

Expletives: Directing the Reader's Attention and Avoiding Wordiness

The term “expletive” refers to two specific sentence patterns that postpone the subject of the sentence.

“There were mists over the river and clouds on the mountain and the trucks splashed mud on the road and the troops were muddy and wet in their capes; their rifles were wet and under their capes the two leather cartridge-boxes on the front of the belts, gray leather boxes heavy with the packs of clips of thin, long 6.5 mm. cartridges, bulged forward under the capes so that the men, passing on the road, marched as though they were six months gone with child.”

~ Ernest Hemingway, from *A Farewell to Arms*

Ernest Hemingway opens this observation of the troops with a sentence that calls attention to landscape: he sets the scene. “There were mists,” we are told, and into these mists the trucks come splashing. This sentence form—“there” plus some form of the verb “to be” followed by the subject of the sentence—is called the **there-expletive**. Writers use this sentence form to emphasize the subject in a descriptive pattern—when the subject is not acting, when the writer is simply calling our attention to the existence of the subject.

Here is another example, from an accounting website:

There are three parties to a check: the drawer, the drawee, and the payee.

~ Adapted from *Account-Management* website: <http://accountlearning.blogspot.com/2010/06>

In this example, the there-expletive once again prepares the reader to take in the details of the list. The expletive calls attention to the existence of three parties. The list names them. A paragraph with this sentence as its topic sentence could go on to define and illustrate each of these parties. Such uses of the expletive help the reader to process the specifics by offering a general idea first.

However, writers can overuse this form, or use it inappropriately—when a more action-oriented sentence would create for readers a clearer view of the subject. Consider this expletive:

There was a need for fumigation.

This expletive sentence does not create a clear image for us: Who needs the fumigation? Who is performing the fumigation? Why is the reader looking at the need for the fumigation and not the fumigation itself?

Revised: The house needed fumigation.
 Revised: We needed to fumigate the house.

Each of these sentences revises the expletive to bring the subject more immediately into focus and to observe the expected word order for English sentences: subject-verb-object.

Expletives can also be found in the sentence structures below. These structures begin with **there** or **it** and use a form of the “to be” verb as the main verb of the sentence. Many times, starting sentences with these words blurs the focus of the sentence. Each of these sentences can be rewritten to get to the specific focus of the sentence more efficiently.

Expletive Sentence	Sentence Analysis	Rewritten Sentence
<i>There is</i> a group of students who are milling about in the hall, making noise.	This sentence focuses our attention on the existence of the group, not the action. A revision could bring the action of the sentence more clearly into focus for the reader.	A group of students is milling about in the hall, making noise. Note the subject-verb order of the revision.
<i>It is</i> important to clean the gutters before the first rain of the season.	The “it is” pattern throws more emphasis on the importance of cleaning the gutters. A subject-verb revision can suggest that same importance using the model “must.”	The rain gutters must be cleaned before the first rain of the season.

Evaluating Expletives

Example: **It is** important that all college students vote.
 Revision: College students should/must vote.

Because the writer uses the “it is” expletive as a sentence opener, it takes the reader longer to get to the main point or idea. The writer can also communicate the importance of college student voting by using different modals: “Should” suggests that the students ought to do it, while “must” indicates that the writer thinks it is a requirement.

Example: **There is** a future plan Congress will propose to overhaul the healthcare system that could negatively frustrate constituents.
 Revision: Congress’s proposal to overhaul the healthcare system could frustrate constituents.
 Revision: There is a chance that Congress’s proposal to overhaul the healthcare system will frustrate constituents.

The original sentence gets off to a fuzzy start with its use of the expletive; add in all of the redundancy, and this sentence is just too wordy to communicate clearly. The first revised version cuts out the redundancy and cuts quickly to a clear subject: “Congress’s proposal.” The second revised version uses the there-expletive appropriately—to call attention to the chance for frustration, not frustration itself.

Example: **It is** necessary for us to agree upon what the decided solution is and how we should implement it.

Revised: We must agree upon a solution and implement it.

Revised: It is necessary that we agree on a solution and implement it.

This example uses an “it is” expletive—also known as a cleft sentence—to point to the necessity of something. However, the rest of the sentence wallows in wordiness. If we cut the redundancy, we can begin to see the outlines of a call to action (in the first revision) or a pointed assertion (in the second revision).

Activity

Rewrite the sentences below to remove the expletives.

1. It is important to always start your essay at least two weeks before it is due.
2. There is something clearly needing to be done about the lack of office space.
3. There has been a sudden crisis that has affected every individual within this business establishment that needs to be solved before we can move on to our plans of success.
4. There are several facts that prove your claim is wrong.
5. It is necessary to know the outcome of the play before you cheer.
6. There is a lot of repetition in the poem, and it brings up a lot of questions about the validity of the author’s argument that technology is harming nature.
7. It was when Mary noticed that they had lost the battle that Mary glanced at Bob.

Answer Key for Activity

The following are possible answers for the activity.

1. Always start your essay at least two weeks before it is due.
2. We must do something about the lack of office space.
3. The crisis affecting the business must be solved before we can be successful.
4. Many of these facts prove that your claim is wrong.
5. You should know the outcome of the play before you cheer.
6. The repetition in the poem complicates the author’s argument that technology is harming nature.
7. When she noticed they had lost the battle, Mary glanced at Bob.