

Cleft Sentences

There are two main types of cleft sentence, **it- clefts** and **what- clefts** (and a variation of *what- clefts*, *all-clefts*). *What- clefts* and variations on them are often referred to as pseudo clefts.

1. It- clefts:

Subject focus:

+ Structure: $\boxed{\text{It} + \text{be (is/was)} + \text{S} + \text{that/who} + \text{V}}$

+ Usage: Emphasize the subject that does the action

Ex: It was Thao who/that visited Tom yesterday
S

Object focus:

+ Structure: $\boxed{\text{It} + \text{be (is/was)} + \text{O} + \text{that/whom} + \text{S} + \text{V}}$

+ Usage: Emphasize on the object of the action

Ex: It was Tom whom/that Thao visited yesterday.
O

Adverbial focus:

+ Structure: $\boxed{\text{It} + \text{be (is/was)} + \text{Adverbial phrase} + \text{that} + \text{S} + \text{V} + \text{O}}$

+ Usage: Emphasize the Adverbial phrase in the sentence

Ex: It was yesterday that Thao visited Tom.
Adv

2. What- clefts

What- clefts (meaning the thing), also known as pseudo-clefts, have three patterns. In the first, the *what*-clause is usually in subject position, but it can also be a subject complement, when it is sometimes called a reversed pseudo cleft. Look at these sentences, then at how they are split to make *what*-clefts.

- *Sally dumped me.*
- *I don't like the way she did it.*
- *She locked me out of the flat.*

a) To focus on a noun phrase, we split the sentence just before the noun phrase

$\boxed{\text{what} + \text{clause} + \text{be} + \text{noun phrase}}$

Ex: *I don't like the way she did it.*

→ ***What** I don't like **is** the way she did it.*

→ *The way she did it **is** **what** I don't like. (reversed)*

This pattern is often used with verbs expressing an emotion or want: **like, love, dislike, hate, enjoy, need, prefer, want, etc.**

*All that happened **was** (that) I broke a vase.*

- b) To focus on an action done by the subject, we split the sentence just before the verb (the action) and add a form of do. Note that we might have to change the form of the verb.

what + subject + do / does / did etc + be + verb etc

Ex: *Sally dumped me.*

→ ***What** Sally did **was** (to) dump me.*

Sally had dumped me.

→ ***What** Sally had done **was** (to) dump me.*

- c) To focus on the whole event, especially used to emphasize a series of events or a sequence or an individual event

what + happen + be + (that) + original sentence

Ex: *She locked me out of the flat.*

→ ***What** happened **was** (that) she locked me out of the flat.*

She has locked me out of the flat.

→ ***What** has happened **is** (that) she has locked me out of the flat.*

***note** - we use **was** with any past tense, including past perfect, and we use **is** with any present tense, including present perfect.

3. Emphasis in cleft sentences with all.

We can also use **all** (meaning **the only thing**) instead of *what* in all three of the patterns we use for *what*-clefts.

- *All I want **is** a room somewhere.*
- *All Oliver Twist did **was** (to) ask for more.*

*All that happened **was** (that) I broke a vase.*

4. Other wh-clefts

Although *what* is the by far the most common, we can also in theory use other *wh*-words in pseudo clefts.

- *What we did **was** (to) build a treehouse in the garden.*
- *Why we did it **was** so that the children would have somewhere interesting to play.*
- *Where we did it **was** in the big oak tree overlooking the river.*
- *How we did it **was** by first erecting a platform in the tree.*
- *When we did it **was** in the spring before the leaves grew too much.*

But apart from the *what*-cleft in the first sentence, these clefts starting with a simple *wh*-word are quite **informal**, and we usually prefer to use a longer expression instead.

- *why* - *the reason (why/that)* + clause + *is/was* + focus element
- *where* - *the place where / that* + clause + *is/was* + focus element
- *when* - *the day / week / etc when / that* + clause + *is/was* + focus element
- *how* - *the way that* + clause + *is/was* + focus element
- We can also use a long expression instead of *what*.
- *what* - *the thing /stuff / matter etc that* + clause + *is/was* + focus element

***note** - we can't start a cleft sentence with *who*. We need to say:

- *the person / one who ...*

PRACTICE

Task 1: Fill in each gap with **ONE** suitable word:

1. What I liked most about the movie (1) the music.
2. What she (2) was (3) look for another job.
3. (4) I said (5) that he was a bit late, and he bit my head off.
4. What (6) then (7) that all hell broke loose.
5. All that has happened is (8) the police (9) given me a warning.
6. (10) really annoys me (11) that he's always right.
7. All I (12) (13) to ask for a clean cup, and the waiter went berserk.
8. What (14) happened was that she'd completely forgotten about it.
9. Your attitude is exactly (15) I was wanting to talk to you about.

Task 2: Complete the sentences as cleft sentences focussing on the underlined phrases and including any words in bold. After It's, only use that where necessary. Don't use any final punctuation.

1. I really enjoy a long walk in the country.
 It's
 What
 (is) A long walk
 (That's) A long walk in the country.

2. I dislike his rudeness the most.
 What
 (what) His rudeness
 It's
 (That's) His rudeness.

3. His sense of irony makes me laugh.
 (what) His
 (That's) His sense of irony.
 It's
 What

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