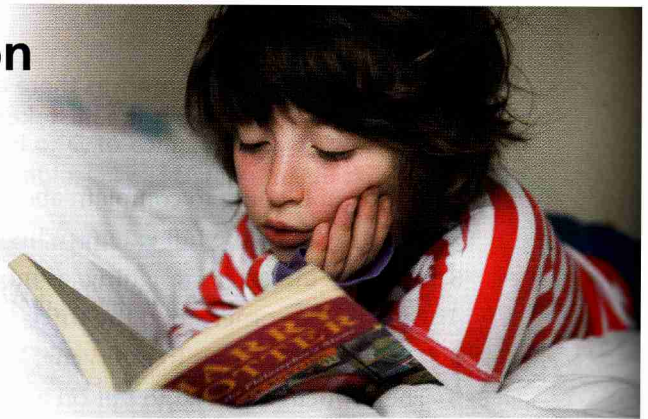


77 Organising information in writing

J K Rowling's first Harry Potter manuscript was rejected by twelve publishing houses. It was finally accepted by a small company in London called Bloomsbury.



1 The information principle

In English we usually move from something known (already mentioned or obvious from the context) at the beginning of the sentence to something new at the end. This is called the information principle:

information obvious from the context already mentioned
The door opened and John walked in. He was holding a black leather briefcase .
new information new information

Starting sentences with information which relates back to something already mentioned helps the text to 'flow' more smoothly and makes it easier for the reader to understand:

J K Rowling's first Harry Potter manuscript was rejected by twelve publishing houses. It was finally accepted by a small company in London called Bloomsbury. The chairman of the company gave the first chapter to his eight-year-old daughter, Alice, to read. She read it quickly and immediately demanded the next chapter.

We do not usually put new information at the beginning, unless we want to focus on it (see 77.3/4).

2 The end-weight principle

In English we prefer to put long and complex phrases or clauses at the end of a sentence. These also often contain new information, so this principle – the end-weight principle – and the information principle reinforce each other:

A striking feature of the central areas of the capital are the elegant classical squares which were originally laid out by aristocratic developers in the eighteenth century.

Sentences with a heavy clause at the beginning can seem clumsy and be difficult to understand:

[The elegant classical squares which were originally laid out by aristocratic developers in the eighteenth century are a striking feature of the central areas of the capital.]



We give more importance to the information principle in text, so we can put a heavy clause at the beginning of a sentence if it contains familiar information linking it to the preceding text:

London has many public parks and squares which date from previous centuries. The elegant classical squares which were originally laid out by aristocratic developers in the eighteenth century are a striking feature of the central areas of the capital.

If the subject of a sentence is a long clause we can use *it* as an 'empty' subject so that we can put the long subject at the end:

It was hard to believe that he had behaved so appallingly.
(= That he had behaved so appallingly was hard to believe.)