

information structure: getting the right subject

choosing the structure English clauses usually begin with the grammatical subject; so speakers and writers choose structures that will put 'known' or less important information in the subject position (depending on what they want to highlight).

(*That storm!*) **It** damaged Margaret's roof pretty badly.

(*Look at Margaret's roof!*) **It** got damaged in the storm.

(*Poor old Margaret!*) **She** had her roof damaged in the storm.

In these examples, an active structure makes it possible to start with the storm, a passive makes it possible to start with the roof, and the structure with *have* makes it possible to start with Margaret. (For more about choosing between actives and passives, see pages 80–81.)

1 Rewrite the sentences twice.

1 Burglars stole all Sandra's jewellery.

All

Sandra

2 My palm was read by a fortune-teller.

I

A

3 We had the central heating put in by Jenkins and Fowler.

The central heating

Jenkins and Fowler

4 The doctor checked my blood pressure.

My blood pressure

I

5 The car was serviced by my neighbour, who's a mechanic.

My

I

6 I had the house looked at by a qualified surveyor.

The

A

choosing the verb We can often get the right element in the subject position by choosing the right verb. Compare:

- *The biscuit factory **employs** 7,000 people.* (in an article about local industry)
- *7,000 people **work for** the biscuit factory.* (in an article about the local population)
- *Paul **led** the children outside.* (giving information about Paul)
- *The children **followed** Paul outside.* (giving information about the children)

2 Rewrite the sentences with different verbs.

1 Oliver impresses everybody. (*admire*)

.....

2 I bought a faulty hair dryer from a man in the market. (*sell*)

.....

3 I learnt Spanish from Mrs Lopez. (*teach*)

.....

4 I borrowed the money I needed from my sister. (*lend*)

.....

5 Joe's stories amuse everybody. (*laugh*)

.....

6 The flu epidemic in 1918–19 killed over 20 million people. (*die*)

.....

It, this and that can all be used in a text to refer back to something. There are sometimes differences. *It* usually refers to something that is already being discussed.

As the cleaner was moving the computer, he dropped it onto the table. It was badly damaged.
(The computer was damaged.)

This refers to something new that is just being brought to somebody's attention.

As the cleaner was moving the computer, he dropped it onto the table. This was badly damaged.
(The table was damaged.)

1 Choose the best pronoun.

- The house that she bought was in the centre of the village, near the church. *It / This* had four rooms and a pleasant garden.
- THE OLD SCHOOL HOUSE, BARTON. *It / This* is an attractive 19th-century house, recently restored and in excellent condition, with a mature garden ...
- After she had lived there for a time, she decided to paint the house pink. *It / This* upset the neighbours a bit.
- I saw a really good film yesterday. I think you'll like *it / this*.
- VAMPIRES FROM SPACE: *It / This* is a film for all the family ...
- Scientists have now decided that chocolate is good for you. *It / This* is welcome news for my wife.
- He put the chocolate in his pocket and forgot about *it / this*. *It / This* melted.

This is also used to refer forward to something new that is going to happen or be said.

That refers back to what has already happened or been said, with more emphasis than *it*. Compare:

Tell me what you think about **this**: *I thought I'd get a job in Spain for a few months.*

I thought I'd get a job in Spain for a few months. Tell me what you think about that.

2 Choose the best pronoun.

- So you think your French is good? OK, see if you can translate *this / that*.
- 'Where's the hair dryer?' 'I put *it / this* in the top cupboard.'
- So then I told her exactly what I thought of her kids. *It / That* really got her jumping up and down.
- That / This* was a lovely meal. Thank you very much.
- Now what about *this / that / it*? Suppose we go camping in Scotland in July, and then in August we ...
- In the middle of the service a dog came into the church. Mrs Perkins got up and took *it / that* out again.

When *he, she and it* are used, it is important to make sure the reference is clear. Here is a note from the *Independent* newspaper, apologising for confusing readers the day before.

Pronoun soup again on Wednesday.

Christina Patterson commented on a row between Iain Duncan Smith and George Osborne: 'But he did, according to one source, tell the Chancellor that he was 'not prepared to tolerate' the 'appalling' way he treated his department, and that he should 'show more respect.'

His staff, he said, 'did not deserve to be treated in such an arrogant way'."

The words "he" and "his" appear seven times. The first, second, fourth, sixth and seventh times, they mean Mr Duncan Smith; the third and fifth times, they mean Mr Osborne. More than once, the reader pauses to work out who "he" is.

Guy Keleny, *The Independent* (adapted)

special word order: fronting

fronting and topicalisation Affirmative sentences usually begin with a grammatical subject.

We have already discussed that question at some length.

My father just can't stand people like that.

If we begin a sentence with something else ('fronting') this is often to give it **emphasis**, and to make it the **topic** – the thing we are talking about – even though it is not the grammatical subject. This can also move the main new information to the end – the most natural position (see page 251).

That question we have already discussed at some length.

Fronting is not particularly common in written English – we generally prefer to find ways of making the topic the grammatical subject (see page 252).

That question has already been discussed at some length.

That question has already received lengthy discussion.

But fronting something that is not the subject is very common in speech (see pages 282–283).

That question – well, look, we've already gone over it again and again, haven't we?

People like that my father just can't stand.

Question-word clauses are often fronted.

What I'm going to do next I just don't know.

1 Rewrite these sentences, fronting the words *in italics*.

1 I am putting *all the information you need* in the post today.

.....

2 We can supply and deliver *any item in our catalogue*.

.....

3 They never found out *how she got the gun through customs*.

.....

4 We are planning to redecorate *the kitchen* in the autumn.

.....

5 These shoes will *last for ever*.

.....

6 We had *a very good lesson* this morning.

.....

7 That does me *a fat lot of good!*

.....

NOTES

As and though can be used in a rather formal structure after a fronted adjective or adverb. In this case they both mean 'although', and suggest an emphatic contrast.

Cold as/though it was, we went out.

Bravely as/though they fought, they had no chance of winning.

Much as/though I respect your point of view, I can't agree.

In American English, *though* is unusual in this structure, and *as ... as* is common.

As cold as it was, we went out.

He's gone I don't know how far. In informal speech, part of an indirect question can be fronted, as in the following examples.

He's been talking for I don't know how long.

We spent I can't tell you how much money on the holiday.

Andy gave me you'll never guess what for my birthday.

special word order: inversion

We put **auxiliary verbs before subjects** ('inversion') in several structures – most commonly in questions and in clauses beginning *so/nor/neither*.

What time is it? Tired? So am I. She can't swim, and nor/neither can I.

after fronted negative expressions If we put certain negative adverbs and adverbial expressions at the beginning of a clause for emphasis, they are followed by **auxiliary verb + subject**.

This structure is usually rather formal.

Under no circumstances can we cash cheques.

(NOT *Under no circumstances we can cash cheques.*)

Not until much later did we learn the truth.

The same thing happens with *seldom, little, never, hardly (... when), scarcely (... when), no sooner (... than), not only* and *only* + time expression. These structures are formal and literary.

1 Normal (N), formal/literary (F) or wrong (W)?

- ▶ Seldom had she felt such terror. F.
- 1 Hardly had I arrived when the problems began. ...
- 2 I had no sooner unpacked than the telephone rang. ...
- 3 Not only they refuse to pay taxes; they also reject the authority of the state. ...
- 4 Little did they know what was to happen. ...
- 5 At no time did she contact the police. ...
- 6 I did not try to influence him in any way. ...
- 7 Under no circumstances I will apologise. ...
- 8 Never again would he believe a politician's promises. ...
- 9 Sometimes had I felt so frightened before. ...

2 Rewrite these sentences in a more normal style.

- ▶ Under no circumstances would I ask her for help.
I would not ask her for help under any circumstances.

- 1 Not until July was he able to start walking again.
.....
- 2 Hardly had I got into the house when he started shouting at me.
.....
- 3 Never has the world faced a crisis of this order.
.....
- 4 Only later did I find out where they had gone.
.....
- 5 Not only did we lose our money; we also wasted our time.
.....

after so, as, than In a literary style, inversion is possible after *so* + **adjective/adverb**, and in clauses beginning *such, as* or *than*. These structures are not very common.

So rapidly did they advance that the enemy were taken by surprise. (more normal: *They advanced so rapidly that ...*)

Such was his reputation that few people dared to question his judgement.

She was politically quite naive, as were most of her friends.

Country people tend to speak more slowly than do city-dwellers.

3 Rewrite these sentences in a more normal style.

1 So friendly were the people in the village that we soon felt completely at home.
.....

2 Harold went into the civil service, as did most of the students in his year.
.....

3 Emma learnt much more quickly than did the other children.
.....

after expressions of place and direction In literary and descriptive writing, structures like the following are common when sentences begin with expressions of **place** or **direction**.

*In front of the door **stood a man** in naval uniform.*

*Round the corner **came three women** on horseback.*

*Above the town **stands a Norman castle**.*

This structure is also common in informal speech with **here**, **there** and other short adverbs.

*Here **comes the bus**. There **goes your sister**.*

*Up **walked a policeman**. Out **came Mrs Potter**.*

We do not use inversion when the subject is a pronoun.

*Out **she came**. (NOT ~~Out came she~~.)*

4 Complete these sentences in any way you like.

1 Into the kitchen rushed

2 Out of the cupboard fell

3 Over the wall flew

4 Through the door came

5 On the table sat

6 Away ran

7 In walked

8 Here comes

reporting In written story-telling, direct speech can be followed by **reporting verb + subject**.

*'It's getting late,' **said Mary** / **Mary said**.*

*'Go away!' **shouted the shopkeeper** / **the shopkeeper shouted**.*

This does not happen if the subject is a **pronoun**.

*'Come in,' **she said**. (NOT ... ~~said she~~.)*

5 Add reporting verbs and subjects (from the box, or from your imagination), using inversion.

added	explained	growled	howled	said	screamed	shouted	whispered
beautiful Melanie	Mrs Carter	my father	the bank manager	the general			
the ghost	the President	the teacher					

1 'Go away,'

2 'I love you,'

3 'No,'

4 'Yes,'

5 'I hate you,'

6 'Never,'

7 'It's Tuesday,'

8 'Come here,'

Note: **May** can come before the subject in **wishes**.

May all your dreams come true!** **May that man rot in hell!

For inversion in conditional structures (e.g. *Had I known, I would have ...*), see page 237.

emphasis: *it ... that*

It is/was ... that We can use ***It is/was*** to highlight an expression that we want to emphasise; we put the rest of the sentence into a *that*-clause.

James crashed the car last week.

- ***It was James*** *that crashed the car last week.* (not Peter)
- ***It was the car*** *that James crashed last week.* (not the motorbike)
- ***It was last week*** *that James crashed the car.* (not this week)

We can also use a *who*-clause to emphasise a personal subject.

It was James ***who*** *crashed the car ...*

1 Change these sentences to emphasise each part in turn.

- 1 Mary was supposed to interview the new students today.

.....

.....

.....

- 2 Paul met his bank manager in prison.

.....

.....

.....

- 3 Henry's dog dug up Philip's roses yesterday evening.

.....

.....

.....

- 4 Mrs Hawkins lost an earring in the supermarket.

.....

.....

.....

Contrast We can emphasise a contrast with ***It's not / It wasn't ...*** OR ***It's / It was ... not ...***

It's not the children *that need help, it's their parents.*

It was her beauty *that he noticed, not her personality.*

2 Change these sentences, beginning *It's not / It wasn't ...*

- 1 We don't need butter, we need sugar.
- 2 I bought a van, not a car.
- 3 Joseph isn't the Director, Maggie is.
- 4 I forgot her address, not her name.
- 5 He doesn't collect stamps, he collects coins.
- 6 I love Sam, not you.

Note the use of pronouns and verbs in this structure in different styles.

INFORMAL

It's me that's right.

It's you that will pay the fine.

FORMAL

It is I who am right.

It is you who will pay the fine.

emphasis: *what ... is/was*

What ... is/was We can use a structure with **what** (= 'the thing(s) that'), to put the words that we want to emphasise at the end of a sentence.

His voice irritates me. → **What irritates me is his voice.**

I saw a white bear. → **What I saw was a white bear.**

This structure (unlike the one with *it*) can emphasise a **verb**. We use **What ... do/does/did**.

I switched off all the lights. → **What I did was (to) switch off all the lights.**

It searches the whole internet. → **What it does is (to) search the whole internet.**

1 Change the sentences so as to emphasise the words in italics. Begin **What ...**

- ▶ She broke *her ankle*. ... *What she broke was her ankle.*
- 1 I want *more time to think*.
.....
- 2 I need *something to eat*.
.....
- 3 She hated *his possessiveness*.
.....
- 4 I have never understood *how aeroplanes stay up*.
.....
- 5 I called *the police at once*.
.....
- 6 She teaches *English in prisons*.
.....

We can use **all (that)** (meaning 'the only thing that') in the same way as *what*.

All (that) he needs is a bit of sympathy. *All (that) you do is press this button.*

2 Complete these sentences about people you know.

- 1 All he/she is interested in is
- 2 All he/she wants is
- 3 What he/she really likes is
- 4 What he/she really hates is
- 5 What he/she mostly does at weekends is

NOTES

Instead of *what*, we can use **the person/people who...**, **the thing that ...** and similar structures.

Louise phoned. → **The person who phoned was Louise.** (NOT *Who phoned was Louise.*)

His stupid laugh annoyed me. → **The thing that annoyed me was his stupid laugh.**

where/when/why ... Expressions of place, time, manner and reason can be emphasised with *where/when/how/why* instead of *what*. This is rather informal.

Where you pay is in Room 24 on the first floor. **When** we met was last January.

How I did it was by using a mirror. **Why** I'm here is to talk about my plans.