

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!



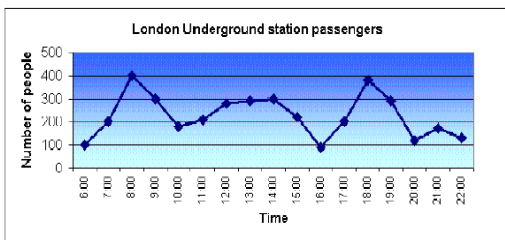
What we're hoping to achieve is 35% of the market by the end of the year.



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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