Sentence Order

If didn't grow up speaking English, you're very likely[1] to have a problem with sentence order when you speak English. The only other language I speak I sGerman, so I have to use that for comparison. In German, there are—from an English speaker's point of view—about a million articles ('*der*' '*die*' '*das*' '*dem*' '*den*') and cases[2] to make clear what job each word in a sentence has. The English sentence 'I ate a steak yesterday' can be translated into German at least four ways:

- *Ich aß ein Steak gestern.*
- *Ich aß gestern ein Steak.*
- *Ein Steak aß ich gestern.*
- *Gestern aß ich ein Steak.*

In German, it's possible to move the owrds around in a sentence, because the different articles make the job of each word clear. In English, however, about all the variety you could get out of that sentence would be to maybe move the time to the front: 'Yesterday, I ate a steak.' That's because **the order of words in an English sentence tells us what their job is in that sentence**.

So, a good place to start is looking at the different roles that are played in a sentence. If you already know this, feel free to jump ahead.

The Sentence Parts

Do you know what a subject is? An object? They're boring, abstract words from grammar lessons you forgot a long time ago, but here they're going to be important.

The **subject tells us who or what is doing the action**. In the sentence 'I ate a steak' the subject is 'I.' In the sentence "Johnny kicked the ball," the subject is Johnny. Johnny does the kicking.

The **direct object tells us who or what the action is done to**. In the 'I ate a steak' example, the direct object is the steak, because it is what the action happened to. In 'I kicked the ball,' the ball is the direct object.

The **indirect object tells us to whom or to what**. Remember the example 'I kicked the ball'? In that sentence, we don't know where the ball went after I kicked it. But, if I say 'I kicked my brother the ball,' then we know that the ball went to my brother. And my brother is the indirect object. Most

1 'Likely' means probably. If you're likely to get a sun burn, use suntan lotion!
2 The cases are nominative, genitive, dative and accusative.

sentences with giving or speaking of some kind will have an indirect object: 'I told <u>him</u> a joke.' 'My father gave <u>me</u> a bicycle.'

Practice: In the following sentences, identify the subject, direct object and indirect object.

1. "I sent him a letter."
   Subject:
   Indirect Object:
   Direct Object:
2. "John tells me a story."
   Subject:
   Indirect Object:
   Direct Object:
3. "The school pays me money."
   Subject:
   Indirect Object:
   Direct Object:
4. "The pizza guy brought us the wrong pizza."
   Subject:
   Indirect Object:
   Direct Object:
5. "Who did he give the ball to?" (This is a trick question.)
   Subject:
   Indirect Object:
   Direct Object:

Sentence Order in Positive Sentences

So far, things should be going smoothly. The parts of the sentence aren't hard to understand. And, when you take a few minutes to learn the rules, it's not hard to learn where they come in the sentence. Here is the simple rule for positive sentences[3]: **Subject, Verb, Indirect Object, Direct Object**. Just about everything you ever say or hear—in a positive sentence—will follow that order. If you look up

3 A 'positive sentence' is one that 1) isn't a question and 2) doesn't include the word 'not' in it. Positive sentences can be sad: 'my dog died' is an example.

at the examples above, you'll see that, except for the question at the end, they all follow this order. (That's why it was a trick question: questions follow different rules.) Remember:

Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object

It should be a piece of cake.

Practice: In the following exercises, you'll get a Subject (S), a verb (V) an indirect object (IO) and a direct object (DO). Put them in the correct order and match the verb to the subject to form complete sentences.

6. (DO: the recording IO: my brother S: my dad V: give)

7. (V: sell S: My boss DO: his car IO: Peter)

8. (IO: Michael V: hit S:Stan DO: the ball)

9. (S: Nathan DO: a bottle of water V: give IO: me)

10. (S: The criminal IO: everyone DO: his version of the story V: tell)

So far, so good, right? But we know it's not always that simple. For starters, there can be a lot more information in a sentence than simple who did what, and to whom. For example there are the questions of when and where. Where do time and place come in the sentence?

Maybe you already know that the time can come at the beginning or the end of a sentence (you know this if you're one of my students!), but the place has a set place, too. We put it between the direct object and, maybe, the time. (If the time is at the end of the sentence.) So, the expanded rule is this:

(Time) + Subject + Verb + (Indirect Object) + (Direct Object) + (Place) + (Time)

Note that the subject and verb aren't in parenthesis. That's because every sentence has to have a subject and a verb. Everything else is optional. In fact, sentences with everyone of these things are more rare than you might think. How often do you say things like “I will give you my iPod in school tomorrow”? It's a lot of information to pack into a sentence. Normally, we just pick a few of the elements, put them in this order (skipping any we aren't using) and make our sentences. Some examples:

- I told him the story in the subway.
- Yesterday I ate a steak.
- She cooked me dinner in her apartment.
- They built their son a house in New York.

It's really not that hard, it's just a matter of forming the right habits. And practice is best for that.

Practice: In the following examples, the parts of sentences are given in parenthesis. Put them in order, matching the verbs to the subjects and times, if they're given.

11. Example: (V: make S: my mother IO: me P: in the kitchen DO: cookies)

My mother makes me cookies in the kitchen.

12. (T: yesterday DO: the car S: my father V: start P: in the garage)

13. (IO: the waitress V: give S: my boss DO: a small tip T: at dinner yesterday P: in a restaurant)

14. (P: in the church V: made DO: donation[4] S: Greg T: Sunday)

15. (S: My brothers P: in front of their friends DO: my sisters V: tease[5])

16. (V: eat S: my best friend P: at my house DO: my dinner T: while I was working)

17. (S: Nathan DO: the tuba P: in the high school V: play T: three years ago)

18. (P: in my bedroom V: fold S: my mother DO: my clothes)

19. (IO: my friend John V: cook S: my girlfriend DO: dinner T: on his birthday)

20. (V: sing S: Udo Jürgens P: in my apartment IO: me DO: a song)

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4 'Donate,' the verb and 'donation,' the noun are words that many of my students stumble over. A donation is something like a gift—you give it and get nothing in return—but normally it's something of value (often money or clothing) and you give it to an organization for a good cause. (Though you can give people donations, too.)

5 'Tease' is a verb meaning to bother, but in a friendly way. My sister often teases me. I tease my wife.

Is That All?

Anybody who's spent very much time learning English knows that there aren't too many rules without an exception. So, when you've come this far and think you understand the rule, it's natural to ask yourself: are there exceptions? And the answer is: 'yes.' And I'm sorry for that.

First, **it's possible to move the indirect object to after the direct object**, using a preposition like 'to' or 'for.' One reason we do this is to 'spice up[6]' our language. Using the same order all the time can get repetitive[7]. Some examples of moving the indirect object include:

- I gave my keys <u>to my mom</u>.
- Susanne knit a sweater <u>for her boyfriend</u>.
- I sent Lucille <u>to the doctor</u> for professional advice.
- We made a present <u>for my brother</u> in the hospital.

Remember, **we have to use a preposition to move the indirect object!** There's no other way to do it.

In each of the examples, the indirect object (<u>underlined</u>) is after the direct object. And the sentences sound fine. Like I said, we do this sometimes just to spice up our conversations, to throw a little variety into the mix. But we also do it when we want to use pronouns.

A **pronoun is a shorter word that can stand in for a noun**. Typical pronouns include 'he,' 'she,' 'it,' 'they,' and 'them.' If you're talking about the singing group "Peter, Paul and Mary," it can be tedious[8] if you have to say all three names each time you talk about them. "I think Peter, Paul and Mary make great music, I really enjoy everything I've heard from Peter, Paul and Mary. What do you think of Peter, Paul and Mary?" That's only three repetitions of their names, but you can see how annoying it can be.

When you decide to use a pronoun to stand in for a direct object, we move the direct object next to the verb and, if there's an indirect object, we use 'to' or 'for' to move it, like in the examples above. Or like in these examples. The pronoun is underlined in each:

- I gave <u>it</u> to John.
- We sent <u>it</u> to him last Thursday.
- I taught <u>that</u> to you last week.

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6 'Spice up' is a phrase we get out of the kitchen. To spice up food is to add salt, pepper, chili and other spices to give the food extra zing. We say 'spice up' for other things, too, when we want to make them more interesting.

7 'Repetitive' is a word that describes something that is the same over and over again. Imagine playing the same song over and over for an entire day. It would make you crazy. That's why we try to avoid repetitive language: it makes us crazy.

8 'Tedius' refers to tasks that aren't especially difficult, but require a lot of attention and time.

- Two New Yorkers gave <u>them</u> to me in the subway.

Practice: The following exercises are like the previous exercise. This time, though, your task is to find the correct pronoun for the direct object and to rewrite the sentence using it.

21. Example (V: sing DO: her favorite songs S: my brothers and I IO: my mother)
"My brothers and I were singing them to my mother."

22. (V: make DO: cookies S: Mary Poppins IO: the twins P: in New York City)

23. (DO: my car IO: me S: the mechanic T: yesterday V: fix)

24. (V: sell DO: winter tires S: the mechanic IO: me T: after he fixed my car yesterday)

25. (S: the President IO: the Queen of England DO: a Rolex V: buy P: in Washington, D.C.)

26. (P: in the Elbe river V: throw S: the lifeguard[9] DO: a life-ring T: when I was a kid IO: me)

Are there any other exceptions?

I know what you're thinking: we've spent six pages discussion sentence order just for positive sentences. I'm sorry about that. But, I can tell you we're finished. No more exceptions.

Just kidding. Of course there are more exceptions. But the rules we've discussed cover ninety-nine percent of the sentences you will use. Most of the other sentences are covered by one more simple rule: when a verb doesn't normally have an indirect object (say 'hit' when you hit a person) we move the indirect object behind the direct object and use a preposition. Here are three example sentences:

- **"He hit me the ball."** -- This is perfectly normal and follows the rules we talked about. It's not unusual to hit a ball to someone, and so we don't change anything.
- **"He hit me."** -- This might not be normal—remember, violence is never the answer—but the grammar is fine. It means that someone just punched me. (Probably my big brother. He's always doing that.)
- **"He hit me for my sister."** -- We say this because, if we followed the rules ('he hit my sister me') it would sound like it was the sister who got hit, and it wasn't my sister, it was me. This

9 'Lifeguard' is the person who is trained to jump in the water and save your life if it looks like you're not able to swim on your own. You may have seen them on 'Baywatch.'

sentence means that someone hit me because my sister wanted him to. (Some sister I have, huh?)

These sentences aren't very common, but once you start to think about it, you'll find them coming up more than you think.

Sentence Order in Negative Sentences

There is good news for students who've mastered the rules for positive sentences and are ready to move on to the rules for negative sentences: **the rules are the same in positive and negative sentences**. At least, the word-order rules. Remember, we use helping verbs in negative sentences ('do,' 'did,' or 'will'), but for the sake of word order, we just throw them all in with 'the verb.'

The trick, then, to making a negative sentence in English is to use the word 'not' (or a shortened version with a helping verb) and the rules we've already learned. In these examples, the helping verb and verb are underlined. You can see they follow the rules you already know:

- I <u>didn't throw</u> that at you in the cafeteria.
- Udo Jürgens <u>didn't sing</u> 'Hotel California' las night.
- My mother <u>doesn't like</u> whiskey in her house.
- Steve and Mary <u>won't come</u> to the last party on Satuday.

Practice: Since it's so easy, we'll jump right to the practice phase. Remember, when the direct object is a pronoun, different rules apply! Form these sentence parts into negative sentences.

27. (S: Peter and his daughter DO: the car D: not drive T: this morning)

28. (V: not build S: Sweeny Todd T: last year DO: it IO: for the phantom)

29. (DO: the house V: not paint S: my father T: this summer)

30. (P: in the United States V: not eat T: today S: Toby DO: pizza)

31. (IO: his favorite sports team V: not give S: Billy DO: a donation)

32. (V: not bake S: my wife IO: my friends DO: it T: before the party)

33. (IO: them DO: life insurance V: not sell S: he T: yesterday P: in his office)

34. (V: bnot ring S: the waiter DO: it IO: my friends P: in the restaurant T: five minutes ago)

Sentence Order in Questions

I can't emphasize the importance of questions enough. Too many of my students understand English alright, but don't have any practice forming questions. And yet, when you're in another country, a large part of what you do in English is ask questions. How else will you know what something costs or where the concert hall is?

Fortunately, if you've made it this far in the worksheet, you've got a pretty good foundation. Questions aren't *exactly* like positive and negative sentences, but they're certainly very similar. Let's start with a few example questions:

- Did you see the play?
- How much have we eaten?
- Why did you pay for that?
- Where are you going?
- Who drives this car?

Of the five examples, four of them begin with a 'question word:' 'who,' 'what,' 'when,' 'where,' 'why,' or 'how.' That's the first change to our sentence order rule: **questions words can (and usually do) come at the beginning of a sentence**.

Look at the last two example questions. In both of them, the verbs come before the subjects. In general, **in questions, the verb comes before the subject**. Look at the first three example questions. Do you see how the helping verb is separated from the main verb? It's separated by the subject. **When there is more than one verb (verb with helping verb) only the helping verb comes before the subject.** That means that the real verb—or the 'main' verb—comes *after* the subject, where we're used to seeing it. It's important to note that this rule is true, whether the helping verb is do, did, will or have, or any other helping verb, for that matter.

Remember: when you form a question using 'did' as the helping verb, the 'main' verb stays 'normal.' That means, you don't have to put the 'main' verb in past tense.

Practice: In each of the following sentences, part of the sentence is underlined. After each sentence, write a question, asking for the information that is underlined.

35. Example: John drove Peter's car to school.

What did John drive to school?

36. My mother baked cookies after school every day.

37. Michael and Susan ate bananas in the tree house.[10]

38. Udo Jürgens sang 'Greek Wine' last night.

39. Michael rowed the boat to shore.

40. The ant is an insect that lives in my kitchen.

That doesn't seem too hard, does it? But we're not finished. Consider the last two of our examples:

- Where are you going?
- Who drives this car?

Neither of those questions has a helping verb. Why? There are two reasons. (That's why there are two example questions.) The first reason is this: **we don't use 'do' and 'did' with the verbs 'be' and 'can.'** Examples are:

- Where are you? (Not: ~~Where do you be~~?)
- What can you do? (Not: ~~What do you can~~?)
- Who is there? (Not: ~~Who does be there~~?)

It's difficult to remember when you're forming questions, but with practice you'll get it. And, fortunately, 'be' and 'can' are very common verbs, so you'll be using them a lot in questions, if you're asking many questions in English.

10 A 'tree house' was one of my favorite things when I was a kid. It's exactly what it sounds like: a house—normally just a platform, maybe with a railing—in a tree. Every kid should have one.

The second rule is this: **we don't use helping verbs when asking about the subject of a sentence**. If you are asking *who* or *what* does a certain action, don't use 'do' or 'did.' Some examples of this are:

- What is in Dresden?
- Who is the greatest singer of all time?

Practice: Like in the previous exercises, part of each sentence is underlined. Form a sentence to ask for the information in the underlined part of the sentence.

41. Udo Jürgens is the greatest singer of all time.

42. I can speak German.

43. Nathan and Lucille are up on the roof.

44. This church is older than the United States of America.

45. You can find me on the internet.

46. The man over there is my boss.

47. I am an American.

I started this by saying that the rules for questions aren't much different from the rules in positive and negative questions. However, we've seen that there are some differences, so, for clarity, here are the rules for questions:

(Question word) (Helping verb) Subject Verb (Indirect object) (Direct object) (Place) (Time)?

Just like with positive and negative sentences, the only parts that *have to* be there are the subject and verb. (And don't forget the question mark, if you're writing it.) The other parts—the ones in parenthesis—are all optional.

There's one last thing to consider before you're finished, though. Consider these questions:

- How many cars do your parents drive?
- Where in Pennsylvania have you visited?
- How much water do you drink per day?
- What kind of problem do you have?

Each of these questions begin with a question word—which we expect, since we learned the rule on page ten—but there are a lot of other words between the question word and the helping verb. So it's time to accept one more small change to the rule: when the question word alone isn't specific enough, it's okay to refine[11] the question word with a few extra words.

It sounds a little crazy, but the odds are you do it already in your native language. With a little practice, it'll seem automatic.

Practice: The following statements are answers. Form the questions. The parts of the statement that you need to ask about are underlined.

48. Example: There are more than three million people in Berlin.

"How many people are there in Berlin?"

49. I have five brothers and sisters.

50. I drive a Toyota.

51. She sings that song once in every concert.

52. The car was damaged very badly.

53. Mrs. von der Leyen has seven children.

54. That movie is on TV twice a month!

Finished!

You made it through eleven (almost twelve) pages of grammar and practice. You deserve a break! But,

11 'Refine' is a verb that means to make something better. Oil, for example, is refined into gasoline. Bad arguments can be refined into good arguments. And hops and barley can be refined into whiskey.

after the break—I'm talking about a day or two—you're going to want to come back and have a go at the exercises on this and the next page, to really cement what you've practiced.

If you can read this, you must have enough English to know that nothing is ever as simple as it seems. There's more to word order—where do adverbs come in the sentence, for example—and we'll cover that, later. For now, you're off to a great start.

Practice:

Identify the subject, verb, direct object and indirect object in the following sentences:

1. "Rupert built his father a six-bedroom vacation home."

   Subject: Direct Object:

   Verb: Indirect Object:

2. "The rain filled my pond up for me."

   Subject: Direct Object:

   Verb: Indirect Object:

With the subject, verb, indirect object, direct object provided in the parenthesis, form complete sentences.

3. (V: Eat T: Tomorrow S: My sister DO: a pizza)

4. (DO: a birthday card S: my father IO: my mother S: make T: yesterday)

5. (IO: the President V: Give S: I DO: a briefing T: next month)

6. (V: bring DO: a bottle of wine S: you IO: your English teacher T: always)

7. (V: be S: seat belts T: always DO: a good idea)

In the following sentences, move the indirect object to after the direct object, using a preposition.

8. The U.S. government gave the banks a lot of money last year!

9. John told Mary the truth.

In the following sentences, substitute a pronoun for the underlined part of the sentence.

10. My mother baked my brother a cake.

11. Susan sold Peter her old car.

12. My boss wrote me a long letter.

13. My sisters sang their bosses a song.

The following sentences are either positive or negative. Change positive sentences to negative sentences, and negative sentences to positive sentences:

EXAMPLE: "He swam up the river."

He didn't swim up the river.

14. Peter, Paul and Mary sang that song.

15. He didn't visit me last weekend.

16. I don't have a problem with mayonnaise on my French fries.

17. I think the dog peed in the living room again.

Make the following sentences in to questions. Form questions about the information that is underlined.

18. My brother bought a house in Texas.

19. I ate chocolate cake on my birthday.

20. He can speak Hindi!

21. The President loves his Blackberry.

22. Seven cats are on the roof.

Solutions:

1. "I sent him a letter."

   Subject: **I**

   Indirect Object: **him**

   Direct Object: **letter**

2. "John tells me a story."

   Subject: **John**

   Indirect Object: **me**

   Direct Object: **a story**

3. "The school pays me money."

   Subject: **the school**

   Indirect Object: **me**

   Direct Object: **money**

4. "The pizza guy brought us the wrong pizza."

   Subject: **the pizza guy**

   Indirect Object: **us**

   Direct Object: **the wrong pizza**

5. "Who did he give the ball to?" (This is a trick question.)

   Subject: **he**

   Indirect Object: **who**

   Direct Object: **the ball**

6. My dad gave my brother the recording.
7. My boss sold Peter his old car.
8. Stan hit Michael the ball.
9. Nathan gave me a bottle of water.
10. The criminal told everyone his version of the story.
11. **Example:** My mother makes me cookies in the kitchen.
12. Yesterday, my father started the car in the garage.
13. My boss gave the waitress a small tip in a restaurant at dinner yesterday.
14. Greg made a donation in the church on Sunday.
15. My brothers teased my sister in front of their friends.

16. While I was working my best friend ate my dinner at my house.
17. Nathan played the tuba in high school three years ago.
18. My mother folded my clothes in my bedroom.
19. My girlfriend cooked my friend John dinner on his birthday.
20. Undo Jürgens sings me a song in my apartment.
21. Example: My brothers and I were singing them to my mother.
22. Mary Poppins made them for the twins in New York City.
23. The mechanic fixed it for me yesterday.
24. The mechanic sold them to me after he fixed my car yesterday.
25. The President bought it for the Queen of England in Washington, D.C.
26. The lifeguard threw it to me in the Elbe river when I was a kid.
27. Peter and his daughter didn't drive the car this morning.
28. Sween Todd didn't build it for the phantom last year.
29. My father didn't paint the house this summer.
30. Toby didn't eat pizza in the United States today.
31. Bill didn't give his favorite sports team a donation.
32. My wife didn't bake it for my friends before the party.
33. He didn't sell them life insurance in his office yesterday.
34. The waiter didn't bring it to my friends in the restaurant five minutes ago.
35. Example: What did John drive to school?
36. What did your mother bake after school every day?
37. Where did Michael and Susan eat bananas?
38. When did Udo Jürgens sing 'Greek Wine?'
39. What did Michael row to shore?
40. What is an ant?
41. Who is the greatest singer of all time?
42. What language can you speak?
43. Where are Nathan and Lucille?
44. What is older than the United States of America?
45. Where can you find me?
46. Who is your boss?

47. What are you? What is your nationality?
48. **Example:** How many people are there in Berlin?
49. Ho many brothers and sisters do you have?
50. What kind of car do you drive?
51. How often does she sing that song?
52. How badly was the car damaged?
53. How many children does Mrs. Von der Leyen have?
54. How often is that movie on TV?

Solutions to the exercises *after* the worksheet.

1. "Rupert built his father a six-bedroom vacation home."

Subject:	**Rupert**	Direct Object:	**a six-bedroom home**
Verb:	**Built/build**	Indirect Object:	**his father**

2. "The rain filled my pond up for me."

Subject:	**the rain**	Direct Object:	**my pond**
Verb:	**filled**	Indirect Object:	**me**

3. Tomorrow my sister will eat a pizza.
4. My father made my mother a birthday card yesterday.
5. I will give the President a briefing next month.
6. You (always) bring your English teacher a bottle of wine (always.)
   'Always' is the time in this sentence, but it's technically an adverb, so it sounds best in front of the verb. A little tricky, huh?
7. Seat belts are always a great idea. (see the note on number six.)
8. The U.S. government gave a lot of it to the banks last year!
9. John told it to Mary.
10. My mother baked him a cake.
11. Susan sold it to Peter.
12. My boss wrote it to me.
13. My sisters sang them a song.
14. Peter Paul and Mary didn't sing that song.
15. He visited me last weekend.

16. I have a problem with mayonnaise on my French fries.
17. T don't think the dog peed in the living room again.
18. Who bought a house in Texas?
19. What did you eat on your birthday?
20. Can he speak Hindi?
21. What does the President love?
22. How many cats are on the roof?