

SWEETHEART, GET ME REWRITE!

In old movies, the grizzled reporter at the scene of the crime—the leg man—races to a pay phone and shoves in his nickel. “Sweetheart,” he rasps when the gum-popping receptionist answers in the newspaper office, “get me rewrite!” Then he barks a few garbled facts to a team of rewrite specialists who turn out something snappy and readable. *Time* magazine still works essentially this way. Wouldn’t it be great to shout a few thoughts into a telephone and a day later have a college essay come back? But it’s unlikely that you have a staff of people wearing sleeve guards and green eyeshades poised in your living room waiting to punch up your copy. Sweetheart, you *are* rewrite.

Writers revise in different ways. I have a friend, a novelist, who rewrote the entire draft of his book three times from beginning to end, by hand, on heavy paper with fine fountain pens. He is insane. Many write a draft directly on the computer, then print a copy to attack with a pen, adding phrases and sentences, crossing out, making notes and arrows. Others still use scissors and tape to move paragraphs around. Some write and revise completely on the computer. I know students who write on their instant messaging devices—what we used to call “phones.” Only

by writing and rewriting often will you find the method of revision that works best for you.

Whatever your method, you know it's revision time when you've written a few pages and your draft begins to dull, like a knife in constant use. You're near the end, but suddenly you can't cut through the jungle of your thoughts, and you need to stop. It's important to keep writing fast until you've pushed a topic as far as it will go. But when you revise, things slow down a bit—not as slow as in the final editing, but a clear change in tempo from your draft. At the rewrite stage, keep an essay alive by pausing to ask the right questions of yourself.

WHERE AM I?

You can teach yourself to be your own rewrite department. One way to find out where you are is to identify good lines. Always work initially from what's good. Also try writing down on a separate sheet the most important nouns and verbs in your draft. Reread all the metaphors. What do they suggest? These are just tricks to help you be aware of the landmarks you've left scattered around, in case you don't know where to go. Often, simply reading your draft carefully will be enough to plot the course ahead.

Can you find a main idea, reducible to a sentence or two, that can serve as your compass? What's the story behind the story? Rereading his first draft, the writer in chapter four who lamented the passing of the sixties might have summed up his idea this way: "Let's not bury the sixties yet—at least not while I'm around."

You may find that a detour you took makes a better essay. Follow it. Or you may want to get back on your original course. Once you glimpse an idea in the distance again, think about rearranging your draft to plot the best way to get there. Sometimes that means a straight line, sometimes the scenic route. It helps to imagine that the path of your idea, like a forest trail seen from an airplane, creates (in your mind and a reader's) a *shape*.

WHAT SHAPE AM I IN?

All essays have shape, or form—not on the page, where they look alike, but in the mind, where they differ sharply. A point-by-point logical argument may climb down to its conclusion like steps; a humorous essay may sprout crazy petals from a center. An anecdotal piece may swerve briefly away from its main subject in an S-curve and finally point, as the tail of an S does, back to the beginning. Talking about shape this way is metaphorical, not literal, but readers sense the pattern (whether or not they realize it), and it puts them on firm footing.

Shape often comes *after* the first draft. You may have only a vague notion of shape—or none at all—as you begin, but it will gradually emerge from the writing, like a figure from a sculptor's block. You may find that what you have to say is shaped by the flow of one memory or experience, like the student essay on the stepmother in chapter eleven; several smaller anecdotes may give it form, as in David Owen's "Pfft," in chapter twelve. Sometimes the shape begins to grow out of your revisions of the beginning and the end.

One way of looking at shape is to think about the time sequence. Look at an essay like George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," and assign a number to every change in its chronology or dating: 1 = the earliest incident mentioned (not as it appears in the *text*, but as it happened in *time*), 2 = the next, and so on in order until the latest. Orwell does not go in order, but jumps all over the place chronologically. So what is his organizing principle?

Then number your own draft, and play around with the order, discovering your own organization. The "frustrated cowgirl" essay on page 136, for example, goes something like this: 6, 2, 1, 3, 5, 4, 7, 6 (or, roughly, the move to NY; her birth; her dad's coming to Oregon; second grade; sixth grade; back to earlier grades; current perspective; and back to the NY move—or 1979, '67, '63, '74, '78, '76, '85, '79).

THE BEGINNING: HOW (AND WHEN)

Earlier I urged you to “start anywhere” when you begin to write a draft. Still true. But once you’ve written a couple of pages you need to think about what newspapers call a *lead*, which rhymes with seed, which is the function of your first sentence—to plant early in a reader’s mind something that will bear fruit later. The worst thing a lead can be is *lead*, which rhymes with deaden, which describes what a careless or dull lead does to readers and to your application. If your writing has only one chance to sparkle, it should sparkle at the beginning.

The irony about a good lead is that it is very often written *last*. That’s right. It’s frequently a product of revision. That’s partly because (I repeat) writers don’t usually know what they’re going to say until they say it. Leads come last also because they’re tough to do and they matter so much. Even the best writers stumble forward with a kind of prayer: Maybe one will come to me. And when they work at it enough, one usually does.

Some experienced writers do keep their eyes open for a lead as they write the draft. This is tricky. Working under frequent deadlines, a journalist tries to find shortcuts, and working from a good lead gives the draft an immediate focus and often does away with the need for a lot of revision. But that’s in the hands of those who do it for a living, every day. You can try it too, with this warning: The minute you slow down and start groping instead of writing fast, forget about the lead and push ahead.

Now and then, when you’re really cooking, you will whip up a good lead right at the outset. If it comes, fine; if it doesn’t, don’t worry about it. Say to yourself, I’ll write a lead if it’s the last thing I do. It may be.

What is a good lead? For writers, a line or two that gives a shaping edge, an “angle,” to an essay; for readers, something that nudges them into the rest of the piece. That’s really all—something to stir up a reasonable amount of curiosity. Here’s the first line of George Orwell’s essay on England during World War II: “As I write, highly civilised human beings

are flying overhead, trying to kill me.” Only the subverbal would not read on. A *great* lead is something else—a memorable sentence in itself and the distilled essence of the essay. E. B. White began “Death of a Pig,” perhaps the only good Pet Death essay ever written, with this: “I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died at last, and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way round and none left to do the accounting.” There’s a seed lead for you—it contains the wry humor of the rest of the piece, a summation of the narrative, and a glimpse of the main idea: that the reminders of our own deaths are tragic and comic both.

A bad lead is all windup and no pitch: “In the following essay I hope to show . . .” Just *do* it, don’t announce it. Or a false question: “Have you ever thought about bee pollen?” You know perfectly well your readers haven’t thought about bee pollen. The false question rings hollow.

Here are a few leads you might play with:

The Anecdote

Probably the most common beginning for an essay. As you saw in chapter six, a story or a snippet of dialogue is an extremely effective lead—as long as it bears on your topic. One girl began an essay about her father, “Every Sunday I wake up to a 1940s Prell Shampoo jingle sung in falsetto by a short, wiry, balding intellectual. My dad is a nut.” Watch for anecdotal leads in newspaper features and magazine stories, and pay attention to how they work.

The Why? Lead

When the reader asks *Why?* In response to your lead, you’re in business. “I try to live reasonably in the modern world, but it gets harder and harder.” *Why?* In another of his essays, George Orwell begins, “In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—

the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me." Why?

The Paradox

The only sound worth hearing is silence. A paradox is an apparent contradiction that is somehow true. Once you get in the habit, these will come easily, and they are very stimulating to your essay writing (and thought!) and a great way to begin. *Nothing is more serious than humor. The most practical thing you can do is dream. It is difficult to tell the truth with facts. Intelligence is the one thing IQ tests do not measure.*

The Shocker

For instance, "I do some of my best thinking in the bathroom" (p. 141). Nobody could pass up the rest of that essay. It's good to startle readers now and then. "I grew up a killer," might begin a light story of becoming a vegetarian.

But the Shocker is not simply any wild or fanciful statement; abused, it's just another tabloid headline. A good one steers a reader to the main idea of the essay. Use it like the loaded weapon it is, with care.

The Curmudgeon

A curmudgeon is a contrary person; the Curmudgeon lead is ornery, sometimes a paradox. "*Moby-Dick* may be a great book, but it is not a good book." You can skewer an immense number of conventional ideas if you're good at the Curmudgeon lead. Here's one by G. K. Chesterton (from around 1907): "I have no sympathy with international aggression when it is taken seriously, but I have a certain dark and wild sympathy with it when it is quite absurd." It doesn't have to be a paradox, though, as this lead from H. L. Mencken (curmudgeon of all curmudgeons) shows: "No man ever quite believes in any other man."

The Split

You can divide people or things into a few simple types. "There are those who have faith in man-made things and those who do not," wrote Ellen Goodman (p. 153). Ada Louise Huxtable began an article called "Modern-Life Battle: Conquering Clutter," with this: "There are two kinds of people in the world—those who have a horror of a vacuum and those with a horror of the things that fill it." Both writers may have been thinking of Charles Lamb's lead (almost 160 years ago): "The human species, according to the best theory I can form of it, is composed of two distinct races, the men who borrow, and the men who lend." It's a good device for a light essay. But always stay close to your own experience. The whole point of beginning this way is that you, too, fall into one of the categories, usually the apparently inferior one.

The Raymond Chandler

Simply use a comparison like one of those from the game in chapter six. "The allurements that women hold out to men," begins a Mencken essay, "is precisely the allurements that Cape Hatteras holds out to sailors: they are enormously dangerous and hence enormously fascinating."

The Confession

David Owen's first sentence (p. 155), for example. The Confession lead is not *really* confessional—the aim isn't to reveal intimate details from a sense of guilt. You're trying to entertain, remember. (p. 141)

"I do some of my best thinking in the bathroom" is a Confession and a Shocker both. What makes the Confession lead effective is the honesty of the observation. By opening up a subject that you know other people—in Owen's case, people his age or older—recognize but don't talk about, you take the reader into your confidence.

Stating the Obvious

I mean the obvious that is hidden, because it is right under our noses. In the lead to "Heavier than Air" (p. 147), White highlights the *weight* of a plane, something so obvious we never think about it. The essay is structured around the simple idea that a plane is *big*. The planes in George Orwell's lead are different from White's, though Orwell states the obvious in an equally startling way—of *course* the people flying a plane are highly civilized; *naturally* they are trying to kill him—there's a war on. But the line is striking, and makes us realize something we knew-but-didn't-know. A good Stating the Obvious lead might be something as simple as "San Francisco is a long way from New York." Well, now that you mention it, of course it is. Why do you bring it up?

Refer to this list—sketchy as it is—during revision, or make up variations of your own. I'll refer to it, too, when I get around to writing the introduction to this book. Maybe something will come to me.

ENDINGS

Let's look at the other pole. Once you hook readers, you've got to make sure to land them. Here's how you *don't* finish a piece: "in conclusion," "in summation," "finally," "I would like to close by saying," or any of the other staples from the Stylebook of the Dead.

The best endings remember where they came from, but they don't insult readers by calling attention to themselves or repeating what's already been said. Beginnings and endings *speak* to each other. "I do some of my best thinking in the bathroom" ends "Maybe they'd think of something." Even the sounds are alike: some thinking, think of something. Another of the Exhibits in chapter eleven (p. 126): "Except for my struggle with jacks—I could never get past sixties while Leslie Ackerman whizzed through tenzies and back to onezies all in one turn—this application is

the greatest challenge I've faced." The end: "The whole thing makes sevens look easy."

The pros know the same secret. "This seems to be an era of gratuitous inventions and negative improvements," is Updike's lead on page 149, and his ending speaks to it: "What we need is Progress with an escape hatch."

Because of the close relationship between the beginning and the end, you may find yourself working on both of them simultaneously; in my magazine writing I have often discovered a good lead buried in what I originally thought was the ending.

Another way to end effectively is with an anecdote, as David Owen does (p. 155) in his piece about growing older. The quoted sound from his father—not even a word!—is surprising and memorable because it sums up so succinctly everything Owen himself has been feeling about growing older. Owen is here using a favorite device of reporters—letting someone else say what's also on the writer's mind.

I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing that Owen started with the quotation from his father—it goes back further in time than anything else he talks about—and wrote the rest of the piece "into" it. You can work the same way. Write your last sentence first—a strong line or two of dialogue—and then write the essay it completes.

Ending with a good quotation often gives a feeling of finality. The filet-frightened New Jersey girl in chapter six quotes herself and leaves us to judge from that how she handled her problem. In both her essay and David Owen's, we say the end-feeling works because the *rhythm* is good. Rhythm in writing refers to the length of sentences, which, in any good piece, should vary. Almost any rhythm, handled well, can work for the ending, but there are certain patterns that writers continually call on, just as there are final cadences and chords in a song or a symphony that let you know the music is ending. Many writers find the sound of finality in short sentences. Owen, Russell Baker (p. 150), Ellen Goodman (p. 153), and a

few of the best student pieces in chapter eleven end with short, vigorous sentences. Especially effective endings often set up the last line with a long, slow sentence full of commas and twists of thought, followed by one or two short, brisk lines to close. Try it. (See?)

One warning about finishing with an anecdote or quotation. Make sure it bears closely on your main point. There are few things more confusing than an irrelevant story. If David Owen had ended his piece this way, it would have fallen flat:

When my daughter and I were walking in the park recently, she bent to pick a yellow flower by the side of the path. "Look," she said, clutching the daisy and holding it out to me. "It's the sun."

There's nothing wrong with this story; it just doesn't complete the thought he's been developing.

In a college essay, the end is not quite as important as the beginning, but make sure your ending remembers where it came from and sounds final.

Hearing Your Own Voice: Revising Style

Your writing voice—the sound of your sentences—is your "style." It's a combination of your word choice, tone, and even your thought. But many individual styles fall into a few big divisions. Compare:

- A. Please elaborate upon the circumstances surrounding the collision.
- B. Describe the accident.
- C. How'd you crash the car?
- D. What went down with your ride?

Four different ways of saying the same thing—four different voices. All can be the same serious, dispassionate tone, but the style is different.

A is formal—tuxedo talk. Scholars, lawyers, and people seeking to maintain a professional distance from their audience use it.

B is informal—a sweater, comfortable shoes. The voice is direct and unadorned.

C is colloquial—T-shirt and sneakers, the breeziness of everyday conversation.

D is slang—flip flops, street talk.

We slip in and out of these styles as we talk, and in your first draft you'll probably find pieces of different styles. Good. In your first draft you are just getting the words out and should write in the voice that feels most comfortable. In revising, you must decide whether each shift in style is effective.

Work toward the informal. It is the most flexible voice, one that can be serious or light. On top of that bass line, you can play variations—just as you do with rhythm. Professional writers mix them skillfully, sometimes in a single sentence:

This seems to be an era of gratuitous inventions and negative improvements. Consider the beer can.

The first line is strictly tuxedo, the second a plain pullover.

Even by standards of that time it was a primitive place. There was no electricity. Roads were unpaved. In our house there was no plumbing. The routing of summer days was shaped by these deficiencies.

Four sweaters followed by a little hint of tails and top hat.

Dialogue usually wears T-shirt or flip flops; few people speak with the directness of an informal style or the elevated sound of the formal.

Rising dust along the road from the mountains signaled an approaching event. A car was coming. "Car's coming," someone would say.

Baker puts them back to back. "A car was coming. 'Car's coming.'"

When you reread your draft, be alert for shifts in your style—are these changes of dress effective, or should you be returning to your informal wardrobe? Although in your essays you should stay close to the informal, good writing moves back and forth easily among the different styles. In general steer clear of tuxedo talk—to write well in a formal style takes years. On the other hand, too much slang in an essay grates like too many car horns in traffic. You're looking for balance. One object of revision is to decide when you should go casual and when you should dress up, and to wear it all convincingly.