

THE USE OF *ER*

The use of the adverb *er* is rather complex and for that reason most foreigners use to drop it completely, which is quite noticeable to native speakers of Dutch. Basically there are five cases where *er* should be used, which can be combined as well.

Indefinite subject

Sentences with an indefinite subject which is not categorial need *er*. This *er* has no real meaning and is only there for grammatical reasons¹. Examples:

Er staat een auto voor het huis - There is a car (i.e. some car) in front of the house.

Er loopt een rivier door de stad - There is a river through the town.

Er heeft iemand voor je opgebeld - Someone has called for you.

Er is een brief voor je - There is a letter for you.

Is er nog koffie? - Is there any coffee left?

The number of the finite form is the number of the 'real' subject:

Er lopen mensen door de straat - There are people in the street.

Note the difference with a categorial indefinite subject:

Een fiets heeft twee wielen - A (= any) bicycle has two wheels;

Een hond blaft nu eenmaal - It's just that a (= any) dog barks.

This *er* is always the first word of a main clause; in subordinate clauses it immediately follows the conjunction:

Ik denk dat er niet genoeg ruimte is - I think (that) there is not enough space.

If the subject is an interrogative pronoun, it is considered indefinite, too, so *er* should be used:

Wie gaat er mee? - Who is coming along (with me)?

Wat is er gebeurd? - What has happened?

Adjunct of place

Er is used as an adjunct of place can be considered as a short form of *daar* or *hier*. Keep in mind that *er* is an existing and useful word, so avoid using a peculiar kind of Dutch by systematically replacing it by *daar* or *hier*. Because of its weak meaning this *er* can never be in first position in the sentence. Examples:

'Weet jij waar het station is in Delft?' 'Natuurlijk, ik heb er een paar jaar gewoond.' - 'Do you know where the station is in Delft?' 'Of course I do, I lived there (= in Delft) for a couple of years.'

Ik werk bij dat bedrijf, dus ik kom er elke dag. - I'm working at that company, so I come there every day.

But:

Ik werk bij dat bedrijf, daar kom ik dus elke dag. - I'm working at that company, so it's there that I come every day.

¹ Some newspapers tend to drop a 'meaningless' *er*, thus writing phrases in bad grammar.

With a preposition *Er* should be used as a replacement of the personal pronouns *hem*, *het* and *ze* if they are combined with a preposition and refer to a thing. **Combinations of a preposition and the personal pronoun *het* are impossible in Dutch** and should always be replaced by *er* and the preposition:

erbij - with it, at it;
erin - in it, into it;
ernaar - to it (see below);
ernaast - next to it;
erop - on it;
erover - about it, over it (see below);
ertussen - between them;
ervoor - in front of it, before it.

The same applies to a combination of a preposition and the demonstrative pronouns *dit* and *dat*. So **in dit* → *hierin* 'in this,' **in dat* → *daarin* 'in that' etc. It also applies to the relative pronouns *die*, *dat* and *wat*. So **in die*, **in dat* and **in wat* etc. should never be used, but always be replaced by *waarin* 'in which' etc.

Note the irregular forms and the peculiarities:

er + *met* → *ermee* - with it;
er + *tot* → *ertoe* - to it, at it;
er + *naar* → *ernaartoe*² (if the verb expresses a movement);
er + *over* → *eroverheen* (same).

In principle the combination of *er* and the preposition is written in one word. However, if other words can come in between, they will. In main clauses this *er* usually follows the finite form of the verb; in subordinate clauses it usually follows the subject of the sentence:

Ik ben erin geweest - I was/have been in it.
Ik heb er geen vertrouwen in - I don't have (any) faith in it.
Hij zei, dat hij er geen vertrouwen in had - He said (that) he did not have (any) faith in it.

With a numeral With a numeral, when answering the question *How many?* the word *er* is essential to make a grammatically correct sentence. Though *er* has no meaning here, it should not be omitted.

'Hoeveel kinderen heb je?' 'Ik heb er twee.' - 'How many children do you have?' 'I've got two [of them].'
'Heb je al je boeken?' 'Ik denk het wel. Ik heb er vier.' - 'Do you have all your books?' 'I think so. I've got four [of them].'

In passive sentences Finally, *er* should be used as the subject of a passive sentence, if there is no 'real' subject (i.e. if the subject is unimportant or unknown).

Er werd veel gezongen - There was a lot of singing.
Er wordt te hard gereden - People are driving too fast.
Er werd de hele middag geld ingezameld - Money was collected all afternoon.

² Instead of *ernaartoe* the adverb *erheen* can be used as well.

Combinations

Some of the above functions of *er* can be combined, but usually *er* is expressed only once. The most usual combination is *er* + an indefinite subject and *er* + a preposition:

De bus was niet vol. Er zaten maar een paar mensen in - The bus was not crowded. There were only a few people in it.

In the above example there is a combination of the indefinite subject *een paar mensen* 'a few people' and *erin* 'in it.' However, *er* is used only once.

In fact, only when *er* is used both with an indefinite subject and with a numeral, it is expressed twice³:

'Hoeveel pakken koffie staan er nog in de kast?' 'Er staan er nog drie.' - 'How many packs of coffee are still in the closet?' 'There still are three (of them).'

³ Another good example is the first line of the well-known birthday song *Er is er één jarig, hoera, hoera!* 'It's somebody's birthday, hurray, hurray!'