

Word order in English

This is a brief comment on word order. The order of words is important in English, and sometimes the word order changes the meaning. Why is word order so important?

There are several reasons, and an important one is that we have very few *inflections*¹. We have the plural, **-s** (or **-es**), like this: **books, boxes**; and we have **-ed** (or **-d**) to show the past tense, like this: **walked, dived**; and we have **-s** on the verb in third person singular present simple, like this: **she goes, Jack gets up, Janice likes apples**. And there are a few others, and a few irregular forms.

It is word order that tells us if a word is the subject or the object of a sentence. Look at these two:

The dog bit the man.

***The man bit the dog* (!!)**

The first sentence sounds unpleasant, but normal; the second sentence sounds very strange!

It is word order that tells us if a sentence is a question or not. Look at these two sentences:

How tall is he? (This is a question about his height)

How tall he is! (This is not a question: he *is* very tall, and I am surprised by this)

Here's another one which often troubles learners:

How tall is Brendan? This is a question.

I asked Susan how tall Brendan was. This is a report of a question, it is *not* a question.

Here's a more complex set:

Only Jack spoke to Jill. Jack was the only person to speak to her.

Jack only spoke to Jill. He didn't give her anything.

Jack spoke only to Jill. He didn't speak to anyone else.

Word order in English can sometimes be rigid:

knife and fork, black and white. We always (nearly always) say these words in this order.

A pleasant young French guy. You can't change this order.

A final point: native speakers sometimes play with the normal order of words to create special effects, but you have to be a native speaker – or close to it – to be able to do that!

¹Inflections. These are syllables that we add to the end of words, to make them plural (-s), change the time (-ed) and so on.