Word order for Chinese speakers

English A2

What this topic teaches

Chinese bends its sentences around the known and the new; English keeps a spine: **subject, verb, object** , and after that, place before time. Learn two rules and one ladder, and most A2 sentences build themselves.

- The spine: Subject, Verb, Object. Time words do not break it; questions only add a hook at the front.
- The tail: place before time, at the end: *I studied in the library yesterday.*
- Memory hook: English is a **train**: engine, cars, and the caboose is time.

The spine: S-V-O

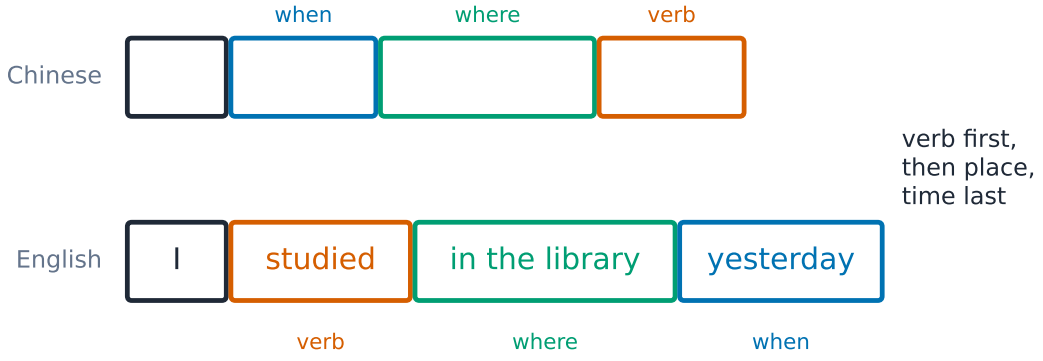
Chinese habit	English spine
(time first)	I met a friend yesterday.
(time in the middle)	I studied in the library yesterday.
(object first)	I do not understand this question.

- Who does what to whom: keep the doer first, the verb second, the receiver third.
- Time is welcome to come, but only at the end (or the very start for emphasis, with a comma).

The tail: place before time

English packs the end of the sentence in a fixed order: HOW, WHERE, then WHEN.

- *She sang beautifully in the hall last night.* (how, where, when)
- *I will wait for you at the gate at six.* (where, when)
- Chinese puts both before the verb, time first and then place – the table's second example above shows yesterday (time) before the library (place). English puts both after the verb in the reverse order, place first and time last: *I studied in the library yesterday.* The caboose is time.



Chinese: when, where, verb. English: verb, where, when

■ **A first try**

Reorder each into English order.

- library in / studied / yesterday / I → I studied in the library yesterday.
- six / at the gate / will wait / I / for you → I will wait for you at the gate at six.

The adverb ladder: where the small words stand

Frequency adverbs (always, usually, never) have a usual home: before the main verb, after be, and after the first helper verb (*I have never seen*, *I can always*). Other common adverbs follow the tail rules.

Adverb type	Home	Example
frequency	before main verb	I often walk.
frequency + be	after be	She is never angry.
manner (how)	end, or before the verb	He drives carefully.
time (when)	very end, usually	We left at eight.

- One adverb moves easily; two adverbs need the ladder: how, where, when.

Questions: the spine with a hook

Questions keep the spine and add a hook at the front: do/does/did, or the question word.

- Yes/no: **Do** you like tea? (the hook do, then the spine: you like tea)
- Wh-: **Where** do you live? (question word + hook + spine)
- In a wh-question the question word moves to the front: *What do you want?* The Chinese-style *You want what?* is only a surprised echo (*You want WHAT?*), not a normal question.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

- Do not park time in the middle: *I yesterday met* is a Chinese guest in an English sentence.
- Do not lead with the object: *This question I do not understand* is possible for strong emphasis, but it sounds strange in normal A2 writing. Use *I do not understand this question.*
- The question hook is cheap: do, does, did carry no meaning, only the question mark.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. The spine: name the three cars in order. – **Subject, verb, object** (the doer, the action, the receiver).
2. Order the tail: *yesterday / in the park / happily / played / We.* – ***We played happily in the park yesterday.*** How, where, when.
3. Adverb home: *She (is / always) busy.* – ***She is always busy.*** After *be.*
4. Build the question: *you / do / where / live?* – ***Where do you live?*** Question word, hook, spine.

■ Practice: fix the order

Each sentence has one order mistake. Write it correctly, then check.

1. *I yesterday played basketball.*
2. *He goes always to the gym.*
3. *We will at seven meet at the cinema.*
4. *This film I really like.*
5. *You want what for dinner?*
6. *She is late never.*

Answers. 5 ***I played basketball yesterday.*** Time goes at the end. 6 ***He always goes to the gym.*** Frequency before the main verb. 7 ***We will meet at the cinema at seven.*** Time does not park in the middle: place, then time, at the end. 8 ***I really like this film.*** Subject, verb, object. 9 ***What do you want for dinner?*** The question word and the hook come first. 10 ***She is never late.*** After *be.*