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The Lead and the Ending

The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn't induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead. And if the second sentence doesn't induce him to continue to the third sentence, it's equally dead. Of such a progression of sentences, each tugging the reader forward until he is hooked, a writer constructs that fateful unit, the "lead."

How long should the lead be? One or two paragraphs? Four or five? There's no pat answer. Some leads hook the reader with just a few well-baited sentences; others amble on for several pages, exerting a slow but steady pull. Every article poses a different problem, and the only valid test is: does it work? Your lead may not be the best of all possible leads, but if it does the job it's supposed to do, be thankful and proceed.

Sometimes the length may depend on the audience you're writing for. Readers of a literary review expect its writers to start somewhat discursively, and they will stick with those writers for the pleasure of wondering where they will emerge as they move in leisurely circles toward the eventual point. But I urge you not to count on the reader to stick around. Readers want to know—very soon—what's in it for them.

Therefore your lead must capture the reader immediately and force him to keep reading. It must cajole him with freshness, or novelty, or paradox, or humor, or surprise, or with an unusual idea, or an interesting fact, or a question. Anything will do, as long as it nudges his curiosity and tugs at his sleeve.

Next the lead must do some real work. It must provide hard details that tell the reader why the piece was written and why he ought to read it. But don't dwell on the reason. Coax the reader a little more; keep him inquisitive.

Continue to build. Every paragraph should amplify the one that preceded it. Give more thought to adding solid detail and less to entertaining the reader. But take special care with the last sentence of each paragraph—it's the crucial springboard to the next paragraph. Try to give that sentence an extra twist of humor or surprise, like the periodic "snapper" in the routine of a stand-up comic. Make the reader smile and you've got him for at least one more paragraph.

Let's look at a few leads that vary in pace but are alike in maintaining

pressure. I'll start with two columns of my own that first appeared in *Life* and *Look*—magazines which, judging by the comments of readers, found their consumers mainly in barbershops, hairdressing salons, airplanes and doctors' offices ("I was getting a haircut the other day and I saw your article"). I mention this as a reminder that far more periodical reading is done under the dryer than under the reading lamp, so there isn't much time for the writer to fool around.

The first is the lead of a piece called "Block That Chickenfurter":

> I've often wondered what goes into a hot dog. Now I know and I wish I didn't.

Two very short sentences. But it would be hard not to continue to the second paragraph:

> My trouble began when the Department of Agriculture published the hot dog's ingredients—everything that may legally qualify—because it was asked by the poultry industry to relax the conditions under which the ingredients might also include chicken. In other words, can a chickenfurter find happiness in the land of the frank?

One sentence that explains the incident that the column is based on. Then a snapper to restore the easygoing tone.

> Judging by the 1,066 mainly hostile answers that the Department got when it sent out a questionnaire on this point, the very thought is unthinkable. The public mood was most felicitously caught by the woman who replied: "I don't eat feather meat of no kind."

Another fact and another smile. Whenever you're lucky enough to get a quotation as funny as that one, find a way to use it. The article then specifies what the Department of Agriculture says may go into a hot dog—a list that includes "the edible part of the muscle of cattle, sheep, swine or goats, in the diaphragm, in the heart or in the esophagus … [but not including] the muscle found in the lips, snout or ears."

From there it progresses—not without an involuntary reflex around the esophagus—into an account of the controversy between the poultry interests and the frankfurter interests, which in turn leads to the point that Americans will eat anything that even remotely resembles a hot dog. Implicit at the end is the larger point that Americans don't know, or care, what goes into the food they eat. The style of the article has remained casual and touched with humor. But its content turns out to be more serious than readers expected when they were drawn into it by a whimsical lead.

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012

A slower lead, luring the reader more with curiosity than with humor, introduced a piece called “Thank God for Nuts”:

> By any reasonable standard, nobody would want to look twice—or even once—at the piece of slippery elm bark from Clear Lake, Wisc., birthplace of pitcher Burleigh Grimes, that is on display at the National Baseball Museum and Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. As the label explains, it is the kind of bark Grimes chewed during games “to increase saliva for throwing the spitball. When wet, the ball sailed to the plate in deceptive fashion.” This would seem to be one of the least interesting facts available in America today.
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> But baseball fans can’t be judged by any reasonable standard. We are obsessed by the minutiae of the game and nagged for the rest of our lives by the memory of players we once saw play. No item is therefore too trivial that puts us back in touch with them. I am just old enough to remember Burleigh Grimes and his well-moistened pitches sailing deceptively to the plate, and when I found his bark I studied it as intently as if I had come upon the Rosetta Stone. “So *that’s* how he did it,” I thought, peering at the odd botanical relic. “Slippery elm! I’ll be damned.”
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> This was only one of several hundred encounters I had with my own boyhood as I prowled through the Museum. Probably no other museum is so personal a pilgrimage to our past....

The reader is now safely hooked, and the hardest part of the writer’s job is over.

One reason for citing this lead is to note that salvation often lies not in the writer’s style but in some odd fact he or she was able to discover. I went up to Cooperstown and spent a whole afternoon in the museum, taking notes. Jostled everywhere by nostalgia, I gazed with reverence at Lou Gehrig’s locker and Bobby Thomson’s game-winning bat. I sat in a grandstand seat brought from the Polo Grounds, dug my unspiked soles into the home plate from Ebbets Field, and dutifully copied all the labels and captions that might be useful.

“These are the shoes that touched home plate as Ted finished his journey around the bases,” said a label identifying the shoes worn by Ted Williams when he famously hit a home run on his last time at bat. The shoes were in much better shape than the pair—rotted open at the sides—that belonged to Walter Johnson. But the caption provided exactly the kind of justifying fact a baseball nut would want. “My feet must be comfortable when I’m out there a-pitching,” the great Walter said.

The museum closed at five and I returned to my motel secure in my memories and my research. But instinct told me to go back the next morning for one more tour, and it was only then that I noticed Burleigh Grimes’s slippery elm bark, which struck me as an ideal lead. It still does.

One moral of this story is that you should always collect more material than you will use. Every article is strong in proportion to the surplus of details from which you can choose the few that will serve you best—if you don't go on gathering facts forever. At some point you must stop researching and start writing.

Another moral is to look for your material everywhere, not just by reading the obvious sources and interviewing the obvious people. Look at signs and at billboards and at all the junk written along the American roadside. Read the labels on our packages and the instructions on our toys, the claims on our medicines and the graffiti on our walls. Read the fillers, so rich in self-esteem, that come spilling out of your monthly statement from the electric company and the telephone company and the bank. Read menus and catalogues and second-class mail. Nose about in obscure crannies of the newspaper, like the Sunday real estate section—you can tell the temper of a society by what patio accessories it wants. Our daily landscape is thick with absurd messages and portents. Notice them. They not only have social significance; they are often just quirky enough to make a lead that's different from everybody else's.

Speaking of everybody else's lead, there are many categories I'd be glad never to see again. One is the future archaeologist: "When some future archaeologist stumbles on the remains of our civilization, what will he make of the jukebox?" I'm tired of him already and he's not even here. I'm also tired of the visitor from Mars: "If a creature from Mars landed on our planet he would be amazed to see hordes of scantily clad earthlings lying on the sand barbecuing their skins." I'm tired of the cute event that just happened to happen "one day not long ago" or on a conveniently recent Saturday afternoon: "One day not long ago a small button-nosed boy was walking with his dog, Terry, in a field outside Paramus, N.J., when he saw something that looked strangely like a balloon rising out of the ground." And I'm very tired of the have-in-common lead: "What did Joseph Stalin, Douglas MacArthur, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Sherwood Anderson, Jorge Luis Borges and Akira Kurosawa have in common? They all loved Westerns." Let's retire the future archaeologist and the man from Mars and the button-nosed boy. Try to give your lead a freshness of perception or detail.

Consider this lead, by Joan Didion, on a piece called "7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38":

> Seven Thousand Romaine Street is in that part of Los Angeles familiar to admirers of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett: the underside of Hollywood, south of Sunset Boulevard, a middle-class slum of "model studios" and warehouses and two-family bungalows. Because Paramount and Columbia and Desilu and the Samuel Goldwyn studios are nearby, many of the people who live around here have some tenuous connection with the motion-picture industry. They once processed fan photographs, say, or knew Jean Harlow's manicurist. 7000 Romaine looks itself like a faded movie

exterior, a pastel building with chipped *art moderne* detailing, the windows now either boarded or paned with chicken-wire glass and, at the entrance, among the dusty oleander, a rubber mat that reads WELCOME.

Actually no one is welcome, for 7000 Romaine belongs to Howard Hughes, and the door is locked. That the Hughes "communications center" should lie here in the dull sunlight of Hammett-Chandler country is one of those circumstances that satisfy one's suspicion that life is indeed a scenario, for the Hughes empire has been in our time the only industrial complex in the world—involving, over the years, machinery manufacture, foreign oil-tool subsidiaries, a brewery, two airlines, immense real-estate holdings, a major motion-picture studio, and an electronics and missile operation—run by a man whose *modus operandi* most closely resembles that of a character in *The Big Sleep*.

As it happens, I live not far from 7000 Romaine, and I make a point of driving past it every now and then, I suppose in the same spirit that Arthurian scholars visit the Cornish coast. I am interested in the folklore of Howard Hughes....

What is pulling us into this article—toward, we hope, some glimpse of how Hughes operates, some hint of the riddle of the Sphinx—is the steady accumulation of facts that have pathos and faded glamour. Knowing Jean Harlow's manicurist is such a minimal link to glory, the unwelcoming welcome mat such a queer relic of a golden age when Hollywood's windows weren't paned with chicken-wire glass and the roost was ruled by giants like Mayer and DeMille and Zanuck, who could actually be seen exercising their mighty power. We want to know more; we read on.

Another approach is to just tell a story. It's such a simple solution, so obvious and unsophisticated, that we often forget that it's available to us. But narrative is the oldest and most compelling method of holding someone's attention; everybody wants to be told a story. Always look for ways to convey your information in narrative form. What follows is the lead of Edmund Wilson's account of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, one of the most astonishing relics of antiquity to turn up in modern times. Wilson doesn't spend any time setting the stage. This is not the "breakfast-to-bed" format used by inexperienced writers, in which a fishing trip begins with the ringing of an alarm clock before daylight. Wilson starts right in—whap!—and we are caught:

At some point rather early in the spring of 1947, a Bedouin boy called Muhammed the Wolf was minding some goats near a cliff on the western shore of the Dead Sea. Climbing up after one that had strayed, he noticed a cave that he had not seen before, and he idly threw a stone into it. There was an unfamiliar sound of breakage. The boy was frightened and ran away. But he later came back with another boy, and together they explored the cave.

Inside were several tall clay jars, among fragments of other jars. When they took off the bowl-like lids, a very bad smell arose, which came from dark oblong lumps that were found inside all the jars. When they got these lumps out of the cave, they saw that they were wrapped up in lengths of linen and coated with a black layer of what seemed to be pitch or wax. They unrolled them and found long manuscripts, inscribed in parallel columns on thin sheets that had been sewn together. Though these manuscripts had faded and crumbled in places, they were in general remarkably clear. The character, they saw, was not Arabic. They wondered at the scrolls and kept them, carrying them along when they moved.

These Bedouin boys belonged to a party of contrabanders, who had been smuggling their goats and other goods out of Transjordan into Palestine. They had detoured so far to the south in order to circumvent the Jordan bridge, which the customs officers guarded with guns, and had floated their commodities across the stream. They were now on their way to Bethlehem to sell their stuff in the black market....

Yet there can be no firm rules for how to write a lead. Within the broad rule of not letting the reader get away, all writers must approach their subject in a manner that most naturally suits what they are writing about and who they are. Sometimes you can tell your whole story in the first sentence. Here's the opening sentence of seven memorable nonfiction books:

In the beginning God created heaven and earth.

—THE BIBLE

In the summer of the Roman year 699, now described as the year 55 before the birth of Christ, the Proconsul of Gaul, Gaius Julius Caesar, turned his gaze upon Britain.

—*WINSTON S. CHURCHILL*, A HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING PEOPLES

Put this puzzle together and you will find milk, cheese and eggs, meat, fish, beans and cereals, greens, fruits and root vegetables—foods that contain our essential daily needs.

—*IRMA S. ROMBAUER*, JOY OF COOKING

To the Manus native the world is a great platter, curving upwards on all sides, from his flat lagoon village where the pile-houses stand like long-legged birds, placid and unstirred by the changing tides.

—*MARGARET MEAD*, GROWING UP IN NEW GUINEA

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women.

—*BETTY FRIEDAN*, THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE

Within five minutes, or ten minutes, no more than that, three of the others had called her on the telephone to ask her if she had heard that something had happened out there.

—*Tom Wolfe*, The Right Stuff

You know more than you think you do.

—*Benjamin Spock*, Baby and Child Care

Those are some suggestions on how to get started. Now I want to tell you how to stop. Knowing when to end an article is far more important than most writers realize. You should give as much thought to choosing your last sentence as you did to your first. Well, almost as much.

That may seem hard to believe. If your readers have stuck with you from the beginning, trailing you around blind corners and over bumpy terrain, surely they won't leave when the end is in sight. Surely they will, because the end that's in sight turns out to be a mirage. Like the minister's sermon that builds to a series of perfect conclusions that never conclude, an article that doesn't stop where it should stop becomes a drag and therefore a failure.

Most of us are still prisoners of the lesson pounded into us by the composition teachers of our youth: that every story must have a beginning, a middle and an end. We can still visualize the outline, with its Roman numerals (I, II and III), which staked out the road we would faithfully trudge, and its subnumerals (IIa and IIb) denoting lesser paths down which we would briefly poke. But we always promised to get back to III and summarize our journey.

That's all right for elementary and high school students uncertain of their ground. It forces them to see that every piece of writing should have a logical design. It's a lesson worth knowing at any age—even professional writers are adrift more often than they would like to admit. But if you're going to write good nonfiction you must wriggle out of III's dread grip.

You'll know you have arrived at III when you see emerging on your screen a sentence that begins, "In sum, it can be noted that …" Or a question that asks, "What insights, then, have we been able to glean from …?" These are signals that you are about to repeat in compressed form what you have already said in detail. The reader's interest begins to falter; the tension you have built begins to sag. Yet you will be true to Miss Potter, your teacher, who made you swear fealty to the holy outline. You remind the reader of what can, in sum, be noted. You go gleaning one more time in insights you have already adduced.

But your readers hear the laborious sound of cranking. They notice what you are doing and how bored you are by it. They feel the stirrings of resentment. Why didn't you give more thought to how you were going to wind this thing up? Or are you summarizing because you think they're too dumb to get the point? Still, you keep cranking. But the readers have another option. They quit.

That's the negative reason for remembering the importance of the last

sentence. Failure to know where that sentence should occur can wreck an article that until its final stage has been tightly constructed. The positive reason for ending well is that a good last sentence—or last paragraph—is a joy in itself. It gives the reader a lift, and it lingers when the article is over.

The perfect ending should take your readers slightly by surprise and yet seem exactly right. They didn't expect the article to end so soon, or so abruptly, or to say what it said. But they know it when they see it. Like a good lead, it works. It's like the curtain line in a theatrical comedy. We are in the middle of a scene (we think), when suddenly one of the actors says something funny, or outrageous, or epigrammatic, and the lights go out. We are startled to find the scene over, and then delighted by the aptness of how it ended. What delights us is the playwright's perfect control.

For the nonfiction writer, the simplest way of putting this into a rule is: when you're ready to stop, stop. If you have presented all the facts and made the point you want to make, look for the nearest exit.

Often it takes just a few sentences to wrap things up. Ideally they should encapsulate the idea of the piece and conclude with a sentence that jolts us with its fitness or unexpectedness. Here's how H. L. Mencken ends his appraisal of President Calvin Coolidge, whose appeal to the "customers" was that his "government governed hardly at all; thus the ideal of Jefferson was realized at last, and the Jeffersonians were delighted":

> We suffer most, not when the White House is a peaceful dormitory, but when it [has] a tin-pot Paul bawling from the roof. Counting out Harding as a cipher only, Dr. Coolidge was preceded by one World Saver and followed by two more. What enlightened American, having to choose between any of them and another Coolidge, would hesitate for an instant? There were no thrills while he reigned, but neither were there any headaches. He had no ideas, and he was not a nuisance.

The five short sentences send the reader on his way quickly and with an arresting thought to take along. The notion of Coolidge having no ideas and not being a nuisance can't help leaving a residue of enjoyment. It works.

Something I often do in my writing is to bring the story full circle—to strike at the end an echo of a note that was sounded at the beginning. It gratifies my sense of symmetry, and it also pleases the reader, completing with its resonance the journey we set out on together.

But what usually works best is a quotation. Go back through your notes to find some remark that has a sense of finality, or that's funny, or that adds an unexpected closing detail. Sometimes it will jump out at you during the interview—I've often thought, "That's my ending!"—or during the process of writing. In the mid-1960s, when Woody Allen was just becoming established as America's resident neurotic, doing nightclub monologues, I wrote the first long magazine

piece that took note of his arrival. It ended like this:

> "If people come away relating to me as a person," Allen says, "rather than just enjoying my jokes; if they come away wanting to hear me again, no matter what I might talk about, then I'm succeeding." Judging by the returns, he is. Woody Allen is Mr. Related-To, and he seems a good bet to hold the franchise for many years.
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> Yet he does have a problem all his own, unshared by, unrelated to, the rest of America. "I'm obsessed," he says, "by the fact that my mother genuinely resembles Groucho Marx."

There's a remark from so far out in left field that nobody could see it coming. The surprise it carries is tremendous. How could it not be a perfect ending? Surprise is the most refreshing element in nonfiction writing. If something surprises you it will also surprise—and delight—the people you are writing for, especially as you conclude your story and send them on their way.