

WORD ORDER

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Intermediate Grammar
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WORD ORDER is important: it's what makes your sentences make sense! So, proper word order is an essential part of writing and speaking—when we put words in the wrong order, the result is a confusing, unclear, and an incorrect sentence.

I. Examples of Word Order

Here are some examples of words put into the correct and incorrect order:

I have 2 brothers and 2 sisters at home. **CORRECT**

2 brothers and 2 sisters have I at home. **INCORRECT**

I am in middle school. **CORRECT**

In middle school I am. **INCORRECT**

How are you today? **CORRECT**

You are how today? **INCORRECT**

As you can see, it's usually easy to see whether or not your words are in the correct order. When words are out of order, they stand out, and usually change the meaning of a sentence or make it hard to understand.

II. Types of Word Order

In English, we follow one main pattern for normal sentences and one main pattern for sentences that ask a question.

a. Standard Word Order

A sentence's standard word order is **Subject + Verb + Object (SVO)**. Remember, the subject is what a sentence is about; so, it comes first.

For example:

The dog (subject) + eats (verb) + popcorn (object).

The subject comes first in a sentence because it makes our meaning clear when writing and speaking. Then, the verb comes after the subject, and the object comes after the verb; and that's the most common word order. Otherwise, a sentence doesn't make sense, like this:

Eats popcorn the dog. (verb + object + subject)

Popcorn the dog eats. (object + subject + verb)

b. Questions

When asking a question, we follow the order **auxiliary verb/modal auxiliary + subject + verb (ASV)**. *Auxiliary verbs* and *modal auxiliaries* share meaning or function, many which are forms of the verb "to be." Auxiliary verbs can change form, but modal auxiliaries don't. Here's a chart to help you:

Auxiliary Verbs		
Be	Do	Have
am is are was were being been	does do did	has have had having
Modal Auxiliaries (Never change form)		
can might ought to will	could may must	should shall would

As said, questions follow the form **ASV**; or, if they have an object, **ASVO**. Here are some examples:

Can he cook? **“Can” (auxiliary) “he” (subject) “cook” (verb)**

Does your dog like popcorn? **“Does” (A) “your dog” (S) “like” (V) “popcorn” (O)**

Are you burning the popcorn? **“Are” (A) “you” (S) “burning” (V) “popcorn” (O)**

III. Parts of Word Order

While almost sentences need to follow the basic SVO word order, we add other words, like indirect objects and modifiers, to make them more detailed.

a. Indirect Objects

When we add an indirect object, a sentence will follow a slightly different order. Indirect objects always come between the verb and the object, following the pattern **SVIO**, like this:

I fed the dog some popcorn.

This sentence has **“I” (subject) “fed” (verb) “dog” (indirect object) “popcorn” (direct object)**.

b. Prepositional Phrases

Prepositional phrases also have special positions in sentences. When we use the prepositions like “to” or “for,” then the indirect object becomes part of a prepositional phrase, and follows the order **SVOP**, like this:

I fed some popcorn to the dog.

Other prepositional phrases, determining time and location, can go at either the beginning or the end of a sentence:

He ate popcorn at the fair. -Or- *At the fair he ate popcorn.*

In the morning I will go home. *I will go home in the morning.*

c. Adverbs

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs, adding things like time, manner, degree; and often end in **-ly**, like “slowly,” “recently,” “nearly,” and so on. As a rule, an adverb (or any modifier) should be as close as possible to the thing it is modifying. But, adverbs are special because they can usually be placed in more than one spot in the sentence and are still correct. So, there are rules about their placement, but also many exceptions.

In general, when modifying an adjective or adverb, an adverb should go before the word it modifies:

The dog was extremely hungry. **CORRECT** adverb modifies “hungry”

Extremely, the dog was hungry. **INCORRECT** misplaced adverb

The extremely dog was hungry. **INCORRECT** misplaced adverb

The dog was hungry extremely. **INCORRECT** misplaced adverb

As you can see, the word “extremely” only makes sense just before the adjective “hungry.” In this situation, the adverb can only go in one place.

When modifying a verb, an adverb should generally go right after the word it modifies, as in the first sentence below. BUT, these other uses are also correct, though they may not be the best:

The dog ran quickly to the fair. **CORRECT * BEST POSITION**

Quickly the dog ran to the fair. **CORRECT**

The dog quickly ran to the fair. **CORRECT**

The dog ran to the fair quickly. **CORRECT**

For adverbs expressing frequency (how often something happens) the adverb goes directly after the subject:

*The dog **always** eats popcorn.*

*He **never** runs slowly.*

*I **rarely** see him.*

Adverbs expressing time (when something happens) can go at either the beginning or of the end of the sentence, depending what’s important about the sentence. If the time isn’t very important, then it goes at the beginning of the sentence, but if you want to emphasize the time, then the adverb goes at the end of the sentence:

Now the dog wants popcorn. **Emphasis on “the dog wants popcorn”**

The dog wants popcorn now. **Emphasis on “now”**

IV. How to Avoid Mistakes with Word Order

Aside from following the proper SVO pattern, it's important to write and speak in the way that is the least confusing and the most clear. If you make mistakes with your word order, then your sentences won't make sense. Basically, if a sentence is hard to understand, then it isn't correct. Here are a few key things to remember:

- The **subject** is what a sentence is about, so it should come **first**.
- A modifier (like an **adverb**) should generally go as close as possible to the thing it is modifying.
- **Indirect objects** can change the word order from **SVO to SVIO**.
- **Prepositional phrases** have special positions in sentences.

Finally, here's an easy tip: when writing, always reread your sentences out loud to make sure that the words are in the proper order—it is usually pretty easy to hear! If a sentence is clear, then you should only need to read it once to understand it.

V. Word Order (Neutral, Positive, and Negative)

a. Neutral Word Order

Most sentences have a subject, and then something that is said about the subject, which is usually the rest of the sentence. This divides the sentence into the subject and the predicate.

- *John (subject) bought the tickets on Saturday (predicate).*
- *The wall (subject) was torn down (predicate).*
- *My elderly mother (subject) is rather deaf (predicate).*

Most sentences put the information that they carry in this order. This is neutral word order. When this neutral order is changed, the meaning of a sentence also changes.

- *The cat killed the dog.*
- *The dog killed the cat.*
- *The child watched the rabbit.*
- *The rabbit watched the child.*

b. Positive Word Order

For the beginning, remember this simple rule:

subject	verb(s)	object
I	Speak	English
I	can speak	English

c. Negative Word Order

The word order in negative sentences is the same as in affirmative sentences. Note, however, that in negative sentences we usually need an **auxiliary verb**:

Subject	verbs	indirect object	direct object	place	time
I	will <i>not</i> tell	You	the story	at school	tomorrow.

VI. Word Order in Simple Sentences

Simple sentences are those which have only one clause. They are extremely common in all forms of written and spoken English. Simple sentences have a normal word order which varies according to whether the sentence is:

A Statement,

- I saw you at the theatre on Saturday night.
- I didn't see you at the theatre on Saturday night.

A Question,

- Did I see you at the theatre on Saturday night?
- Didn't I see you at the theatre on Saturday night?

A Command.

- You should buy a ticket now.
- You shouldn't buy a ticket yet.
- Buy a ticket now.
- Don't buy a ticket now.

Word order also varies according to whether the sentence is **negative** or **positive**.

VII. Focusing

When we want to focus the attention of a reader or a listener on a particular word or phrase, we can use variations on neutral order, such as putting the subject last, splitting the clause into two, or repeating some part of the sentence. Some variations on the theme of neutral word order.

- *We used to call him 'Fuzzy'.*
- *'Fuzzy', we used to call him.*
- *Didn't we use to call him 'Fuzzy'?*
- *'Fuzzy' was what we used to call him.*
- *It was 'Fuzzy' we used to call him.*

VIII. Indirect Objects

Lastly, there are certain sentences that have an indirect object couples with a direct object. Regardless of this, the sentence stays true to the **SVO** word order. In such cases, we follow the **SVOI** or the **SVIO** word order. A key point to remember is that if the indirect object is a noun or a pronoun we follow the **SVIO** order. On the other hand, if the indirect object is preceded by a 'to', then we follow the **SVOI** word order. We can understand this with the help of the following examples:

She gave her mother the present. (SVIO)

She gave the present to her mother. (SVOI)