

Focusing: **it-clauses** and **what-clauses**

A

Focusing with **it-clauses**

We can use an **it-clause** with **be** to focus attention on the information that immediately follows **it + (be)**. A sentence like this is sometimes called a *cleft sentence*. The clause after the **it-clause** (usually a **that-clause**) contains information that is already known or considered to be less important:

- 'Lea bought the car from Olav.' 'No, **it was Olav** *that* bought the car from Lea.'
- I don't mind her criticising me, but **it's how she does it** *that* I object to.
- It was to show how much I cared for her** *that* I bought her the necklace.

We sometimes use **which** or **who** instead of **that**; **when** and **where** can also be used, but usually only in informal English; and note that **how** or **why** can't replace **that**:

- Karl was always there to help her, and **it was to him** *that / who* she now turned for support.
- 'Ida's seriously ill in hospital.' 'But **it was only last Sunday** *when / that* I was playing tennis with her.'
- It was in Warsaw** *where / that* the film was made.
- 'Was it by cutting staff that he managed to save the firm?' 'No, **it was by improving distribution** *that* he made it profitable.' (*not ... how he made it profitable.*)

B

Focusing with **what-clauses**

We can also use a **what-clause** followed by **be** to focus attention on certain information in a sentence (= another form of *cleft sentence*). This pattern is particularly common in conversation. The information we want to focus attention on is outside the **what-clause**. Compare:

- We gave them some home-made cake. *and*
- What we gave them** *was* some home-made cake.

We often do this if we want to introduce a new topic; to give a reason, instruction or explanation; or to correct something that has been said or done. In the following examples, the information in focus is in italics:

- What I'd like you to work on** *is the revision exercise on the website.*
- Isa arrived two hours late: **what had happened was** *that his bicycle chain had broken.*
- 'We've only got this small bookcase – will that do?' 'No, **what I was looking for was** *something much bigger and stronger.'*

We can often put the **what-clause** either at the beginning or the end of the sentence:

- What upset me most was** *his rudeness.* *or*
- His rudeness was* **what upset me most.**

To focus attention on an *action* performed by someone, we use a sentence with **what + subject + do + be + to-infinitive** clause. We can't use an **it-clause** to do this (see A):

- Luis lost his job and was short of money, so **what he did was (to) sell** his flat and move in with his brother. (*not ... so it was (to) sell his flat that he did.*)

C

The pattern in B is only usually used with **what-clauses**. Instead of placing other **wh-clauses** (beginning **how**, **when**, **where**, **who**, **why**) at the beginning of the sentence we prefer to use a noun which has a meaning related to the **wh-word** (e.g. **reason** rather than **why**; **place** rather than **where**) followed by a **that-** or **wh-clause**. Here are some examples:

- The only reason (why / that)** I left the party early was that I was feeling unwell. (*rather than Why I left the party early was ...*)
- The place (where / that)** you should play football is the playground, not the classroom.
- Somebody (who / that)** I enjoy reading is Peter Carey.
- The time (when / that)** I work best is early morning.



## Exercises

98.1 Complete the rewritten sentences to focus attention on the underlined information. Start with **it + be** and use an appropriate **wh-word** or **that**. **A**

- 1 Mark's known for ages that his parents are coming to stay with us this weekend, but he only told me yesterday. *Mark's known for ages that his parents are coming to stay with us this weekend, but ... it was only yesterday that / when he told me.*
- 2 Helena has been feeling a bit depressed for some time, so I booked a holiday in Amsterdam to cheer her up. *Helena has been feeling a bit depressed for some time, so ...*
- 3 It's not that I don't want to have dinner with you tonight; I can't come because I've got so much work to do. *It's not that I don't want to have dinner with you tonight; ...*
- 4 I had my wallet when I went into the sports hall, so I lost it somewhere in there. *I had my wallet when I went into the sports hall, so ...*
- 5 She doesn't find learning languages very easy, and she improved her Spanish only by studying very hard. *She doesn't find learning languages very easy, and ...*
- 6 I have had a great deal of help from my parents and two brothers in my research, and I dedicate this thesis to my family. *I have had a great deal of help from my parents and two brothers in doing my research, and ...*

98.2 Write B's responses beginning **No, what ...**, correcting what was said in A's question. Use the notes in brackets. **B**

- 1 A: Did you say that Rudi was going to live in Austria? (*holiday / Austria*)  
B: *No, what I said was that he was going on holiday to Austria.*
- 2 A: Do you hope to sell your Picasso paintings? (*be put into / public art gallery*)  
B: .....
- 3 A: Did it annoy you that Carla came so late? (*not apologise*)  
B: .....
- 4 A: Did you mean to give Ella your bike? (*could borrow it / until needed again*)  
B: .....

Now give similar responses which focus on the action.

- 5 A: Did you watch the football on TV last night? (*get brother / record it / watch tonight*)  
B: *No, what I did was (to) get my brother to record it and I'll watch it tonight.*
- 6 A: This steak tastes delicious. Did you fry it? (*put oil and soy sauce on / grill*)  
B: .....
- 7 A: Did you buy Megan the coat she wanted? (*give / money towards it*)  
B: .....
- 8 A: Did you fly from Sydney to Brisbane. (*hire a car / drive all the way*)  
B: .....

98.3 Complete B's responses using one of the phrases from section C opposite and the information in brackets. Put the information in the right order and add an appropriate form of **be**. **C**

- 1 A: I suppose Paul got the job because of his qualifications. (*uncle owns company*)  
B: *Well, actually, I think ... the reason why / that Paul got the job was that his uncle owns the company.*
- 2 A: Do you know anyone who could mend my computer? (*might be able / help / Petra*)  
B: *I don't know if she's free, but .....*
- 3 A: You grew up in this village, didn't you? (*between this village and next*)  
B: *In fact .....*
- 4 A: In what period of your life do you think you were happiest? (*lived Australia*)  
B: *I suppose .....*