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## It suffices to

I guess I'm getting interested in eggcorns after all. Yesterday I had lunch with a couple of nonlinguist friends, and one of them asked me whether "suffice it to say" or "suffices to say" is grammatically correct. I had never heard (or read) "suffices to say" before, but I had some educated guesses about how to answer my friend's question, which were later generally confirmed with a few quick Google searches. First, my educated guesses. I think "suffice it to say" is the right idiomatic phrase, but it's easy to see why it might be misanalyzed as "suffices to say". For one thing, "suffice" is not a commonly-used verb in English outside of this idiom. Thinking it over since the conversation over lunch yesterday, I can only think of one other common use: the phrase- or sentence-final use that is typically preceded by a modal; e.g., "a simple phone call would suffice". The available evidence thus does not make it clear that this verb can be used transitively, the "it" of "suffice it to say" not being particularly referential. Moreover, the subjectless subjunctive is also not very common in English anymore; there's no reason to think that the covert subject is third person singular, and thus that the verb is third person indicative, which in the present tense is "suffices", which sounds sufficiently like "suffice it" to complete the misanalysis. [ Update, Oct. 17: Rich Alderson writes to offer the following better-educated alternative analysis: In what way is "suffice it to say" to be taken transitively, or to have a covert subject? It is, of course, a frozen subjunctive, with nonpersonal "it" as subject, and the typical inverted subject-verb ordering of older hortatory subjunctives in English (as in the example you quoted, "be that as it may"). Add in the slightly more archaic "suffice to say", and the common conversion of frozen subjunctives to an indicatives ("It suffices to say"), and we have the situation with which your friend presented you. Absolutely right – don't know what I was thinking by calling that "it" an object. (Can you say "that suffices me" as an alternative to "that is sufficient to/for me"? I think not.) I need to work on my syntactic analysis skills, or maybe I just need to buy the Cambridge Grammar. Incidentally, further perceptive comments on this post can be found here. ] Now, the results of my Google searches. {"suffice it to say"} gets over 2 million hits, whereas {"suffices to say"} gets just under 100,000. More interestingly, the vast majority of the examples of "suffices to say" (roughly 90%) are subparts of ("it suffices to say"), which indicates to me that, among most people who use "suffices to say", the misanalysis is fairly complete: roughly put, if they were just misanalyzing "suffice it" as "suffices" but otherwise just memorizing the phrase as an idiomatic, subjectless indicative clause, there would be no motivation for adding the subject "it". (Incidentally, I also got a literal handful of 5 hits for ("he suffices to say"), and none for ("she suffices to say").) Finally, the first hit in my search for "suffice it to say" was for a Random House "Word of the Day" page. (The link to the original page appears to be dead, so I relied on Google's cache thereof "as retrieved on Oct 8, 2005 18:17:28 GMT".) The word of the day on July 14, 1997 was apparently "suffice", but the text on the page (copied below) is a response to someone's question about the idiomatic phrase "suffice it to say". Details aside, the parallels between what's said in this response and what I thought about it over lunch yesterday are pretty remarkable, given that I'm not a grammarian of English – though of course this may say more about this particular Random House Word of the Day columnist's abilities than about mine ... Allison Payne writes: I hear people say "suffice it to say..." To my way of thinking, this should be "let it suffice to say that..." Is there a rule about this or am I getting irritated for no reason? You're getting irritated for no reason. There are a few things going on here, and the easiest thing to do would be to say it's just an established idiom, but we can look at it in some more detail. Suffice has several meanings, of which the most important, and the only truly current one, is the intransitive 'to be enough or adequate': "Two hours should suffice"; "Why need I volumes, if one word suffice?" (Emerson). In the expression suffice it to say, the word suffice is a subjunctive. In other words, it does mean "let it suffice to say..." In the past there were various ways suffice could be used in the subjunctive ("Suffise, that I haue done my dew in place"--Spenser; "My designs/Are not yet ripe; suffice it that ere long/I shall employ your loves"--Beaumont and Fletcher), but now it is effectively found only in this set phrase. This example is known as the formulaic subjunctive: an invariant expression found chiefly in independent clauses. Some other examples of the formulaic subjunctive are the phrases "Be that as it may..." (i.e. "let that be..."); "Come what may..." "God save the Queen!" (i.e. "may God save the Queen"), and others, none of which excite any controversy. The it in suffice it to say is an impersonal or indefinite pronoun, one that functions as a grammatical placeholder without supplying much real meaning. Relevant examples, which are assigned to various complex subcategories by grammarians, are "it's raining," "go it alone," or "it behooves you," where behoove itself is an impersonal verb we discussed last year. [ Comments? ] Posted by Eric Bakovic at October 15, 2005 02:29 PM In short; in summary; it is enough to say. Often followed by "that." I won't go into the details of our conversation, but suffice it to say that Bob won't be coming back on Monday. There were a lot of unexpected hurdles in the application process, and the whole thing turned out to be a lot more complex than we anticipated. Anyway, suffice to say, we were granted planning permission for the new office in the end.See also: say, suffice, toFarlex Dictionary of Idioms. © 2015 Farlex, Inc, all rights reserved. (formal) used for saying that you could say much more about somebody/something but you do not want or need to: I won't tell you all that was said at the meeting. Suffice it to say that they approved our plan. Suffice it here means "it is enough."Farlex Partner Idioms Dictionary © Farlex 2017See also: Want to thank TFD for its existence? Tell a friend about us, add a link to this page, or visit the webmaster's page for free fun content. Link to this page: suffice to say... The plot makes twists and turns like a snake writhing in the desert. To tell would be to spoil, but suffice to say, writer, director and cast have colluded brilliantly. Fraser's scenes are painfully boring to watch—suffice it to say, he's not a master of physical comedy. An editor in an online editorial group raised the question of which version is correct, and her query elicited more than 80 comments. Many people swore that suffice to say was the correct and only version, and that suffice it to say was a "hairy mutant". People in the other camp lambasted their opponents, and resorted to dictionaries to prove beyond a doubt that the four-word version was gospel. What is the truth of the matter? Quick takeaways Both forms are in use (see more detail at Frequency below). Suffice it to say is slightly more frequent in a British corpus, and much more frequent in an American one. Suffice it to say was formerly considered standard, and is still seen by many people as the only correct formulation. However, possibly because of its puzzling syntax, it is often "regularized" to suffice to say. The traditional formula is still widely used, and useful, despite being considered pompous or old-fashioned by some. There are strange variations on it, such as sufficed to say and the eggcornish surface it to say. Below, I look in more detail at the grammar, frequency and history of this phrase, which the Oxford Dictionary Online aptly defines as "Used to indicate that one is saying enough to make one's meaning clear while withholding something for reasons of discretion or brevity." Meanwhile, the results of the poll embedded in this blog show that the option with most votes is that both versions are 'correct'. Which you use is likely to depend on where you're from, how you first heard or used the phrase, and how you parse it, among other things. If you enjoy this blog, and find it useful, there's an easy way for you to find out when I blog again. Just sign up (in the right-hand column, above the Twitter feed) and you'll receive an email to tell you. "Simples!", as the meerkats say. I shall be blogging regularly about issues of English usage, word histories, and writing tips. Enjoy! Syntax Three things are worth mentioning about suffice it to say. First, the subject of the sentence is the "dummy" or impersonal it. Second, the verb form is subjunctive—the absence of the normal third person singular –s shows this, i.e. suffice, rather than suffices. Third, there is subject-verb inversion. The phrase thus belongs to that very small group of "fossilized" phrases in which the subjunctive is used: God save the Queen! far be it from me to.... Perish the thought! All of them could be rewritten as "Let + subject + verb" i.e. let God save the Queen, let it suffice to say, etc. In particular, far be it from me displays the same subject-verb inversion. However, the fact that such subjunctive phrases are rare and on the fringes of most people's grammar means, I believe, that they have difficulty analysing the "suffice it to say" form, and therefore attempt to regularize it to "suffice to say". The inversion of subject and verb presents a further block to analysis. It has also become clear to me, from discussion of this issue in online editorial forums—or fora, if you really, absolutely must—that some people interpret the it as the object of the verb suffice. As a result, they reject it, correctly, in so far as they perceive suffice to be intransitive in this use, but incorrectly if one analyses the phrase as having subject-verb inversion. "Suffice to say", however, while sounding superficially like a second person imperative—stand up, wake up, pay attention, etc.—is as anomalous as the four-word form. Who is being addressed in this imperative? Current situation Frequency The Oxford English Corpus (OEC) has slightly more examples of the string "suffice to say" than of "suffice it to say": 952:937 (and each occurs less than once per million words of text.) However, filtering out "suffice to say" as a zero infinitive, i.e. in phrases such as let it suffice to say, it should suffice to say, etc., reduces its total to well below 900, making it, therefore, less frequent than the longer form. Though the shorter form is used in all varieties of English, its use does seem to be particularly marked in Australian English, at least in the OEC data. In the Corpus of Contemporary American the distribution is very different: 376 occurrences of the longer version against 97 for the shorter. It is particularly noticeable that in academic writing the longer form occurs in an even higher ratio of 6:1. A Google Ngrams comparison of "suffice to say" and "suffice it to say" suggests a decline in the use of both phrases over the last century, However, "suffice to say" is often the zero infinitive mentioned previously, and it would be too time-consuming to compare the frequency of the two phrases in detail over time. For the period 1960-2000 (i.e., the latest period covered by Ngrams) "suffice it to say" is the more frequent of the two strings. Dictionaries Both the Oxford Online Dictionary and Macquarie bracket the it: suffice (it) to say, indicating clearly that they accept it as optional. Merriam-Webster Online notes "often used with an impersonal it

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