Sentence Structure

Sentence structure refers to the order of ideas in a sentence. Typical English sentences have a subject-verb-object order (e.g. “She pet the cat”). The way these elements appear within a sentence can change the meaning and focus of a sentence. Usually, the first part of a sentence is what the reader will think the sentence is about.

For example:

- “Bigfoot is definitely real,” says Charlie Brown, noted cryptozoologist.
- Noted cryptozoologist, Charlie Brown, says, “Bigfoot is definitely real.”

The emphasis in the first sentence is on the fact that someone is claiming Bigfoot is real rather than who is making that claim. In the second sentence, the focus seems to be on Charlie Brown, the “noted cryptozoologist.”

A more dramatic example:

But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing cloud of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; [...] when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.

(Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," 1963)

This is a very long, powerful sentence. Imagine the way it all changes if this passage were to start with “You will understand why we find it difficult to wait when you have seen vicious mobs.” The focus shifts away from the discrimination Dr. King has seen and experienced to difficulty waiting, which is not as powerful a message as the discrimination.