

Bad News

Compare the following two sentences:

(A) I have bad news.

(B) I have news not of the kind for which I would have hoped.

Authors of most Composition textbooks use this kind of pairing constantly to display their wares: “Here is a bad, evilly written sentence that I have transformed into a fine, virtuous sentence by the application of my wonderfully rigid rules.” Almost all of them would by far prefer (A) to (B). They have many reasons: (A) is shorter – 4 words to (B)’s 13. (A) is direct; (B) is rambling and not to the point. The news in (A), while negative, is communicated in a positive way; (B) delivers the negative news only by a use of the negative word “not.” (A) tells us the news is “bad”; (B) never utters an adjective or noun that communicates “bad.” (A) contains no prepositional phrases; (B) is weighed down by two of them.

Such responses seriously underestimate the rhetorical complexities involved in the choice between what we might call the “American” version (A) and the “British” version (B). Just imagine hearing (A) recited by a voice from Iowa and (B) by a voice from Henley-on-Thames. You can hear the difference, yes? They both sound at home.

Neither of these sample sentences is good or bad by itself. They can be evaluated only in terms of (1) the context that surrounds them and (2) the purpose they are intended to serve. For whom is the sentence written? Under what conditions? For what purposes?

If the case calls for straightforwardness, for not beating around the bush, then (A) is superior. A doctor informing a patient she has cancer may prove kinder by being direct. That works well for the patient who seems emotionally hardy enough to deal with such a shocking revelation. If, on

the other hand, she seems particularly fragile, the longer, more buffered delivery of (B) may give her more time for the bad news to set in. I say “time” because that sentence is going to be one of the longest, most slow-motion sentences she will ever hear. It might echo in her mind forever. With (B), no individual word delivers the bad news. The word “not” warns that the rest of the sentence is likely to be unpleasant; but it doesn’t deliver the blow all by itself. It takes the global essence of sentence (B) to communicate the shock.

Change the context. Have either sample sentence be the first in an email from a man to his concerned family and friends announcing that the news from a CT scan, despite months of chemotherapy, is not good. The (B) version is not simply kinder and gentler than (A) in delivering the news; it also suggests his state of mind in advance of his articulating that state of mind. Even though stated in the negative, his Stress position in (B) still contains “hope.” This sentence might well not be dispositive of the issue: The following sentence might plunge into despair. (In that case, sentence (A) might well have been the better choice.) But if the rest of the paragraph displays a positive state of mind -- anywhere from acceptance to serenity --, then sentence (B) will have established that possibility far better than (A). The presence of the well-placed positive word “hope” makes the eventual “acceptance” easier to perceive, receive, and understand for the reader. Sentence (A) would have seemed jolting, had it led up to “acceptance”; it would have been downright disruptive in advance of “serenity.” Indeed, it would have made that serenity unbelievable - the statement being reduced to a self-deluding and others-deluding lie.

That is one of the reasons why, compared to Americans, the British always sound so significantly superior and more self-possessed. They have been trained to make their formal, interactive language far less concerned with delivering the news and far more concerned and caring for the state of mind of the person listening. They call it “manners.” Tone of voice helps as well: An English man or woman can say “How nice it is to see

you” in exactly the same tone of voice as “You won’t be staying long, will you?” and make them sound equally hospitable.

Another, more controlling difference between the two sample sentences is their rhythmical structures. Really well-written prose – M.L. King’s “I have a dream” speech, JFK’s Inauguration address, J.K. Rowling’s every page of the Harry Potter series – tends to be composed in a musical fashion that depends highly on rhythm. These writers balance one prose unit (phrase, clause, or even whole sentence) against another; then they change how many rhythmic sub-units there are in each larger unit to influence or control the reader’s sense of either tension or relaxation, anxiety or arrival.

Since this is hard to contemplate when given only this short description, here is an example of a famous piece of prose – the opening paragraph of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. I have arranged it into what I call a colometric – a way of being able to “see” the rhythm. Every unit that has an extra space before or after is meant to contain one reading accent or beat.

It was the best of times, * it was the worst of times,
 it was the age of wisdom, * it was the age of foolishness,
 it was the epoch of belief, * it was the epoch of incredulity,
 it was the season of Light, * it was the season of Darkness,
 it was the spring of hope, * it was the winter of despair,
 we had everything before us, * we had nothing before us,
 we were all going direct to Heaven, * we were all going direct the other way
 - in short, the period * was so far like the present period,
 that some of its noisiest authorities
 insisted on its being received,
 for good or for evil,
 in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Note how patterns affect interpretation:

- The nouns just before the asterisks are, with only one exception, shorter than their balancing words to the right of the asterisks;

- The first six lines are controlled in part by their final words. In the first three, the length of the ending word keeps increasing. That done, for the next two lines, Dickens changes tactics and uses the alliteration of the “d” sound for resonance. Then he pairs the next two just by meaning - “”everything”/”nothing” versus “Heaven”/”the other way.”
- All the first six lines have two beats on either side of the asterisk; but the seventh line swells to three beats each. The drama that produces leads us straight to Hell. Once Dickens had led us there (“the other way”), he apparently feels this tactic has done what it could.
- He then retreats to a non-dramatic pair of three-beat lines. The last five lines, though less dramatic, continue to communicate through their rhythmic structure. We return from Hell by returning to the original four-stress line. But this reduction from 6 beats per line to four begins a cascade downwards, as the next two lines have but 3 beats and the next lines only 2. In that shortest of lines, the structural content of the opening six lines is repeated, as if in summation: Everything to the left of those asterisks is “good; everything to the right of them is “evil.”
- In his final line, he reverts to default value four beats that has acted as a “home” rhythm from the start. The drama is gone. The recognizable rhythm has restored order. It is - intentionally - almost boring.

Applying this colometric method of seeing/hearing to our two example sentences proves instructive. Sentence (A) can support an accent or beat on every single word:

I have bad news.

Sentence (B), in contrast, has a rhythmic lilt that plays a significant and signifying role in how the reader perceives its message. It is a different kind of music. Here is one way (not the only way) it might be experienced by the reader - with the rhythmical beats underscored.

I have news
not of the kind
for which I would have hoped.

The 3-beat third line rhythmically expands on its 2-beat predecessors, producing the sentence's closure, logically, grammatically, and rhythmically. That sense of arrival is aided by the alliterative "w" sounds ("which" and "would") followed the softer alliteration of the "h" sounds ("have" and "hoped"). (It is softer not only because "h" is itself a softer sound than "w," but also because only one of the two "h" sounds occurs in an accented word.) Sentence (B) is Mozart; sentence (A) is heavy metal. Both have their purposes.

The rhetorically sensitive writer can, to some extent, control a reader's reception of and response to the message by the way in which the sentence is crafted - even down to its rhythm; the writer who slavishly follows the advice in nearly all writing textbooks will merely keep cutting down the number of words in the sentence and avoiding the passive voice. The former is better.