24

Information Structure: Given, New, and End-Weight

Two sentences can be truth-conditionally identical yet feel utterly different in context. Information structure — the packaging of given and new information — explains why, and it governs most "which version sounds better?" decisions in skilled writing.

24.1 Given before new

English sentences flow best when they start from what the reader already knows (the **theme** or topic) and move toward what is new (the **rheme** or focus):

> *Marie Curie discovered polonium in 1898.* ***The discovery*** *made her famous.* (smooth: *the discovery* is given)
> *Marie Curie discovered polonium in 1898. Fame came to her because of* ***the discovery****.* (jolting: new information first)

Most of the constructions in this book exist to serve this principle:

- **Passive** keeps the topic in subject position: *The bridge was designed by Telford* (paragraph about the bridge).
- **Clefts** (Chapter 18) mark one element as the focus.
- **Fronting** moves a given element to the start: ***That objection*** *we have already answered.*
- **Inversion after place adverbials** unveils a new subject at the end: *On the hill stands* ***a ruined tower****.*

24.2 End-weight

English pushes long, heavy constituents to the end of the clause. Violating end-weight strains the reader even when the grammar is impeccable.

- **Extraposition** of clausal subjects: ✗ *That the minister knew nothing about payments made in her name over six years is implausible.* → ✓ ***It*** *is implausible* ***that the minister knew nothing****. . .*
- **Heavy-NP shift**: *She explained* ***to the board*** *[her plan to restructure the entire division].* (long object moved after the PP)
- **Dative alternation**: choose *give someone something* or *give something to someone* so the heavier item comes last: *She gave* ***the committee*** *[a report running to three hundred pages]* vs. *She gave* ***the report*** *to [the committee that had commissioned it three years earlier].*
- **Phrasal verb particles**: *turn* ***down*** *[the offer of a lifetime]* rather than *turn [the offer of a lifetime] down*.

24.3 Existential *there*

There + *be* exists to introduce brand-new referents at the end of the clause: ***There's*** *a package for you at reception.* Starting instead with the new item (*A package is at reception for you*) sounds unnatural precisely because it violates given-before-new.

Formal variants: *There* ***remains*** *one problem. There* ***arose*** *a dispute. There* ***seems to be*** *a misunderstanding.*

24.4 Focus by stress and by syntax

Speech marks focus with intonation; writing must use syntax and lexis:

- Focusing adverbs: *only, even, also, just, particularly* — position them next to what they modify. ***Only*** *the interns attended* (nobody else) vs. *The interns* ***only*** *attended* (they did nothing else) vs. *The interns attended* ***only*** *the morning session*. In speech, loose placement is normal; in print, misplaced *only* genuinely misleads.
- *do*-emphasis: *We* ***do*** *appreciate your patience. She* ***did*** *warn you.*
- Emphatic reflexives: *The author* ***herself*** *admits as much.*
- *as for / regarding / when it comes to* to (re)set the topic: ***As for*** *the budget, we'll decide next week.*
- Right-dislocation (informal speech): *He's a genius,* ***that boy***. Left-dislocation: ***That boy****, he never stops.* (conversational only)

Style & Register

When a sentence feels awkward, diagnose it informationally: (1) Does it open with given information? (2) Does the main news come last? (3) Is the heaviest constituent at the end? Rewriting to satisfy these three checks fixes most clumsy sentences without touching the content.

Exercises

Exercise 24.1 Reorder for flow

Rewrite the second sentence of each pair so it flows from the first.

1. The lab tested three alloys. Titanium proved the most durable of the three alloys tested by the lab. (tighten)
2. In 2019 the firm opened a Lisbon office. Forty engineers now work in the office the firm opened in Lisbon. (tighten)
3. A stranger knocked at midnight. The stranger's arrival changed everything. (fine — explain why it works)

Exercise 24.2 End-weight

Improve each sentence by repositioning the heavy constituent.

1. That anyone could survive a fall from that height without serious injury amazed the doctors.
2. She sent the analysis that the client had been demanding for weeks to us.
3. He turned the most lucrative sponsorship deal in the sport's history down.

Exercise 24.3 Focus

Place *only* to express each meaning of "She lent her car to her brother on Sundays."

1. The car was the one thing she lent him.
2. Her brother was the one person she lent it to.
3. Sundays were the one day she lent it.