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 reasons 1. 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 definite 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:

'Heet 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.

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

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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 - daar in '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* → *er mee* - with it;
- *er + tot* → *er toe* - to it, at it;
- *er + naar* → *ernaar toe* (if the verb expresses a movement);
- *er + over* → *er over heen* (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.

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

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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 twice:\(^3\):

*‘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).'

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\(^3\) 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!'