

7 Grammar Rainbow – Explaining ‘B’

‘B’ on the grammar rainbow stands for Basics, and we need to spend a bit of time on the basics, because we need to get these right.

When I talk about the basics, I’m actually referring to words and word classes, and the functions they play in sentences. So what I’d like to do here is take individual words, and discuss how we might group them together to make a sentence.

Let’s take this word here – bird. What type of word is ‘bird’? Well, ‘bird’ is a noun. And anything in grammar that names something is a noun. It is a naming word class. So we might say bird, tiger, table, sofa, all of these are nouns. Now, nouns can be organised into proper nouns, or pronouns.

If it is a general naming word, it is just called a noun: bird, table, tiger. If it is a proper noun, then it is a noun that deserves a capital letter, and when we talk about proper nouns, we’re talking about people’s names. When we talk about people’s titles – Mr, Mrs – when we talk about brand names, all of these are proper nouns.

You might have heard of the term pronoun, and when I talk about pronoun, pronouns cleverly replace nouns so we don’t repeat ourselves as writers, and these are words like he, she, they, we. That is the family of nouns.

Verbs are often described to children as the action-packed part of a sentence, and this is true, but actually it’s much bigger than that. It’s not just action, it’s also condition and it’s also experience.

If we go back to our sentence: “A bird was injured in the city”, and we look at the verb part here being ‘injured’, we have that sense of a condition, there is a movement coming in behind that word. And sometimes children find that type of verb hard to recognise, which is why our teaching has to be really clear.

But there’s something else going on here and this is why it is absolutely critical that we don’t fudge our teaching between phrases and clauses. When we zoom into the verb part of a sentence, as teachers, we need to be explicitly clear which chunks are functioning as a verb.

Well, we can see that ‘injured’ is, but actually also the smaller word, the verb ‘to be’ is working with the verb. It is holding hands with the main verb. We have an auxiliary verb, that is the ‘was’, and we have the main verb, ‘injured’, and they work together as a verb chain.

If we go back to the sentence we looked at earlier: “A bird was injured in the city”, we can now add in an adjective and we could drop one just before the noun – just here: “A small bird was injured in the city”.

And we can see now very clearly the part that’s working as an adjective, ‘small’, describing the noun, and actually how ‘was injured’ is working together as a verb chain and is the verb component part of the sentence.

I talk about that because actually I could pull out ‘injured’ and use it as an adjective: “An injured bird was lost in the city”. And ‘was lost’ now could be used as a verb and ‘injured’ change its word class to a different function.

Adjectives and verbs are very interchangeable and knowing that as a teacher is critical. Sometimes teachers mislabel words out of context. We must always be thinking about sentences.

My favourite word class is the preposition. And why I love it so much is it says what it does on the tin.

It has the word position in the title. So when we’re thinking, well, what is a preposition? It’s positioning in the

environment or positioning in time. And when we talk about positioning in the environment, it's words like in, on, next to, behind, over.

When we talk about positioning in time, it's before, next, later. And these are really important words to children when they're trying to move characters in stories.

Often, there are smaller words in a sentence and we're still not quite sure what they are. The big name for these smaller words is determiners.

The sort of words that live in the family of determiners are words like a, and an, and the. And these words point to nouns.

But determiners break down into two different types of articles. We have definite articles and indefinite articles, and how do we know the difference? Well, with children, I often use the point. And when we point directly at a noun, we definitely mean that item.

So, I might say 'the' laptop, 'the' camera, 'the' flipchart. If I meant any noun, I might say 'a' laptop, 'a' camera, 'a' flipchart, and I'd shrug.

And that use of a cue for children will help them recognise the difference between a definite article, I definitely mean that handbag, 'the' handbag or any handbag. 'A' handbag, that's an indefinite article.

We've zoomed in really closely to word classes, but I want to now take your thinking to that next phase up, and we're going to look very closely at phrases.

"A small bird was injured in the city" – how do you label that at phrase level? We've got to think about which chunks of words like to live together as word families, little units of meaning.

Now, in this sentence, there are three sections. One of them, the first one, is 'a small bird'. Now, the most dominant word there, the one that yields the most amount of meaning, is the word 'bird'.

We know bird is a noun, so we call that chunk a noun phrase. The next chunk in this sentence that lives together is 'was injured'. Now we must never call the verb part of a sentence a phrase, so as grammarians, we call that chunk a verb chain. 'Was', the auxiliary verb, 'injured' the main verb, working together as the verb chain.

Now the final part 'in the city'. Does that answer how, does that answer when? But it does answer where, and as we look at it, we can see this is an adverbial phrase, an adverbial phrase that answers where something is happening.

Its component part is a prepositional word in the word 'in', and we can move this about. So now we can see the flexibility within this sentence.

"In the city, a small bird was injured"

"A small bird was injured in the city"

"A small bird, in the city, was injured"

And that green part is really coming into play to bring mobility to writing.