

2. PROBLEM VERBS

Lay/lie; Raise/rise; Set/sit; Hang/hang

Confusion arises when speakers and writers need to choose between lay or lie, set or sit, raise or rise, and hang (suspend) or hang (execute).

In the first three pairs, one verb is transitive, and the other is intransitive. With hang/hang, we are dealing with two different verbs, with different senses and different structures.

Lay, raise and **set** are transitive verbs - that is each needs a *direct object* to complete its meaning, to receive the action or motion which it expresses. The word 'transitive' comes from a Latin word meaning 'to pass over'. In other words, a transitive verb is passing over from the subject to the object - it is in *transit* from the subject to the object

She *raises* her voice.

Her *voice* completes the meaning of the verb; the action passes over from subject (*She*) to object (*voice*). *She raises* alone is incomplete, the statement is unfinished.

Lie, rise and *sit* are intransitive verbs - that is, they do not take a direct object. An intransitive verb needs no direct object to complete its meaning; the action or motion is confined to the subject. An intransitive verb isn't in transit to anywhere - it doesn't need to move to, or relate to, anything else to complete its meaning.

He *sits*.

The action seems complete, the statement is finished.

More often than not, other words or phrases will accompany intransitive verbs such as *he sits, she rises, or the dog lies*. These are not direct objects, but adverbs or prepositional phrases. For example, he sits in the front seat (prepositional phrase), she rises at 6am (prepositional phrase), the dog lies asleep (adverb).

We can determine which is which by deciding on what meaning we need to convey.

| | Verb | Direct Object? | Verb type |
|-------------------------------------|-------|-------------------|--------------|
| You'd better lie down. | lie | no | intransitive |
| I'll lay that carpet tomorrow | lay | yes (that carpet) | transitive |
| On weekends, I rise at a later time | rise | no | intransitive |
| They raised the flag | raise | yes (the flag) | transitive |
| Please sit down. | sit | no | intransitive |
| Please set the table | set | yes (the table) | transitive |

On the following two pages, the different forms of these eight problem verbs are listed, with examples given of their use in the present tense, the past tense, and their past participle.

| Meaning | Simple/ base form | Past tense | Past Participle |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|------------|-----------------|
| to rest in a horizontal position | lie | lay | lain |

Present - *I want to lie down for a while. The cat lies in the shade of the tree.*

Past tense - *He lay injured where he fell. She lay asleep, curled on her side.*

Past participle - *They have lain in the sun for too long.*

| | | | |
|--|-----|------|------|
| To place on a surface, or in the proper or specified place | lay | laid | laid |
|--|-----|------|------|

Present tense - *The decorator suggests we lay carpet in the living room and lay tiles in the hall.*

Past tense - *He laid his arm around her shoulders.*

Past participle - *We have laid our coats on the settee.*

| | | | |
|--|------|------|-------|
| Move from a lower position to a higher one | rise | rose | risen |
|--|------|------|-------|

Present tense - *The audience rise to their feet, the applause is thunderous.*

Past tense - *The smoke rose from the bonfire.*

Past participle - *The dough has risen.*

| | | | |
|---|-------|--------|--------|
| To put or take into a higher position; increase the amount of | raise | raised | raised |
|---|-------|--------|--------|

Present tense - *They raise money for charity.*

Past tense - *She raised her arm to protect her face.*

Past participle - *Edmund Hilary was the first to have raised the flag on Mt Everest.*

| | | | |
|---|-----|-----|-----|
| To be in the position, more or less upright, with the body supported by the buttocks. | sit | sat | sat |
|---|-----|-----|-----|

Present tense - *Please sit in this chair.*

Past tense - *They sat in the garden.*

Past Participle - *They had sat quietly all afternoon reading their books.*

| Meaning | Simple/ base form | Past tense | Past Participle |
|--|-------------------|------------|-----------------|
| To put, lay or stand something in a certain position or location | set | set | set |

Present tense - *Please set the table*

Past tense - *He set the porcelain vase carefully on the mantelpiece.*

Past participle - *The umbrella had blown over in the wind, but someone had set it upright again.*

| | | | |
|---------------------------|------|--------|--------|
| Execute or commit suicide | hang | hanged | hanged |
|---------------------------|------|--------|--------|

Present tense - *Take that rope away from her neck, before she hangs herself.*

Past tense - *The prisoners were hanged for treason.*

Past participle - *It was eventually discovered they had convicted the wrong man, but he had hanged himself in his cell the year before.*

| | | | |
|------------|------|------|------|
| To suspend | hang | hung | hung |
|------------|------|------|------|

Present tense - *Just hang your hats on the stand here.*

Past tense - *We hung the painting above the fireplace.*

Past participle - *We discovered that the previous owner had hung new curtains throughout the house.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The material for this section was compiled from the following sources:

Waldhorn, A & Zeiger, A (1967) *English Made Simple*, W H Allen, London.

Eunson, Baden (1994) *Writing Skills*, The Communication Skills Series, John Wiley & Sons, Milton, Queensland.