

GRAMMATICAL EXPLETIVES

In grammar, certain words—often referred to as “**empty words**”—are considered “**expletives**,” which means they—like the curse words we also refer to as expletives—can add emphasis but, essentially, **take up space while not adding meaning**.

The most common expletives, and my particular pet peeves, come in the form of “**it is/was/will be**,” and “**there is/are/was/were/will be**,” especially at the beginning of sentences.

For example, in the sentence, “**There is a study room located in the back of the library**,” the words “there is” function as expletives. If we follow the basic and primary rules of clear and clean writing (Subject + Verb, in that order, as close together as possible, and at the beginning of the sentence), we can see the actual subject is “study room” and its verb is “is.” If we, then, rewrite our sentence by beginning with our main subject and verb, we get, “**A study room is located in the back of the library**.”

The same works with “it is.” **Does the following phrasing look familiar? “It is likely the Court will hold...”** Again, here, we find “it is” working as expletives. The main verb is “hold,” and its subject is “the Court.” Therefore, if we rewrite the sentence so the subject and verb are in that order, as close together as possible, and at the beginning of the sentence, we end up with the following: “**The court will likely hold...**”

Tip: When dealing with modal verbs (*have, can, will, shall, may, must, might*), the adverb **follows** the verb like in the above sentence: The court will *likely* hold...

While expletive constructions tend to take space without adding meaning, they can, when used correctly and sparingly, **add emphasis to a sentence by delaying the subject**:

“It was Tito who brought the dessert” or “It was the dessert that Tito brought.”

Note the first sentence still emphasizes the subject whereas the second sentence emphasizes the object. **Also note** that, in the words of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, “Obviously we achieve no emphasis if . . . we begin a good half of our sentences with ‘It is’ or ‘There is’ . . . All emphasis or haphazard emphasis is no emphasis.” (*Modern Rhetoric*)

As for those **pesky curse words, they, too, are expletives** when functioning as adjectives, adverbs, or intensifiers, which is another reminder that only nouns and verbs create real meaning. If you can remove the curse word from the sentence without changing its meaning, it is an expletive, and, if you so choose, you can then write, “**expletive deleted**.”