Cleft sentences

It is possible to give special prominence to one element of a sentence by dividing it into two clauses, each with its own verb. The basic pattern of a cleft sentence is the following: It + verb “to be” + subject, object etc. + that relative clause. Cleft sentences are common in speech as well as writing, since they guide readers’ interpretation by helping them assign the correct prosody to a sentence:

- It is her professionalism that I want to praise
- It isn’t my interest I am defending
- It was the grassroots militants who were pushing for a change of line

Subject pronouns other than “it” may occur:

- Those are my notes you’re tearing up!

That can be substituted by who when emphasis is put on a personal subject:

- It wasn’t the miners who started the fight

When emphasis is put on a pronoun two options are available, one formal and the other informal; pronouns are used in the nominative or accusative case respectively. Notice the use of different relative pronouns and verb forms:

- It is he who has taken the initiative (formal)
- It is him that has taken the initiative (informal)
- It is I who want to move (formal)
- It is me that wants to move (informal)

Modal verbs can also be used in cleft-sentences:

- It could be your career you have to sacrifice
- It must have been the manager that convinced him to withdraw his resignation

The emphasized element is usually found early in the sentence, yet the peculiar structure of clefts ensures that they assign double focus to a sentence. Which of the two focussed items conveys new information, and thus constitutes the heart of the sentence, depends on context:

- It is her money he is after
  A: I think he is just interested in her money. B: I would say it is her money he craves!

Clefting is employed to highlight different parts of a sentence, typically the subject, direct object, and adverbial expressions of time and place; verbs, adjectives and adverbs of manner cannot be given prominence. From a sentence like The French representative vetoed the new resolution on Iraq at the United Nations last week it is possible to obtain the following four cleft sentences:
It was the French representative that vetoed the new resolution on Iraq at the United Nations last week (subject as focus)
It was the new resolution on Iraq that the French representative vetoed at the United Nations last week (object as focus)
It was last week that the French representative vetoed the new resolution on Iraq at the United Nations (time adverbial as focus)
It was at the United Nations that the French representative vetoed the new resolution on Iraq last week (place adverbial as focus)

The focus of a cleft sentence is occasionally constituted by a prepositional phrase:

It is for you that I did all this
It is on him that our success depends

Cleft-sentences are also found in questions and exclamations:

Is it on this field that we are supposed to play?
What a great article it was you wrote!

Pseudo-cleft sentences

Another common way to give prominence to one part of a sentence is to use the structure What ......is/was ...., often called a pseudo-cleft sentence. Like cleft sentences, pseudo-clefts make explicit the separation between the new and the given part of the message. The emphasized element is usually found at the end of the sentence, though some emphasis is also put on the initial clause. Typically, pseudo-clefts have the wh-element as subject, though this is not necessarily so:

What I need now is a glass of wine
A glass of wine is what you need now

This structure is used to emphasize the subject or object of a sentence:

My left leg hurts ⇒ What hurts is my left leg
I like her style ⇒ What I like is her style

In order to make a verb stand out the construction what .... do must be used; different verb forms will be found, according to context. Infinitives with or without to are possible. If the wh-clause contains a verb in the progressive aspect the complement also has a verb in the -ing form:

What they do is dump their products
What I did was (to) call the police
What he was trying to do was just earning your trust
Where and when clauses can be used in a similar way to what clauses, especially in informal English. This occurs much less frequently than for the pseudo-cleft sentence “proper”, and mainly when the wh-clause is used as subject complement:

- Greece is where the Olympic Games took place in 2004
- February is when most students get the flu

Other wh-words are rarely employed in pseudo-cleft constructions (once again, they are informal and tend to be avoided at the beginning of a sentence). Different expressions are used in their stead, for example the person who and the reason why in lieu of who and why respectively:

- Lack of money is the reason why I decided to postpone my research trip to the States
- The person who accused him has now been arrested

Structures beginning with all (that) and expressions containing the word “thing” can be used in a similar way to pseudo-cleft sentences:

- All (that) I’m asking for is group solidarity
- The best thing you can do is apologize