

## Grammatically Speaking

by [Michelle Jackson](#)

### How to Teach Subject-Verb-Object Word Order

One way that linguists classify world languages is by word order. As language teachers, we benefit from developing an understanding of the variety of word order patterns. This understanding can inform our teaching as it enhances our knowledge of our students' native languages.

The most common word order is Subject + Object + Verb (SOV; e.g., Mr. Zuckerman a pig bought.) This order is followed in languages such as Korean, German, and Japanese. English follows the second most common word order, which is Subject + Verb + Object (SVO; e.g., Mr. Zuckerman bought a pig). Other SVO languages include Romance languages (e.g., Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese), Chinese, and Russian. Less common are Verb + Subject + Object languages (e.g., Bought Mr. Zuckerman a pig.), which include Celtic languages such as Irish and Gaelic, as well as Arabic. Other languages have such flexible word order that they defy consistent word order classification.

Because English follows the second most common word order pattern, it is likely that ESL students from SOV mother tongues will assume English is an SOV language. This assumption may lead them to commit word order errors in English.

### Classroom Activity: Chalkboard Relay Race

A chalkboard relay race is an interactive and collaborative method of increasing all students' written production while allowing them to practice SVO word order. If planned for properly, it can also allow for a review of vocabulary or reading content.

#### Materials Required

- Chalkboard or whiteboard, writing utensils (one utensil per team)
- A list of potential subjects, verbs, and objects from a recent reading or vocabulary chapter

**Timing:** 20–30 minutes

#### Step 1

Inform students that English follows a Subject + Verb + Object word order and that this word order might be different from their native language.

The following examples are from *Charlotte's Web*, though you may want to borrow examples from recent vocabulary themes or readings. (5 minutes)

- |               |        |        |
|---------------|--------|--------|
| Mr. Zuckerman | bought | a pig. |
| subject       | verb   | object |

- Fern **named** the pig Wilbur.  
subject    verb    object
- Wilbur **made** lots of friends.  
subject    verb    object

## Step 2

Introduce the concept of a chalkboard relay. Students will be divided into teams and everyone will receive a subject, verb, or object that must then be incorporated into a sentence. A student from each team will approach the board, one at a time, each adding one word to the sentence until it is complete. Model the activity for the students, if needed. (5 minutes)

## Step 3

Divide students into groups of six. Pass around writing utensils. Remind students that all their sentences must follow SVO word order. (2 minutes)

## Step 4

Provide students with the required subject, verb, or object for the first sentence. For example, give students with the word “Fern” as the subject. When you say “go,” the first student from each team would approach the chalkboard and write “Fern” on the board, then pass the chalk to the second student on his or her team. The second student might write “likes” (or any other verb) before passing the chalk to the next teammate. This continues until a team completes a correct sentence with SVO order in the shortest amount of time. The first team to write an SVO sentence on the board gets 1 point. (2 minutes per sentence)

## Step 5

Repeat step 4 as desired. (2+ minutes)

## Optional Extension

The relay could easily be extended by completing rounds with different themes or by doing the first round in the simple present and the second round in the simple past. If you are short on board space, students can sit in groups at their desks and collaboratively write the sentences on paper. If competition is not preferable, rather than rewarding the quickest team, you can reward all teams that are able to complete the sentence task in a set amount of time (45–60 seconds).

Happy teaching,  
Michelle

## Resources

Cook, V. (1997). *Inside language*. New York, NY: Arnold.

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***Dr. Michelle Jackson*** is the associate director of teaching at New Mexico State University's Teaching Academy. She designs, develops, and delivers workshops on a variety of teaching and learning topics. Prior to NMSU, she was the manager of the English Language Institute at UT El Paso. She has taught English as a second language at UT El Paso and Harvard University as well as Spanish at UT Austin.