

## Communication 4312 – Writing the Longer Story

At some point you'll be writing much longer stories than we have been writing in the class so far. Perhaps it will be for a newspaper, a magazine, a historical account of some kind, a memoir, a book, etc.

You may be surprised at what I'm going to tell you about writing longer stories. It's fairly simple, really. Writing the longer story is no different than writing the shorter story.

Well, of course, you will have to gather a great deal more information. You'll have to spend a great deal more time thinking about the story. You'll tend to rewrite more than you might in a shorter piece.

Other than that .....

But I can think of one more drawback: You may get bogged down. In fact, you will get bogged down. You'll have so much information you won't know where to start and how to organize what you have.

Remember, different people are good at different kinds of writing. If you are very, very lucky, perhaps you will be good at gathering a great deal of information and organizing it into a coherent, well organized piece of writing. If so, you are indeed fortunate.

More than likely, though, as with other forms of writing, this will be a process you'll have to learn. And the best way to learn it is through experience. [Although, of course, reading can help.] So, good luck !

Here are my suggestions on writing the longer piece:

Suggestion #1: When you are ready to start writing, start writing. You might even write as you go. That is, get as much down on paper as you can.

Suggestion #2: Do not wait for the Muse or whomever to come by for a visit. I hate to be the one to tell you this, but – the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny and the writer's Muse are all imaginary. Sorry about that.

Suggestion #3: Don't worry so much at the start about leads and organization and stuff like that. Your lead may not come until you have sorted through the information and put a great deal of it on paper. The organization will probably emerge before the lead does. The organization might even dictate what the lead should be.

## The Lead

Everything is the same as writing any other piece. However, you are going to write a different kind of lead. This isn't going to be a lead in which someone says something. This kind of story is not going to lend itself to that approach.

Before going into the lead in more detail, let me remind you what not to do. Stay away from quote leads, from question leads, from never did she dream leads, etc. Learn what clichés are and stay away from them.

Do not make the mistake of thinking you can just begin the piece anywhere or in any way. That kind of writing is for amateurs. You've got to have a beginning that makes sense – a beginning that sets the stage for the story in some way.

Let me suggest at least three ways the story might begin. But, be careful here. You don't want your writing to fall into a predictable pattern. Also, these aren't the only ways a story can begin. These are only the most obvious ways.

Way #1: The lead can tell a story about the person. That's what we refer to as the anecdotal lead. Not antidotal. But, if you do that, the story has got to be a story that sums up what the piece you are writing is about. It can't just be any old story. It must say something about the person, the situation or whatever. If you don't have the information to support this kind of lead, try another approach.

Way #2: A second possibility is to set the scene. However, this can very quickly become a cliché. So, any scene you use must be a very important scene – one that sets in motion everything that is to come. Again, it can't be an incidental scene that doesn't take you anywhere.

Way #3: A third way to get into the story is to summarize what the story is about. I don't mean that you should do this in a direct way. However, the best way to think about this approach is to find a way to say, Here's what this story is about (without saying that, of course).

Often as a teacher I make suggestions. Some students follow them, others don't. Here's a suggestion that falls in the category of one you ought to pay attention to: Collect examples. Constantly be on the lookout. Evaluate what you find. Be forever conscious of seeing the process in what you read. That will have obvious benefits. Put them in files. Keep them. Have one file for the kind of leads you might like to emulate, another for the leads to avoid.

The best advice I ever heard about leads came from an interview of John McPhee by, I think Terri Gross, on *Fresh Air*. Let me paraphrase what he said:

The lead of the story should reach down into the story, explain what the story is about and set the stage for what is going to happen later.

That's the essential concept behind organization. If you can find a way to create a lead that reaches down into the story, the organization of the story will tend to fall into place. Well, maybe not that easily. But, if you get the lead right, working out the organization will be easier.

## The Organization

You may end up with most of the story written before you get around to the lead. If you write as you go, you'll see that elements of the story belong in various places. So that you may have much of the story written before you get around to organizing it.

I like for stories to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Think of that in terms of organization. Then the question becomes, what to put in these three areas of the story.

But, here's a word of warning: Be extremely careful of chronology. That is, for the entire story. Some stories may lend themselves to chronological order. Most stories don't. Not only that, if you are only thinking in terms of chronology, you are not going to develop as a writer.

That's not to say that if you are summarizing background somewhere in the story that shouldn't be presented in order of occurrence. It should be. But mainly here I'm talking about the entire story.

Some stories may start with and even emphasize the background. You've got to know when that approach works. Be extremely careful with that approach. Handle background as though it will explode. Find the right place – or places – for the background and put it there.

Do not sprinkle the background through the story. Do not include background and description or anything else except simple identification with attribution. This is particularly true in the longer story.

Every story should have a distinct organization. You are the person charged with finding that organization. That's what writers do. They take raw material and turn it into prose. They take the ingredients and make something out of them.

Let's consider the concept of having a beginning, a middle and an end. That doesn't mean that each part should be the same length. Say you are going to write 30 paragraphs. Don't expect the organization to fall into 10, 10 and 10. You've got to take into consideration what's inside each of those sections.

For instance, the lead may be seven or eight paragraphs. Then, the body of the story may be 12 to 14 paragraphs. That makes the ending eight paragraphs or so.

And what will be in each one of these sections? Observations by the writer, descriptions of characters and settings, background, quotes, paraphrases. Mixing these elements and getting them in the right places is what constitutes writing.

The mixing depends on the nature of the story.

If the story involves the writer writing about something she or he sees and observes, the amount of observation and description will increase.

If the writer is writing about someone she or he interviewed, the amount of quoted material will increase. And the amount of paraphrased material will increase.

Remember, we want to hear how the person talks and we want to see what the person has to say. In other words, you've got to let the subject of your piece speak for herself or himself. Be extremely careful of speaking for them.

Also, the quotes help authenticate the story. They demonstrate to the reader that what you've been saying is backed up in part by the subject.

But, different stories are going to put different weight on different things.

If the story is about a person's experiences at some time in the past, obviously the amount of background will increase.

If other people other than the subject are brought into the story you have to figure out just where to introduce them and what to let them say.

I like sketching, or mapping the organization. That is, draw some kind of organizational chart and put what you are going to put in each area. With experience, you may be able to carry this in your head. But, in the beginning you might be better served by actually writing it out.

One way to do that is with note cards. You can put the note cards on a board of some kind to give you the feel for what the story will look like.

## The Ending

My favorite ending is "The end." This isn't television, so you don't have to summarize the story. However, if you have something that seems natural, use it. But don't force it. And don't save something really good to use at the end. More than likely that material belonged somewhere else in the story. When it's time to quit, just quit.

■ David McHam

## A Postscript

Everything in writing, everything in this class, everything in life is accumulative. Please keep in mind all the suggestions and admonishments I have made from the very first of the class.

For instance, don't use quote, question, cute or cliché leads.

Don't start leads of stories with *when* and *while*.

Don't start sentences with *it* and *there*.

To anticipate your questions on this, yes exceptions do exist.

I'd save the *it* and *there* until you've written an awfully lot. And I would use *while* only when something is happening at the exact same time – and that timing matters.

*When* can be useful, but you need to hold on to it for just the right moment. If you use it indiscriminately, you won't be able to use it with effect when the right time occurs.