

Cleft Sentences: Potentials and Pitfalls

Have you ever used ALL CAPS to emphasize a word in a line? It is “all caps” that stands out, visually, in that line. But look again at the second line:

It is the “all caps” that stands out, visually, in the last line.

In the second sentence, the words “all caps” stands out rhythmically—we hear an added emphasis on those words, given their place in the sentence.

These words have been positioned within the line for emphasis. They have been positioned as the delayed subject in a **cleft sentence**.

Examples of Cleft Sentences

- “It is only to the individual that a soul is given.” ~Albert Einstein
- “It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world and moral courage so rare.” ~Mark Twain
- “It amazes me what humans can do, even when streams are flowing down their faces and they stagger on, coughing and searching, and finding.” ~Markus Zusak, *The Book Thief*
- “It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.” ~Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

If you return these sentences to their normal word order, the emphasis of the cleft pattern falls away, as does the succinct outline of the thought.

Revised Sentences without Cleft Pattern

- A soul is given only to the individual.
- Physical courage is common in the world. Moral courage is rare. This relationship between physical and moral courage in the world is curious.
- What humans can do, even when streams are flowing down their faces and they stagger on, coughing and searching, and finding, amazes me.
- The summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs was a queer, sultry summer, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.

To understand what a cleft sentence is, we must first understand that a sentence is composed of a series of phrases, including noun phrases and verb phrases. Additional information (such as time or place) is often provided.

John threw a party at his parents’ house last week for his graduation.

The term “cleft sentence” refers to a type of sentence constructed so that one important phrase is delayed to emphasize a particular detail.

The Potentials of Cleft Sentences

Beginning the following sentence with “It was” postpones “John,” redirecting the emphasis in the sentence to John, thereby making him the most important detail in the sentence.

It was John who threw a party at his parents’ house last week for his graduation.

If the writer wanted to show that the party in the sentence was the important detail, he or she could write the following cleft sentence.

It was a party that John threw at his parents’ house last week for his graduation.

Similarly, if the writer wanted to emphasize that the most important part of this sentence was the time frame, he or she could write the following cleft sentence.

It was last week that John threw a party at his parents’ house for his graduation.

Likewise, if the writer wanted to show that either the reason or the location were the most important details in the sentence, he or she could write the following cleft sentences.

It was for his graduation that John threw a party at his parents’ house last week.

It was at his parents’ house that John threw a party last week for his graduation.

Writing cleft sentences allows the writer to control the focus in a sentence. As you can see, sentences can be rearranged to reflect whichever details the writer wants to showcase.

Q. Which one of the above examples sounds stilted? Which one would you choose to write? Why?

A. _____

The most common cleft pattern is the It-cleft (like the examples above). However, there is also the Wh-cleft pattern: Wh-cleft sentences are called so because they begin with words such as who, what, where, when, and why.

Examples of Wh-Cleft Sentences

- **Whom** I really want to win an Oscar Award this year is Leonardo DiCaprio.
- **What** I most love to do during the weekend is clean my house and watch TV.
- **Where** I went yesterday was to the library to study for a biology test.

The Pitfalls of Cleft Sentences

Cleft sentences can build excitement and drama in the sentence until the writer reveals the most important phrase. However, sometimes cleft sentences can seem like they take a long time to get to the intended point.

In the following example, the reader does not know what the point of the sentence is until he or she has read almost halfway through the sentence. That takes a lot of time!

Whom I really want to win an Oscar Award this year is Leonardo DiCaprio.

Once we can recognize a cleft sentence, we can revise the sentence to be more concise.

I want Leonardo DiCaprio to win an Oscar Award this year.

The cleft sentence and the revised sentence say the same thing, but the revised sentence uses normal sentence rhythm to move us to the point much more directly. Here are some other revisions of the Wh-cleft pattern sentences that are listed above.

I went to the library yesterday to study for a biology test.

During the weekend, I love to clean my house and watch TV.

These sentences are more direct: readers get a clear subject and verb right away. Cleft sentences slow the reader down so that emphasis can shift, often away from the subject/verb core of shorter sentences. Context determines when such slow-paced sentences are useful.

Conclusions

Write a cleft sentence when

- you want to emphasize a key phrase other than the subject + verb;
- you want to build suspense leading up to a key point;
- you want to avoid a long clause as the subject.

Write a direct subject + verb + object sentence when

- it is important to emphasize who is doing what to whom;
- your readers need a concise statement with a clear sense of purpose.

Activity 1: Identifying Cleft Sentences

Read the following sentences and circle the cleft phrases. If applicable, underline the other phrases that a writer might possibly want to emphasize by rearranging the sentence.

1. It was Gina who read a poem to Tom in front of their entire class.
2. What I wanted was to take a long nap once I came home from school.
3. It was several hours before I finished writing my essay about Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.
4. Where I wanted to go on vacation was Hawaii.
5. It was with joy and pride that Bryan held his newborn son for the first time.

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. it was
2. what
3. it was
4. where
5. it was

Activity 2: Revising Cleft Sentences

Rewrite the following cleft sentences.

1. Who I never thought would betray me was my best friend Julia.
2. It was Walter who used to give me a ride home from work every night.
3. What I expected to happen was that everyone cheer for me when I crossed the finish line.
4. What I wanted was to eat pizza and fall asleep on the couch.
5. It was Sarah who gave me directions to San Francisco.
6. It is time to save water.
7. It is clear that you need a new distributor cap.

Now, compare your rewrites to the original cleft sentences. How is emphasis changed by the cleft pattern? In which of these cases does the shift seem appropriate?

Answer Key for Activity 2

(Answers may vary slightly.)

1. I never thought that my best friend Julia would betray me.
2. Walter used to give me a ride home from work every night.
3. I expected that everyone would cheer for me when I crossed the finish line.
4. I wanted to eat pizza and fall asleep on the couch.
5. Sarah gave me directions to San Francisco.
6. We need to save water now.
7. You clearly need a new distributor cap.

References

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 5th Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013. Print.