Lesson 2.2 Clauses and Subjects: Subject-Auxiliary Inversion (SAI)

In Lesson 2.1, we saw one test (tag questions) for identifying the subject of a clause. Being able to easily pick out the subjects of our sentences will help ensure

- that each sentence has a subject
- that the subject "agrees with" the verb
- that each **independent clause** has only one main subject

We make use of subjects all of the time in our speech, and have no problem doing so. Here's some cool evidence for that knowledge.

When a speaker of English turns a statement into a question, the subject changes places with the auxiliary (or helping) verb.
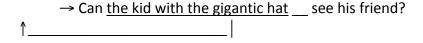
These verbs include forms of *have* and *be*, as well as the modal verbs: *can, could, shall, should, will, would, may, might,* and *must*.

The chicken will eat the corn. → Will <u>the chicken</u> __ eat the corn?
↑_____|

The portion of the sentence that the auxiliary verb inverts with or moves around will always be the subject, no matter how long or how short it is.

Mo is eating carrots. → Is <u>Mo</u> __ eating carrots?
↑____|

The kid with a gigantic hat can't see his friend.

→ Can <u>the kid with the gigantic hat</u> __ see his friend?
↑_____|

Turn the following sentences into questions by using SAI. Underline the subject that is revealed when you do this.

The kids should take their lunches on the fieldtrip.
The teacher visiting from Chicago will be our substitute next week.
The test on factors could be next week.

The man who talked with us on the bus about safety could also visit the classrooms.

[**Teacher Notes:** Subject Auxiliary Inversion (SAI) will always pick out the subject of an independent clause, not a subordinate (also called dependent) clause, so it will distinguish these from each other. Distinguishing subordinate clauses from independent clauses is an important aspect of learning not to write in fragments, since one of the most common types of stigmatized fragments in writing is a subordinate clause. Consider, for example, the following complex sentence.

> The monkey can see that the banana is ripening.

This sentence contains two clauses: the independent clause and the subordinate clause, *that the banana is ripe*, contained within it. Apply SAI, and you get

> Can the monkey __ see that the banana is ripening?
> ↑_____|

Employing SAI picks out the independent clause subject, *the monkey*. Even though *the banana* is also a subject (of the subordinate clause), SAI will not work with that subject since *the banana* is not the subject of the independent clause.

> *The monkey can see that is <u>the banana</u> __ ripening?
> ↑_____|

SAI is, therefore, a useful test to determine whether a sentence has the subject that is required in most forms of writing. When SAI is attempted with a sentence without an independent clause subject, the result is ungrammatical.

> Because he does not like it. → *Because does he not like it?

SAI fails here since *because* introduces a subordinate clause and there is no independent clause subject. Similarly for other kinds of fragments, SAI will not work since there is no subject.

> At the skateboard store. → ??

There is no auxiliary verb and there is no way to turn this into a question.]