

# Cleft sentences for emphasis

## Introduction



**What** I love most about my job is being part of a great team. **It's** their enthusiasm that really inspires me.

## Definition

These are structures that we use in order to focus on a particular part of a sentence. The sentence is cleft (split) into two in order to emphasise one part.

## Construction

The two most common structures use 'it' or 'what' at the beginning of a sentence or clause:

I saw a tiger. [normal sentence]

**It** was a tiger / that I saw. [cleft sentence - second part is a defining relative clause]

**What** I saw / was a tiger. [cleft sentence - the whole is a nominal relative clause]

### Note that:

1. With 'it' clefts, we use a singular verb after 'who' or 'that' when talking to one person.

You have agreed to chair the meeting.

**It's** you who has agreed to chair the meeting.

1. After the verb 'to be', we usually use an object pronoun to emphasise a subject pronoun.

**I'm in charge of the accounts.**

**It's me who's in charge of the accounts.**

**It's I who's in charge of the accounts.**

**I'm the one/person who's in charge of the accounts.**

**[conversational]**

**[very formal and not natural]**

**[a good neutral alternative in conversation or writing]**

1. **'What' clefts can be reversed:**

**What** I don't like is the way he disagrees with everything.

The way he disagrees with everything is **what** I don't like.

2. **When focusing on an action by a particular subject, the sentence is split before the verb and a form of 'do' is used:**

**Joe forgot to cancel the order.**

**What** Joe did was (to) forget to cancel the order.

**When focusing on an entire event, we can introduce another verb. For example:**

**What** happened was that Joe forgot to cancel the order.

**What** went wrong was that Joe forgot to cancel the order. Etc.

**We use 'is' with all present tenses and the present perfect. For example:**

**What** I enjoy most is...

**What** I'm enjoying most is...

**What** I've enjoyed most is...

**We use 'was' with all past tenses. For example:**

**What** I enjoyed most was...

**What** I was enjoying most was...

**What** I'd enjoyed most was...

## Uses

## 'It' clefts

These are used to emphasise people, places and things. Our attention is drawn to important information by placing it near the beginning of a sentence or clause.

### Note that:

1. We often use question tags after 'it' clefts.

**It** was Richard who organised that meeting, wasn't it?

**It's** Friday that you're going on holiday, isn't it?

2. 'It' clefts are often used to correct information.

**It** wasn't in London that we met, but Birmingham.

**It's** *Jane* you need to speak to - not her manager.

In this kind of sentence, we often emphasise the noun when speaking. Similarly, we can emphasise the verb when asserting the truth or denying something:

**It** *was* a tiger that I saw - honestly!

**It** *isn't* me that eats all the biscuits.

1. 'It' clefts can be used to avoid ambiguity.

Did you visit the site with Paul?

[We don't know if this question is about 'you' or Paul.]

Was **it** you who visited the site with Paul?

Was **it** Paul who you visited the site with?

## 'What' clefts

These are used to emphasise verbs and actions - very often related to feelings:

**What** I need/hate/prefer/wish...etc.

They can be used to announce something, especially to an expectant audience:

**What** I'd like to talk about today is the drop in our sales figures.  
**What** we're going to do in today's meeting is look for a long-term solution.

## Using 'all'

We can use 'all' instead of 'what' in 'what' clefts. It means 'the only thing'.

**All** I want is a pay rise, please.  
**All** I did was ask for a pay rise.  
**All** that happened was that I asked for a pay rise.

## Using other 'wh' words

We sometimes use other words instead of 'what':

**Where** I'd really like to live is Italy.  
**Why** we moved offices was to cut costs.  
**How** we managed it was by combining two teams.

**Note that** we can't use 'who' in this way:

Who I don't want to work with is Susan. ❌

The person (who) I don't want to work with is Susan. ✅

## Exception



Hi, **it** was at the Tokyo conference where we last met, wasn't it?



**It** wasn't David whose car broke down on the motorway; it was Mark.



**It's them that I blame - they can never compromise!**



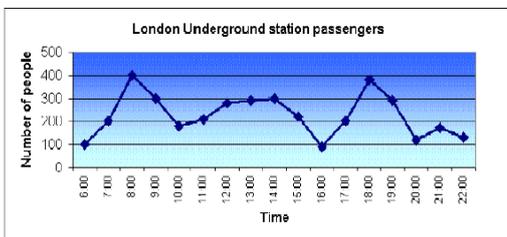
**What we're hoping to achieve is 35% of the market by the end of the year.**



**Is it Jake that you're working with on the new site?**



**All we need now is a bottle of port.**



**When we usually see the highest number of passengers is around rush hour.**

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Last update: 2023/02/14 14:21

