

## Avoiding Vague Expletive Wording

When we speak to one another, we often begin clauses and sentences with vague words that are sometimes referred to as expletives. Yes, we use the same term to label swear words, but really, the term just means that the words have no real function in conveying the meaning of the sentence or clause. They can be left out without significantly changing the meaning. They usually consist of the word *it*, *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*, or *there* followed by a verb, and most often, the verb is a form of the verb *be*.

For example, *It is a cold night* starts with *It is*, which really isn't necessary in terms of the meaning of the sentence. A better option would be *The night is cold*.

In speaking, using expletives actually helps slow down the pace of our conversations so that we have time to formulate our thoughts before actually verbalizing them and so that listeners can keep up more easily with whatever topic it is we're discussing. In writing, however, the pace moves as quickly or slowly as the reader likes, and any text that isn't understood immediately can be re-read. As a result, unless you're trying to achieve a particular effect, you're better off avoiding the use of expletive constructions to start sentences or clauses. Including them makes your text wordier and defers the subject of the sentence until after the verb.

Listed below are some examples of expletives that start sentences and possibilities for how the sentences could be improved.

- **It is . . .** *It is obvious that the governor is sick* could become *The governor obviously is sick.*
- **This is . . .** *This is why we can't visit the monument* could become *Because the monument is closed due to construction, we cannot visit it.*
- **This + [any verb] . . .** *This confirms our earlier fears about the crime* could become *The new evidence confirms our earlier fears about the crime.*
- **That is . . .** *That is why we cannot raise tuition*, could become *We cannot raise tuition because doing so would overburden many students financially.*
- **That + [any verb] . . .** *That reeks of political favoritism*, could become *The new contract reeks of political favoritism.*
- **These are . . .** *These are the reasons we must fund higher education*, could become *We must fund higher education for these reasons.*
- **There is . . .** *There is no reason to change the oil that often*, could become *James does not need to change the oil that often.*
- **There are . . .** *There are many mistakes in my essay*, could become *My essay contains many mistakes.*
- **There was . . .** *There was a man standing on the corner*, could become *A man stood on the corner.*
- **There were . . .** *There were chickens scuttling around the yard*, could become *Chickens scuttled around the yard.*

As you can see, the revised versions of these sentences are clearer, more vibrant, and more specific. Rephrasing expletive sentence/clause openings can significantly improve your writing.