

Introduction

You may have already discovered that the world is divided into two camps; not good and evil as you may have been lead to believe, but native speakers (me) and non-native speakers (you). I'm American and have worked for decades in Sweden editing scholarly articles and business documents written in English by non-native speakers. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from a Swedish university which means that my degree is in English as a Second Language. Besides reading the classics and contemporary English literature, our course examined the stumbling blocks Scandinavians face when they write in English, and for some reason, the stumbling blocks faced by people with a Slavic native tongue when they confront the English language. I don't know why the latter was included on our course; probably someone from the English Department had written a paper about the differences between Slavic languages and English and found a way to slip their know-how into the curriculum.

Anyhow, my clients are an eclectic bunch from all over the world since Sweden receives tens of thousands of international graduate students annually. I also edit business documents that are produced in mind-boggling quantities by non-native speakers, since English is the corporate language of multinational companies with offices in Sweden. All of my clients, scholars and businesspeople alike, have a firm grasp of their topic, but since English is their second language they make mistakes that look childish. I

can't explain why this happens; my clients are not on the beginner level. I guess these mistakes can be chalked up to putting intricate thoughts into print on a short deadline with coffee as the only sustenance over an extended period of time. Whatever the reason, whether it's lousy coffee or a tight schedule, these mistakes give my clients an inexperienced appearance in the eyes of peers with English as a native tongue. This can have undesired consequences: A scholarly article may be refused by a peer reviewed journal, a PhD candidate may be rebuked for their English usage while they're defending their dissertation, and a financial report for investors may be shuffled to the bottom of a paper mountain never to be read.

I've discovered that it doesn't matter what country my clients come from, because they all make the same mistakes in five areas of English grammar and composition. I suspect that the root to these mistakes is deeply embedded in the reptilian brain along with breathing, body temperature and sexual behavior, far beyond the reach of instructors or wisdom. But, having said that, I thought that if I could write a guide that explains these basic problem areas in plain English instead of academic-lingua-babble, maybe you could keep these areas in mind and improve your writing.

I use two sources in this guide. One of these sources is the classic *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White. I admire the no-nonsense approach to grammar and composition of these authors. Another source I use is *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills* by John M Swales and Christine B Feak. Both of these books address matters of grammar, style, composition and vocabulary for the native speaker.

Grammar for the Non-Native Speaker addresses these same matters in a no-nonsense fashion, but for the non-native speaker on the intermediate or advanced level. I've included a chapter on stylistic pointers, because I've found that instruction in English abroad is uneven and, sorry to say, outdated to the point of being Shakespearean. These stylistic pointers will help bring your text into the 21st century.

This is what this guide is not: It is not a comprehensive grammar book or a style manual. There are plenty of those on the market. It does not deal with punctuation. It does not give spelling rules like “*i* before *e* except after *c*.” It is not in-depth or definitive about the grammar rules it examines. It is not highfaluting.

This is what it is: It is easy to access and navigate; taking into consideration the panicky writer whose deadline was yesterday. Each chapter is short with a reader-friendly layout, so that if you don't have time to read the body of text in a chapter, you can learn by looking at the examples provided. This guide addresses the most common mistakes made by non-native speakers. It is elemental.

Deborah Fronko

Word order important, why is?

The above sentence is grammatically incorrect, but you understand what it means even though it is written in *Yoda-speak*.¹ The sentence also gives the impression that it is written in backwards English. If you are writing a scholarly article in English you want your reader to understand what you mean, but not only that, you want your reader to accept you as a peer. If you write in English using the word order of your native tongue, you risk writing backwards English and sounding like Master Yoda. Yoda-speak has an endearing quality that is hard to resist, but if you write in Yoda-speak you will not be accepted as an equal in your professional community. Consequently, your scientific finding will not have the earthshaking effect you are hoping for, your business prowess will be underestimated, or your artistic achievement will be unappreciated.

The problem with word order occurs because different languages have different word order typologies. Typology is a word for a classification used by linguists and it is based on types or categories. In language, these are types or categories of syntactic constituents, which are the parts of sentences linguists call phrases or clauses.

Basic word order is described in linguistics as (V) the infinite verb, (S) the subject and (O) the object. This means that there are six possible word orders for a transitive sentence. By transitive sentence I mean a sentence that

¹ [http:// www.yodaspeak.co.uk](http://www.yodaspeak.co.uk) (February 22, 2011)

expresses an action between a subject and an object. Here is an example: *A scientist conducts research*. You've probably already figured it out, but in case you haven't, there are six possible word orders: (SVO) subject verb object, (SOV) subject object verb, (VSO) verb subject object, (VOS) verb object subject, (OSV) object subject verb, (OVS) object verb subject.

The majority of languages use the SOV word order. Modern English, the Romance languages, Bulgarian, Chinese and Swahili, use the SVO order. So you can see that there are grounds for confusion here. Another element that may confuse matters for you if you have a Germanic language as your native tongue is a thing called V2 word order, or verb-second word order. This means that a verb is always in the second position of a declarative main clause, which is not true for English. Since I know Swedish, I will show you an example of what I mean in that language, and in Swedish this movement is only allowed in main clauses. Examples in five other languages are on page 57.

Swedish V2 word order

Igår skrev hon ett brev.

Literal translation

Yesterday wrote she a letter.

But the word order is the same here in both Swedish and English (SVO).

Swedish

Hon skrev ett brev igår.

English

She wrote a letter yesterday.

You must agree with me that the literal translation in the first example above resembles Yoda-speak. I know you would never intentionally make this mistake, but you may get lost navigating the winding road of verb-subject-object positions when you are composing a complicated sentence or expressing a complex idea in English. Below are examples of backwards sentences in English written by brilliant non-native scholars who, despite lofty IQs, sound like little Master Yoda.

This is backwards:

- Through the area runs a pedestrian path covered with a pent-roof.

This is straightforward:

- A pedestrian path covered with a pent-roof runs through the area.

This is backwards:

- In connection with introducing new and better tools the field of semi-automatic ontology construction has emerged.

This is straightforward:

- The field of ontology has emerged as new and better tools are being introduced in the field of semi-automatic ontology.

Below are some additional examples of sentences that are confusing and give an inexpert impression. I want to include them here to illustrate the importance of unambiguous, straightforward language.

The first sentence in each pair below winds around without getting to the point. I have a lousy sense of

direction and get lost easily, so sentences that wind around, twisting and turning their subject-object-verb positions lose me. I don't get the point, and if I don't get the point then I can't make sense of the sentence. I'm only an editor but what if I was a member of the Nobel Committee and couldn't make sense of your sentences?

Confusing

- Descriptions of health conditions can be made at different levels of detail.

Clear

- Health conditions can be described at different levels of detail.

Confusing

- Analyses of wood meal and leaching liquor were made as described above.

Clear

- Wood meal and liquor leaching were analyzed as described above.

Do you see the difference between the backwards sentences and the straightforward ones? I am not saying that I have made them perfect and that they cannot be improved, but they are straightforward and to the point. A straightforward sentence is easy to understand. Straightforwardness enables your readers to stay on course to the end of the sentence and whatever it is you want to say.

Exercise Word Order

These are famous quotes. Can you put them in the correct word order? Can you guess who wrote them?

Answer key page 57.

1. Begin with a single step, the journey must of a thousand miles.
2. Of revenge before you embark on a journey, dig two graves.
3. You enjoy wasting time, was wasted not.
4. Life is what happens to you while, busy making other plans you are.
5. Never the one we had prepared ourselves for, the calamity that comes is.
6. Paid for in wartime wars are not, the bill comes later.
7. Love to twenty-five thousand people I on stage make, and then I go home alone.
8. To satisfy every man's need earth provides enough, but not every man's greed.
9. Sinking desert rats a ship.
10. Twice seldom knocks opportunity.