impersonal verbs & expressions: il faut, il est important ...  

1. weather expressions  
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The impersonal pronoun il ('it') is used in French when an action has no agent, that is, when there is no person or animate being responsible for the action. The conjugated verb is always in the third person singular, no matter what tense the impersonal verb takes.

Tex: Tiens, il pleut très fort!  
Tex: Wow, it is raining really hard!

The action of the verb (pleut, 'is raining') is an impersonal, natural force. The impersonal pronoun il is often referred to as a 'dummy subject' because it fills the syntactic position of subject but doesn't have any real meaning.

weather expressions  
Weather expressions in both French and English require impersonal subjects. The infinitive of 'weather verbs' can only be conjugated in the third person singular form (the il form).

pleuvoir, to rain  
Il pleut.  
It's raining.
neiger, to snow  
Il neige.  
It's snowing.
grêler, to sleet  
Il grêle.  
It's sleetting.
geler, to freeze  
Il gèle.  
It's freezing.
bruiner, to drizzle  
Il bruine.  
It's drizzling.

Weather conditions are also expressed in French using the verb faire followed by an adjective or noun. Of course, when the verb faire is used impersonally in such weather expressions, it can only be conjugated in the third person singular form (il fait). See faire expressions for a more complete list of weather expressions.

Il fait chaud.  
It's hot.
Il fait du vent.  
It's windy.
Il fait beau.  
It's beautiful.

falloir (il faut ...) 'to be necessary'  
The verb falloir only exists in the impersonal form (il faut). It always expresses the notion of necessity or obligation which is translated into English in various ways ('must,' 'should,' 'have to'). Falloir may be followed by an infinitive as in (d), by a noun as in (c), or by a subordinate clause introduced by que as in (a); note that the verb in the subordinate clause in (a) requires the subjunctive mood. Finally, it may be preceded by a pronoun acting as an indirect object as in (b), a way to avoid the subjunctive.

Comme la majorité des Français, Tex ne voit pas l'intérêt du scandale Lewinsky.  
Like the majority of the French, Tex does not see the point of the Lewinsky scandal.
Tammy (scandalisée):  
Tammy (shocked):
(a) Il faut que nous sachions la vérité.  
It is necessary that we know the truth. We should/must know the truth.
(b) Il **nous faut** des preuves. [indirect object + **faut**] We need evidence.

(c) Il **faut** une enquête. [**faut** + noun] An investigation is necessary.

Tex: Mais tu sais bien ce qui s'est passé! Tex: But you know what happened!

(d) Il **faut** te calmer. [**faut** + infinitive] It is necessary that you calm down. You have to calm down.

**impersonal expressions with 'être' + [adjective]**

The impersonal subject *il* may appear with the verb *être* followed by an adjective and an infinitive. Note that the infinitive is always introduced by the preposition *de* in such impersonal expressions:

*Il est* + [adjective] + *de* + [infinitive]

**Tex:** *Il est amusant de* lire les journaux américains! Tex: It's fun to read American newspapers!

**Tammy:** *Il est difficile de* comprendre ton humour. Tammy: It is difficult to understand your sense of humor.

**other common impersonal expressions**

*Il y a*, there is, there are
*Il est* + clock time (*Il est deux heures*, It's two o'clock.)
*Il s'agit de*, to be about, to be a matter of, to be a question of
*Il vaut mieux*, to be better, to be advisable

Listen to the dialogue:

**Tammy:** *Il est* 18 h. Regardons le journal télévisé. *Il y a* un reportage sur l'ininfidélité.

**Tex:** Ah non, ça alors. *Il s'agit seulement de* tourmenter les présidents et les tatous! *Il vaut mieux* changer de chaîne!

**Tammy:** It's 6 o'clock. Let's watch the news. There's a report on infidelity.

**Tex:** Oh, no, not that. It's only about tormenting presidents and armadillos! It's better to change the channel!

**fill in the blanks**

Complete with one of the following impersonal expressions: 'il fait', 'il neige', 'il pleut', 'il gèle', 'il est', 'il faut', 'il y a'.

1. Tammy : En été, au Texas, ______ très chaud.
2. Tex : Oh! ______ du vent. Mon béret s'est envolé!
4. Edouard : Les escargots et les canards aiment l'eau. Ils aiment quand ________.
6. Tammy : Quand ________, on fait du patin à glace sur le lac.
7. Bette : Tu as l'heure? Oh, non, ______ déjà 8 heures!
8. Joe-Bob : ______ visiter l'Alamo une fois dans sa vie!
10. Tex : Oh, c'est tard, ______ rentrer. Tammy ne va pas être contente.
11. Tammy : Regarde, ______ jour, le soleil se lève!
12. Tammy : ______ difficile de comprendre Tex.