

Communication 4312 – The Form of the Story

The beginning writer must be aware of form. Later, with experience, the writer can break the form or get away from the form in some way. But, in the beginning the story should have a definite, recognizable form.

What do I mean by this kind of form? I mean the content of and the arrangement of the paragraphs in an orderly fashion. Without this form the story will wander and be inexact.

To start with, you've got to have a good, solid lead. No trick leads. No questions, no clichés. The lead has got to have umph. It's got to say something. It's got to define what the story is about.

Here I will interject that not everyone will necessarily agree with me on the lead and on other aspects of story organization. But, for now, I am the editor and this is what I expect you to do. From now on, please take my instructions in that context.

The lead shouldn't be too long or too short. It ought to be one sentence. It may require attribution. It should have a rhythm -- a pace to it. It should read well aloud. You don't necessarily have to have all the elements -- the five w's and the h -- in the lead. You need only the ones that are important at this stage of the story.

The second paragraph is going to be a bridge into the story. This is where you take care of all those questions that need to be answered but weren't in the lead. You might more fully identify the speaker, for example.

Suppose in the lead you said that a prominent educator told an audience at U of H such and such. You can identify her in the bridge. Maybe you didn't say when and where the event occurred in the lead. You need to do it by the second paragraph.

Stop here and check to see if you've answered all the questions that should have been answered by this point in the story. Then go on.

The third paragraph should be a quote. The quote should follow up what you have emphasized in the lead. It needs to be a full quote and it needs to stand out. That is, it shouldn't be introduced in any way.

Now, an important consideration in this paragraph is where to put the attribution. If so far you have introduced only one person, we can assume that this is the person who is talking in this quote. Nevertheless, don't have a long quote before you give the attribution. Find a pausing point within the quote and put the attribution there. Then continue the quote.

If you get to this point you are practically home free.

Next comes a paraphrase of something the speaker and/or the interviewee has said. Or background. From then on you can alternate the direct quotes with the paraphrases and additional background.

To review what we have done so far: we have the lead, the bridge, a quote and a fourth paragraph. Think of the basic story form as consisting of seven paragraphs. So, if you are to this point you only need a quote, a paraphrase and a quote and you are finished. After that, you can extend it.

I like the 11- to 13-paragraph story. That gives us more room for background. We can even use consecutive paragraphs of quotes. With the longer story you can insert at least one and maybe even two transitional paragraphs. Or it could be longer. But, at some point we will have to revisit how organization changes when the story is longer.

Don't worry at this point about this being a kind of formulaic writing. In the beginning we need to be writing in some kind of established pattern. Otherwise, we are in danger of having no pattern whatsoever.

You will notice that this story emphasizes quotes. If you are going to do a story about a person, you are going to have to let them talk. That's the way you demonstrate what they have to say and how they sound.

Keep attribution simple: said, said, said. Write in past tense. You will use the early part of the story to set the story in time and place. Every story needs to be set in time and place. Once you set the story that way, the rest of the story follows from that in sequential time. Most of the time this is about something that happened in the past, and placing it in present tense doesn't accurately reflect the circumstances in which the story originated.

■ David McHam