

Indirect Structure and Reader Response

Doug Brent, (1985). *The Journal of Business Communication* 22(2): 5-8.

Indirect structure is a classic way of handling bad-news messages (including sales messages, which I categorize as bad news). The typical strategy is to precede the bad news or sales message with a number of buffer sentences; these are intended to insure that the writer appears interested in and appreciative of the reader's point of view, and generally to establish a positive attitude. Sometimes they may also supply information or arguments designed to make the main thesis of the message more acceptable. In short, the strategy is to manipulate the reader into a receptive frame of mind before delivering the zinger.

Certain aspects of the strategy are very attractive. It is hard to quarrel with the idea that bad news should be presented in a graceful manner, with an emphasis on careful reasoning and shared values. However, I wish to argue that the central tenet of the strategy--the delaying of the bad-news message by the use of buffer passages--is misguided, for it is founded on a false notion of how people read.

When using indirect structure to buffer a message that may be unpalatable, a writer is behaving as if he can use sequence to manipulate a reader's response. The implicit assumption is that readers not only read but react in strict sequence. First they will read sentence 1, and have reaction A. Then they will read sentence 2, and have reaction B--or rather, A', since the original reaction will not be replaced but only modified by the next sentence. Thus, when they read sentence 5, the zinger, they will not have reaction E, the reaction that they would have had if they had read the sentence by itself, but rather reaction A''', a reaction mediated by all previous ones.

Or so the theory goes. But have you ever monitored your own reactions as you read a letter written according to these principles? Not long ago I received a letter from an academic journal (not, I might add, an ABCA publication, but one whose staff should be equally familiar with theories of audience). The letter began with three brief paragraphs explaining the benefits of subscribing to the journal: how it kept me up on current thinking in my profession, how its reputation had already grown, how many notable figures had published in its pages. My reaction was, I imagine, supposed to be growing admiration of this precocious little publication. Actually, my reaction was growing puzzlement and frustration. I already subscribed: why were they telling me all this? What were they after? What was the hidden agenda?

What they were after, of course, was a renewal. Paragraph 4 informed me that they had not yet received my check, and that they were reminding me of some of the reasons why I subscribed. My reaction (A''''') was anger at having had my time wasted with self-congratulatory paragraphs that couldn't possibly influence my decision.

I mention this incident not just because it is an example of indirect structure mishandled--any strategy can flop if handled badly--but because it illustrates several points about readers that seem often to be overlooked when indirect structure is used. First, readers have more ability to suspend reaction than they are credited with. Both cohesion theory and common sense agree that individual pieces of information are meaningless without an organizing idea, implicit or explicit, to hold them together and give them significance.[1] A good reader knows this instinctively, and will attempt as much as possible to withhold reaction until all the pieces are in place, or at least until it is clear where the message is heading. Good readers—especially business readers, but in fact any who weren't born yesterday--are also inherently suspicious. Alarm bells will ring if the opening sentences of a communication do not seem to bear on a relevant thesis, or seem to be designed to procure agreement rather than advance an argument. As a result, they will be particularly careful not to react in the way the buffer sentences are encouraging them to, because they realize that to do so might be to walk into a trap.

Consider, for instance, the following paragraph, the buffer paragraph of a model bad-news letter in Richard Hatch's *Communicating in Business*:

Congratulations on the beautiful landscaping job you've done on your property. Last summer I drove by your home on my way to work and was very impressed with your garden--particularly the roses. I know you must have worked almost every weekend to get such quick results.[2]

What would be your reaction to reading such a paragraph, written not by a personal friend but by the vice-president of First Federal Savings and Loan Association? Most readers, I suspect, would be trying to figure out whether they were about to be foreclosed on or merely sold a new savings plan to help finance their roses. I doubt that very many would think, "How lovely. What a thoughtful person."

Second, readers--again, business readers even more than other kinds—hate nothing more than feeling that their time is being wasted. And nothing strikes the average reader as more a waste of time than waiting for the ulterior motive of a set of buffer sentences to become clear. The result is that readers may resort to skim reading--another ability of readers that not all writers seem to credit them with. If the first few sentences seem to be ore that yields little metal, the reader's

eyes flick almost unconsciously to the proverbial bottom line, hoping for a higher payoff in significance in exchange for time spent reading.

Indirect structure is often compared with Rogerian rhetoric, with which it shares a number of features. Rogerian rhetoric, popularized by Young, Becker and Pike's book *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*,^[3] emphasises a co-operative relationship with the reader. Rogers advises the communicator to establish an atmosphere of trust by attempting to understand, as honestly as possible, the other's point of view, and by concentrating on areas of shared values before discussing areas of disagreement. Thus the typical Rogerian argument has what may be termed an indirect structure. This structure, however, is not the salient feature of the strategy; it is only an incidental that grows out of the fact that the entire strategy is to treat similarities as more important than differences. To the extent that this attitude is genuinely maintained, Rogerian argument is not really indirect, as the material that comes first is in a sense the most important. This entire frame of mind, moreover, is appropriate to a very specific type of communication: a leisurely and discursive attempt to solve a mutual difficulty by exploring points of view and examining alternatives. This is not quite the same thing as softening the reader up for an unpleasant piece of information.

What, then, is a writer to do if he must deliver an unpalatable message? My advice to students is as follows. First, attain a certain degree of humility. Forget the flattering illusion that you can control the reader's response as if he were a computer that will finish operating on line 10 before going to line 20. If you treat writing as a sort of psychological warfare, you must remember that, as in any armaments race, defence keeps pace with offence. Good readers have seen every one of your brilliant psychological strategies before, and have their own strategies to neutralize them before they leave the silos.

Instead, treat the reader as you like to be treated when you read. As a busy person with a large pile of correspondence to get through, how many neutral sentences would you tolerate? I usually tolerate one, or at most two, especially if they are in some way relevant to the topic ("Thank you for your inquiry about X," etc.). Such an opening, serving primarily a phatic function, does not trouble me any more than does a "Hello, how are you?" in personal conversation. Both serve the time-honored and socially useful custom of establishing lines of communication, like blowing into a speaking-tube before using it. But don't give me three sentences about my roses if you really want to discuss my mortgage.

What would you want to come next? Would you want the news right away, or would you be prepared to tolerate some delay? As a reader, I am prepared to tolerate some delay only when I can clearly see that the argument is unfolding quickly and directly toward a thesis, and when I

can see that that arrangement is clearly dictated by the material and the situation. Most bad-news or sales messages fall naturally into a thesis-and-support structure: "We cannot grant your request because..."; "You should buy this because...". When this natural structure is inverted for manipulative purposes I rebel. However, other persuasive messages may naturally fall into an indirect order. Problem-solution structure, for instance, reflects a natural course that thought processes may take when dealing with some kinds of material. When presented with a problem, I am not threatened or offended if the solution is not instantly forthcoming, for the structure itself dictates a delayed thesis--assuming that I have been told or know already why I should be concerned with this particular problem.

In "Writing Business Correspondence Using the Persuasive Sequence,"[4] Michael G. Moran discusses another type of structure that could be called indirect. His "persuasive sequence," adapted from Priestly's scientific rhetoric, involves establishing common ground after the fashion of a scientific hypothesis; this hypothesis is then refuted by evidence and replaced by a revised hypothesis. Thus the reader is led gently from his old belief to a new one. Here again, the structure grows, not out of an attempt to manipulate the reader, but out of an attempt to follow a natural process of thought. The reader should therefore not be offended. Most important, argument of this kind does not depend for its effect on a precise sequence of reactions. If the reader chooses to read out of order, or react out of order, the effect is not ruined as there is no trap to be sprung early.

In short, the opening of a communication must stand up in the context of the entire message. The communication should be seen to work as a piece, all parts contributing to an argument whether read up, down or sideways. The writer must not pretend to be able to manipulate the reader's response, and above all must not waste the reader's time. Thus, like many things in life, intelligent use of indirect structure is not as much a matter of psychology as it is a matter of good manners and common sense.

Notes

1. See especially A. D. Van Nostrand et al, *The Process of Writing: Discovery and Control*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).
2. (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1977), p. 157.
3. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).
4. ABCA Bulletin, June, 1984, pp. 23-27.