

IMPERSONAL STRUCTURES AND DEMONSTRATIVES

By 'impersonal structures' we are referring to 'it is' and 'there is/are'. By 'demonstratives' we mean 'this', 'that', 'these' and 'those'.

As with the definite and indefinite articles ('the' and 'a/an'), there are certain difficulties connected with these simple structures which do not disappear as you progress in English.

Many learners whose English is otherwise adequate never master these basic structures. They do not learn that 'these' is the plural of 'this' and 'those' is the plural of 'that'. They may forget to ever use the very common structure 'there is', or say something like: '**They** are many possibilities in engineering' when they mean to say: '**There** are ...'

THERE IS/ARE

The structure *there is/are* is used to introduce a subject. It obeys rules of singular/plural agreement* and is used with all verb tenses:

There was a crowd standing on the opposite pavement.

There were between 20 and 30 people there.

There will be a short meeting tomorrow.

There have been some changes to our plans.

* Expressions such as 'a number of' are generally considered to have a plural reference. We say:

There were a number of reasons not to follow the instructions.

With lists, agreement is determined by the first item:

There is a shirt, and two pairs of socks and underpants in the cupboard.

IT/IT IS

The pronoun 'it' is used to refer to a subject or object that has already been mentioned:

People have accepted the smoking ban, and it has saved lives.

Your magazine has arrived. I've put it on the table.

The structure *it is* is also used as an impersonal subject to talk about time and dates, distance, the weather, temperature etc:

It's half an hour until dinner time.

It's Thursday today, isn't it?

He said it's fifty miles to the next service station.

Look! It's snowing.

It's not warm enough in here.

IT IS VS THIS IS

In describing a process, how something works etc, if there is no change of subject, we use *it is*:

The iron ore is put into the top of the furnace. It is then heated until it is white hot.

Compare with the sentence below, where *this is* makes it clear that we are talking about what was mentioned last::

The chocolate and butter are melted to make a creamy sauce. This is then allowed to cool.

This is and *that is* are also used for emphasis where *it is* would be considered not strong enough:
Due to the movement, there is an apparent change in frequency. This is (not 'It is') the Doppler effect.

We have to match their standards of skill, fitness and organization. That is (not 'It is') what I am talking about.

DEMONSTRATIVES

singular	plural
this	these
that	those

A simple rule is:

this/these ----->here

that/those----->there

Come here and look at **this** insect I've found.

Put **those** chairs over there in the corner. We don't need them.

We use *that*, not *this* to distance ourselves from something:

That's a funny story! (I'm not the person telling it.)

I think **that's** a terrible thing to do! (I strongly disapprove.)

The idea of proximity and distance applies to time as well as space. *This* is often associated with present tenses, including present perfect, and *that* is often associated with simple past:

This is the best weekend I've ever spent.

The 1960s! Now **that** was a decade of great music!

POINTS TO REMEMBER AND ERRORS TO AVOID

to emphasise something strongly, use *that*:

That's right!

I think **that's** completely untrue!

- to make a concession, use *it*:

It's true that I was a bit late.

- *there is/are* is almost always a better choice than *there exist(s)*:

There are (not 'There exist') some errors in your English CV.

- the word *it* is not used in expressions such as:

As I said before(not 'As I said it')

- the structure *there are* is never used as a synonym for 'ago':

I came to the school three years ago (not 'there are three years').

Exercise 1

What is the correct completion for each sentence?

1. five miles to the next stop.

- They are
- There is
- It is

2. several possible solutions to the problem.

- There exists
- There have
- There are

3. So you've finally arrived! I've been waiting at this table for two hours.

- a) here
- b) there
- c) you

4. Look at all people waiting to buy a ticket!

- a) this
- b) those
- c) them

5. were the happiest days of my life.

- a) This
- b) These
- c) Those

6. One of days, you'll listen to what I say.

- a) this
- b) these
- c) those

7. As I said before, I'm happy to help you.

- a) Ø
- b) it
- c) that

8. two years since I last saw you.

- a) It is
- b) They are
- c) There are

9. Can who want to go please raise their hands?

- a) them
- b) these
- c) those

10. It's too expensive. It costs 500 euros, and I don't have

- a) it
- b) them
- c) those