm} \text{butter} \rightarrow \text{ eat } \rightarrow \text{ I}
\]

Note: some label the DO simply as “object” (O); consequently, they would label this type of sentence S V O.

C. S V IO DO

Such sentences will contain transitive verbs, since these types of sentences require a DO. The IO (indirect object) receives or is the beneficiary of the verbal action affecting the DO.

Exx.:

I gave John butter.
\[
\text{S } \rightarrow \text{ V } \rightarrow \text{ IO } \rightarrow \text{ DO } \hspace{1cm} \text{butter} \rightarrow \text{ John} \rightarrow \text{ gave } \rightarrow \text{ I}
\]

Martha made Jesus a meal.
\[
\text{S } \rightarrow \text{ V } \rightarrow \text{ IO } \rightarrow \text{ DO } \hspace{1cm} \text{butter} \rightarrow \text{ John} \rightarrow \text{ gave } \rightarrow \text{ I}
\]

Bert posed me a question.
\[
\text{S } \rightarrow \text{ V } \rightarrow \text{ IO } \rightarrow \text{ DO } \hspace{1cm} \text{butter} \rightarrow \text{ John} \rightarrow \text{ gave } \rightarrow \text{ I}
\]

Note: some label the IO simply as “object” (O), just like they do the DO; consequently, they would label this type of sentence S V O O. I have not followed this scheme simply for the sake of clarifying the functions of the two different objects.

D. S V SC (A or N)

Such sentences will contain a linking verb. SC = subject complement; it tells you what is being predicated about the S. [Note: grammarians also label the SC as a predicate nominative or a predicate adjective.] Structurally, in English the linking verb most often comes between the S and the SC. The “(A or N)” notation above indicates that the SC can be either an adjective or a noun. Exx.:

You are beautiful. [SC = adj.]
\[
\text{S } \rightarrow \text{ V } \rightarrow \text{ SC } \hspace{1cm} \text{beautiful} \rightarrow \text{ you } \rightarrow \text{ are } \rightarrow \text{ I}
\]
You are a woman.  [SC = noun]

We are the world.  [SC = noun]

E.  S V DO OC (A or N)

Such sentences will contain a transitive verb (since there is a DO).  OC = object complement; it tells you what is being implicitly predicated about the DO.  [Note: grammarians also label the OC as a predicate accusative--if that’s helpful to you!] The “(A or N)” notation above indicates that the OC can be either an adjective or a noun.  In these types of sentences, there is an implied copular relationship between the DO and the OC.  Exx.:

I appointed David the king.  [OC=noun]

I made my dog pretty.  [OC=adj.]

I dub thee knight.  [OC=noun]

In each of these exx., the result of the verbal action is such that the DO “is now” (copular idea!) what the OC indicates:  David is now king; my dog is now pretty; you are now a knight.

III. Some Problems of Ambiguity

A. Appositional Phrases.  Sometimes sentence structure can be clouded by the presence of apposition, usually nouns in apposition.2  Nouns are in apposition when two nouns fill the same function slot and share the same referent (i.e., they refer to the same entity).  The second noun is the one said to be in apposition to the first noun, and it has the semantic function of modifying the first noun in some way.  Exx.:

“Charlie, my brother, kicked the can.”  [Charlie is the subject noun, and the noun phrase my brother is in apposition to Charlie.  Both fill the subject slot; both refer to the same entity.  Thus, in this sentence, there are not two different subjects of the verb kicked; rather, there are two noun phrases constituting one subject, the second noun phrase restating the first one as a way of further explaining or modifying it.]

2Verbs can stand in apposition to each other theoretically, although it is rare: “John ate, scarfed down, a hog!”  In the discussion above, however, we shall only concern ourselves with apposition in nouns/noun phrases.
Compare the prior sentence with this one: “Charlie and my brother kicked the can.” What’s the difference? [In this sentence, *Charlie* is a subject noun, and *my brother* is also a subject noun phrase! They are joined (coordinated) by the conjunction *and*, indicating that they form a compound subject of the single verb *kicked*. Even though both *Charlie* and *my brother* are in the S slot, they do not refer to the same entities; they are two different people. This is therefore NOT an example of apposition.]

HINT: If you see two nouns (or noun phrases) that might be in apposition, one test to try is to place the expression “namely” or “who is” between the two noun phrases to see if it makes sense. If so, you probably have apposition. For ex., “Charlie, my brother, kicked the can” can be rephrased as “Charlie, namely my brother, kicked the can” and “Charlie, who is my brother, kicked the can.” These rephrasings accurately capture the sense of the first sentence and indicate the presence of an appositional phrase.

B. Ambiguity between Appositional Phrases and Object Complements.

Sometimes the structure of a sentence is ambiguous and can be understood to convey two different conceptual situations. One such sentence is

Yahweh appointed David the king.

This sentence is ambiguous between two possible scenarios:

1. David is already the king. The speaker intends to convey that Yahweh has appointed David to some other office (besides king), and *the king* is in apposition to the DO *David*, specifying some information about the David who has received an appointment. It could be rephrased as “Yahweh appointed David, *who was* the king.” It’s a S V DO sentence:

Yahweh appointed David the king.

2. David was not yet the king. The speaker intends to convey that Yahweh has appointed David to bear the office of king now. *David* is the DO, and *the king* is the OC, indicating what the DO has become. It could be rephrased as “Yahweh appointed David *to be* the king.” It’s a S V DO OC sentence:

Yahweh appointed David the king.

C. Ambiguity between Indirect Objects, Appositional Phrases, and Object Complements.
Here is another example of a situation where the structure of a sentence is ambiguous and can be understood to convey three different conceptual situations:

I made David a hot dog.

This sentence is ambiguous between three possible scenarios:

1. Perhaps David is already known to be a proverbial “hot dog” (slang for someone who shows off by performing risky stunts). The speaker intends to convey that the subject (I) created David, whom everyone considers already to be a hot dog. The noun phrase *a hot dog* is in apposition to the DO *David*, specifying some information about the David whom I have made. It could be rephrased as “I made David, *who is* a hot dog.” It’s a S V DO sentence:

I made David a hot dog.  

2. Or, perhaps *hot dog* refers to a real piece of food, and *David* is the IO. The speaker intends to indicate for whom the subject (I) has made this hot dog. Its sentence structure is S V IO DO:

I made David a hot dog.  

3. Or, finally, perhaps David was not yet a proverbial “hot dog.” The speaker intends to convey that I have somehow turned David into a proverbial “hot dog.” [Perhaps we played Truth-or-Dare one too many times!] *David* is the DO, and *a hot dog* is the OC, indicating what the DO has become. It could be rephrased as “I made David *to be* a hot dog.” It’s a S V DO OC sentence:

I made David a hot dog.  

As you can see, three different scenarios can be expressed by the exact same string of words. How you understand the assertion of the sentence depends on how you understand the constituents to function, and drawing a sentence diagram is a helpful tool that can help you (or force you!) to make those syntactic and interpretive choices. Notice, for example, that the diagrams are different for each of the possible scenarios in the ambiguous sentences above.