

More on Zinsser's Finger

In our last column, we were looking at Mr Zinsser's advice about the finger of forward motion: the writing must begin, build, develop and end, all in the same direction. It sounds simple but is actually quite hard to do. In my experience it is rarely achieved in a first draft and usually requires several close 'edits' to pick up the little side-steps or roadblocks.

It might be too much detail on an unimportant point. It might be casting sentences in a way that shifts attention away from the main theme. Consider this paragraph below.

Boutakoff began work for the Victorian Geological Survey in 1948. Their offices were crowded and very in need of repair. The old building where they were located had originally been used by Treasury. Dr D. M. Thomas was the Director of the Survey, a Welshman, world famous for his work on graptolites in the UK, and now in Australia to work on them here.

This may be all very interesting but it's gone from Boutakoff starting work to the history of the offices to the Director's work on graptolites. All or most of it might deserve keeping but it needs to be set along Zinsser's finger.

Boutakoff began work for the Victorian Geological Survey in 1948. He found the offices crowded and very in need of repair, and considered them an insult to the professional men who worked in them. His boss, the Director of the Survey, was Dr D. Thomas, a Welshman, world famous for his work on graptolites.

This covers most of the same points but keeps the focus on Boutakoff, where it belongs. The difference is not big but it affects flow. If we describe how Boutakoff felt about the offices, the reader continues to learn about the main subject. If we describe the offices as an aside, we risk that becoming a distraction. Ditto with Thomas: by introducing Thomas as Boutakoff's boss, we stay on the finger – and the finger is good.

(There's obviously a separate issue with sections of a report or paper, and how they need to align, but let's handle this Zinsser finger business one knuckle at a time.)

I want to stay a little longer with Zinsser and borrow from him to comment on two themes regularly visited in Words over the years: the opening and the exit.

The opening is the foundation stone but it is also the welcome and the teaser. The reader wants to be interested; otherwise he wouldn't be looking at your paper or report. The opening sentence has to lure him a little closer and the sentences that follow in the first few paragraphs must make him stay.

Too many papers start out very general. If we were dealing with the Goldwyer source in the Canning Basin, for instance, one could begin: *The Canning Basin is located in northern Western Australia and contains over 10 km of mainly Paleozoic sediments. The Goldwyer Formation, an Ordovician shale in the southern Canning Basin contains abundant algal organic material and is an excellent source rock.*

I suggest that the second sentence has the makings of a better opening. The paper is about the Goldwyer. So put the zinger on Zinsser's finger right up front: *The Goldwyer Formation, an Ordovician algal-rich, black shale in the southern Canning Basin in WA's far north, is arguably the best oil-prone source rock in Australia.*

That got my attention a little better. Now tell me what more I'm going to learn if I keep reading – and make me want to keep reading.

For a training exercise, buy a copy of *The Australian* and read the opening paragraphs of the stories on the first few pages. Check the World News section too. *Time* or *Newsweek* are other good lunch-break lessons. Is the opening sentence clear? Catchy? A summary of the main point of the article? All of these? Or is it setting a theme or mood? How quickly does the writer get into the facts that fit that theme or mood?

While you're sipping your latte and getting inspired, don't forget to read on a few paragraphs and see how they add point on point, layer on layer, (usually) on a single track to their exit line.

Most of these writers will never have your knowledge of geology and the oil industry and you're never likely to meet them, but they can help you learn to write well if you study how they begin and build their articles. (Don't forget to keep the ones you really like in your 'Good Writing' folder.)

It's not rocket science, and even if it was, the same advice applies: start with the main fact, then describe things slowly and methodically, without side-trips or waffle. If you do that well enough, the reader's engines will fire.

There's a tendency for young writers, when told to make their papers interesting, to protest that they are writing about geology, not gorillas in the Ruwenzoris, or something similarly exotic. True enough, the Goldwyer Shale or the Cenomanian sediments in the Bight Basin may not have universal appeal, but they are very much of interest to company or professional colleagues working on the area or on related matters. Whether or not your writing about that subject is interesting is another issue; that is up to you.

Zinsser supported his case by noting that the 1993 United States National Magazine Award, in the category of reporting, was won by *IEEE Spectrum*, defeating nominees including *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker*. (They wouldn't have been allowed in the building for the 'Best Magazine Name' awards, but that's not our point here.)

IEEE Spectrum is the news bulletin of the American Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. Imagine that: a journal serving a membership of over 300,000 engineers winning the national best writing award! That challenges the usual opinion of engineers' literary abilities!

The *Spectrum* editor, Don Christiansen, said the magazine used to be 'full of integral signs and acronyms and its articles were incomprehensible even to other engineers'. He changed that. For the magazine to speak to all members across the dozens of engineering disciplines, Christiansen told the writers that they had to describe their work in words, not jargon and formulae. Processes, whatever their substance, had to be described simply and sequentially, so that they were clear to the reader.

I had thought we'd have endings to this column, for an ending but that will have to wait. The opening sentences are the first priority. Lose the reader there and it doesn't matter how good the exit is.

Conversely, snare his interest in the opening sentences, build each section with the same clarity and Zinsser-finger flow, and there's a good chance he'll be there to enjoy your snappy exit – about which, next time.

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