UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH
FACULTY OF BUSINESS & LAW

USING AUXILIARY VERBS

STUDY SUPPORT

What is an auxiliary verb?

An auxiliary verb, is also known as a 'helping verb', it is important to make the meaning of a clause clear.

The main verb shows about what is happening in the sentence, the auxiliary verb gives more information that makes the sentence clearer.

Auxiliary verbs appear together with a main verb.

- I am walking to work.
- He is studying in the library.
- We are researching the ways in which students use IT equipment.

Above the verb 'to be' have been used as an auxiliary verb – walk, study and research are the main verbs. In this case the verb 'to be', indicates that it is happening at the present time.

The verb 'have' can also be used as an auxiliary verb:

- I have been shopping.
- She has played football.
- We have researched into the popularity of online learning among academics.

In these examples 'have' is the auxiliary verb and to be, played and researched are the main verbs. In this case the auxiliary verb 'have' indicates that these things happened in the past.

Can an auxiliary verb change the meaning of a sentence.

If you do not use auxiliary verbs in sentences where they are needed, the sentence may not make sense, or it may change the meaning.

Look at the sentences without the auxiliary verbs. Do they make sense?

- I walking to work every day.
- He studying in the library.
- We researching the ways in which students use IT equipment.

When you read these sentences you do not know whether these things are happening now or happened in the past. It does not give your reader enough information. You need an auxiliary verb to say it is happening or it has happened.

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If your friend texted you and said:

"I waiting for you in the library".

What would that mean?

Would it mean?

I am waiting for you in the library now, come along!

OR

I was waiting for you for three hours in the library and now I have gone home!

You wouldn't know, so you wouldn't know whether to go to meet them or to text them and apologise for keeping them waiting.

See how using or leaving out an auxiliary verb changes the meaning of these sentences.

Using auxiliary verbs in negative statements

You also need an auxiliary verb in a negative statement:

- I do not play tennis
- I am not going to the library today.

Using auxiliary verbs questions?

Without an auxiliary verb a question becomes a statement.

Statements

- I know you.
- I passed the test.
- You play tennis.

Questions

- Do I know you?
- Have I passed the test?
- Will you play tennis?