

# COMMUNICATING PREFERENCE: FRED AND HIS DOG

GEORGE D. GOPEN

The author is Professor Emeritus of the Practice of Rhetoric at Duke University.

It is insufficient to create a sentence that is merely *capable* of being interpreted the way you want. The sentence is sufficient only when it leads at least 95 percent of your readers to perceive precisely what you wanted them to perceive.

Let us meet Fred and his dog. We will assume the dog is nice. We have to figure out not what we think of Fred, but rather what the writer wants us to think of Fred. Here is the same information about Fred offered in four different sentence constructions:

- 1a. Although Fred's a nice guy, he beats his dog.
- 1b. Although Fred beats his dog, he's a nice guy.
- 1c. Fred's a nice guy, but he beats his dog.
- 1d. Fred beats his dog, but he's a nice guy.

I have worked through this example with more than 350 groups of people. The results have been the same in essentially every case. Taking each sentence by itself, I ask the participants to determine whether the writer wants us to approve or disapprove of Fred and to indicate their decision by a show of thumbs up or

thumbs down. Here are the stunningly consistent results.

- 1a. Although Fred's a nice guy, he beats his dog.

Unanimous or nearly unanimous thumbs down on Fred.

- 1b. Although Fred beats his dog, he's a nice guy.

Nearly unanimous thumbs up on Fred.

- 1c. Fred's a nice guy, but he beats his dog.

Some up, some down, many hesitating to vote, and some demonstrating a vacillating hand motion of ambivalence. Overall, somewhat more negative than positive, but definitely split as a group. Some people are split within themselves.

- 1d. Fred beats his dog, but he's a nice guy.

Same varied response as (1c), except the overall result is noticeably more positive.

Because the facts remain the same throughout the four sentences, the “instructions” for interpretation must have been sent by the structures in which the facts are differently deployed. The same facts in differing structural locations will produce differing interpretations.

When two clauses compete with each other for attention and emphasis, there are three dominant structural/syntactical factors that influence the reader:

1. End placement. Readers tend to give greater emphasis to the final clause because it contains the stress position—that moment of closure that tells readers to give additional emphasis.
2. The “main” clause (as opposed to the “qualifying” clause). Readers emphasize the “main” clause—a clause that can stand by itself as a complete sentence—because its completeness signals the presence of the main thought. A “qualifying clause” has a subject and a verb but cannot stand by itself as a sentence, usually because it begins with a word like “although” or “that.”
3. Length. A disparity in length between two clauses invokes a disparity of emphasis to be given by the reader. The longer clause usually receives greater attention. Sometimes the shorter clause can invite emphasis if it acts as a kind of “punch line.”

The consistency of the communal judgments on Fred and his dog can now be explained. Because the clauses in each of the four sentences are of approximately equal length, we need only consider the effects of emphasis derived from the first two of the three indicators.

- 1a. Although Fred's a nice guy, he beats his dog.  
End placement: dog-beating  
Main clause: dog-beating

Both indicators of emphasis point the reader to the negative material, thus explaining why almost all thumbs are down on Fred.

1b. Although Fred beats his dog, he's a nice guy.

End placement: nice guy

Main clause: nice guy

Both indicators of emphasis are positive, producing mostly thumbs up for Fred.

1c. Fred's a nice guy, but he beats his dog.

End placement: dog-beating

Main clause: nice guy.

The two indicators point in different directions. This explains the hesitation and indecision of certain readers and the ambivalence of the group as a whole. Some follow one sign, some follow another, and others cannot decide which to follow. In general, however, the vote is notably more negative than positive.

1d. Fred beats his dog, but he's a nice guy.

End placement: nice guy

Main clause: dog-beating

The fact that the emphasis indicators once again diverge in their instructions accounts for another ambivalent response. But the response to (1d) is consistently more positive than the response to (1c). That suggests that whenever end placement and the main clause compete with each other for attention, slightly more readers tend to favor the end-placed clause: The attraction power of the main clause is not quite as strong as the attraction power of the stress position. It is clear that this does not hold for all individuals, for that would once again have produced a unanimous vote. But it is just as clear (from the consistency of the outcomes) that it does hold for a community of readers taken as a whole. The end placement of a qualifying clause will not eliminate the influence of an earlier main clause; it only results

in somewhat greater influence than its competitor.

Now let us complicate the matter by introducing the factor of length:

1e. Fred is a good husband, a caring father, a fine colleague, and an altogether nice guy, even though he beats his dog.

1f. Even though he beats his dog, Fred is a good husband, a caring father, a fine colleague, and an altogether nice guy.

Audience responses to these are just as consistent as those in the previous four examples: (1e) engenders great consternation and a good deal of inability to vote at all; and (1f) engenders unanimous or nearly unanimous thumbs up.

1e: End placement: dog-beating

Main clause: nice guy

Length: nice guy

As we saw with (1c) and (1d), when end placement and the main clause compete for attention, end placement wins a narrow victory, due to the power of the stress position. What happens when the influence of length is added to the influence of the main clause in that struggle? Does the combination of length and the main clause outweigh the power of the stress position? Or will the stress position maintain a certain dominance no matter what is placed in opposition to it? Neither of these turns out to be the case. Instead, reading communities respond keenly to the turmoil raised by the structural conflict. If, after all that information about Fred being a nice guy, he ends up beating his dog, then something is drastically wrong with Fred. He needs help. It is the turmoil, the conflict, the friction that wins the reader's attention.

1f: End placement: nice guy

Main clause: nice guy

Length: nice guy

All three indicators are positive. The sentence translates into "Although Fred beats his dog, he is wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful!" Fred for president! By the time the sentence ends, the dog has disappeared from view.

From these experiments, we can derive tactics (not rules) for structuring sentences that have two clauses competing for reader attention. Let's say you are a member of Congress and must vote on the expensive and highly controversial MRX plan. With an election coming up, you poll your constituents and find they are split 50-50 on the issue.

You feel you must take into account both of those strong feelings and demonstrate you are open to both points of view. Tactic: State your decision clearly in the main clause; but do not place that clause at the end. Let the risks attract the attention provided by the stress position.

Thus: "We should invest in the MRX plan, even though the risks are high."

Perhaps instead of demonstrating ambivalence, you wish, while noting the risks, to indicate a firm support for the MRX plan. Tactic: Put the risks in a qualifying clause at the beginning; put your opinion into the main clause, and place it at the end. Your opinion will seem firm to a majority of your readers."

Thus: "Even though the risks are high, we should invest in the MRX plan."

Do you wish to push harder for the MRX? Tactic: State your opinion in the main clause, place it at the end, and beef it up with additional length. This will produce a sense of urgency for a majority of your readers.

Thus: "Even though the risks are high, we should draw upon whatever funds are available and invest in the MRX plan."

It is insufficient to create a sentence that is merely *capable* of being interpreted the way you want it to be interpreted. If you understand Fred and His Dog, you can manipulate how most readers will weigh and balance the conflicting material you hand them in a single sentence. ■