6 Ways Not to Bury Your Lead

Sometimes, finding the right article opening is a simple matter of excavation.

I’m forever harping on the importance of a strong start to whatever you’re writing. The reason’s simple, and maybe your mom put it best: You never get a second chance to make a first impression. If you don’t grab editors and readers right from the start, they may never get to the “good stuff” buried several paragraphs or pages later.

Fortunately, the solution to many opening woes is simple: Dig down and excavate that bang-up material you should have started with in the first place. Newspaper editors call this syndrome “burying the lead.” It happens when writers obscure the real “grabber” of their stories, hiding the part most likely to engage readers’ attention under extraneous verbiage or paragraphs that belong someplace other than at the top.

Here’s a simple example from our local newspaper. A recent story began with news that the director of the chamber of commerce was joining the local hospital foundation. Good for her, many readers may have thought—but how does she find the time? Only if they read on to the fourth paragraph did the real news become clear: This is no volunteer gig—she’s quitting the chamber of commerce job. That was the lead, but it got buried.

It’s not just short articles that can suffer from buried leads, however. Book-length works can hide their best beginnings several chapters deep—a mistake that can be fatal in the tough-to-crack publishing world. Few editors or agents will delve past your first few pages to discover the fascinating story waiting in Chapter 4.

I’ll never forget the student I was helping several years ago at a writing retreat who opened her memoir with a long, turgid scene about visiting her uncle in prison. A day or two into the retreat, she shared the buried scene that should have been the start to her book: She’d come home from school one day to find a porn movie being filmed. Her mother was the producer of most of the best-known triple-X movies of the ’70s. Who
cares about the uncle in prison? Give us the suburban mom porn queen!

As these disparate examples show, burying your best opening often springs from an inability to figure out what your story’s really about—or should be about. Once you understand your true focus, it’s easy to find something that exemplifies or dramatizes that focus and bring it to the top.

Here are six tricks you can try to excavate those buried openings:

1. Figure out your focus. Try writing a headline and subhead for your article, or a sales blurb for your book. If a magazine put your story on its cover, what would it say to entice newsstand browsers? Now compare with the opening of your story. Are these tests of your focus and your story’s start on the same page, so to speak?

2. Talk it out. Summarize your story aloud to a friend or family member. Odds are, when you talk about it—instead of putting on your formal authorial hat—the most interesting material will naturally come to the fore. If not, watch your listener’s reaction: When does his attention perk up? That point may be the best place to start your story in print.

3. Cut to the bone. Take a hard look at the first few paragraphs of your story. What would happen if you simply deleted them? Often writers bury their best openings under a pile of throat-clearing, metaphorical overkill, cute stuff and other devices to keep from getting to the point. Start cutting and stop only when you hit the spot where you’d do real damage to the information in your story by cutting further.

4. Turn it inside-out. Maybe those first few paragraphs (or pages) are essential but just don’t belong upfront. Play with your structure. What if you moved that crucial section from Page 2 up to the opening and flipped what’s now on Page 1 into its place?

5. Twist the timeline. If you’re working with a chronological narrative, remember that you don’t have to begin at the beginning. The first thing that happened isn’t likely to be the most interesting thing or even the second most interesting. While you don’t want to turn your timeline into a Mobius strip that confuses readers, you can start with a bang and then later loop back to the chronological beginning. Memoirs are a good example of how strict adherence to chronology can bury a better opening. Sure, you could begin your memoir just as your life began, at birth, but unless you were born in your parents’ stranded car in a raging blizzard, that’s unlikely to make a dramatic Page 1.

Another writing student, a former pop singer, buried her best opening under several hundred pages that began with her parents’ courtship. When she excavated the scene in which she first heard herself on the radio, the story started with a bang instead of a lengthy whimper.
6. Put it on paper. Try diagramming the key points of your story or roughing out a crude outline. Sometimes the best opening will jump out at you when you see it in this bare-bones way. You can also use this simple outline to test rearrangements of what you’ve got. A strong opening should not only grab the reader’s attention but should also lead you naturally into writing what comes next. If you’ve written yourself into a dead end at the beginning from which you had to restart your momentum, maybe that restart point is the real, buried opening, and the dead end needs to be introduced to the Delete key.

Then you might find that the solution to your starting-point woes was there all along, like a nugget of gold, just waiting for you to strike it rich. WD

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