

Sentences for the non-psychic - transcript

Okay, here's a question for you.

How many of the people you write for are psychic with infallible memories? It's a dumb question right?

And yet it's so, so easy to treat them as if they are.

We see it all the time.

Take this sentence:

Owing to the fact that we have been experiencing severe difficulties with our suppliers, coupled with industrial action by postal staff, we are sorry to inform you that your order has been delayed.

Let's leave aside the fact that this is a very long sentence. (Thirty-three words long, in fact.)

No, we're talking about the structure here.

There are two parts to this sentence:

What's happening (the order has been delayed, and we are sorry).

And **why** it's happening (supplier difficulties, industrial action).

And the writer has put the WHY first.

Now, ok, they may have been thinking they'd get their excuses in early.

But it also does two other things, which are bad news for engagement and building understanding.

First, it keeps the reader guessing. They have to read three quarters of the sentence before they get to the point - the WHAT.

When you write a sentence like that, you're asking the reader to invest their time and energy, to set aside whatever else

they're doing and just keep reading. Taking it on trust that it'll be worth it.

OK, if you were building up to telling them they'd won the lottery (or even got a job they'd applied for), then you could be pretty sure they'd be happy to keep reading. But for most situations, you're more likely to just end up annoying them.

And you're also doing something else when you write sentences like this: you're asking the reader to remember that first part of the sentence - the why - while they read the last part. And THEN you're asking them to recall the first part and tack it onto the end.

That's a lot to ask. Really.

It's a big drain on what could be a tired, stressed or busy reader. (Because, yes, they're just like you.)

Scientists call it cognitive load: the amount of brainwork needed to understand something. The higher the cognitive load, the harder your reader has to work.

Wouldn't it be better to let them save their brainpower for retaining what you've said or thinking about how they'll apply the information? The main part of a sentence is WHAT's actually happening. WHY is secondary.

Really, it's easy. Just write the first part first and the second part second - and you'll make it easy on the readers and easy on you.