

DUMMY SUBJECTS

Defining the Dummy Subject

What exactly are dummy subjects? Dummy subjects are expletive words—words that take up space without adding meaning. *It* and *there* are commonly used dummy subjects in English, and generally occur in phrases like *there is*, *there are*, *there was*, *there were*, *it is*, and *it was*. Because they are usually unnecessary and wordy, avoid using dummy subjects whenever possible!

Note: the phrases mentioned above are not **always** dummy subjects, since they can sometimes refer to something specific. Observe the difference between “It is a nice day” and “My mom gave me a new laptop, and it is nice.” See how “it” in the first sentence merely fills space? A more specific, concise version would be “Today is a nice day.” However, in the second sentence “it” refers directly to the laptop, so it is **not** a dummy subject.

Dummy subjects are not grammatically incorrect; indeed, we use them very often in everyday spoken English (“It’s nice to meet you”; “There’s a lot of snow today”). When used rarely and mindfully, even in academic writing they can be effective. However, they do add extra fluff and filler that usually slow your reader down and take up valuable space. Even more importantly, they lessen the impact of your writing by allowing you to use bland verbs (usually forms of “to be”) instead of more potent, vivid verbs. Since sentences without dummy subjects typically have more action and more immediacy, removing a dummy subject will allow your reader to grasp your meaning more quickly.

Examples:

- With dummy subject: *There was a group of buses in the parking lot.*
- Without dummy subject: *A group of buses filled the parking lot.*

Because it contains fewer words and the verb (“filled”) is more vivid, this second sentence has more action and is preferable to the first.

- With dummy subject: *It will soon be night.*
- Without dummy subject: *Night will fall soon.*

Similarly, this second sentence is shorter and more vivid because of the verb (“fall”). This makes the second sentence a better choice than the first.

Exercises

Eliminate the dummy subjects from the following sentences. Most have more than one right answer, so play around with different options. Be creative!

1. It was raining.
2. There were many people at the party.
3. There are a bunch of great skiing resorts in Colorado.
4. It is better to give than to receive.
5. There are so many books I want to read!
6. There are plenty of people ready to vote in the election.
7. It is important to wear a helmet when you are riding a bicycle.
8. It was necessary for me to take the bus to the museum.
9. There have been many experiments conducted by scientists on this topic.
10. It is possible that Sophia overslept this morning.

Possible Answers: (1) The rain came down; (2) Many people attended the party; (3) Colorado has a bunch of great ski resorts; (4) Giving is better than receiving; (5) I want to read so many books! (6) Plenty of people are ready to vote in the election; (7) Wearing a helmet is important when you are riding a bicycle; (8) I had to take the bus to the museum; (9) Scientists have conducted many experiments on this topic; (10) Sophia may have overslept this morning.

Credit: Adapted from Lydia Fash and Robert Cochran, University Writing Program, 2020.

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