**LESSON PLAN: Heads and tails**

The lesson plan below comes from the 'Word order and ellipsis' section of my Udemy course, [Spoken Grammar: a Guide for English Language Teachers.](https://www.udemy.com/course/spoken-grammar-a-guide-for-english-language-teachers/?src=sac&kw=spoken+grammar) This section also includes 'declarative questions' and 'ellipsis' (see below for examples).

**Teacher’s notes**

‘Heads’ and ‘tails’ are features of conversational English where bits of language are placed outside the normal clause structure, either at the beginning (heads) or the end (tails). Here are typical examples:

The people over there *(head)*, what are they waiting for?

What are the people over there waiting for? *(normal word order)*

It’s a great place to go for a weekend, Brighton *(tail)*.

Brighton’s a great place to go for a weekend. *(normal word order)*

People use **heads** to emphasise (or ‘point at’) what is important by mentioning it first, and to make complex utterances easier to process by breaking them into two parts. Utterances with heads are often questions, but they don’t have to be:

That tall guy, he’s looking at you.

It’s not always clear why people use **tails**. The obvious explanation is that you begin your utterance with a pronoun, and then feel you need to add the full noun, phrase or clause later, to avoid confusion. But there are at least three things that make the picture more complex.

First, there are the times when no full or new information is given in the tail, and the result is simply repetitive (or emphatic):

He’s a real joker, him.  (OR: He’s a real joker, he is.)

She drives like a maniac, she does.

It tastes a bit odd, this.

Secondly, there are the occasions when you feel the speaker may be hiding the full meaning of an utterance on purpose, until they have your attention:

You know what? In my opinion, they actually do it deliberately, people who turn up late.

And finally, there's the issue of conversational style or preference. In the first example at the top, it's possible that the speaker simply has the chunk ‘It's a great place, X’ in their lexicon and is fond of it, perhaps because the impact word ‘Brighton’ comes at the end in a final flourish.

Note: In this lesson plan, I use the conventional one-sentence structure. But since we don’t know what ‘punctuation’ a speaker is using, you could argue that heads and tails don’t necessarily exist within a single sentence: ‘That tall guy, he’s looking at you,’ for example, could be transcribed as ‘That tall guy. He’s looking at you’ – in other words, a verbless first sentence, followed by a regular sentence.

**LESSON PLAN**

1. The basic grammar of heads and tails

2. The purpose of heads and tails

3. More advanced grammar

4. Practice

5. Complex heads and tails sometimes used by native speakers

**1. The basic grammar of heads and tails**

To introduce the topic to your students, you could show students some simple dialogues like these:

A: What a wonderful view!

B: Fantastic! *(pointing)* That white building, is it the Museum of Contemporary Art?

A: I think so.

C: I thought it was great, that film.

D: Really? Too violent for me, I’m afraid.

E: Those new jobs you’re applying for, are they part-time or full-time?

F: Full-time, but they’re only short contracts.

G: I prefer cats.

H: But they’re so friendly, dogs!

Ask them to identify any language features that they find interesting. They may, for example, point out ellipsis (leaving words out): ‘Fantastic’ instead of ‘It’s fantastic’ or ‘Too violent’ instead of ‘It was too violent.’ But they’ll probably also notice the ‘heads’ and ‘tails,’ now in bold:

A: What a wonderful view!

B: Fantastic! *(pointing)* **That white building**, is it the Museum of Contemporary Art?

A: I think so.

C: I thought it was great, **that film**.

D: Really? Too violent for me, I’m afraid.

E: **Those new jobs you’re applying for**, are they part-time or full-time?

F: Full-time, but they’re only short contracts.

G: I prefer cats.

H: But they’re so friendly, **dogs**.

Together with the class, now rewrite both examples in more conventional grammar, just so that students can see the difference:

**That white building**, is it the Museum of Contemporary Art?

🡪 Is that white building the Museum of Contemporary Art?

I thought it was great, **that film**.

🡪 I thought that film was great.

Then in each sentence pair, ask students to count the words in the two versions. They’ll find one extra word in the spoken grammar version. Ask them which word and why it’s there.

‘It’ is the extra word. Why is it there? The answer you might get in one form or another is that the pronoun represents the head or tail in the other part of these two-part sentences. (Technically, this is called ‘a co-referential pronoun.’)

Here are two examples with ‘they’ instead. You could gap ‘they’ to check students’ understanding of the changes in pronoun.

Those new jobs you’re applying for, are they part-time or full-time?

They’re so friendly, dogs.

**2. The purpose of heads and tails**

Now ask students in groups or pairs why and when they think people use heads and tails. It’s not an easy question, but you may get some interesting answers.

Here are the main reasons:

*Heads allow you to say the important thing first, and then ‘do’ the grammar later.*

*Heads can make complex sentences easier to say by breaking them into two parts.*

*Heads are often questions, asking for clarification. (But they don’t have to be, e.g.: ‘Your dad, he’s so helpful.’)*

*A head can be a bit like pointing your finger (‘That white building…?’)*

*Tails are often evaluative : ‘great film,’ ‘friendly dogs.’*

*Tails are sometimes used to clarify (i.e. you use a pronoun first, and then want to make sure your listener understands what you’re talking about).*

*Tails may be used to withhold information from the listener until the end of the utterance.*

*Heads and tails usually refer to things we know about already, or can see – shared information rather than new information – and often use ‘that/those.’*

The second reason - breaking complex ideas (often with relative clauses or prepositional phrases) into two parts to make them easier to say - is, in fact, one of the most useful functions of heads.

To reinforce this idea, you could ask your students to try reading the following questions aloud and then to break them into two, using heads or tails.

Here are the questions, and the answers.

Is the hotel where you’re staying in the centre of town?

What are the people over there waiting for?

**The hotel where you’re staying**, is it in the centre of town? *(using a head)*

Is it in the centre of town, **the hotel where you’re staying**? *(using a tail)*

What are they waiting for, **the people over there**? *(using a tail)*

**The people over there**, what are they waiting for? *(using a head)*

By now your students will be aware of the basics of heads and tails. If your time is limited, you may want to break the lesson here. But there’s more to reveal about the grammar, and also some forms of productive work that students can do.

**3. More advanced grammar**

On grammar, it may be worth making students aware of how heads and tails vary grammatically; how they can be subjects or objects, and how they can contain prepositional phrases or relative clauses.

Without explaining all of this, why not just try asking your class what differences they notice between some of these heads and tails? As well as emboldening the heads and tails themselves, you could underline key elements that draw attention to these differences, as I’ve done here. (I’ve also given the answers.)

They’re friendly, **dogs**. *(Here, the tail is the subject)*

**My coat and scarf**, I’ve left them in the library! *(Here, the head is the object)*

Do you recognise him, **that tall guy at the bar**? *(This tail has a prepositional phrase)*

**The woman that asked the question**, did you get her name?

*(This head includes a relative clause)*

So, as you can see, heads and tails can represent subjects or objects, and may, for example, include relative clauses and prepositional phrases.

**4. Practice**

As for practice on a controlled level, the best approach may be short dialogues developed into exercises where students get used to forming heads or tails. These can be done in groups or pairs, with students reading aloud the corrected results. This gives you an opportunity for a pronunciation check.

The transformational exercise below allows students to take their own time creating fairly natural heads and tails. (Gap-fill or error correction exercises would also work.)

Teacher’s note: A’s line ‘You could ring him, then?’ is a declarative question (i.e. a statement as a question). Such questions are normally used when some information has already been shared by the speakers, and ‘then’ is common at the end. I cover the meaning and use of declarative questions in detail (with exercises) in my online course later in the section that contains heads and tails.

**Rewrite the sentences in italics, using a head or a tail, as suggested:**

A: *Did the guy you spoke to give you any advice?*

The guy \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (head)

B: No, but I’ve got his number, of course.

A: You could ring him, then?

C: *That lecture on global warming was much too difficult.*

It \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (tail)

D: I know, but it’s a complex subject, isn’t it?

E: I found a hotel on Forster Square.

F: *But the east side of the city is dangerous.* That’s what I read.

But it’s \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ That’s what I read. (tail)

E: You can’t believe everything you read, though, can you?

G: *Did you finish your project on dolphins?*

Your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (head)

H: Yes, but it took me ages.

G: Still, I bet you’ll get a good grade.

I: *Paula is always borrowing my stuff.*

Paula, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (head)

J: As long as she gives it back, why are you worrying?

K: *These shoes are much too tight.*

They’re \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (tail)

L: So try the next size up!

K: I told you, they don’t have it.

*The answers:*

*A: The guy you spoke to, did he give you any advice?*

*C: It was much too difficult, that lecture on global warming.*

*F: But it’s dangerous, the east side of the city.*

*G: Your project on dolphins, did you finish it?*

*I: Paula, she’s always borrowing my stuff.*

*K: They’re much too tight, these shoes.*

In terms of more creative practice, students can try to construct their own mini-dialogues, practising them orally first, seeing if a head or tail could be naturally included, and then writing them down for checking with you, if you like, and reading them out to the class.

Some prompts:

1. You’re in a restaurant. Talk to each other or to a waiter about one or more of these things: where you’re going to sit; what you see on the menu; what the food is like; the people you see. (*That table by the window, do you think it’s too close to the toilets?*)

2. You’re in a clothes shop. Talk to each other or to a salesperson about one or more of these things: the clothes that you can see; trying on a jacket or a pair of shoes; the prices; whether items of clothes would suit you. (*Are they in the sale, these jeans*?)

**5. Complex heads and tails sometimes used by native speakers**

Finally, there are issues in spoken grammar over what is teachable and useful, and what students might actually be comfortable using. The examples I’ve worked with in this lecture so far have all been fairly straightforward.

But here are some other examples that you may want to be aware of, or even explore with more advanced classes.

One of my friends at college, his uncle has an apartment near Barcelona.

*(This kind of subject change after a head, rather than a co-referential pronoun, is sometimes used in spoken English.)*

She would always finish her the exam before anyone else, Liz would.

*(Expanding the tail for emphasis to include the verb form. As in questions, ‘do’ is used if there is no auxiliary: ‘He often gets angry and says stupid things, Eric does.’ )*

It’s a lovely view, this (is). They’re the best seats, those (are).

*(Use of the demonstrative pronoun for emphasis. An interesting alternative to a question tag.)*

She works really hard, she does. Roy’s a perfectionist, Roy is.

*(Tails that simply repeat information for emphasis, rather than expand on pronouns.)*

You shouldn’t force it open, should you, the door?

*(A combination of a question tag and a tail: again, quite common in interactive native speech.)*

*END*

This plan has been adapted from my online course: <https://www.udemy.com/course/spoken-grammar-a-guide-for-english-language-teachers/?src=sac&kw=spoken+grammar+a>