Rephrasing Expletives or “To Be” Verbs

Two kinds of expletive constructions exist:

- “It” + a form of “to be”
- “There” + a form of “to be”

Often the expletive construction is followed by a noun and one out of three words: “that,” “which,” or “who.”

Examples:

- There is a city that never sleeps named New York City.
- There was a tornado siren, which was loud, and people rushed to the basement.
- It is John Augustus Roebling who designed the Brooklyn Bridge.

Not all expletives follow this pattern, however.

Example:

- It was a tragedy when the Titanic sank.

Reasons to avoid expletive constructions:

- They are wordy.
- They are unclear. Readers will wonder what “there” or “it” refers to.

Rephrase expletive constructions by eliminating the “there” or “it” at the start of the sentence and beginning the sentence with the noun that is the subject of the sentence.

- New York City never sleeps.
- A loud tornado siren caused people to rush to the basement.
- John Augustus Roebling designed the Brooklyn Bridge.
- The sinking of the Titanic was a tragedy.