This article explains the rules of Toki Pona grammar using only the sitelen pona hieroglyphic writing system in examples. For help with the pronunciation, definition, and spelling using the Latin alphabet, see A Graphical Dictionary of Toki Pona.¹

Basic sentences
The particle > separates the subject and the verb:

_cat > = The cat is eating.
_person > = The person is sleeping.

There is no verb “to be”; the part after > can also be a noun or an adjective.

_fruits > = Fruits are food.
_water > = Water is good.
_water > = Water is a drink.

If the subject is _ or _ the > is always omitted:

_i > = I eat.
_you > = You are good.

Modifying words
Words can be modified by appending other words. With a single modifier, just put it right after the main word:

_small human = child
_my house
_to feel good = to be happy

To modify with several words, introduce them with the particle ±. Although often translated as “of”, the grammatical function of ± is actually different: it regroups the following words. Note the difference:

_crazy water house = strange bathroom
_house of the crazy water = pub
_no strong people
_people of not-strong = weak people

± can only be used when followed by multiple words.

Ambiguity
You’ll often need to know the context to decide what things mean. Many words have multiple or general meanings:

_cat = cat / dog / (any land mammal)

Many words can play the role of a noun, adjective, or verb:

_water = water / wet / to wash
_good = good, simple / to fix, to repair

Nouns have no singular or plural, and no definite or indefinite article:

_a fruit / the fruit / some fruits / the fruits

There are ways to narrow down which object you are talking about:

_this apple is bad.
_my apple is bad.
_light yellow apple is good.

The apple is on the table. That apple is good.

Direct objects
The particle >> separates a direct object from the rest of the sentence:

_the cat drinks the water.
_i’m washing the cat.

Negation
To negate a word, append ×:

_i’m not sleeping.
_nobody is talking.

¹Typesetting with LaTeX. The font is linja pona. Initial explanations are from the Toki Pona Cheat Sheet.
Questions

To ask yes-or-no questions, replace the verb with “(verb) × (verb)”:   
лежа = Are you able to sleep?  
лежа = Is the cat hungry?  

Alternatively, append ɬ? (“or what”) to the sentence:   
лежаɬ? = Do you want to kiss me?  

To answer these questions, reply with either “(verb)” or “(verb) ×”.   
лежа = Yes, I want to kiss you.  
лежа = No, I do not want to kiss you.  

To ask questions that can’t be answered with yes or no, write a normal sentence and replace the word in question with ɬ:   
лежаɬ? = What are you eating?  
лежаɬ? = Who/what ate my fruit?  

Providing context

To provide context for a sentence, prepend another sentence or expression, followed by ɬ.  
This often results in a structures like “If (part 1), then (part 2)” or “In the context of (part 1), (part 2).”  

To ask questions that can’t be answered with yes or no, write a normal sentence and replace the word in question with ɬ:   
лежаɬ? = What are you eating?  
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The context of a sentence is not the same thing as it’s subject.

Time and Tense

Verbs have no tense:   
лежа = I am eating. / I was eating. / I will be eating.  

Instead, use a ɬ-clause to add a temporal context to a sentence:   
лежаɬ = When I’m asleep, everything is okay.  
лежаɬ = To me, fruit is good.  

The context of a sentence is not the same thing as its subject.

Prepositions

ɬ, ɬ, ɬ, ɬ, and ɬ can be used as prepositions at the end of a sentence to modify the verb:   
лежаɬ = I eat in the house.  
лежаɬ = I eat using a fork.  
лежаɬ = You are good for me. = I like you.  
лежаɬ = Why are you leaving?  

In proper Toki Pona, prepositions do not modify nouns but adjectives do. ɬ can be used in either role!.

Commands

Use ɬ and then what you want the person to do:   
лежаɬ! = Look at this!  

To address someone, start a sentence with “(person) ɬ,!”:   
лежаɬ = Malin, you are pretty.  

Also use this together with a command, merging the two ɬ’s:   
лежаɬɭ = Sam, go home.  

Numbers

Combine number words to add them up:   
ɬ = 1, ɬ = 2, ɬ = 5  
ɬɭ = 13