

Delivering bad news? Don't beat around the bush

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When receiving bad news, most people prefer to hear it straight. Credit: Savanna Richardson/BYU

You know you want to end your relationship, but you're nervous and don't want to be hurtful. So you spend the first 10 minutes of your dinner

date making friendly and fidgety small talk before diving into the matter at hand.

Alternatively, you sit down at the table and, before your date has a chance to open the menu, you blurt out, "We need to talk." Band-Aid ripped off, just like that.

New BYU research shows that when it comes to receiving [bad news](#), most people prefer directness, candor and very little—if any—buffer.

Such were the findings in a study recently completed by BYU linguistics professor Alan Manning and the University of South Alabama's Nicole Amare. Study participants were offered varied forms of hypothetical visual, textual and verbal bad [news](#).

Manning and Amare found that if someone is delivering bad news about a social relationship—think "I'm breaking up with you" or "I'm sorry, you're fired"—you might prefer they ease into it with the tiniest of buffers. But the research found that people value directness over an extended and overly polite lead in.

"An immediate 'I'm breaking up with you' might be too direct," said Manning. "But all you need is a 'we need to talk' buffer—just a couple of seconds for the other person to process that bad news is coming."

A
toxic water hazard



no swimming

B

The water here is a pretty color but it can cause

- .Skin and eye irritations
- .Stomach problems
- .Fungal infections such as thrush
- .Other infections such as rashes

Think! would you swim in ammonia (pH 11.5) or bleach (pH 12.6)?

Well these are similar to the Blue Lagoon (pH 11.3)!

Given the following two warning-sign options, 89 percent of study participants favored A for its clarity and directness. Credit: Brigham Young University

And when it comes to receiving negative information about physical facts—e.g., "you're dying" or "that water is toxic"—most people want it straight up, no easing in.

"If we're negating physical facts, then there's no buffer required or desired," Manning said. "If your house is on fire, you just want to know that and get out. Or if you have cancer, you'd just like to know that. You don't want the doctor to talk around it."

For this project, 145 [study participants](#) received a range of bad-news scenarios, and with each scenario, they were given two potential deliveries. For each received message, they ranked how clear, considerate, direct, efficient, honest, specific and reasonable they

perceived it to be. They also ranked which of those characteristics they valued most. Participants, for the most part, valued clarity and directness over other characteristics.

Previous research and advice on delivering bad news has been mixed, in part because it's been shaped in a way that makes bad-news delivery easiest for the deliverer, said Manning. And that has led to buffers that drag out uncertainty for the bad-news recipient.

"If you're on the giving end, yeah, absolutely, it's probably more comfortable psychologically to pad it out—which explains why traditional advice is the way it is," he said. "But this survey is framed in terms of you imagining you're getting bad news and which version you find least objectionable. People on the receiving end would much rather get it this way."

Though the buffer in giving bad news is almost always a bad idea, there are cases when it can be valuable—necessary, even, explained Manning. When trying to make a persuasive case for someone to change a firmly held opinion, strategic buildup can play an integral role. "People's belief systems are where they're the most touchy," he said. "So any message that affects their belief system, their ego identity, that's what you've got to buffer."

More information: Alan Manning et al, Bad news first: How optimal directness depends on what is negated, *2017 IEEE International Professional Communication Conference (ProComm)* (2017). [DOI: 10.1109/IPCC.2017.8013959](https://doi.org/10.1109/IPCC.2017.8013959)

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