

Expletive Constructions

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Expletive Constructions

Expletives are grammatical constructions that consist of phrases using forms of the to be verb and it or there. More specifically, these constructions generally use a noun followed by a relative clause. A relative clause is a sentence clause that begins with relative pronouns such as who, that, which, whose, where, and when. In example, “There are many examples of expletive constructions,” or “It was a good idea to start the day.”

Expletives have their place in writing--they can be used to emphasize words and play a role in syntax, or the formation of well-crafted sentences. For example, stating “It is imperative that we finish our essay,” allows the writer to emphasize the word imperative. However, these constructions also delay the meaning of a sentence, so they should be used sparingly. Further, these types of constructions generally don’t add much additional meaning to the sentence. Overall, fewer expletives are better when writing, but they can be employed to emphasize words or ideas stylistically.

Examples

From Strunk & White’s *The Elements of Style*

Orig: There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

Rev: Dead leaves covered the ground.

Orig: It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had.

Rev: She soon repented her words.

From the Purdue OWL

Orig: There are four rules that should be observed: ...

Rev: Four rules should be observed:...

From the UW-Madison Writing Center

Orig: There are likely to be many researchers raising questions about this methodological approach.

Rev: Many researchers are likely to raise questions about this methodological approach.

From Groat (1995)

Orig: That the president will be reelected and that he will be impeached are equally likely at this point.

Rev: It is equally likely that the president will be reelected and that he will be impeached.

From Grammarbook.com

Orig: To train at least four weeks for the event is crucial.

Rev: It is crucial to train at least four weeks for the event.

From Thoughtco.com

Orig: It was a simple rule my parents made that got me interested in the trumpet: no television or computer time until I had practiced for half an hour. There were many days when this rule angered me, but when I look back it seems my parents knew best. Today I'll always pick up my trumpet before the television remote.

Rev: My parents made a simple rule that got me interested in the trumpet: no television or computer time until I had practiced for half an hour. This rule often angered me, but when I look back I know my parents knew best. Today I'll always pick up my trumpet before the television remote.

From Abe (2018)

Orig: There is no doubt that the investigation of how expletive constructions are derived has had a significant impact on the theory of movement at various stages of the development of generative grammar.

Alt: The investigation of how expletive constructions are derived has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the theory of movement at various stages of the development of generative grammar.

Orig: It seems to Mary that John is honest.

Alt: Mary believes that John is honest.

Alt: John seems honest to Mary.

From Jalongo & Saracho (2016)

Orig: There is not one, linear writing process to which all writers ought to conform; rather, there are as many writing processes as there are authors.

Alt: No uniform, linear writing process applies to all writers; rather, every author's writprocess is unique.

Practice Exercises: Rewrite the following sentences without using an expletive.

1. There were two rats sharing a pizza on the subway track!
 - a. Two rats were sharing a pizza on the subway track!
1. It is the editor who decides whether the manuscript gets accepted.
 - a. The editor decides whether the manuscript gets accepted.
1. There are going to be hundreds of people interested in purchasing these tickets.
 - a. Hundreds of people will be interested in purchasing these tickets.
1. It was the goal of this initiative to recruit new members.
 - a. The goal of this initiative is to recruit new members.
1. It was agreed upon that everyone would meet at the restaurant.
 - a. Everyone agreed to meet at the restaurant.
1. There is currently one volunteer signed-up for the Saturday shift.
 - a. One volunteer signed up for the Saturday shift.
1. It was the last scene that finally got to me!
 - a. The last scene finally got to me!
1. There was music coming from the apartment next door.
 - a. Music was coming from the apartment next door.
1. It is the phone company that sets the monthly rate.
 - a. The phone company sets the monthly rate.
1. It was I who left the kitchen lights on.
 - a. I left the kitchen lights on.

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