

Double Subjects



Grammar Girl, she teaches grammar. Are sentences like that OK?

By Neal Whitman, read by Mignon Fogarty, [Grammar Girl](#)

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A listener named Tom wrote in with a question about repeated subjects. He enjoys listening to the Planet Money podcast, which explains economics in everyday language, but he has noticed that the hosts often repeat the subject of a sentence.

Here are two examples from the April 8 episode that occurred one right after the other:

This whole fight, **it** doesn't matter for the deficit. This year's federal deficit, **it's** about 1.5 trillion dollars.

In his e-mail, Tom writes, "[T]heir constant use of a double subject makes me crazy. . . . I would like to persuade the people who do this podcast to mend their ways just this little bit. Can you help?"

Dislocated Subjects



The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language refers to this kind of sentence as left-dislocation, which sounds unpleasantly like something that happened to one of my friends during a ski trip. In our first example, the noun phrase "this whole fight" has been moved, or dislocated, to the beginning of the sentence, which is on the far left when the sentence is written out in standard left-to-right fashion. This dislocated noun phrase has been replaced in the rest

of the sentence by the pronoun "it," so that we end up with the double subject that's bothering Tom: "This whole fight, it doesn't matter for the deficit."

Dislocated Direct Objects

But left-dislocation doesn't just happen with subjects. You also find it with direct objects. For example, at a baseball game, you might hear, "Cold beer! You want it? I got it!" The direct object of "want" is "cold beer," but instead of saying, "You want cold beer, I got it!", the vendor dislocates "cold beer" to the front of the sentence, and fills the direct-object position with the pronoun "it": "Cold beer! You want **it**, I got it."

Left dislocation is a useful rhetorical tool, but limit it to your informal writing or speech.

Dislocated Objects of Prepositions

You can also left-dislocate the object of a preposition. Take this sentence: "My brother, a scout came looking for him at the football game." Here, the left-dislocated noun phrase "my brother" is repeated in the rest of the sentence as "him," the object of the preposition "for."

Dislocated Indirect Objects

You can left-dislocate indirect objects, too, as in, "That drunk guy who kept trying to pick a fight, the police gave him a citation for disorderly conduct." The left-dislocated noun phrase is "that drunk guy who kept trying to pick a fight," and it's repeated in the rest of the sentence as the indirect object "him": "the police gave **him** a citation."

Dislocated Noun Phrases

You can even left-dislocate noun phrases that would have been possessives if they had stayed in their usual location. For example, in the sentence "That woman who just moved in, it turns out her daughter is a Girl Scout," the left-dislocated noun phrase is "that woman who just moved in," and it's repeated in the rest of the sentence as the possessive pronoun "her": "it turns out **her** daughter is a Girl Scout."

Dislocation Is an Informal Style

Left-dislocation is considered informal English, because the dislocated noun phrase just sits there at the beginning of the sentence, syntactically disconnected from the rest of it. Or worse, the left-dislocated phrase may even turn into a sentence fragment, if you separate it completely from the rest of the sentence with a period or exclamation point. In our "cold beer" example, "Cold beer!" is a sentence fragment.

Dislocation Can Help Avoid Awkwardness

So why would someone use left-dislocation? For one thing, left-dislocation is useful if you have a noun phrase that would sound awkward if it stayed in its expected position. With our example, "That woman I see in the gym every day, it turns out her daughter is a Girl Scout," it would be pretty awkward to say, "That woman I see in the gym every day's daughter is a Girl Scout."

Dislocation Can Make Sentences Easier to Process

Another benefit of left-dislocation is that it makes it easier for a listener to process a sentence. Sentences are easier to understand if they present old information first, and new information later. To see how left-dislocation lets sentences do this, let's take another example from the April 8 episode of *Planet Money*:

The people who are less price-sensitive, who are willing to pay more, well, **they** just don't spend that time and they pay full price. [starting at 12:58]

When you say, "The people who are less price-sensitive, who are willing to pay more," you're introducing a new piece of information. When you repeat it as the pronoun "they," it's now old information, and is easier to process with the new information about how they end up paying the full price.

Dislocation Can Set a Friendly Tone

Finally, because sentences with left-dislocation are considered informal, they can help set a friendly tone in presentations that are trying to make things simple and fun, such as the *Planet Money* podcast. When I listen to *Planet Money*, it sounds as if the hosts are having an unscripted conversation, even though each episode is carefully researched and planned. (Hey, maybe I should start using more left-dislocation myself!)

Avoid Dislocation in Formal Writing

Even with those advantages, left-dislocation is still considered informal, so you should avoid it in your formal writing. It's more appropriate in places like advertising copy, dialogue, or speech. But as Tom points out, even in speech, left-dislocation can become a distraction if it's overused. In our first example, "This whole fight, it doesn't matter for the deficit," the dislocated noun phrase isn't really long enough to make dislocation worthwhile, and it's not introducing a new topic, either. It's just part of their conversational style, a style that unfortunately is driving Tom bonkers.

Summary

Left-dislocation, it's a useful rhetorical tool, but limit it to your informal writing or speech. Even then, use it sparingly, to preserve your listeners' sanity!

This article was written by Neal Whitman, who has a PhD in linguistics and blogs at [Literal Minded](#), and it was edited and read in the podcast by Mignon Fogarty, author of [Grammar Girl's Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing](#).

Reference

Huddleston, Rodney, and Geoffrey K. Pullum. 2003. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, pp. 1408-1411.

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**Ceitllyn Connal**

This: "That woman I see in the gym every day, it turns out her daughter is a Girl Scout," it would be pretty awkward to say, "That woman I see in the gym every day's daughter is a Girl Scout." - makes no sense to me. Couldn't one say "That woman I see in the gym every day, her daughter is a girl scout."? Or, stop dislocating yourself all together, save yourself some pain.

Like · Reply · Nov 28, 2015 11:45am

**Terri Plez**

My students are mainly Arabic speakers. "Arabic verb forms incorporate the personal pronouns, subject and object, as prefixes and suffixes. It is common to have them repeated in English as part of the verb: *John he works there." (Learner English, Swan M. and Smith B. 1987)

Like · Reply · Dec 4, 2014 12:13am

**Terri Plez**

I came across this post, not because I've been annoyed by left dislocation from native speakers but because I often find my ESOL students repeating subjects and objects in spoken and written discourse. I was searching to find the name of this error type. Should I still use the term "left dislocation" to describe it if it is an error? (e.g. My sister she lives in a flat.)

Like · Reply ·  1 · Nov 29, 2014 7:36am

**Catherine Freeborn** · Delta secondary hamilton

I hear left dislocation by the news casters on chch tv station and it drives me crazy. They say " Jane Doe, she was at the corner" instead of saying , "Jane Doe who was at the corner"....

Like · Reply · Aug 5, 2014 7:24am