

C'est vs il est

Whether to use *c'est* or *il est* hinges on the nature of the referent (what *c'est* or *il est* refer to) and the complement (what completes the sentence i.e. what complements the verb: Il est facile - facile is an adjective complement of the verb être)

These rules only apply to the third person subject pronouns – il, elle, ils, elles (which contrast in usage to *c'est*).

Note: here *il est* is used in two different ways.

1. Where *il est/elle est/ils sont* etc refer to actual things/beings.
2. Where *il est* is impersonal, such as in expressions like, “Il est difficile de le trouver”.

C'est/il est + adjective

Adjective complements on their own:

In general, *il est* is used with adjectives.

Il est beau

BUT

If you are referring to something *unspecified*, *c'est* is used

- Attention, *c'est* lourd! (Whatever is heavy has not been named so we cannot use *il/elle est* because that would require a clear gender)

C'est is used to refer more generally to the referent

- Compare
 - Regardez ces enfants, *c'est* formidable!
 - Refers to the situation that the children are in (implication that they are doing something/something is happening to them that is fantastic)
 - Regardez ces enfants, *ils sont* formidables!
 - Refers specifically to the children themselves as being fantastic.
- Similarly
 - “Regarde ces lumières, *c'est* fantastique!”
 - Refers to the general experience of looking at the lights
 - “Regarde ces lumières, *elles sont* fantastiques!”
 - Refers specifically to the lights themselves

When the adjective refers to a whole clause

C'est is used when the clause precedes

- Vous devez comprendre, *c'est* essentiel
- (essential refers to the clause “Vous devez comprendre” which precedes, so *c'est* is used)

Impersonal Il est is used if the clause follows.

- *Either in the sequence: il est + adjective + que*

- E.g. "Il est essentiel que vous compreniez"
- Or Il est + adjective + preposition + infinitive
 - Il est difficile de trouver un emploi
(Compare with "Trouver un emploi, c'est difficile." where c'est is used to refer to a preceding clause)

EXCEPTION

C'est + adjective + **temporal/conditional proposition**

C'est gentil **quand** il vient

- Despite the fact the c'est refers to a clause that follows, *il est* is not appropriate because of ambiguity (see below)

Ce serait sympa **si** elle venait.

This avoids ambiguity of "Il est gentil quand il vient" and "Il serait sympa si elle venait" where *il* could quite easily be construed as referring to a man.

C'est/il est with adjective complement + preposition + infinitive

When the referent precedes:

When the referent is animate and precedes

- Use Il est + adjective + à + infinitive

E.g. Catherine, elle est difficile à contenter

When the referent is inanimate and *general* (and precedes)

- Use c'est + adjective + à + infinitive

E.g. Manger trop de viande, c'est difficile à éviter

- Here we have a clause - cannot assign a gender to it so cannot use *il est*.

When the referent is inanimate and *specific* (and precedes)

- Use il est + adjective + à + infinitive

Vous n'aimez pas ma mayonnaise sans huile? Elle est très facile à digérer!

When the referent follows (animate or inanimate)

- Use impersonal il est + adjective + de + infinitive

Il est facile de faire la mayonnaise. (Inanimate referent)

Il est difficile de contenter Catherine. (Animate referent)

Preposition + infinitive complement

The referent is a whole clause

If the clause has already been expressed, use *c'est*

- Allez-vous vous mettre à travailler? C'est à espérer.

If the clause follows, use *impersonal il est*

- Il est à espérer que vous allez vous mettre à travailler.

Adverb phrase as complement

Animate referent

- *Il est* is used
- -Où sont les chiens? -Ils sont dans le salon.
- J'ai vu Marie; elle est dans le jardin.

Inanimate referent

- If the referent is a place, *c'est* is used
 - -Où est Londres? - C'est en Angleterre
- If the referent is anything else, *il est* is used
 - -Où est votre montre? - Elle est sur la table.

Ce, cela or whole clause referent

- Use *c'est*
- Je ne comprends pas cela: c'est en chinois
- Je ne comprends pas ce qui est écrit: c'est en russe

Noun complement

C'est is used most often with nouns

E.g. C'est un chat.

Ce sont mes amis.

For professions

C'est is used when the profession is expressed as a noun : "C'est un journaliste"

BUT if the article is deleted then *il est* is used

- Il est journaliste

Il est is used in expressions of time

- *Il est* is used
- "Il est dix heures"