Do You Want the Good News or the Bad News First?  
News Order Influences Recipients' Mood, Perceptions, and Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Giving bad news can be anxiety-provoking. When faced with a bad news delivery situation, people may use prosodic techniques such as mixing good news with the bad. In these events, people may ask, “Do you want the good or the bad news first?” In this study we examined whether news order has affective, cognitive, and behavioral consequences. Participants completed a personality test and received fake results in either a ‘good then bad,’ ‘bad then good,’ or ‘bad only’ order. Participants completed questionnaires about how they felt about their results and chose whether to watch a personality improvement video. Results revealed that news order has consequences. People who received good news last reported better mood and appraisal of the results. Additionally, people who received bad news last reported greater intentions for behavioral change and were more likely to watch the improvement video. Our findings suggest that there is no correct approach to delivering news and that instead news-givers should consider the optimal outcomes for the recipient. To buffer negative affect they should relay good news last, but if the goal is behavior change then ending with bad news may be best. Our findings have important implications for the bad news delivery process and its consequences between news-givers and recipients.

MENTORS

Faculty Mentor: Kate Sweeny (left)  
Graduate Student Mentor: Angela Legg (right)  
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Ann Nguyen possesses the kind of enthusiasm and passion for psychology that every mentor hopes to see in a student. After working in the Life Events Lab in the Department of Psychology for over two years, Ann approached us and asked if we would mentor her Honor’s thesis. From the outset, Ann expressed an interest in being involved in every aspect of the research process. She fulfilled this ambition by developing an experimental study, conducting a thorough literature review, helping with data analysis, and writing the paper. At each juncture Ann proved that she possesses a true talent for psychological research by offering creative insight and new perspectives on her research topic, immersing herself in the research literature, and seeking out opportunities to go “above and beyond” with her project. She also maintained a positive attitude throughout the entire process. It has been a joy to work with Ann and to see her excel. Because of her dedication and enthusiasm Ann was accepted to present her research at the competitive Psychology Undergraduate Research Conference at UCLA, as well as at the UCR Symposium for Undergraduate Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity. Ann’s plans to pursue a degree in clinical psychology which will perfectly suit her personality and skill set, and we look forward to seeing Ann succeed in the future.

AUTHOR

Ann Nguyen  
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Ann Nguyen is a fourth year psychology major and is enthralled by the study of human behavior. Her University Honors Thesis focuses on the roles of good news and bad news, and whether certain delivery sequences of good and bad news affect outcomes for new recipients. Ann plans to earn a doctorate degree in clinical psychology and work in a psychiatric hospital, collaborating with other mental health professionals to treat one of the most stigmatized groups of people, the mentally ill. Ann would like to thank her faculty mentor and graduate student mentor for cultivating her interest in this particular research and for their unwavering guidance and support throughout this project.
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INTRODUCTION
An old man visits his doctor to receive some test results, and the doctor tells him, “I have good news and bad news, what would you like to hear first?” The patient replies, “Give me the bad news first.” The doctor informs him, “You have cancer. You have about two years left.” The shocked patient responds, “That’s awful! What kind of good news could you give me after this?” The doctor meekly responds, “Well, you also have Alzheimer’s. In about three months, you are going to forget everything I told you.” – Source unknown

The above doctor-patient narration illustrates an ineffective and poorly organized approach taken by a health-care professional in delivering bad news to his patient. Although some guidelines exist, research still has not come close to filling certain knowledge gaps in relation to the complex nature of news delivery. Engagement in the bad news delivery process can not only be an arduous task, but a highly anxiety-provoking one as well (McKee & Ptacek, 2001). Thus, people attempting to negotiate delivering such news may turn to techniques such as pairing good news with bad (Maynard, 2003). Techniques such as these are used within the business, education, and medical sectors, as well as in ordinary life. For example, if a person has high cholesterol, should the doctor also tell them that his or her blood sugar levels are in the healthy range? Does giving good news to a patient, such as being at a healthy weight, alter how people react to the bad news of hearing about high cholesterol levels? The pairing of good news with bad news comes into play in other domains as well. For example, employers utilize this pairing of good and bad news to fire employees, and partners frequently plan break-up schemes base on this paragon. Within interactions such as these, it is common for those relaying bad news to ask at the beginning of the process, “What would you like to hear first, the good or bad news?” The bad news delivery conversation, whether it begins with this question or not, is a crucial beginning to the bad news delivery conversation as a whole.

A line of research that examined elements of news-order preferences found that when participants were given a choice, most people (up to 88%) preferred to hear bad news first before the good news (Marshall & Kidd, 1981). This finding comes from an accumulation of three studies. Experimenters in the first two studies asked participants to make a choice between hearing good news or bad news. However, participants within these studies did not expect nor were presented with an actual set of results; they were simply asked hypothetical questions in a selected natural setting without any experimental manipulations involved. The third study remedied this limitation by creating a situation in which participants expected to receive some type of results (from either a personality, intelligence, or social sensitivity test) and were asked to state whether they preferred to receive good or bad news first. Findings from all three studies suggest that when given a choice, the majority of people preferred to receive bad news first.

More recent research sought to further explicate people’s preferences when good news is paired with bad news. One goal of the studies conducted by Legg and Sweeny (2010) was to mirror and elaborate previous research on news order preferences (Marshall & Kidd, 1981). These studies addressed several limitations of the research conducted by Marshall and Kidd (1981). Participants in these studies actually completed a personality test and fully expected to immediately receive feedback. Experimenters gave participants the choice to hear their good or bad news results first. Legg and Sweeny found that the majority of people (78%) preferred to hear the bad news first, replicating the findings of previous research.

Some other research that may support the idea that news recipients may want to hear bad news first is research that comes from the “improving sequences” base. Overall, people prefer to begin with a loss and ultimately end in a gain. For example, when asked, “If you were to experience a headache, how would you prefer that course of the headache to subsist?” people would rather experience severe pain at first that reduces down to minimal pain rather than experience minimal pain that intensifies into severe pain (Chapman, 2000). This same concept applies to several other domains, such as how people prefer to spend their weekend time (Lowenstein & Prelac, 1993), and in situations involving money in which people prefer initial financial losses knowing that gains will potentially follow (Ross & Simonson, 1991).
However, although prior research provides evidence that people prefer to hear bad news before good news, the present study seeks to examine whether this preference aligns with lay prescriptions for giving bad news and to investigate whether news order substantively influences outcomes. The specific aims of this study are to examine the consequences of differential sequences of good and bad and to see if there is any benefit of pairing good news with bad. We hypothesized that news order would influence affect (mood), perceptions of the news, and intentions for and actual behavioral changes. First, consistent with prior research on improving sequences, we hypothesized that ending with good news would result in better overall mood and more positive perceptions of the set of news compared to ending with bad news or giving only bad news. However, by ending with bad news (or only giving bad news), people should have stronger intentions to change their behavior. In other words, although ending on a high note might make people feel better, ending on a low note should cause people to take more action to change their behaviors.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Participants were 105 undergraduate college students (79% female) recruited from introductory psychology courses at the University of California, Riverside. Students ranged in age from 18 to 29 years, with an average of 18.76 years ($SD = 1.36$). Of those who reported their ethnicity, 7.2% of participants were European American/Caucasian, 2.9% were African American, 26.1% were Hispanic (Latino), 43.5% were Asian/Asian American, and 20.3% reported to be mixed or other ethnicities.

**Materials**

**Mood.** Four items measured affective states on Likert-type scales, which were scored such that higher numbers indicate more negative affect. One item asked participants to indicate their general mood (1 = *extremely bad mood*, 9 = *extremely good mood*), and three items asked participants to rate how disappointed, distressed, and upset (1 = *not at all*, 6 = *extremely*) their results made them feel.

**Perceptions.** In order to measure how participants perceived the set of personality test results, they answered the question, “Overall, what were your results from the test?” (1 = *extremely negative*, 7 = *extremely positive*).

**Intentions.** Participants’ indicated their willingness to change or improve their personality by responding to the statement, “I plan on taking steps to improve my personality” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*).

**Procedure**

Undergraduate participants arrived at each lab session individually. The experimenter randomly assigned each participant to one of three conditions: “Bad news only” ($BNO, n = 35$), “Good news then bad news” ($GNBN, n = 35$), or “Bad news then good news” ($BNGN, n = 35$). Upon arrival, the experimenter seated the participant and provided a brief introduction to the study, informing the participant that the study seeks to examine college students’ personalities. After participants provided informed consent they completed a personality test on a computer. All participants were led to believe in the legitimacy of the personality test. The personality test consisted of 85 items taken from the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991) and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Thompson & Borrello, 1986). An example item from the BFI asks participants whether they agree or disagree (on a 5-point Likert-type scale) with the statement, “I see myself as someone who is talkative.” Participants responded similarly to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator questions by agreeing or disagreeing (on a 4-point Likert-type scale) with statements such as, “I tend to sympathize with other people.” Once finished with the test, the experimenter told participants that their personality test results would be presented after they completed a short questionnaire (a questionnaire used to get baseline measures of participants’ mood and perceptions about personality).

After completion of the baseline questionnaire, the experimenter went over the first set of personality test results, transitioning from giving the participant either “good then bad” news or “bad then good” news in correspondence to the participant’s assigned condition. In the $GNBN$ condition participants first received their positive personality results followed by their negative personality...
test results and then completed a questionnaire assessing their mood, perceptions of the results, and intentions to attempt to improve their personality. In the BNGN condition participants proceeded similarly; however, they received the negative personality test results first and then viewed their positive test results. They also completed a questionnaire after viewing the set of results. In the BNO condition, participants only received the set of negative results before completing the same questionnaires as the other two conditions.

All participants received the same set of fake personality test results (the personality test was never actually scored). Experimenters read how the participant scored on each personality category while the participant viewed their results on a computer monitor. For example, when given the set of good news results, all participants were told that they scored in the 90th percentile for altruistic motivations; for the bad results, all participants learned that they scored in the 25th percentile on questions about stability. A total of five positive test results and five negative test results were viewed (with the exception of the BNO condition in which participants viewed only the five negative results). After participants completed the final questionnaire, participants indicated whether they wanted to watch an interactive video on improving aspects of their personality, which served as the measure of immediate behavior change (as opposed to the measure of intentions, which merely asked participants to report plans to change their personality in the future). In actuality, no improvement video existed and participants were fully debriefed after providing their choice.

RESULTS

ANOVAs were used to analyze effects for each dependent variable. Least-squared-differences analyses were used to test post-hoc differences between the conditions.

Mood. Starting with the mood measures (Figure 1), as hypothesized news-order sequence influenced overall mood, $F(2, 102) = 3.74, p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$. Participants in the BNO condition ($M = 1.86, SD = 1.63$) reported a poorer overall mood compared to people in the BNGN condition ($M = 0.97, SD = 1.15$), $p < .001$. No other significant differences were found for overall mood.

News-order sequence also influenced disappointment, $F(2, 102) = 27.02, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .35$. All groups were significantly different from each other based on post-hoc analyses. Participants in the BNO condition ($M = 1.91, SD = 1.17$) were significantly more disappointed compared to participants in the GNBN ($M = 1.31, SD = 1.11$) and BNGN conditions ($M = 0.23, SD = 0.49$), both $ps < .01$. Participants in the GNBN condition were also significantly more disappointed compared to participants in the BNGN condition, $p < .001$.

News-order sequence also influenced how distressed the participants felt after viewing the results, $F(2, 102) = 10.08, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .17$. All groups were significantly different from each other based on post-hoc analyses. Participants in the BNO condition ($M = 1.31, SD = 1.13$) were significantly more distressed compared to participants in the GNBN ($M = 0.83, SD = 1.01$) and BNGN conditions ($M = 0.26, SD = 0.78$), both $ps < .05$. Participants in the GNBN condition were also significantly more distressed compared to participants in the BNGN condition, $p = .02$.

Finally, news-order sequence also influenced how upset the participants felt after viewing the results, $F(2, 102) = 7.50, p = .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .13$. Participants in the BNO condition ($M = 1.26, SD = 1.42$) were marginally more upset than participants in the GNBN condition ($M = 0.80, SD = 1.21$), $p = .09$. Participants in the BNO condition were significantly more upset than participants in the
DO YOU WANT THE GOOD NEWS OR THE BAD NEWS FIRST? NEWS ORDER INFLUENCES RECIPIENTS' MOOD, PERCEPTIONS, AND BEHAVIORS

Ann Nguyen

**BNGN condition** ($M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.49$), $p < .001$. Finally, participants in the **GNBN condition** were also more upset than participants in the **BNGN condition**, $p = .03$.

**Perceptions.** Consistent with our hypothesis, news-order sequence influenced how participants perceived the personality test results, $F (2, 81) = 15.85$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .28$. All conditions were significantly differently from each other, all $ps < .01$ (Figure 2). Participants in

**Behavior change.** We finally examined whether news-order sequence influenced intentions for behavior change. As hypothesized, news-order sequence influenced behavioral intentions, $F (2, 102) = 3.68$, $p = .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$. Participants in the **BNO condition** ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 2.79$) had stronger intentions than participants in the **BNGN condition** ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 2.59$), $p < .01$. No other groups were significantly different from each other, $ps > .05$ (Figure 3).

![Figure 2. Means and standard errors for perception measures by news order condition. “Rating of news valence” refers to the measure of perceptions (1 = extremely negative, 9 = extremely positive).](image)

![Figure 3. Means and standard errors for intentions by news order condition. “Rating” refers to the measure of intentions (1 = strongly disagree to 9 = strongly agree).](image)

More impressively, news-order sequence resulted in significant behavior change as measured by opting to view or not view the personality improvement video, $\chi^2 (2, N = 103) = 15.01$, $p < .001$, $\varphi = .38$. The majority (71%) of participants in the **BNO condition** and 59% of participants in the **GNBN condition** wanted to view the video. In contrast, only 26% of participants in the **BNGN condition** opted to watch the video (Figure 4).

![Figure 4. Percentages associated with actual behavior change as measured by choosing to watch a video on improving personality.](image)

**DISCUSSION**

The current study sought to examine the most optimal way of relaying bad news. The primary goals were to better understand the bad news delivery process from the news-
recipient’s perspective and to see whether sequences of good and bad news influence affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes. The majority of our findings supported our hypotheses. In terms of affective outcomes, our findings show that people who ended on a high note (i.e., with good news) felt best overall. In addition, people who ended on a high note also perceived the set of news most positively confirming that news order influences certain cognitive outcomes. Regarding behavior change, our study found that ending on a high note led people to have the weakest intentions for behavior change and to avoid taking actual steps to improve. Finally, providing only bad news resulted in the most negative mood and a more negative outlook on the results, but greater intentions and actual behavior change.

The reception of bad news can have both positive and negative effects. Hearing bad news may feel bad, but it can bring about behavior that could improve the situation. This positive consequence of bad news is especially relevant in real-life settings when it comes to discussions about health, business, and events that occur in everyday life. Our results support the idea that delivering news in a way in which news-givers end with the bad news may actually cause people to change their behaviors. This outcome may prove especially important in domains such as healthcare in which healthcare providers often want their patients to take active measures to improve their health.

Although the internal validity and experimental control of the present study seems strong, it should be noted that the present study is somewhat limited by the nature of the sample (a convenience sample of college students) and the contrived environment of a laboratory. Furthermore, we did not account for shared decision-making that may occur more frequently in the real world. That is, news-givers often give news-recipients the option of which news to hear first. However, in our study we assigned participants to receive a specific news order, rather than allow the participants a choice. Future studies can examine the role of shared decision-making between news-giver and news-recipient. Future research could investigate the short- and long-term consequences of hearing certain news-sequences in real-life settings, such as when people find out test results from their doctors.

The present study provides an account of the “news delivery sequence” which reveals that news-order sequence substantively influences several different recipient outcomes. Our findings provide evidence that there is no single correct approach to delivering bad news. The task of news-givers is to consider the most optimal outcomes for the recipient. If news-givers want to minimize negative affect and improve perceptions of the news then it is best to relay good news last. However, if news-givers want to improve intentions for behavior change, they should give bad news last. This research is essential for providing recommendations for better delivery of both bad and good news in professional or occupational settings. Our overall conclusion is that how people give news matters. By relaying news in the most effective way, news-givers can help create happier, healthier patients, more productive employees, better social relationships, and more attentive students.

REFERENCES


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