



## SENTENCE ORDER

### 35a

### Vary basic sentence order

In English, there are seven basic sentence orders for declarative sentences, influenced by different types of verbs and the elements that work with those verbs. Becoming familiar with these basic sentence orders will help you revise your writing if you find yourself frequently writing the same pattern or order. For more in-depth discussion of the word classes that form these patterns, see [Section I](#).

#### 1. Subject + intransitive verb

A sentence that includes an intransitive verb does not need anything to follow the verb for the sentence to be complete. However, the intransitive verb **can** be followed by an adverb or other optional elements, such as a prepositional phrase, and other optional elements can occur in other places in the sentence.

→ **Money talks.**

S V

→ **Money talks** loudly.

→ Sometimes, **money talks** loudly.

→ Sometimes, **money talks** loudly in a bad economy.

→ Sometimes, in a bad economy, **money talks** loudly.



Notice that all of the sentences above have the same basic sentence order with the subject and intransitive verb at the center of the sentence.

Even though these sentences might appear different to you, they have the same underlying pattern, and as such, if you write most of your sentences using this same pattern, your prose style will take on a monotonous rhythm.

## 2. Subject + transitive verb + direct object

A sentence that has a subject, transitive verb, and direct object is the most frequently used English sentence order. The transitive verb requires a noun or noun phrase as its direct object. A noun that comes after a direct object answers one of these questions: What? Whom? (What did the highway workers clean? Whom did John see?) Just like any other sentence pattern, this one can take optional elements, such as adverbs or prepositional phrases.

→ The highway workers **cleaned** **the sign**.

S                      V              DO

→ Yesterday, **the highway workers**  
**cleaned the sign**.

→ Yesterday, **the highway workers**  
**cleaned the sign** vigorously.



## 3. Subject + transitive verb + indirect object + direct object

Some transitive verbs require both a direct object and an indirect object. There is a simple way to tell the difference between an indirect object and a direct object. Direct objects answer one of these questions: What? or Whom? Indirect objects answer one of these questions: To what? To whom? For what? For whom?

→ The foreman **gave** **Chris** **the work order**.

S              V              IO              DO

Gave what? the work order

To whom? Chris

You can also add optional elements to this type of sentence order.

→ At the beginning of the shift, **the foreman gave Chris** **the lost work order**.

#### 4. Subject + transitive verb + direct object + object complement

A small number of transitive verbs—such as *declare*, *call*, *name*—require a direct object and object complement. The object complement is a necessary element in this type of sentence; it describes the direct object. Remember that a direct object answers one of these questions: Whom? What? An object complement can be either a noun phrase or an adjective phrase.

→ Sarah **called me a novice.**

S V DO NP

Whom did Sarah call a novice? me

→ Sarah **called me lazy.**

S V DO Adj

Whom did Sarah call lazy? me

Just like with any other sentence pattern, you can add other optional elements, but you still have the same sentence pattern.

→ When I could not do the ASL sign for *water*, **Sarah called me a novice.**

#### 5. Subject + transitive verb + direct object + adverbial complement

Some transitive verbs—such as *place*, *put*—require both a direct object and an adverbial complement. An adverbial complement is the name for a prepositional phrase that gives information about when, where, why, and how.

→ Alex **put the sign on the door.**

S V DO Adv

You can also lengthen this type of sentence pattern with optional elements.

→ Yesterday morning, **Alex put the sign on the door** with the red stripes.



## 7. Subject + linking verb + adverbial complement

A linking verb can also take an adverbial complement. The adverbial complement—usually a prepositional phrase—is required for this type of sentence to be complete.

→ The warning signs **are on the back wall**.

S                      V                      Prep Ph

### DID YOU KNOW?

You might think that sentences are structured in all languages the same as many English sentences: begin with a subject, add a verb, and end with an object (e.g., *Sam drank the water*). But not all languages are subject-verb-object (SVO) languages. Many are SOV (e.g., *Sam the water drank*), including Japanese and Persian. There are even a few languages with VOS, OVS, and OSV word orders; Fijian, for example, has a VOS word order: *Drank the water Sam*.



## 35b

### Vary sentence openings

You can vary sentence openings to help your writing not take on a dull or boring sentence rhythm.

#### 1. Add introductory words, phrases, and clauses

Adding in optional introductory words, phrases, or clauses can also lengthen your sentences, a sign of a more sophisticated and complex writing style.

Sample of dull or boring sentence rhythm → The Hollywood sign is a national monument. The Hollywood sign is in Griffith Park in Los Angeles. The sign is 45 feet tall, and it has white letters. It was created as an advertisement in 1923.

Add a transitional/introductory word → The Hollywood sign is a national monument. **However**, it is located in Griffith Park and not Hollywood.

Add an introductory verb phrase → **Located in Griffith Park**, the Hollywood sign is a national monument.

Add an introductory prepositional phrase → **In Griffith Park**, the Hollywood sign is a national monument.

Add an introductory clause → **Although the Hollywood sign was first created as an advertisement in 1923**, it is now a national monument.

## EXERCISE 2

*Directions: Join the pairs of sentences together by using introductory words, phrases, or clauses.*

*Example: The Hollywood sign was created in 1923. The Hollywood sign is a national monument. → Created in 1923, the Hollywood sign is a national monument.*

1. The Welcome to Las Vegas sign is a historic landmark. The Welcome to Las Vegas sign is on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places.
2. The Welcome to Las Vegas sign is a historic landmark. It was funded and erected in May 1959.
3. The sign is in the town of Paradise. The sign is roughly four miles away from the city limits of Las Vegas.
4. In March 2009, Clark County council members nominated the sign to be



placed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. On May 1, 2009, the sign was placed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places.

5. The sign is 25 feet tall. The sign is a classic roadside pole design.

## 2. Avoid *subject-itis*

When you use the same sentence pattern or order, your sentences can start to look like they all have the same beginning. Some teachers and editors call this *subject-itis*, labeling it as a sentence disease. Check out this group of sentences that all begin with a subject.

**The Hollywood sign** is a national monument. **The Hollywood sign** is in Griffith Park in Los Angeles. **The sign** is 45 feet tall, and it has white letters. **It** was created as an advertisement in 1923.

One of the ways you can cure *subject-itis* is by using introductory words, phrases, or clauses. Another way is to do some sentence combining, joining some of the sentences together to form compound or complex sentences.

Add an introductory verb phrase → **Standing 45 feet tall with white letters**, the Hollywood sign is a national monument located in Griffith Park in Los Angeles.

Join sentences together → The Hollywood sign is a national monument located in Griffith Park in Los Angeles; **its white letters stand 45 feet tall.**

Add an introductory verb phrase → **Created as an advertisement in 1923**, the Hollywood sign is a national monument located in Griffith Park; **its white letters stand 45 feet tall.**

### Helpful hint

*Subject-itis* can quickly turn into *I-itis* (with every sentence beginning with an *I*) when you write a first-person narrative. Be especially careful of this type of repetition when using the first-person for narratives or other types of academic writing.

## 35c Fix misplaced modifiers

Modifiers can be used to add information to sentences, but they can sometimes cause problems as well if not placed in the correct position in the sentence.

### 1. Check for misleading or misplaced modifiers

If a modifier is misplaced, it can cause confusion or even give an unwanted meaning to a sentence. There are three main types of misleading or misplaced modifiers: squinting, limiting, and disruptive.

**Squinting modifiers** are words or phrases that can refer to more than one word or phrase in the sentence. Revise the sentence so the modifier is placed directly where it refers to only a single word or phrase.

Squinting modifier → The girl in my English class is in the corner with the protest sign.



Is the girl in the corner? Is the protest sign in the corner? Are they both in the corner? Place the modifier where its meaning cannot be misleading.

OK → **The girl with the protest sign is in the corner; I know her from English class.**

**Limiting modifiers**, such as *almost*, *even*, *just*, *merely*, and *only*, usually give information about how many or how often. Be careful where you place these modifiers since poor placement can cause ambiguity.

Limiting modifier poorly placed → We **almost** had 30 signs painted by the end of the day.

How can you *almost have* something? The *almost* is modifying how many signs were done by the end of the day, so this limiting modifier needs to be next to the phrase it modifies.

OK → We had **almost** 30 signs painted by the end of the day.

**Disruptive modifiers** are any type of modifiers that come in the middle of a phrase or sentence, **and** their position allows them to disrupt that same phrase or sentence. Some disruptive modifiers can be grammatically correct and still be disruptive. Be sure that modifying phrases or clauses do not become long and winding paths that lead the reader off the main point.

Disruptive modifier → We had 30 signs—**ten blue ones, five yellow ones, five red ones, three green ones, three purple ones, three orange ones, and one black one**—that needed to be painted by the end of the day.

OK → We had to paint 30 signs by the end of the day; they included **ten blue ones, five yellow ones, five red ones, three green ones, three purple ones, three orange ones, and one black one**.

Splitting a verb infinitive (*to + verb*) with a modifier is also disruptive. Although some instructors and editors accept split infinitives, many do not; it will always be fine to rework a split infinitive.

Split infinitive → The foreman warned us to **carefully** place the signs in the truck.

OK → The foreman warned us to place the signs **carefully** in the truck.

### Helpful hint

Some split infinitives are part of our culture; fixing them might cause confusion and comment.

→ On *Star Trek*, the captain and crew want to **boldly** go where no one has gone before.

## 2. Check for dangling modifiers

**Dangling modifiers** are verbals (to + verb, verb + *-ing*, or verb + *-en/-ed*) placed either at the beginning or end of the sentence and has the verbal modifying the wrong word.

Dangling modifier → **Having been painted**, we put the signs into the delivery truck.

The dangling modifier (*having been painted*) appears to modify *we*, but it should modify *the signs*. You can fix a dangling modifier in a variety of ways, including moving the word being modified into the correct position or rewording the entire sentence.

OK → **Having been painted**, the signs were put into the delivery truck.

OK → The **painted** signs were put into the truck.

OK → We put the **painted** signs into the truck.

Participial verb phrases (with *-ing* or *-ed*) endings are often at the beginning of a dangling modifier.

Dangling modifier → **Left on their own**, the signs were put into the truck by the kids.

OK → The kids, **left on their own**, put the signs into the truck.

### EXERCISE 3

*Directions: Rewrite each sentence to avoid the misplaced or misused elements.*

1. He says sometimes that he worries about the job his painters are doing.
2. The painters, who he had hired only one month ago and who had previously worked for the city of Las Vegas where one had been fired, were doing an acceptable job overall.
3. Calling the painters each morning, the painters then went to the job the manager assigned.

4. The painters sometimes left their equipment at the job site which sometimes included brushes and paint.
5. The manager wants his painting crew to only do good work.

## 35d

**Check direct v. indirect speech**

Direct speech is highlighted with quotation marks. Indirect quotations or speech do not take quotation marks. When you use an indirect quotation or indirect speech, be sure to change the order of the sentence, if necessary, and use the correct punctuation.

Direct quotation → The manager said, "Put the signs in the truck."

Indirect quotation → The manager said to put the signs in the truck.

Direct question → Did you put the signs in the truck?

Indirect question → He asked if the signs had been put in the truck.

## 35e

**Check for empty phrases and clauses**

Even though sentences that begin with *it* or *there + be* are grammatically correct, they use extra words or empty phrases that sometimes can be easily removed if the sentence is rephrased.

**1. Check for empty *it***

Empty phrase → It had taken three hours for the students to paint the signs.

OK → **The students took three hours to paint the signs.**

**2. Check for empty *there***

Empty phrase → There were three signs that the students forgot to paint.

OK → **The students forgot to paint three signs.**