

A Study of the Mandative Subjunctive

Consider the following sentence with the subjunctive forms highlighted: “Tens of thousands of people rely on this aquifer for their water, and we are really concerned that it **not be contaminated** in any way and still **be** a viable drinking source for the city of Rapid City.” The concern is that the aquifer is not yet contaminated but may become so.

Now consider how the meaning changes when the subjunctive forms are replaced by indicative forms: “Tens of thousands of people rely on this aquifer for their water, and we are really concerned that it **is not contaminated** in any way and still **is** a viable drinking source for the city of Rapid City.” The concern now seems to be, illogically, that the aquifer should be contaminated but is not.

The difference between “We propose that the project **is finished**” (indicative) and “We propose that the project **be finished**” (subjunctive) is a difference between actualized and not yet actualized. The project referred to in the subjunctive clause is not yet finished.

For their recently published study of the mandative subjunctive in technical writing (*Technical Communication*, May 2021), Professors Ed Malone and Elizabeth Roberson analyzed workplace documents such as reports, manuals, and proposals. They also administered two versions of a performance-based elicitation test in eight sections of writing courses at S&T. For each of the twelve prompts on the test, a student had to either compose a complete predicate for a *that*-clause showing only a subject or supply the simple predicate (verb phrase) in an otherwise complete *that*-clause.

Supply a complete predicate (analogous to writing):

- Safety demands that the driver _____.
- The requirement was that the night manager _____.

Supply a simple predicate (analogous to editing):

- The department requests that the candidate _____ the application by June 5.
- It is vital that the user _____ all procedures.

Each *that*-clause contained a trigger word for the mandative subjunctive—verbs such as *require*, *suggest*, *demand*; nouns such as *requirement*, *stipulation*, *rule*; or adjectives such as *necessary*, *important*, *imperative*. The goal was to determine whether the students were more likely to use subjunctive or indicative forms in these clauses and whether the frequency of use would be greater in writing or editing. The hypothesis was that students would be more likely to use subjunctive forms in writing because they would be subconsciously accessing a large store of grammar rules acquired through performance, whereas in editing they would be consciously accessing a far more limited store of grammar rules acquired in school.

The results showed that the students used the mandative subjunctive frequently, but they used the mandative indicative more frequently. They were more likely to use the mandative subjunctive when they were generating complete predicates (applying the grammar rule subconsciously in composing/drafting) than when they were supplying only simple predicates (applying the grammar rule consciously in editing/revising).

The study has implications for copyeditors, among others, who are tasked with increasing semantic accuracy as well as clarity and consistency through editing.

Code	Form	Examples from Responses
I	indicative, present, singular	“submits,” “is provided,” “does not break,” “has completed,” “reviews and understands,” “has to wear”
S	subjunctive, present, singular	“submit,” “be locked,” “not break,” “have completed,” “read and follow”
M	modal	“should be,” “must complete,” “couldn’t move,” “can go,” “will alternate” (but not verb phrases containing <i>has to</i> , <i>is to</i> , etc.)