

Word order: structures

There are a number of options, which we can use to add emphasis or focus within a clause.

Indirect object versus prepositional complement

When we talk about someone receiving something, we can express it using the typical word order: indirect object (io) + direct object (do).

If we want to bring more emphasis or focus to the recipient, we can use a prepositional complement (pc) instead of an indirect object.

Compare

<i>I gave [IO] Margaret [DO] a present.</i>	Typical word order: IO + DO
<i>I gave [DO] a present [PC] to Margaret.</i>	Untypical word order: DO + PC Putting the prepositional complement at the end brings more emphasis and focus to the person who received the present.

In formal contexts, we sometimes put prepositional complements in front position so as to bring focus to the new information given in the direct object:

[PC] *For his wife, he wrote* [DO = focus] **a beautiful poem.**

Warning: We don't normally put indirect objects in front position:

He passed Williams the ball.

Not: ~~Williams he passed the ball.~~

Active and passive voice

Active voice is the typical word order. That is when we put the subject (the doer) first, followed by the new information (which is the focus):

Lesley has written four successful novels.

If we use the passive voice, we can often omit who the doer is:

The cake was cut. (no doer)

Or we can place the doer in a prepositional phrase after the verb. When we do this, we focus on the doer:

*The music was played **by a local quartet.** (doer in prepositional phrase after the verb)*

*The hotel was run **by a quaint couple from Wales.***

Cleft sentences

Cleft means 'divided' and in a cleft sentence a single message is divided across two clauses. We use cleft sentences, especially in speaking, to connect what is already understood to what is new to the listener. By doing this we can focus on the new information. There are different types of cleft sentence.

It-cleft sentences

In these sentences, the focus is on the *it*-clause and this is where we put the new information (underlined below). We use *that* to connect another clause containing information, which is already understood by the listener:

A: *Did you find your MP3 player, Lisa?*

B: *It was my phone **that** I'd lost. I found it under the couch.* (Focus: *it was my phone* (not my MP3 player). Already understood: *I'd lost something.*)

Wh-cleft sentences

Wh-cleft sentences are introduced by a *wh*-word, usually *what*. The old information is in the *wh*-clause and the new information (underlined) is at the end:

What *I love about you is your sense of humour.*

Where *you'll find great seafood is Molly's Seafood Restaurant on the quay.*

The thing, the one thing, something

The thing

We can use *the thing* in front position plus a form of the verb *be* to bring attention to an item in the clause. It means the same as *what* plus *be*, but it is more informal (the focus in each sentence is underlined below):

The thing *I like most about Italy is the food.* (or *What I like most about Italy is the food.*)

We can use a singular verb even if the item we focus on is plural:

The thing *I like most about Scotland is the castles.*

When we focus on a *that*-clause, we can omit *that* in informal situations:

The thing *you need to remember is (that) all of the files from before 2008 are stored in Shona's office.*

When we focus on an infinitive clause, we can omit *to* in informal situations:

The thing *I didn't want to do was (to) queue all day just for a ticket, so I booked it online.*

One thing, the one thing

We can emphasise *thing* with *one*. *The one thing* is even stronger:

*You'll meet a lot of people when you're travelling but **one thing** you must never do **is** give your address to a complete stranger.*

*The **one thing** I should never have done **was** trust Marlene.*

Something

We can use *something* in front position plus a form of the verb *be* to bring attention to an item in the clause (underlined). It is less specific and less direct than using *the thing*, and means 'one thing among others':

***Something** I mustn't forget is my umbrella. (or *What I mustn't forget is my umbrella.*)*

***Something** you need to know is that Kate is not very well at the moment.*

It to create focus

When we use *it* at the beginning of a clause, the subject can go at the end of the clause and therefore be in the position of focus or emphasis (underlined):

***It's** great to know that you have passed all of your exams.*

***It** was ridiculous paying for two houses.*

To create extra focus on time adjuncts (*yesterday, in the morning, at 4 am*), we can front them using phrases such as *it is/was not until, it is/was only when*. In the case of *not until*, the negative verb comes in the *until*-clause, not the main clause:

***It wasn't until** the bill came yesterday that we realised what an expensive hotel it was. (Compare: *Until the bill came yesterday, we didn't realise what an expensive hotel it was.*)*

***It was only when** I woke at 8 am, that I realised the alarm hadn't gone off! (Compare: *When I woke at 8 am, I realised the alarm hadn't gone off.*)*

There to create focus

We can use *there* at the start of a clause as a type of indefinite subject. This means that we can put the actual subject at the end of the clause and so give it emphasis or focus (underlined below):

***There** was a strange smell coming from the room. (Compare: *A strange smell was coming from the room.*)*

***There** are many people willing to travel to the concert. (Compare: *Many people are willing to travel to the concert.*)*

Noun forms of verbs to create focus

In formal writing, especially academic writing, we can use a noun form of a verb as a subject. By doing this, extra focus is given to the end of the clause. Noun phrase subjects (topics) are in bold type below; the focus of each sentence is underlined:

The discovery of oil brought immense wealth to the country. (Compare: *Oil was discovered and this brought immense wealth to the country.*)

His emergence as a leader came about after the strikes of the 1980s. (Compare: *He emerged as a leader (and this came about) after the strikes of the 1980s.*)
