In order to write well, you need to understand how elements within a clause fit together. This handout will help you understand how to craft more advanced clause structures.

### A Note about These Clause Structures

These clause structures are generally structures of emphasis. Since the beginning and the end of the clause tend to be the areas of most importance, these various structures provide strategies for moving elements into those positions.

That being said, these structures should be used deliberately. Too many clauses with non-standard structure can confuse your reader.

### Extraposition

Some subordinate clauses (e.g., content clauses and non-finite clauses) can serve as a subject or object within a main clause.

**Subordinate Clause as Subject:** 
That he should be home so early is strange.

However, these subordinate clauses are often moved toward the end of the main clause, a process called extraposition. When this happens, the dummy pronoun “it” occupies the subordinate clause’s initial position.

**Step 1: Move Subordinate Clause:** 
_____ is strange that he should be home so early.

**Step 2: Insert Dummy Pronoun “It”:** 
It is strange that he should be home so early.

Although you will find many extraposed objects, their non-extraposed versions are often ungrammatical.

**Extraposed Object:** 
I find it hard to concentrate with the cat around.

**Non-extraposed Object (Ungrammatical):** 
I find to concentrate with the cat around hard.

Compare these different types of extraposed subordinate clauses:

**Declarative Content Clause:** 
It breaks my heart that they didn’t adopt that cat.

**Open-interrogative Content Clause:** 
It is still hard to know where the cat is hiding.

**Non-finite Clause (“To” Infinitival):** 
It is easy to love a cat.

**Non-finite Clause (Gerund-participle):** 
It is fun playing with a cat.
Existential Clauses

Like their name suggests, existential clauses make a claim that something exists or exists in a certain location. This construction is formed by extraposing the subject and filling its initial position with “there.”

**Standard Clause:** A cat is under the car.

**Step 1: Move Subject:** _____ is a cat under the car.

**Step 2: Insert Dummy Pronoun “There”:** There is a cat under the car.

However, some existential clauses have no standard clause counterpart.

**Existential Clause:** There isn’t a solution.

**Standard Clause (Ungrammatical):** A solution isn’t.

**Existential Clause:** There are three kinds of cats.

**Standard Clause (Ungrammatical):** Three kinds of cats are.

Other existential clauses use a verb other than “be,” such as “appear,” “develop,” “emerge,” “exist,” “persist,” “stand,” “remain,” etc.

**Example:** There remain two missing cats.

Cleft Clauses

Cleft sentences allow you to emphasize certain elements in a clause.

**“It” Cleft**

“It” cleft clauses are formed by fronting the emphasized element, turning the rest of the original clause into a relative clause, and then placing “it” and a primary form of the verb “be” (e.g., “is,” “was,” etc.) at the beginning of everything.

**Standard Clause:** A cat bit James on the nose.

**Step 1: Front Emphasized Element (object):** James a cat bit _____ on the nose.

**Step 2: Relativize Remainder of Original Clause:** James whom a cat bit on the nose.

**Step 3: Insert Dummy Pronoun “It” and Verb “Be”:** It was James whom a cat bit on the nose.

Consider how different elements are emphasized in the following “it” cleft sentences:

- **“It” Cleft Clause (Subject):** It was a cat that bit James on the nose.

- **“It” Cleft Clause (Object):** It was James whom a cat bit on the nose.

- **“It” Cleft Clause (Preposition Phrase):** It was on the nose that a cat bit James.

**“Wh-” Clefts**

“Wh-” clefts (also known as psuedo-clefts) also work to emphasize certain elements of the clause.

The element emphasized is called the foreground, and everything else is the background. The foregrounded information is separated from the background by a plain form of “be” (e.g., “is” or “was”). The background is then converted into a fused relative clause introduced by a “wh-” word like “who,” “what,” “when,” or “where.”
Standard Clause: He needs a cat.
Step 1: Divide Foreground and Background with “Be”: He needs is a cat.
Step 2: Convert Background into Fused Relative Clause: What he needs is a cat.

Note: For more information on fused relatives, please see our “Clauses” handout.

Consider how different elements are emphasized in the following “it” cleft sentences:

Who: Who he should date is a cat owner.
What: What she shouldn’t have said was that she hates the smell of kitty litter.
When: When they originally planned to adopt the cat was after graduation.
Where: Where they should sleep is under the couch.

Like existential clauses, not every “wh-” cleft has a standard clause counterpart.

“Wh-” Cleft: What I need to do is find an animal shelter.
Standard Clause (Ungrammatical): I need to do find an animal shelter.

Preposing

Preposing is simply fronting an element that normally comes after a verb into a position before the subject.

Preposed Direct Object: A kitten they gave _____ to him.
Preposed PP Serving as Indirect Object: To him they gave a kitten _____.
Preposed Predicative Complement: Tame that cat is not _____.

If the clause contains auxiliary verbs, you can prepose the main verb.

Preposed Main Verb: And go to school I did _____.

The most commonly preposed elements are modifiers in verb phrases.

Manner: Playfully, the kitten pounced.
Place: Under the couch, the kitten waited.
Time: Last Wednesday, we adopted the kitten.
Duration: Until dawn, the kitten slumbered.
Frequency: Every five minutes, the kitten meows.
Purpose: To be let in, the kitten scratches on the door.
Condition: If she is tired, the kitten sleeps.
Concession: Although she is tired, the kitten loves to play.

Postposing

Postposing is simply shifting an element out of its normal position and moving it toward the end of the clause.

Postposed Relative Clause: A cat _____ walked by that I had never seen before.
Postposed Object: They carried _____ with them a dozen fat, angry kittens.
Inversion

Sometimes elements within a clause change places or invert.

**Subject-Auxiliary Inversion**

Subject-auxiliary inversion—when a subject and an auxiliary verb swap places—happens most frequently in closed-interrogative clauses:

**Closed-interrogative Clause:** Have they left yet?

However, other situations create subject-auxiliary inversion, such as the preposing of a negative or of a phrase containing words like “only” or “so.” Remember, if no auxiliary verb is present in the original, the dummy auxiliary “do” is inverted.

**Standard Clause:** I have never owned a cat.

**Step 1: Preposed Element (Negative):** Never

**Step 2: Subject and Auxiliary Invert:** Never have I owned a cat.

Consider these other examples of subject-auxiliary inversion.

- **Preposed “Only”:** Only later did the cat eat the mouse.
- **Preposed “So”:** So bad did it smell that they had to leave the room.

**Subject-Dependent Inversion**

Another type of inversion occurs between the subject and a dependent of the verb. This dependent can either be a complement (specifically a predicative complement) or a modifier (usually a preposition phrase) indicating location.

**Standard Clause:** Her fur was green.

**Inverted Subject and Predicative Complement:** Green was her fur.

**Standard Clause:** The cat sits on the table.

**Inverted Subject and PP Modifier:** On the table sits a cat.

**References**
