

## What we need is flexibility

Word order is extremely important in English, because it is a language with very few inflexions. However, word order is not as inflexible as many grammars and coursebooks assert. Merely stating restrictive rules, which often seem arbitrary, gives learners the feeling that the language is trying to catch them out. It may be more beneficial and productive to show them the different possibilities and the changes in meaning or emphasis they produce.

## Varying the word order

Learners of English soon become familiar with the usual sequence of clause elements in declarative sentences: we normally focus on the subject, so we put it first, followed by the verb, and an object, complement, or adjunct if there is one: "I screamed... She has brought the tape with her".

In speech we can sometimes vary the focus by our use of intonation, but intonation alone is not always sufficient. So in speech as well as in writing, we often do it by moving an element to the beginning of the sentence, a strategy sometimes called 'fronting'. Adjuncts in particular are frequently 'fronted': "At eight o'clock I went down for my breakfast... With a sigh, he rose and walked away... Luckily, I had seen the play before" (note that after place adjuncts and negative adjuncts we also invert the subject and the verb: "In came a girl she had not seen before... On no account must they be let in").

## The passive

We do not usually put objects and complements at the beginning of a sentence, except in literary or formal writing: "The third sheet he folded and placed in his pocket... Rare indeed is the individual who does not belong to one of these groups". If we want to focus on the person or thing affected by an action, sometimes called the 'logical object', we more frequently use a passive construction. The person or thing affected is stated first and we often do not mention the agent of the action, the 'logical subject', at all: "He has almost certainly been murdered".

There are various possible reasons for this: we may not know who the agent is, we may want to conceal his or her identity, we may already have said who the agent is, and so on. Of course, if we do want to indicate the agent, we can add a prepositional phrase: "This view was challenged by a number of workers... Her hand was covered with blood... Free transport was not included in the contract". We often do this when we want to add further information about the agent in the subsequent clause: "His best friend was killed by a grenade, which exploded under his car".

## Impersonal 'it'

We can use impersonal 'it' structures to shift the focus off the subject and onto one of its attributes. We often do this when we are describing places and situations, or talking about the weather or the time: "It's lonely here... It's my fault... It's raining... It's eight o'clock". If we want to focus on the presence or absence of something, we can use "There is": "There's someone in the bushes... There's no milk".

## Cleft structures

Cleft structures allow us great freedom in selecting focus. We can use impersonal `it', a relative clause, or a `to'-infinitive clause as the subject of the verb `be', and put the important information into the complement. We can use cleft structures to focus on the subject or object: "It was Jason who told them... It's money that they want". Or we can use them to focus on the action itself: "It was meeting Peter that really started me off". Or it may be the circumstances that we want to focus on: "It was in Paris that I met him... It was one o'clock when they left".

### Clefts with `what'

Grammars and coursebooks aimed at the advanced learner often mention the `it' cleft, but neglect the cleft structure beginning with `what'. This structure can be used with a wide range of verbs: "What really changes things in a city is that such stores exist at all... What I have in mind is the neighbours complaining... What we are doing is recognizing the needs of potential tourists... What I object to is when this is made a standard for all other kinds of fiction".

One particularly frequent use of the `what' cleft is to focus on our needs and preferences. The commonest syntactic pattern is `what' followed by the subject, a verb such as `want' or `need', the verb `be', and a noun group referring to the thing that is wanted or needed. A small group of verbs are often used in this pattern, `adore, dislike, enjoy, hate, like, loathe, love, need, prefer, want':

"It is clear that what Charles actually dislikes is not so much 20th century architecture, but the 20th century itself... He liked a game of dominoes but what he really enjoyed was talking about flying... What I would like you to do today, is just to give me the general factual background of your life... She is so energetic and kind and indiscriminating, and what she loves in those children is the returning image of her own cheerfulness... What you need is the padre type, somebody who will have a drink with you in the bar... What we want to see is sensible, workable proposals put forward, discussed and evaluated".

Instead of using `what', we can sometimes use `all' in a similar structure: "All he needed was enough to bet a little on the horses and treat himself to a good port... All you need are big boots and a strong arm and a clever gillie... All I want, Castle, is a serious adventure. An adventure indefinite in length. A month, a year, a decade... All they wanted to get was more pay".

In most spoken instances, the agent is an important part of the sentence, and occurs as the subject in the relative clause. But, especially with the verb `need', the agent is often a situation or people in general, so a passive form of the structure is used. This pattern shows up most frequently in the polemical writing of journalists: "What is needed is a training ship which operates on a commercially-viable route, say between the UK and the Mediterranean... What is now needed, however, is a sharing of learning materials so these networks can be fully exploited... All that was needed was a clever idea for telling the machine which of the infinite variety of `patterns of action' were to be employed at any one time... What was needed was an organized struggle".

### Conclusion

So instead of frightening learners with a lot of `do not's', perhaps we should encourage them to use the rich variety of patterns available to them in English and explain the differences.

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(such as those in this article) easily and accurately. The corpus also provides the numerous authentic examples that are an essential part of all Cobuild publications.