

Creating emphasis in English

In spoken English we can emphasize things in a sentence with **stress and intonation**.

In written English there are **sentence structures** that permit us to create emphasis.

Generally speaking information placed at the end of a sentence receives most emphasis. This can be called the **end-focus principle**. E.g.

I worked in a factory

This is where we put new information.

It is also where more weighty parts of a sentence (defined in terms of length or grammatical complexity) should be placed. This can be called the **end-weight principle**. Compare

My father owns the largest first class hotel in London.

The largest first class hotel in London belongs to my father.

The second sounds awkward and unbalanced but can be defended on the grounds that the writer wants to place the focus of information on father.

The first position in the sentence is familiar territory. **Here we tell the reader or listener what we are going to talk about** and for this reason we can call the first element in the clause **the topic**. In most sentences it is the subject of the sentence.

The Japanese make the best cameras.

Here 'The Japanese' is **the topic**. If we want to emphasize 'The Japanese' rather than 'cameras' we can do so by using the passive:

The best cameras are made by the Japanese.

alternatively we can use the it-cleft:

It is the Japanese who make the best cameras.

How to create emphasis in English: the It-cleft

A cleft sentence is a way of cutting a sentence in half so that you can give emphasis to the important or new information. It tells the reader or listener what information they need to pay attention to.

Rob ate my biscuits yesterday.

Here we can make 3 sentences with similar meanings but emphasizing different things.

***It was Rob** who ate my biscuits yesterday.* (not Charlotte)

***It was my biscuits** that Rob ate.* (not my banana)

***It was yesterday** that Rob ate my biscuits* (not today)

The cleft sentence with introductory *it* is useful for **fronting an element as a topic and also for putting focus (usually for contrast) on the topic element.**

For centuries London had been growing as a commercial port of world importance. But it was in the north of England that industrial power brought new prosperity to the country. [Topic = adverbial]

Structure of the it-cleft

It is/was + the key info we want to emphasize + (that) + *the rest of the message*

Rewrite these sentences using an it-cleft

1. Scientists now believe that human activity is the principle cause.

→ It is human activity that scientists now think is the principle cause.

2. Young people are attracted to science by idealism not by money or career opportunities.

→ It is idealism, not money or career opportunities, that attracts young people to science.

3. The demonstrators didn't start the trouble

→ It wasn't the demonstrators who started the trouble.

4. Real wealth is health, not pieces of gold and silver.

→ It is health that is real wealth, not pieces of gold and silver (Gandhi)

5. Money is the thing that people care more about nowadays

→ It is money that people care about nowadays.

6. Obesity rather than cancer is now the major cause of death in the UK.

→ It is obesity rather than cancer that is now the major cause of death in the UK.

7. She hardly ever saw her family because she worked all the time.

→ It was because she worked all the time that she hardly ever saw her family.

8. The freshness of his ingredients makes his cooking so good

→ It is the freshness of his ingredients that makes his cooking so good.

Wh-type clefts sentences (sometimes called pseudo clefts)

I enjoyed the music more than anything else in the film.

→ *What I enjoyed more than anything else in the film was the music.*

In this case important information is emphasized by putting it at the end of a sentence.

We put the less important information into a clause at the beginning with what and open the sentence with this clause. We can then finish with the more important information. The two parts of the sentence are joined with is or was, since we treat the what clause as singular.

We can emphasize different things in the sentence.

Emphasizing the noun

What + understood information + is/was + information you want to emphasize

I hated the insects most. → What I hated most was the insects.

His comment upset her. → What upset her was his comment.

Emphasizing the verb

What + subject + do/does/did + is/was + verb

They moved us to another hotel

→ *What they did was to move us to another hotel*

Emphasizing the whole sentence

What happens/happened is/was + clause

We got to our hotel and found that the room had been double booked.

→ *What happened was we got to our hotel and found that the room had been double booked.*

Rewrite these sentences using a cleft sentence with *what*

1. People who are rude really annoy me

→ What really annoys me is people who are rude.

2. The world is getting hotter. This terrifies me.

→ What terrifies me is that the world is getting hotter.

3. The world needs more love and less paper.

→ What the world needs is less paper and more love.

4. How old is she? That's what I'd like to know.

→ What I'd really like to know is how old she is.

5. I know for sure that what you give comes back to you.

→ What I know for sure is that what you give comes back to you.

6. He lost his job, so he started up his own business.
(emphasize the verb)

→ He lost his job, so what he did was start up his own business.

7. Their car broke down on the highway and they missed their flight. (emphasize whole sentence)

→ What happened was that their car broke down on the highway and they missed their flight.

8. People are travelling more and more nowadays
(emphasize whole sentence)

→ What's happening nowadays is that people are travelling more and more.