

Avoid The Beginning Being The End

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.

I will be eternally grateful to the Pesaperson who puts me out of my misery (08 9245 2155; ppurcel@tpgi.com.au) by telling me the name of the book from which that is the opening line.

It was one of the examples in an article about opening lines in the *Weekend Australian Review* in January this year. (Actually the article wasn't at all about opening lines in the *Weekend Australian*! Most readers would have understood at a first reading what I meant there, but the sentence is ambiguous and deserves rewriting. It would be better as 'It was one of the opening lines quoted in an article in the *Weekend Australian Review* in January this year'.)

Author Phillip Norman's premise is that 'the opening sentence may be the most important thing you will ever write'. He was referring to novels and newspaper stories and columns, rather than scientific writing, but the advice is equally applicable there, especially if the point is expanded from just the 'opening sentence' to the 'opening sentences or paragraphs'.

It is these opening few words or sentences that must grab the reader's attention. You will know instantly, says Norman, not only whether you 'can bear to read it but also whether the writer is a soulmate or an insufferably pretentious or clumsy prat'.

'It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking 13...' Immediately you want to know more, as you do with the sentence I used to open this column. And didn't it work better than if I'd written 'This article is about the importance of the opening sentence(s) of reports'?

Contrast the following two sentences: 'Marley was dead...' and 'This book addressees itself in an atmospheric fashion to the confluence of belief systems that informed Bob Marley'. The first is from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*; the second: who cares!

Sometimes what takes hold of you is the beauty in the words (two of my favourites are the opening paragraph of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Alan Paton's *Cry, the*

Beloved Country) but I'm more interested here in the content of that opening section, rather than its style or elegance.

Obviously fiction lends itself to greater flair and freedom than a scientific report, but that doesn't over-ride the value of the lesson. This is especially the case with company reports that, while dealing with very technical material, often have a distinct commercial component. This would include internal reports written (say) to present a new play concept or recommend a gazettal application, as well as farm-out reports intended for other companies.

These reports are ultimately meant to sell a product and, all science aside, selling a product is selling a product: you want the potential buyer's attention as quickly as you can get it, and you want it tightly held. Best then that you begin your report with a statement that will catch the reader's interest.

What are you selling (to use the term in a broad sense here)? What is the main point? What does this offer the buyer? What does it offer him that he doesn't know it offers him?

You could begin *This report presents the results of the recent interpretation of seismic data from Permit X* and go on to refer to the prospects developed. This is true but bland, and may be more the stuff of the last paragraph of the Introduction, rather than the opening.

Go back to those questions. What are you selling? Is the prospect ready to drill? Is your target looking for drillable prospects? Has recent work proven previously unconfirmed potential (e.g. shows that prove a petroleum system)? Is cost of the deal less than past costs?

The Betty Prospect in the Mother-of-all Sub-basins is mature for drilling and offers companies...

An active petroleum system has now been proven in the The Mother-of-all Sub-basins and the Betty Prospect...

Even a tightening and recasting of that opening sentence might work better: *The new interpretation of seismic data in Permit X has shown...*

Is there something particular you should be addressing? For instance, you might be preparing a farmout report on a Timor Sea block for a company experienced in the North Sea but relatively new to Australia. Your block covers half a million acres and has a two-well commitment next year — which local folk think is a bit rich.

The fact that your block is roughly equivalent to 10 North Sea blocks, all located over a producing Upper Jurassic rift basin, may be the point to lead with. Two wells, in that context, may look cheap in London town — even allowing for all the complexities and the rest I'm obviously glossing over here. Regardless, the point will get their attention — and that's the idea.

Norman's counsel about the importance of opening lines becomes all the more useful when we see the opening not as the formal 'Introduction' but as the 'Executive Summary' or 'Abstract'. That page or so is probably all the Exploration Manager will read. The clever technical arguments in the document will go nowhere if he's unimpressed and doesn't bother to pass it on to his team for review.

Better to open with (say): *The confirmation of a new petroleum system in the Browse Basin...* rather than *The Browse Basin is located off the coast of ...* Yawn! Yawn!

More often than not, Norman suggests, the opening line is the last piece to be written. I find that is true for myself, though I find it is a multi-step process.

I usually end up reworking the Introduction and the Conclusion because I find that some of what I've written in the Conclusion belongs in the Introduction, albeit slightly recast, so that the reader comes in near where he will leave — and, hopefully, he'll have been on a nice smooth road from opening to exit. The Abstract or Executive Summary is then constructed by combining the Introduction and the Conclusion and tightening it to the point of pain!

Then all you need is an exit line and a title!

Peter Purcell