Cleft Sentences:
Advanced Cleft Sentences: Reversed Clefts, Inferential Clefts & Formal Emphasis

Fill in the blank with the correct option.

1.   Adequate funding _____ what this research project needs above all else.
   a) was   b) are
   c) is   d) were

2.   Financial stability — that is _____ every small business owner strives for.
   a) what   b) that
   c) which   d) how

3.   The professor's lack of transparency _____ what ultimately led to his dismissal.
   a) it was   b) was
   c) that was   d) what was

4.   _____ I object to the plan; it's just that the timeline seems unrealistic.
   a) That's not why   b) It's not that
   c) What's not that   d) Not that it

5.   It's not that the candidate lacks experience; _____ her communication skills need improvement.
   a) it's why   b) it's because
   c) it's that   d) what's that

6.   It's not _____ I object to change; it's that the proposed timeline is simply unachievable.
   a) because   b) why
   c) what   d) that

7.   If the negotiations collapsed last month, it _____ because neither party was prepared to make concessions.
   a) is   b) has been
   c) would be   d) was

8.   If employees are leaving in such large numbers, _____ the company's management style is fundamentally flawed.
   a) that's why   b) it's because
   c) the reason   d) what's more

9.   It was not until the full extent of the damage had been assessed _____ the insurance company agreed to pay the claim.
   a) that   b) when
   c) before   d) which

10. It _____ not until she read the contract in full that she realised how unfavourable the terms were.
    a) is   b) had been
    c) was   d) has been

11. It _____ the managing director who authorised the controversial merger, though no one can prove it definitively.
    a) must have been   b) may have been
    c) should have been   d) would have been

12. Given the severity of the security breach, it _____ an insider who leaked the confidential documents — no external hacker could have accessed that system.
    a) can't have been   b) might have been
    c) should have been   d) must have been

13. What the research team eventually decided to do was _____ a longitudinal study spanning five years.
    a) conduct   b) conducting
    c) conducted   d) having conducted

14. What subsequently emerged from the inquiry was _____ the defendant had been in a different city on the night in question.
    a) how   b) what
    c) which   d) that

15. What the government should have done _____ invest in renewable energy much earlier, rather than continuing to subsidise fossil fuels.
    a) has   b) did
    c) was   d) is

16. _____ happened next took everyone by surprise: the chairman resigned on live television.
    a) What   b) It
    c) All   d) The thing

17. _____ the lack of proper oversight that allowed the fraud to go undetected for so long.
    a) What was   b) It was
    c) All was   d) That was

18. Greater transparency in government spending — that _____ what voters have been demanding.
    a) is   b) was
    c) has   d) does

19. _____ truly sets this candidate apart is her extensive experience in international diplomacy.
    a) It   b) All
    c) The thing   d) What

20. The managing director made it absolutely clear: _____ cost-cutting that would save the company, but a complete rethinking of its business model.
    a) there was no   b) what was not
    c) it was not   d) not only was it

Answers

1. c) is

2. a) what

3. b) was

4. b) It's not that

5. c) it's that

6. d) that

7. d) was

8. b) it's because

9. a) that

10. c) was

11. b) may have been

12. d) must have been

13. a) conduct

14. d) that

15. c) was

16. a) What

17. b) It was

18. a) is

19. d) What

20. c) it was not

Explanations

1. "is" (c)

This is a reversed wh-cleft, where the focus element ('Adequate funding') comes before the linking verb and the wh-clause. The present tense 'needs' in the wh-clause requires present tense 'is'. The wh-clause 'what this project needs' functions as a singular noun clause, so 'are' and 'were' are incorrect. 'Was' creates a tense mismatch with present 'needs'.

2. "what" (a)

In this reversed wh-cleft, 'what' introduces the noun clause describing the thing being strived for. 'That' cannot introduce a free relative clause in this position — it would need an antecedent noun. 'Which' requires a defined set to choose from, making it inappropriate here. 'How' would refer to manner, but the sentence is about the thing desired, not the manner of striving.

3. "was" (b)

This is a reversed wh-cleft: focus ('The professor's lack of transparency') + linking verb + wh-clause. The simple past 'was' links the subject to the wh-clause 'what ultimately led to his dismissal'. 'It was' creates a double subject (the noun phrase + 'it'). 'That was' and 'what was' insert unnecessary pronouns that break the reversed cleft structure.

4. "It's not that" (b)

This is an inferential cleft: 'It's not that X; it's (just) that Y.' The speaker corrects a potential misperception — they don't object to the plan itself, but have concerns about the timeline. 'That's not why' presupposes objection and explains a different reason for it, which contradicts the intended meaning. 'What's not that' and 'Not that it' are ungrammatical constructions.

5. "it's that" (c)

The inferential cleft pattern pairs 'It's not that…' with 'it's (just) that…' to correct one interpretation and offer another. 'It's because' shifts to a causal explanation, but the sentence is clarifying what the real issue is, not giving a reason for the first clause. 'It's why' reverses the logic — it would mean 'the reason her skills need improvement is the first clause', which is nonsensical. 'What's that' is ungrammatical in this context.

6. "that" (d)

The inferential cleft requires 'that' to introduce the noun clause: 'It's not that X; it's that Y.' Using 'because' would create a mismatched pair — 'It's not because…' pairs with 'it's because…', not 'it's that…'. 'Why' changes the meaning to 'It's not why I object', which is about the reason for objecting rather than denying objection. 'What' cannot follow 'It's not' in this structure.

7. "was" (d)

This is an if-because cleft explaining causation: 'If X happened, it was because Y.' The past tense 'collapsed' with the specific time reference 'last month' and 'was prepared' establish a factual past context, requiring 'was'. 'Is' creates a tense mismatch with past verbs. 'Has been' implies ongoing relevance that doesn't fit the completed event. 'Would be' introduces a hypothetical condition, but 'last month' confirms the collapse actually occurred.

8. "it's because" (b)

This is a present-tense if-because cleft: 'If X is happening, it's because Y.' The structure identifies the cause of the stated condition. 'That's why' reverses the causation — it would mean 'employee departures cause the management style to be flawed', which is logically backward. 'The reason' is incomplete without a linking verb. 'What's more' is an additive connector, not a causal one.

9. "that" (a)

In the 'It was not until… that…' cleft pattern, 'that' is the required connector linking the time expression to the main clause. This structure emphasises how late an action occurred. 'When' is not used in this cleft pattern — although 'not until… when' might seem logical, the fixed cleft structure requires 'that'. 'Before' changes the meaning entirely, and 'which' cannot introduce an independent clause here.

10. "was" (c)

The 'It was not until… that…' pattern uses simple past 'was' to match the past tense narrative ('read', 'realised'). 'Is' creates a tense mismatch with the past verbs. 'Had been' is not standard in this cleft — the pattern is fixed as 'It was not until', not 'It had been not until'. 'Has been' similarly does not fit the established past narrative.

11. "may have been" (b)

This combines a modal perfect with an it-cleft to express uncertain past speculation. 'Though no one can prove it definitively' signals uncertainty, making 'may have been' (possibility) the correct choice. 'Must have been' expresses near certainty, which contradicts the lack of proof. 'Should have been' expresses obligation or expectation, not speculation. 'Would have been' implies a counterfactual condition.

12. "must have been" (d)

This combines strong deduction with an it-cleft. The evidence is conclusive: 'no external hacker could have accessed that system' eliminates all alternatives, making 'must have been' (near certainty) the only appropriate modal. 'Can't have been' contradicts the evidence (it WAS an insider). 'Might have been' is too weak for such conclusive evidence. 'Should have been' expresses obligation, not deduction.

13. "conduct" (a)

In the do-cleft pattern 'What + subject + did/decided to do + was + bare infinitive', the verb following 'was' takes the bare infinitive form. The tense is already carried by 'decided' and 'was', so the main verb needs no additional tense marking. 'Conducting' (progressive), 'conducted' (past), and 'having conducted' (perfect participle) all add unnecessary or conflicting tense/aspect marking.

14. "that" (d)

This is a formal event cleft: 'What emerged was that + clause.' The conjunction 'that' introduces the noun clause reporting the factual finding. 'How' would imply manner ('the way in which'), but the sentence reveals a fact (the defendant's location), not a method. 'What' would create an awkward 'What… was what…' double structure. 'Which' cannot introduce a noun clause after 'was' without an antecedent.

15. "was" (c)

This is a do-cleft with a past modal: 'What X should have done was + bare infinitive.' The linking verb 'was' connects the wh-clause to the emphasised action. 'Is' creates a tense mismatch with 'should have done' (past reference). 'Did' cannot serve as a linking verb here — 'What X should have done did invest' is ungrammatical. 'Has' similarly cannot link to a bare infinitive.

16. "What" (a)

This is a wh-cleft where 'What happened next' forms a noun clause acting as the subject. Only 'What' can directly precede a verb to form a free relative clause. 'It happened next took everyone…' is ungrammatical — 'It' cannot head a relative clause. 'All' and 'The thing' would each require the relative pronoun 'that' after them ('All that happened', 'The thing that happened').

17. "It was" (b)

This is an it-cleft: 'It was + focus + that + clause.' Only 'It was' correctly begins this pattern, emphasising 'the lack of proper oversight'. 'What was' would require a different structure ('What was the lack of oversight was that…' — ungrammatical). 'All was' does not form a valid cleft ('All was the lack…' is ungrammatical — you'd need 'All that allowed…'). 'That was' creates a confusing double 'that' structure.

18. "is" (a)

This is a reversed wh-cleft with a demonstrative: 'Focus — that is what + clause.' The present perfect 'have been demanding' indicates an ongoing situation, requiring present tense 'is'. 'Was' would imply the demand has stopped, contradicting the present perfect. 'Has' cannot function as a linking verb before 'what'. 'Does' is an auxiliary that would need a main verb after it.

19. "What" (d)

This is a standard wh-cleft: 'What + verb + is + focus.' Only 'What' can directly precede the verb 'sets' to form a free relative clause. 'It truly sets this candidate apart is…' has two finite verbs without a conjunction — ungrammatical. 'All' would need 'that' ('All that truly sets…'). 'The thing' would also require 'that' ('The thing that truly sets…').

20. "it was not" (c)

This is a negative it-cleft with the 'not… but' contrast pattern: 'it was not X that… but Y.' The structure denies one element (cost-cutting) and emphasises another (rethinking). 'There was no' changes the meaning to 'cost-cutting didn't exist', rather than denying its effectiveness. 'What was not' does not form a valid cleft structure. 'Not only was it' is an inversion structure that requires 'but also', not just 'but'.