

Writing 201: Finding Your Story

WRITING 201: FINDING YOUR STORY

The Editors, WordPress.com

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INTRODUCTION

Roald Dahl once said that “good writing is essentially rewriting,” and here at *The Daily Post*, we agree. *Writing 201: Finding Your Story* is a self-directed course on the art of revision: four weeks dedicated to self-editing and rewriting, looking at our work with a magnifying glass, and improving it.

In our workshops, we’ll explore how to find your unique angle on a topic you’re writing about, craft a more engaging introduction for a post, find the key moment or true heart of your story, and expand your material into scenes.

Ultimately, the goal of the course is to learn how to self-edit and read your writing with an editor’s eye, and to improve one or multiple posts in your archives.

Above all, have fun!

–The Editors, WordPress.com

1

WEEK 1: WHAT'S YOUR ANGLE

What's your story? It's all in the telling.

— Rebecca Solnit

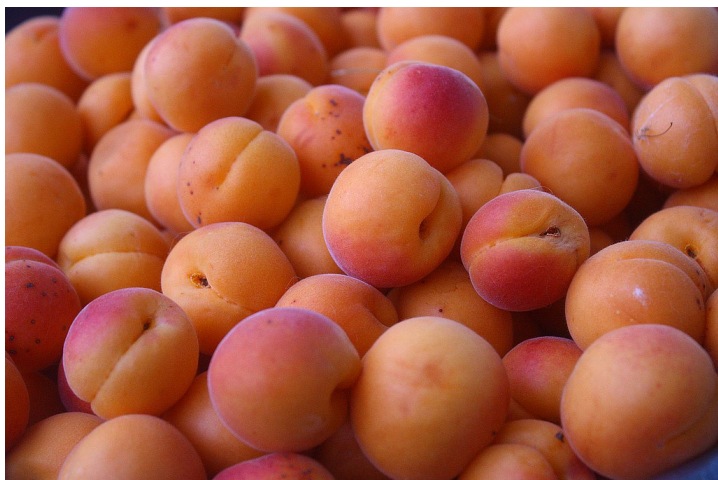
They say that there are no new stories. In fact, author [Christopher Booker](#) suggests that every story ever told is a variation on seven basic plots. So, how do you differentiate your story from every other comedy, tragedy, memoir, quest, or rebirth? The answer is in the specific *angle* you use to tell your tale.

Consider Eric and Charlotte Kaufman's story.

According to CNN, the Kaufman story is a dramatic US Navy rescue. The Kaufmans' storm-damaged boat is far out at sea — three weeks away from medical attention — when their baby becomes seriously ill. Legions criticize the Kaufmans for putting their daughter's life in danger simply by being so far from land and modern medical facilities.

Ira Glass tells Eric and Charlotte's story on *This American Life*, but from a very different angle: Eric and Charlotte are experienced sailors. They're similar to many families who routinely make the same sea crossing with very young children. A series of mishaps forces Eric to call for help to ensure their baby's safety. Calling for help, Eric and Charlotte knew they'd lose their boat — their family's home — and all their belongings.

Anyone can tell a story using straight facts — the who, what, why, when, where, and how — of a story. What makes for the most interesting writing and the most interesting *reading* is discovering a new angle from which to tell that story.



Apricot still life by naturalflow (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice.

–Rebecca Solnit

Consider Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby*. In the book, she examines her somewhat fraught relationship with her mother through boxes and boxes of apricots harvested from the tree outside her mother's house. Solnit could have just stated that her mother was a difficult, jealous woman. It's much more interesting to consider a relationship through the metaphor of a box of fruit. Solnit writes:

Sometimes a story falls into your lap. Once, about a hundred pounds of apricots fell into mine. They came in three big boxes, and to keep them from crushing one another under their weight or from

rotting in close quarters, I spread them out on a sheet on the plank floor of my bedroom. There, they presided for some days, a story waiting to be told, a riddle to be solved, and a harvest to be processed...The reasons why I came to have a heap of apricots on my bedroom floor are complicated. They came from my mother's tree, from the home she no longer lived in, in the summer where a new round of trouble began.

Finding your angle

Finding your angle can be the most challenging and rewarding aspect of the writing and editing process. Here are some ideas to help you find your angle in a piece of writing.

1) What makes you you?

Which elements of your experience and unique perspective couldn't possibly be present in someone else's story?

Canadian author David Bergen [recalls overlooking the unique story angles](#) that were right before his eyes as a young writer:

At the age of twenty, having published nothing, and having had little guidance in my reading, I decided that I wanted to write. I was driving a feed truck that winter, making runs to the Canada Packers in Winnipeg where I picked up meat meal, ground-up bones and meat that would be mixed in with grain, which would then be fed to layers and broilers. The smell permeated my clothes and my nostrils. As I waited in line behind other truckers, I decided to use that time to write.

Looking back, I should have been writing about the characters I met at Canada Packers, about the stories they told, spoken in great vernacular, about their lives, which were so different from mine. These were men who were in their forties and fifties and had worked at the same job for years. I was young, working a temporary job. I had my whole life before me. I was aware of these men, but didn't see them as subjects for a novel or a story.

2) What original details do you see in your story?

In Solnit's case, the apricot tree (and one-hundred pounds of its fruit in various stages of decay) was the original detail that makes her familiar mother-daughter conflict unique. For Canadian author Lisa Moore, original details she collects during her day form what she calls the “[glimmer of a beginning](#).”

Something might coalesce, a story charged with the significant, shimmering detritus of a single day, the flotsam of dreams and flux of crowds, intimate moments with strangers in elevators, errant lusts, the crunch of a peanut in a curried prawn dish. The thick scent of the organic oil of oregano I'd bought to fight a cold, a dense furry smell still clinging to the hotel glass I drank it from, just before dawn, a long way from home.

Collecting original details: “If you ask a group of people to write about the contents of their closet, each person would likely approach the same subject from a different angle.” Adair Lara offers more [tips](#)

to help you find your specific angle and gather the details you need for your story.



Pennies by Rattan Amol (CC BY-SA 2.0)

3) How can you mine your personal history for just the right angle?

In *Seeing*, Annie Dillard begins her essay by recounting a story from her personal history — her childhood delight in hiding pennies for others to find. She expands that idea into writing advice to us all, to always be on the lookout for the small treasures that surround us.

When I was six or seven years old, growing up in Pittsburgh, I used to take a precious penny of my own and hide it for someone else to find. It was a curious compulsion; sadly, I've never been seized by it since. For some reason I always "hid" the penny along the same stretch of sidewalk up the street. I

would cradle it at the roots of a sycamore, say, or in a hole left by a chipped-off piece of sidewalk. Then I would take a piece of chalk, and, starting at either end of the block, draw huge arrows leading up to the penny from both directions. After I learned to write I labeled the arrows: SURPRISE AHEAD or MONEY THIS WAY. I was greatly excited, during all this arrow-drawing, at the thought of the first lucky passer-by who would receive in this way, regardless of merit, a free gift from the universe. But I never lurked about. I would go straight home and not give the matter another thought, until, some months later, I would be gripped again by the impulse to hide another penny.

It is still the first week in January, and I've got great plans. I've been thinking about seeing. There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. But—and this is the point—who gets excited by a mere penny? If you follow one arrow, if you crouch motionless on a bank to watch a tremulous ripple thrill on the water and are rewarded by the sight of a muskrat kid paddling from its den, will you count that sight a chip of copper only, and go your rueful way? It is dire poverty indeed when a man is so malnourished and fatigued that he won't stoop to pick up a penny. But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple. What you see is what you get.

4) Once you've got detail, look even closer — a new angle may be waiting to surprise you.

Take a page out of [Amy Tan's book](#). She finds new details by looking closely at familiar items.

I try to see as much as possible — in microscopic detail. I have an exercise that helps me with this, using old family photographs. I'll blow an image up as much as I can, and work through it pixel by pixel. This isn't the way we typically look at pictures — where we take in the whole gestalt, eyes focusing mostly on the central image. I'll start at, say, a corner, looking at every detail. And the strangest things happen: you end up noticing things you never would have noticed. Sometimes, I've discovered crucial, overlooked details that are important to my family's story. This process is a metaphor for the way I work — it's the same process of looking closely, looking carefully, looking in the unexpected places, and being receptive to what you find there.

When you consider an event in your personal history, try to immerse yourself in the memory: what did it feel like to be there? What emotions did you have, if any? Thinking about this event years later, have your perceptions of that event and the emotions around it changed or evolved? It's perfectly okay if things feel nebulous or you're not sure where a thought or memory might take you. Revision takes time and perseverance. The important thing is to keep at it.

Identifying new angles in the familiar:

- Revisit old diary pages or letters and compare past you and present you.

- Research an event you once attended to gather big picture details and to place yourself within it.
- Compare notes with others who were also there.
- “Build up” a memory with outside sources — then see where and how your perspective fits.

5) Consider using an object as a way “in” to the story.

Writer [Andrea Badgley](#) suggests that objects [hold their own stories](#) — that any object can be a talisman infused with meaning.

Objects are evocative; they hold stories...Take something small, and concrete — a thing, a noun — and use that as a starting point. You may simply want to describe the object: what does it look like, how does it feel, does it have a scent, a flavor, does it make a sound? Or you may want to use an object as a focal point to expand into something bigger. I wrote about rolling pins once, and a cookbook another time, and both led me into old kitchens, and musings of grandmothers, and recollections of favorite family meals. A piece on pie led me into my son’s Buddha soul. You never know where you might end up. Show us where an object leads you.

What objects are most important to you, that you keep from move to move, refusing to throw away? There’s a chipped, yellow ceramic teapot that sits on my fridge. I never use it to make tea. My husband hates it. Why do I keep it? It belonged to my grandmother, who has long since passed away.

Every time I see that teapot, I see my grandmother's smile and remember her easy laughter. What objects speak to you and what do they say?

Using an inanimate object might be the way to find your unique spin on a universal story.

Apply it

And now, over to you. Choose any piece of writing you'd like to improve and reread it. What's your angle? What's your spin? How can you approach this topic or issue or tale in a way that shows your imprint and your experience?

Worry not if the angle isn't immediately apparent to you. Editing takes time and thought. Writing often needs to sit and steep, just like the best tea. If you'd like, set this piece down for a while. Take a walk and return with a fresh mind later today — or in a few days. You never know: the perfect angle might come to you while you're in the shower or doing the dishes.

If you're not interested in working on a personal essay or piece about you, you can still apply these ideas and techniques to other forms of writing, or if your subject is someone else.

Sometimes, the struggle to find the right angle becomes part of the story itself. Consider [Wendy Rawlings' love story](#) on *Bending Genre*, in which she struggles to find the precise angle from which to write about her romance with an Irish man.

Additional food for thought

Same topic, distinct angles: Think about how peo-

ple from all walks of life tell tales on a single topic. In the *New York Times*' column, [Modern Love](#), you'll read a mix of stories about love, relationships, and marriage. What's *your* take on a topic?

Finding fodder in your own life:

- Dig into memories of “magical” childhood adventures.
- Tap into your inner world of dreams.
- Think about the experiences that have moved, affected, or changed you.
- Recall fleeting, unexpected encounters.
- Consider your peculiar passions, esoteric interests, and pet peeves.

To gently nudge your muse:

- Is your story simply about a childhood trip to the beach, or about how your perspective on your dad changed when he taught you how to swim that day?
- Is your story about a fight you had with your best friend, or about how you learned that in giving in, you're really gaining?
- Is your story about the drudgery of taking your know-it-all, impoverished father-in-law out for lunch each week — or that sometimes love and duty are the same thing?
- Is your story about the chaos and culture shock of traveling to Vietnam, or about how much you need and crave the growth that traveling offers?
- Is your story about the fact your mom was often mean-tempered when you were a

child, or that you're terrified that you're exactly like her?

2

WEEK 2: INTROS AND HOOKS

Dandruff shampoo commercials don't lie: [you never get a second chance to make a first impression](#).

Your opening lines are your first chance to hook your reader — but also to lose them. Nowhere is this truer than on the internet, where we make near instantaneous judgments on whether to stay on a page, or move on.

Last week, [you found your story's angle](#). Next, make sure people stick around by crafting a compelling opening: a question your readers can't refuse, asked in a way only you can.

Throughout this workshop, we'll explore the

openings and hooks of famous novels, and touch on nonfiction and film. Remember that these techniques can be applied to all genres and styles, from memoir to journalism to experimental prose.

What makes a great opening?

You might not love *The Catcher in the Rye* — I can't say it's one of my favorites — but there's no denying that it's got an effective opening:

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

— J. D. Salinger

Salinger sets up the entire novel in this sentence, giving us previews of everything from sentence structure to our narrator's personality. You may not know exactly what's going to happen over the next 250 pages, but his mood and style are established with these 63 words.

The crux of the intro, though, is the question it prompts us to ask: who is this kid, and what's the bee in his bonnet? Once the question is out there, there's no turning back. There are few things more tantalizing than the hope of understanding the unexplained, and so we turn the page.

Of course, a great opening doesn't need 60+ words. A third as many can do a dandy job:

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.

— Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

Or even a tenth:

All this happened, more or less.

— Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Feeling pithy? These authors also mastered the short but effective intro:

“Where’s Papa going with that axe?” said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.

– E B White, *Charlotte’s Web*

They had flown from England to Minneapolis to look at a toilet.

– Nick Hornby, *Juliet, Naked*

My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark.

– Mary Karr, *The Liars’ Club*

My high school friends have begun to suspect I haven’t told them the full story of my life.

— Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*

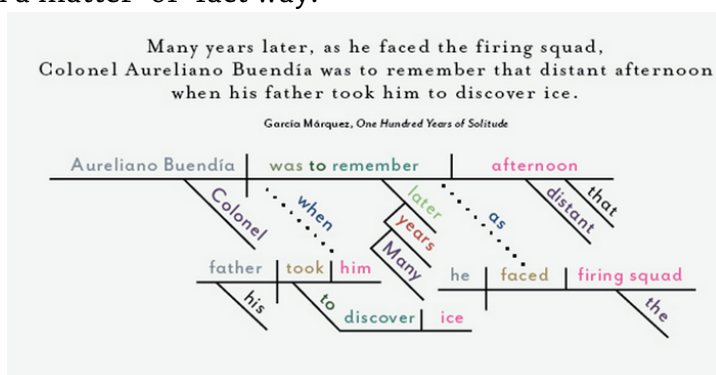
There was a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.

— C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

In six words, Vonnegut establishes the storyteller

as an **unreliable narrator** and prepares you to dive into an off-kilter, multi-layered story. Most importantly, he provokes a tantalizing question: how do I know what to believe? Wanting the answer keeps us reading.

One Hundred Years of Solitude sets off a cascade of specific questions. Who is the Colonel? Why is he facing a firing squad? Why does it remind him of the day with his father, and why did anyone need to “discover” ice? For a novel that’s a keystone of **magical realism** — where fantastic stories are relayed as mundane, everyday occurrences — these questions lift the reader out of the ordinary and prepare them to confront the unexpected, but do it in a matter-of-fact way.



Each of these authors presented their fundamental questions through the lens of their particular viewpoints, and that’s what makes their opening lines sing. If you can distill your subject into the question or two that your piece seeks to address *and* you’re clear on the perspective from which you’re writing — your angle — you can do the same to craft a great opening.

(If you aren’t clear on each of those, you probably

need to do a bit more thinking about what you want to accomplish. Refer to the week one workshop, which includes tips for [figuring out your angle](#).)

Translating the big question

A strong opening can take a variety of forms, but in every case, it presents an unanswered question meant to draw the reader in. *How* you turn your topic into a question is wide open to interpretation — and is firmly rooted in your unique angle — but we can rewrite most great hooks as questions.

One of my favorite columns from humorist Dave Barry condenses great works of literature into single-sentence synopses. My favorite is his funny but astute take on Dostoyevsky's epic *The Brothers Karamazov*:

*Dear Reader,
Is there a god? Beats me.*

*Love,
Fyodor*

Talk about a focused angle! The novel sprawls across hundreds of pages, but it all hangs together — and keeps us intrigued — because Fyodor never loses sight of his fundamental question.

In *Middlesex*, Jeffrey Eugenides takes a page from Gabriel García Márquez's use of fascinating detail but gives it his own spin, introducing irresistible questions cloaked in quotidian details:

I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974.

Translation: Can a person's life change so much that they're literally reborn as someone else?

Tolstoy, in an opening line often hailed as one of literature's best, sets up the underlying theme of *Anna Karenina* without sharing any detail at all:

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

Translation: Why do unhappy families differ?

Quick Tip: Think about your favorite movies for inspiration. How do they begin? What's the opening shot? In Chuck Sambuchino's post on [how to start a novel](#), he asks you to visualize the opening of the film *True Lies* and go "inside-out" when starting your story. It's a nice read for *all* writers, not just novelists.

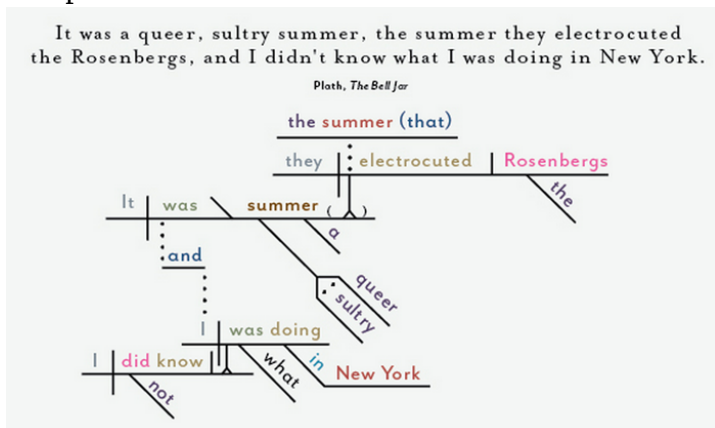
True Grit — a novel before it was a film by the Coen Brothers — opens with a huge spoiler, but withholds critical details. The effect? We have to keep reading to discover the who, what, when, where, why, and how:

People do not give it credence that a fourteen-year-old girl could leave home and go off in the winter-time to avenge her father's blood but it did not seem so strange then, although I will say that it did not happen every day.

Translation: What turned a fourteen-year-old girl into a vigilante?

The classic opening to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell*

Jar places the story in a specific time period, but isn't specific about much else:



Translation: What's it like to be unmoored in your own life?

This isn't to suggest that a great opening needs to be short, shocking, or mysteriously devoid of details to hook a reader. E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* opens with an abundance of detail:

Here is an account of a few years in the life of Quoyale, born in Brooklyn and raised in a shuffle of dreary upstate town.

Hive-spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp, he survived childhood; at the state university, hand clapped over his chin, he camouflaged torment with smiles and silence. Stumbled through his twenties and into his thirties learning to separate his feelings from his life, counting on nothing. He ate prodigiously, liked a ham knuckle, buttered spuds.

His jobs: distributor of vending machine candy, all-night clerk in a convenience store, a third-rate newspaperman. At thirty-six, bereft, brimming with grief and thwarted love, Quoyale steered away to Newfoundland, the rock that had generated his

ancestors, a place he had never been nor thought to go.

Translation: What drives a repressed man into the unknown?

That we can picture Quoye creates the same compulsion to keep reading — we can see him, maybe even identify with him, so we need to know what happens to him (and why).

Nor is a great opening the sole province of fiction writers. Check out Rachel Maddux, introducing her nonfiction piece “[Hail Dayton](#)”:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, or maybe he didn't, but either way vast ribbons of peat came to rest under what became the foothills of Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau, and in time the peat became coal, and later the railroads arrived, along with mines and coke ovens, and near one lazy arc of the Tennessee River workers built homes to return to after their long days of burrowing and burning, and the homes became a town, and the town was called Dayton.

Translation: What's so special about Dayton?

Never have I been so interested to read about Ohio.

Try a few test runs to pump yourself up to write your own opening:

- First, pick up a few of your favorite books or articles, pieces that you always remember because they commanded your attention from the first line. Read the first

paragraphs, and translate the authors' lines into a question or two.

- Now, look back at a few of your already-published pieces — pick one of the posts you're proudest of, or one that got a particularly positive response from readers. Read your openings. Did you start with a big question?

From question to angle to hook

Insofar as any creative process like writing can be distilled into a bulleted, three-step process, here's what you'll do next:

1. Start with your subject. (This is the big question you're exploring. What are you writing about, and why?)
2. Next, consider [your angle](#). (Remember, this is the unique way you're approaching your question.)
3. Finally, smoosh 'em together. (This is where you figure out how to ask your big question in a way that's unmistakably you.)

When combining your big question with your angle, consider the difference between "I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies," and "I'm in an office, talking to two men." The former is from the great David Foster Wallace in *Infinite Jest*, setting the scene and hinting that the speaker doesn't view the world quite like the rest of us. The latter is me, *sans* angle. (I know which piece I'd keep reading.)

Note: Sometimes we don't know exactly what our big question is until we've written through it. You can return to this workshop later; these tools will still work whether you're starting from the beginning, or starting from the end.

Even if you think you have the perfect opening now, revisit it throughout the writing process. As Joyce Carol Oates said: "*The first sentence can't be written until the last sentence is written.*"

As the examples we've looked at illustrate, you could open your piece in so many different ways. Here are some approaches to try on for size:

A simple statement. "It was a pleasure to burn," begins Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451*. Burn what? Why? Why does the speaker take pleasure in the destruction, and will s/he reflect any further on this? Just like the intro of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, these six words do the work of many more. This approach works well for pieces with a matter-of-fact style, or pieces where you want the reader to quickly identify with your topic.

A not-so-simple statement. "We were about to give up and call it a night when somebody dropped the girl off the bridge," writes John MacDonald, who stops us in our tracks at the start of *Darker Than Amber*. We know someone is up to no good, and we know the book won't be pulling any punches.

I also love how Frank McCourt begins his 1996 memoir *Angela's Ashes*. He writes: "My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my

brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone.” It begins with no surprises, but ends unexpectedly.

John Scalzi employs a more lighthearted take in *The Android’s Dream*: “Dirk Moeller didn’t know if he could fart his way into a major diplomatic incident. But he was ready to find out.” Phrases like these make us do a virtual spit-take, and are great for jarring readers into paying attention.

The middle of a moment. “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” At the beginning of George Orwell’s 1984, we know *when* we are...but we also know something is amiss in this world we’ve entered.

Hunter S. Thompson also goes this route in the opening of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:



Starting in the middle creates an immersive experience for your reader.

An introduction of voice. Consider this line from Augusten Burroughs’ memoir of his bizarre childhood, *Running With Scissors*: “My mother is standing

in front of the bathroom mirror smelling polished and ready; like Jean Nate, Dippity Do and the waxy sweetness of lipstick.” We’re introduced to Burroughs’ sharp and distinct voice immediately.

The same goes for Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*: “You don’t know about me without you have read a book called *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain’t no matter.” For a piece where language, voice, or cadence play a starring role, this puts them front and center.

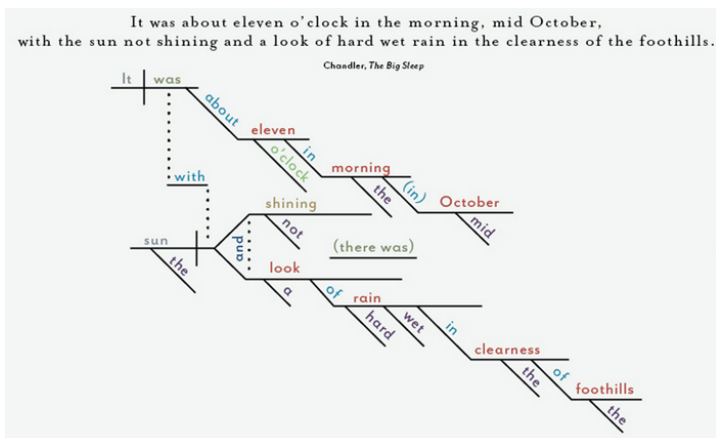
A statement of principles or values. Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* is the poster child here, but many authors have done this effectively, including Margaret Atwood in *Cat’s Eye* (“Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space”) and V.S. Naipaul in *A Bend in the River* (“The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it”). Give this a try to kick off a philosophical or reflective piece.

A richly detailed picture. In the nonfiction classic *Hiroshima*, John Hersey sets the scene with great detail: “At exactly fifteen minutes past eight in the morning on August 6, 1945, Japanese time, at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel department of the East Asia Tin Works, had just sat down at her place in the plant office and was turning her head to speak to the girl at the next desk.”

In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, John Kennedy O’Toole shows us that detail can also be brief. He introduces main character Ignatius J. Reilly as:

“A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head.”

In *The Big Sleep*, Raymond Chandler focuses instead on details of a place, rather than a character:



Like starting in the middle, this immerses the reader, but the effect is a bit different.

A description of mood. Some writers, like Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar* and Susanna Kaysen in *Girl, Interrupted*, choose to steep us in the mood of the story to come. In her memoir chronicling her stay in a psychiatric hospital in the 1960s, Kaysen writes: “People ask, How did you get in there? What they really want to know is if they are likely to end up in there as well.”

The Grapes of Wrath does the same: “To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth.”

Dostoyevsky creates a similar effect in *Notes from the Underground*, in which the protagonist tells

us, “I am a sick man...I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man. I think my liver is diseased.”

A straightforward introduction. Gimmicks and tactics aside, some stories make a convincing case for just starting at the beginning:

“The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed,” writes Stephen King in *The Gunslinger*.

“Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested,” begins Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*.

“You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*,” writes Calvino.

This can be a great set-up for nonfiction pieces, and, funnily enough, for fiction — the juxtaposition of the mundane and the fantastic can be quite engaging.

* * *

Time to roll up your sleeves! This is a time to play — write five different intro sentences, or ten.

If you’ve had a lightbulb moment and have an opening that moves you, hooray! If not, start with a few of the options above, and see whether one helps you express your angle. This is a time to play — write five different intro sentences, or ten. Which ones express what you hope to say? Riff on them, and mix and match elements from all of your attempts to create just the right opening, which we hope you’ll share in [the Commons](#).

Along with the facts you want to present, think about how you want your reader to feel and what

parts of your story you want to emphasize. Do you want to shock them? Make them laugh? Make them uncomfortable? Bring them into your story gradually? Have them begin reading in a good mood? An apprehensive mood? A gloomy mood? An excited mood? These are questions that will inform the way you translate your question.

How not to get started

Knowing your angle and figuring out your question are critical, but having both don't ensure an amazing hook. There are ways we can go wrong in introductions.

Consider this reimagined intro for *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "Billy Pilgrim, an optometrist, time travels to various points of his own life (and death). The World War II firebombing of Dresden plays a major role, and also there are aliens. He gets shot at the end."

With all due apologies to Mr. Vonnegut for that synopsis, is that a book you'd want to read? (I wouldn't.) The simple "All this happened, more or less," is far more intriguing.

We give away too much. It's easy to fall into the overkill pit; we want to entice ALL THE READERS, so we throw ALL THE DETAILS up front hoping that everyone will find something that intrigues them. The problem: why should the reader keep reading?

None of these openings we've looked at give away the whole story; even the spoiler-filled *True Grit* or richly detailed *The Shipping News* withhold key facts.

We bury the lede. Your "lede" is your big ques-

tion, the point of your piece. You bury it when you begin with lots of non-essential details that push the point of the piece further away from the beginning — the longer it takes for your big question to hook your reader, the more likely it is that they'll check out before they get there.

We start from the very beginning. This is a common way of burying the lede. If I'm writing a post about a particular moment in this year's Little League World Series, it makes sense to include information about the history of Little League baseball somewhere in the post. But if I *start* my post in 1880 and trace that history before I ever get to my actual subject (or introduce my angle), most readers aren't going to make it.

Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.

— Mark Twain

We don't discern among details. This is another easy way to heap dirt on the lede. All details are not created equal; some of them add richness to your piece, and some are a distraction.

Including every detail is the written equivalent of your friend who can never get to the point of a story because he can't remember if it happened on Tuesday or Wednesday, or if it was 1 PM or 2 PM, or if the car was red or blue. If a detail plays a role, either because it's key to the timeline or a character or creates the feeling you're aiming for, great. If not, keep it out of your opening.

* * *

Okay, that's enough words spilled in the service of an introductory paragraph!

Time to write: take your pick of the exercises outlined above, or just start typing and see where your fingers take you. Then, head to [the Commons](#) to share your opening lines and see what other participants have come up with for their own posts.

Additional food for thought

Notes for bloggers and nonfiction/essay writers publishing online:

There's so much to read on the web, your piece needs to stand out right from the start — you've got a few seconds to hook a reader. Some quick tips for a timely, attention-grabbing post:

- **Start with an [epigraph](#).** Open your piece with a quote that resonates with you, or a great passage from a recent relevant article you've read.
- **Grab 'em with a trending story.** No matter what style you're writing in — personal essay, journal article, memoir — you can use a news or viral story to introduce your post, if it's relevant to your subject. This attracts readers searching for material on the topic, and makes your piece part of a larger discussion on the internet.
- **Enhance with imagery.** Insert a stunning photograph to accompany your opening — one that complements your words. If you're not the world's best shutterbug, check out [these sites for free images](#).

Images from [A Diagrammatical Dissertation](#).

3

WEEK 3: FINDING YOUR KEY MOMENT

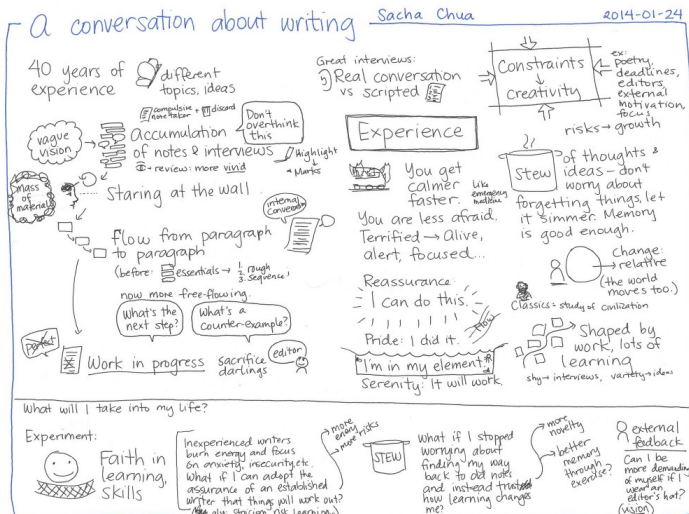
Over the past two weeks, you've worked on two aspects of the writing process: [finding a unique story angle](#), and reeling your readers in, [right from the opening line](#). By today, hopefully you've found your own spin on a topic you're writing about, and decided how to craft an introduction to a post-in-progress.

This week, we'll dive deeper into our writing and learn to extract key moments in our pieces: to pluck out moments that deserve more attention and find bits that are worthy of scenes. You may not realize

it, but you *do* have material to mine, from the kernels buried in your drafts, to the nearly ripe ideas in your free-writes, to even the published posts you aren't satisfied with (c'mon, if you're like me, you have a bunch of these, too).

Contrary to what your inner perfectionist tells you, this material is not trash. As I mentioned in [a post about Haruki Murakami's *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*](#), much of the writing process involves *not* writing, but simply observing and being; thinking about how to translate our life experiences onto paper; and then rewriting.

Being a disciplined writer isn't just about creating a finished product, either. It's about the steps behind the scenes, *in between our published posts*, and reflecting on ideas and themes that appear in our writing again and again, and then improving what we've written.



Sketch by Sacha Chua (CC BY 2.0)

Revisiting your drafts

You have material to mine, from the kernels buried in your drafts to the nearly ripe ideas in your free-writes.

Before you roll up your sleeves and work on your own writing, let's consider this example:

A blogger named Dee writes a personal post about the challenges of living with her autistic brother, Sam. The post reads like a diary entry: a braindump of thoughts with no regard for structure, or even a clear beginning, middle, and end. Dee starts a number of sentences with phrases like *Last week, Sam decided to...* and *That year was better, because...* and *Today, I'm upset because mom and dad said...*, but there's not really a chronological approach.

In the end, Dee's post is a jumble of thoughts and feelings, jumping around in time.

The most heartfelt, poignant part of Dee's post involves music, when she recounts a guitar lesson Sam had given her when they were teens. It's a significant moment, representative of their relationship, but the moment is buried near the end of the post, described in just a few lines. Many readers may not reach this part — they've likely stopped reading, leaving this beautiful moment undiscovered.

I read posts like Dee's every day, where the most resonant writing — arguably the “best part” — is buried somewhere in the prose. (Think back to last week's workshop, when Michelle talked about [how not to write an introduction](#): burying the lede and

starting from the very beginning. The idea is similar here: sometimes the meat and heart of a post is misplaced.)

Let's suppose Dee's post was in response to a free-write exercise from [Writing 101](#). Is this material still usable? Can it act as a springboard for something more? Absolutely. I'll bet you, too, have posts like this in your archives, published or unpublished. Oftentimes, if we're not happy with a post after taking the first stab at writing it, we trash it. We forget about it. I encourage you to view "practice posts" and writing you've finished or forgotten as eternal works-in-progress; sometimes all it takes is fresher eyes and a more mature perspective to get started on them again.

Art is never finished, only abandoned.

— (Often attributed to) Leonardo da Vinci



Image by [Hannah Sheffield](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0)

The lapse between first draft and revision may be

short: a week, or even a day. Other times, the simmering period takes a while — months, even years. In [“On Not Being Able to Write It,”](#) a lovely post we shared in week one, Wendy Rawlings says she’s still waiting, after thirteen years, for the right time to tackle her memoir about a fling with an Irishman.

Writing, and rewriting, takes time.

This week: Select a post that you’d like to experiment with. It can be a post you’ve already been workshoping, or something different.

For this workshop, let’s return to the piece you’ve been working on the past two weeks. Or, dive into your archives, from your published posts, to the drafts in your dashboard, to the free-writes we asked you to do in [Writing 101](#) (if you participated in the course). Select anything you’d like to revise and experiment with.

Ideally, it’s a post that “needs work” — that you feel is unfinished or to which you didn’t give enough attention. We’ll try to improve it in this workshop by looking for the most significant moment within it, which will act as the anchor of your story. If you don’t have an appropriate post to work with, the tips below are still helpful in general, as you grow as a writer over time.

Mining your material: finding the key moment

Section at a glance — tips to find your key moment:

- Present a grand idea by thinking small
- Consider universal themes, describe human emotions

- Take a cue from the art of filmmaking
- Tear your work apart (literally)

When you revisit a piece, how do you pinpoint the “aha!” moment — the true heart of your post that you’ll build upon? How do you scan your own material with editor’s eyes?

Here are four techniques to consider as you revisit your post. Feel free to dive in and absorb them all at once, or focus on one each day of this week:

1) Present a grand idea by thinking small

In the past, I’ve read a number of friends’ personal statements as part of their applications to graduate programs. Interestingly, no matter their field of study or essay topic, my feedback to each has been the same:

Great overview! But you need to *zoom in*.

You know that part where you mention a transformative moment in passing? [I’ve circled a sentence.] This *shows* your passion. Expand on it. Everything else you’ve written will fall into place.

A friend applying to an MBA program talked about how he wanted to effect change in a global society. In his epic backstory, he described many life experiences, but never dug beneath the surface. The essay showed his range, but at the end, I was unimpressed.

Think small. Be specific.

I said: *Tell me a specific story about one internship abroad. Recount a single conversation with someone that changed your worldview. Show me you, as a human being.*

Likewise, a colleague applying to a residency for women artists spent 2,000 words listing her hurdles and accomplishments, yet I came away not reading anything memorable.

I suggested: *Describe something — a childhood encounter, a challenging exchange with a professor, a moment of enlightenment — I can picture. Make yourself a character: one that I can follow, that I can imagine when I close my eyes.*

Revisit [our advice on your story angle](#) in week one: what details in your life can help to illustrate your unique story? What is distinct about you — or the subject you're writing about — and how can you show that quality to a stranger?

Scan your piece and look out for these moments in your writing that you may have glossed over. Print out your draft and read it with a pen, circling phrases that jump out at you — that might be more meaningful than you first thought.

If you'd like brainstorming help, head to [the Commons](#) and share an excerpt of your writing that you think has potential, and why. Your fellow writers might be able to [provide feedback](#).

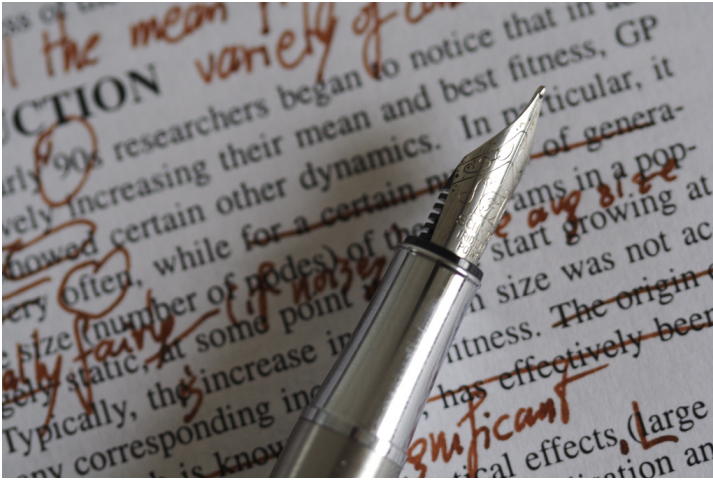


Image by Nic McPhee (CC BY-SA 2.0)

2) Consider universal themes, describe human emotions

As you scan your draft for usable material, think also about the types of stories people identify with, no matter their life path or background. Personal and emotional takes on universal topics like loss, death, friendship, family, and love always garner responses because readers can relate, even if their experience is different from yours.

*I am of the mind that emotions should be shown,
not told.*

— Matt Salesses, [A Month of Revision](#)

Let's say you've written a piece of memoir about being estranged from your mother for twenty years, or you've drafted a post about finding your calling as a chef in Italy. If you scan your material but aren't sure what you're looking for, or what it's

missing, think about books you've read, or films you've watched, that have moved *you*.

Are there moments, like the ones in your favorite stories, that you can tease out?

For example, we've all witnessed — or experienced — awkward, painful phone conversations. Can you retell an exchange between you and your mother and show the strain on your relationship in a way others will understand?

Your readers have likely had interesting meals abroad — can you recount that dining experience in Rome and show how life-changing it was?

Or, let's return to the example of Dee: she starts with an unfocused post about her brother Sam, but scans it with a magnifying glass and plucks out a single encounter — one memorable guitar lesson — which she'll use to show the beauty of and unique communication in their relationship.

We all lead different lives, of course. While no two stories are identical, we can look to the work of others to see how they tackle themes around grief and pain, love and hope, and more.



Image by Sam Caplat (CC BY 2.0)

3) Take a cue from the art of filmmaking

To identify moments that you can expand into scenes, and to help you think more cinematically, let's also consider the craft of screenwriting. The Script Lab introduces [five key plot moments](#) in a movie script, some of which are worth mentioning:

The inciting incident: the first incidence of conflict, which creates the main problem of the story. The inciting incident can happen after the first sequence, or even within the first few minutes. (In [“Narrative First,”](#) Jim Hull compiles examples in popular films like *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*.)

The lock-in: the point at the end of act one — roughly thirty pages or minutes into a film — at which the protagonist is locked into the central conflict of the story. He or she moves into act two with an objective.

Consider [the plot points in your favorite movies](#). What incident sets off a chain of events? What motivates a character to act a certain way? Which scenes have made you cry, or cover your eyes, or laugh, or shake you to the core?

Scan your own piece for a cinematic moment. While it doesn't have to center around a problem that needs to be solved, do remember that conflict drives a story, and this moment should include some kind of action or exchange. Think about it: how could you write a scene where nothing happens?



Image by [Ricardo Liberato](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0)

4) Tear your work apart — literally

In [“A Month of Revision,”](#) Matt Saleses offers tips on the rewriting process. Consider point number five:

Cut up your story.

When I edited a manuscript in my MFA program, I cut problematic chapters into sections and paragraphs, laid these slips of paper out on the floor, and moved them around like puzzle pieces. This visual and tactile process is invaluable when experimenting with structure (which we'll discuss below), and you can try it with an individual post, too.

Print your post and cut it into parts, so each part equals an idea or main point (or another “unit” you’d like to use). Splitting your post into parts makes it easier to see what you have — and what’s missing.

Study each part, isolated from the rest of the piece. You’re forced to read your writing in a new way, and you may think of ideas you’ve haven’t before. Also, look for parts that lack descriptive details — these might hold hidden moments and missed opportunities.

Ultimately, there is no fool-proof formula. After exploring a particular piece, you might find that the story just isn’t ready. Let it sit. Move on to another piece. A big part of the writing process involves figuring out which ideas are *ripe*.

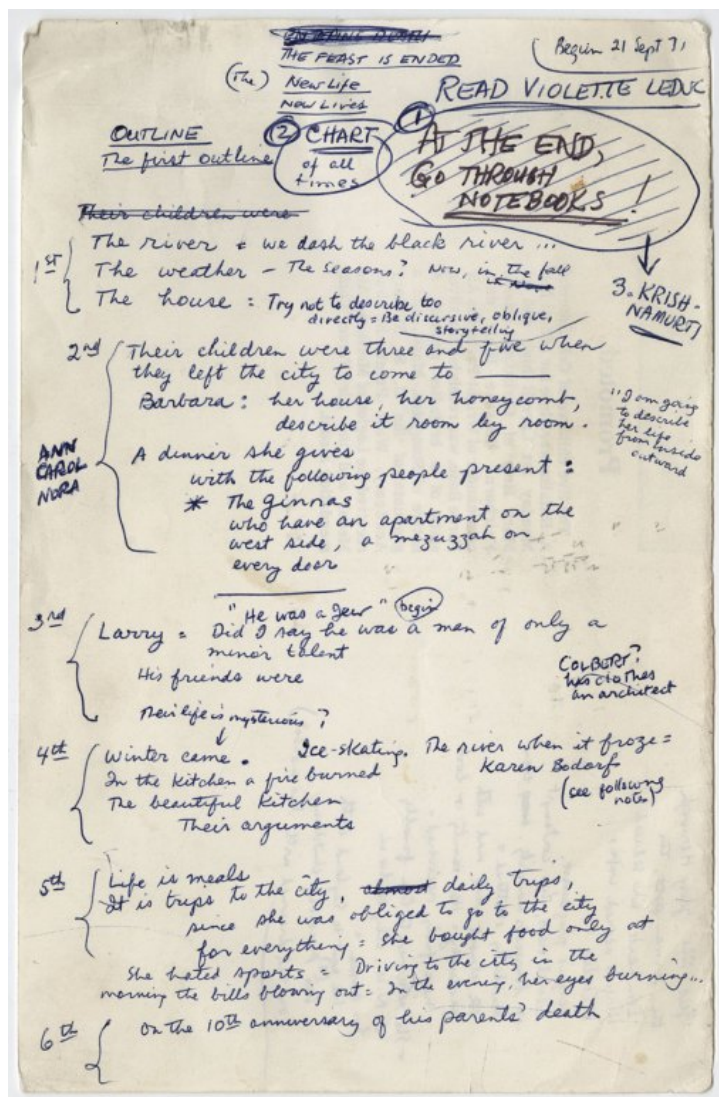
I hope these techniques have shown you how to read and reconsider existing material in new ways, and that you’ve pinpointed a key moment in the post you’re working on!

An introduction to structure

The approach to structure in factual writing is like returning from a grocery store with materials you intend to cook for dinner. You set them out on the kitchen counter, and what’s there is what you deal with, and all you deal with. . . . To some extent, the structure of a composition dictates itself, and to some extent it does not. Where you have a free hand, you can make interesting choices.

— John McPhee, “[Structure](#)”

So, let’s say you discovered the key moment in your post. Now what?

James Salter's outline for *Light Years*, via [The Paris Review](#)

John McPhee's [insightful New Yorker piece on structure](#) is an interesting look at a master writer's process on the organization of a piece of writing.

You should ponder the best structure for your work, no matter your genre or style. Consider those classic five paragraphs, with a thesis at the end of the introduction, in a high school composition essay. The nonlinear plot in your sci-fi short story. Or the wandering narrative of your music memoir, in which the chapters of your life are organized by songs.

When I was growing up, lessons on structure were rather boring. We learned how to create outlines using roman numbers, and it felt like an unglamorous step in the writing process. *Make sure each body paragraph has three supporting points*, my teacher would say. We hated the task and thought it was a waste of time.

Years later, I want to thank all the teachers who forced me to outline my essays.

When you begin to organize a piece, you probably don't know what you've got. You lay out your ingredients on a table, as McPhee writes, and move them around: [your introduction](#), some backstory, perhaps a paragraph of technical information, a section on a specific person, a great quote from an interviewee, your key moment, and so on. As Krista and Michelle discussed in weeks one and two, you've put your own spin on a topic, and have attracted your readers with your hook and question. Likewise, you'll decide where to place your other components, like the key moment you'll use to anchor the post.

But how do you decide the order of things?

Think back to Dee's piece, which currently reads as

a series of musings, with no sense of chronology. Where might she insert her guitar lesson scene? Could it fit at the beginning, as a way to introduce her relationship with Sam, and frame the rest of her thoughts? Or does it make more sense to write about their childhood first, and then craft the guitar lesson scene?

In the next workshop, we'll talk more about scene placement and development. This week, let's plant the seed: think about the different parts of a post you have — from your hook, to your key moment, to all of your supporting details. Consider these questions:

- Is your story best told chronologically, and arranged in the order that things happened or came to be?
- Could you consider a nonlinear approach, in which your post might have sections that jump back and forth in time?
- Could you disregard time altogether and create parts that are more thematic?

Richard Gilbert, who began writing his memoir, *Shepherd*, in our graduate program at Goucher College, shares his thoughts on the topic:

We live our lives chronologically, of course, so it's an easy structure for readers to grasp. But human memory doesn't work that way — it's a jumble from which images arise — and neither does our understanding.

Structuring a post involves more than simply outlining an introduction, body, and conclusion; you

should think about the most effective, dramatic way to tell a story, and consider how the placement of information might affect your reader emotionally, too.

Establishing a notetaking system

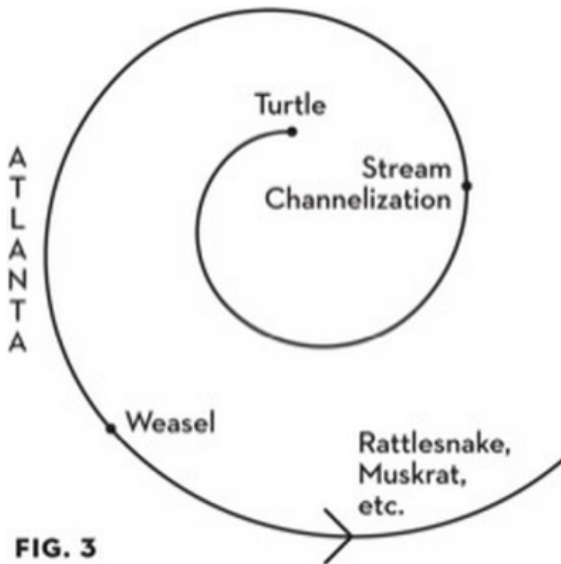
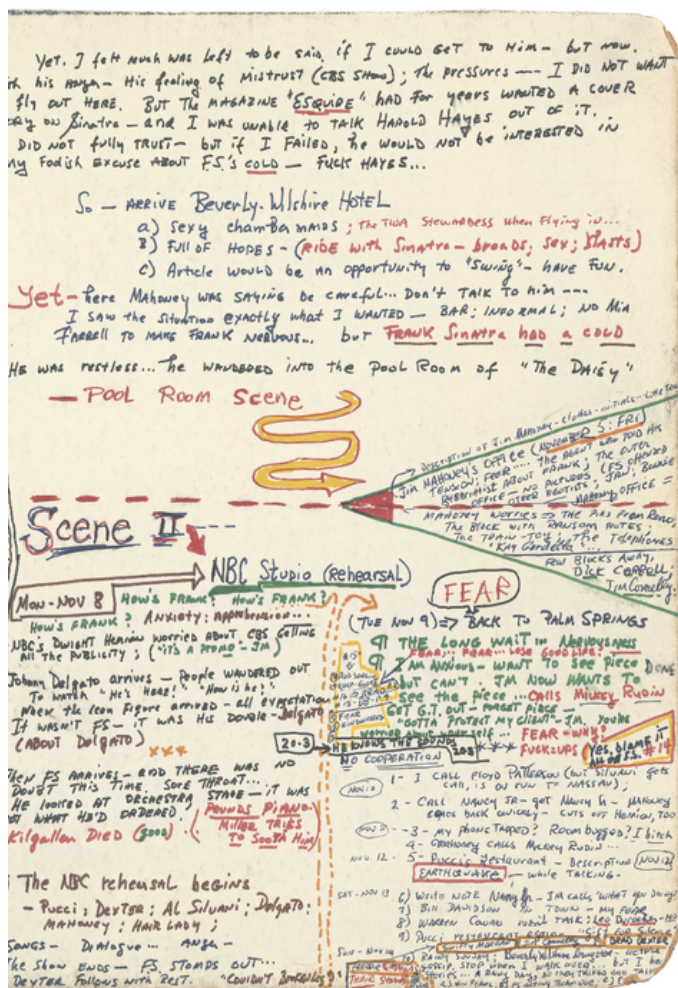


FIG. 3 Outline for McPhee's "Travels of Georgia," via [The New Yorker](#).

In addition to [traditional numbered or bullet-point outlines](#), or the cutting-and-moving method of paper mentioned above, try doodles and diagrams, as McPhee did with his 1973 article, "Travels of Georgia." Or [charts and bubbles](#), or different-colored Post-its or index cards.

Get a chalkboard or whiteboard for your writing, which you can set up next to your workspace. Use a journal specifically for outlining your posts. Find

inspiration in the [handwritten notes of famous authors](#), like Gay Talese's now-famous outline for his story, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," as shared by [The Paris Review](#):



Not all posts need be outlined, and many writers don't bother at all. But if you're learning to organize your thoughts, and want to plan your revision before sitting down to type, experimenting

with an outline — of any format — is a great exercise.

And that's it for now. So, spend some time this week revisiting a previous post (or multiple posts), using these techniques to pinpoint your moments.

Additional food for thought

- Scan your post — your life or subject — with a magnifying glass.
- Scan your piece for a cinematic moment.
- Print your post and cut it into parts.

Thinking thematically:

- A longform post on the TV show *Homeland* in which sections focus on themes (politics, infidelity, bipolar disorder).
- A short story on friendship where the parts focus on characters (versus a linear progression in time).
- A personal essay of disparate (unrelated) threads held together by what they have in common: you!

4

WEEK 4: SETTING THE SCENE

We've spent the first three weeks of Writing 201 zooming in. Whether it was to [find your own original angle on a story](#), [craft a hook](#) your readers will find irresistible, or [identify the key moment](#) of your story, we sought to achieve greater focus through a process of elimination and narrowing down of options. You will do this — this stripping off of dead (written) weight — again and again (and again) as you write more.

But every once in a while there will also be moments to expand and to build on your findings. This final week of Writing 201 is one of those opportunities. Now that you've put your finger on

[your key moment](#), it's time to craft a scene around it, and to give some serious thought to how you'd maximize its effect on the piece as a whole.



Working behind the scenes, stagehands are preparing a theater set. [Image](#) by [Paul Lim](#) (CC BY-ND 2.0).

Building a scene, plank by plank

Note: Scene-building isn't a step restricted to fiction. A lot of the best memoir, essays, and journalism are narratives rich with scenes. These tips apply to all genres.

Last week, we encouraged you to think about your key moment cinematically: what are the key narrative elements that keep your plot moving forward? Now that we're moving into the next step — fleshing out a scene — let's also switch metaphors (and art forms), and move into the realm of theater.

Laurie Hertzal at [Nieman Storyboard](#) on scenes:

“You want the reader to feel like he’s right there with you. Scenes are all about action and movement and tension and detail. They should unfold moment by moment.”

This is no arbitrary choice: “scene” derives from the Latin word for stage. Even if you’d never consider the story you’re telling dramatic enough for rousing soliloquies and exaggerated hand gestures, the basics of scene-building are the same even if the scene in question will only ever come to life on your readers’ computer screen. To get going, let’s consider some of the key elements of any scene. We’ll talk more about these later on, too.

- **Character(s).** At the heart of every scene is a human drama, however minor. Human drama requires a minimum of one person, preferably someone your readers care about.
- **Setting.** A stage is always a representation of *somewhere*, a specific set of spatial features, of openings and obstacles. Where that place is is up to you, but it’s your job to make sure your characters are rooted in space — or you risk making your readers feel like they’re floating through it.
- **Action.** Something always happens in a scene — some discrete unit of narrative energy must be spent. It doesn’t matter if a president gets sworn in or a panhandler decides to cross the road, but the world can never be the same by the end of the scene.
- **Duration.** In classical theater, a scene started when a character either entered or

left the stage, and ended the exact same way. You obviously don't have to follow such rigid guidelines, but the idea is that your readers should know when your scene has started and ended (it should also never overstay its welcome).

Scenes — entering late, leaving early: “Beginners almost always begin their scenes earlier than they should and then carry them on longer than they should,” says [Charles Deemer](#). You don't have to explain *everything*. Try this tip from [The Story Body-guard](#): Write your entire scene. Then go back and find the very first action or sentence that absolutely cannot be left out to begin. Do the same with the end of the scene.

Let's make this more concrete and imagine that after last week's assignment, a blogger named Jesse found his key moment. His post was about leaving New York, where he'd hoped to become a professional travel writer, and deciding to move back to his hometown, where lower living costs would allow him to actually do more traveling and writing. He wasn't sure how to tell a story of broken dreams without sounding clichéd and over-dramatic. He also didn't know how to convey his complicated feelings about the decision, since they contain both disappointment and optimism.

Then, after going over his draft a few times, he decided to zone in on an event that, he now realized, encapsulated the stakes of his decision. On a previous trip to Mexico, a power outage had prevented him from charging his laptop, and he couldn't write for an entire day. But that night, in a

candlelit bar, he ended up having a heart-to-heart conversation with the old proprietor, Antonio, who told him about his childhood in a poor household in a village far away. Obstacles, tradeoffs, unexpected twists, the tension between acceptance and perseverance — it was all there. Now what?

Designing the house around the safe

In week two, Michelle went over some of [the elements that make a powerful opening and an irresistible hook](#). Building a scene happens in a similar fashion, only on a larger scale. Instead of the level of the sentence, we're working with a sequence of longer duration (this isn't to say, of course, that sentences are no longer important — they never stop being the most basic building block of your narrative). Consider, once again, [novelist Amy Tan](#) on details:

I try to see as much as possible — in microscopic detail. I have an exercise that helps me with this, using old family photographs. I'll blow an image up as much as I can, and work through it pixel by pixel. This isn't the way we typically look at pictures — where we take in the whole gestalt, eyes focusing mostly on the central image. I'll start at, say, a corner, looking at every detail. And the strangest things happen: you end up noticing things you never would have noticed.

This process of gradual zooming out works beyond descriptions alone — you can apply it to the overall structure of your piece. The goal is to immerse your

readers in the experience you're recounting, leading them all the way to the scene's climax and conclusion. It may sound counterintuitive, but you want to think about that end-point first.

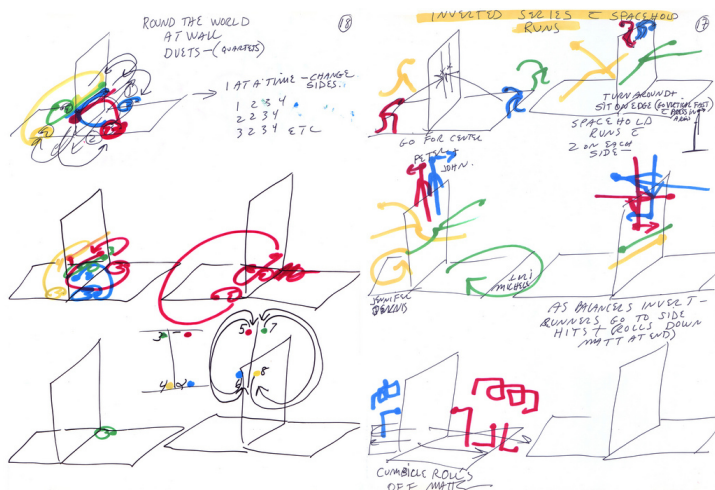
The end-point of your story: "In some stories, the climax will involve a drawn-out physical battle. In others, the climax can be nothing more than a simple admission that changes everything for the protagonist. Almost always, it is a moment of revelation for the main character." Read more about the climax of a scene on [Helping Writers Become Authors](#). The discussion focuses on longer narratives like books, but the ideas and examples might provide inspiration.

Whether it's a major (or minor) epiphany, a decision made, a secret revealed, or an emotion transformed, you'll want to tune whatever's leading to that moment so that it's in the right key. The moment is your treasure chest, the safe containing your most prized possessions. Build your house — your scene — around it. In Jesse's story, it's his conversation with the old bartender that drives home the idea that dreams change, that compromises don't always mean defeat, and that in real life it's difficult to know when to change course and when to stick with original plans. In order to convey these complex notions successfully, this scene would require a few necessary ingredients:

- The setting needs to be vivid: the reader should feel like she's sitting there with Jesse in the same bar in Mexico.
- The character of Antonio, the old bartender, should be convincing — we

want to be able to hear his voice, and to understand why his presence was meaningful.

- Jesse's own reflections on the story he's recounting will probably have to be part of the scene itself, but placed there carefully. He'll want to avoid a heavy-handed "eureka!" moment.



Like the choreography of a dance, your scene is composed of discrete details brought together into a meaningful sequence. Image by Design Trust for Public Space (CC BY 2.0)

Writing with a spoon in your hand

In theory, it shouldn't be *too* hard for Jesse to recreate such a scene and report on its effect: he could write down every single thing he can remember from it, and spell out each and every emotion he experienced as it was unfolding. The problem? This is like watching the unedited video footage of

a wedding: painfully tedious to anyone subjected to it (including the happy couple, one would think).

The challenge is, first, to choose the right details, and, second, to present them — to narrate them — in the right way. This is where the inevitable Show vs. Tell dilemma rears its head. Err too much on the side of direct exposition (“Jesse was really frustrated he couldn’t use his laptop that night”) and your story becomes a flat, monotone dictation. Go too far in the direction of flowery paraphrases (“Jesse’s eyes twitched, a few droplets of sweat rolled down his forehead. His laptop lay languid on the desk, a metal box of endlessly unavailable possibilities”), and your reader will get very tired, very quickly.

A description gives the reader a moment to reflect, to feel, to intuit. It’s like a pause in the forward momentum of a piece. — Mary Jaksch,
[How to Show \(Not Tell\)](#)

There is, of course, real value to not always spelling things out — obscurity, even in minimal doses, even on the level of language, creates tension, and tension drives writing — and reading — forward. In other words, that worn adage of writing workshops, “Show, don’t tell,” still has its value. Sometimes, though, you *really, really* just want to tell it like it is. It could be because you’re running out of space, or your pace has ground to a near halt. It could be because sometimes, simple, straightforward statements are elegant and beautiful in their own right. And it could be because sometimes variation is worth it just for its own sake. Here’s nov-

elist [Joshua Henkin's refreshing take](#) on the show-don't-tell dilemma:

If you ask me, the real reason people choose to show rather than tell is that it's so much easier to write "the big brown torn vinyl couch" than it is to describe internal emotional states without resorting to canned and sentimental language. You will never be told you're cheesy if you describe a couch, but you might very well be told you're cheesy if you try to describe loneliness. The phrase "Show, don't tell," then, provides cover for writers who don't want to do what's hardest (but most crucial) in fiction.

Showing vs. Telling — The Camera Test: Faced with a passage you're not sure about? In [The First 50 Pages](#), author Jeff Gerke suggests asking one question to help identify writing that tells rather than shows: *Can the camera see it?* Read what you've written, and then see if it passes this camera test. If it doesn't, perhaps your description needs a bit more fleshing out.

How do you know how much to show, how much to tell, and whether a sentence is actually telling or showing something? For the most part, you don't. You write. You read. You add a bit here, remove a few words there, and repeat. And repeat. And repeat. This is writing with a spoon in your hand — you keep tasting, keep correcting, and keep adjusting. At some point — you might be satisfied at last, or you might just be exhausted — you stop.

To follow up on Jesse's story, he might start with a brief description of the candlelit room in Mexico, jump to an analysis of his thoughts about perse-

verance, and then conclude with a powerful snippet of dialog between him and Antonio. He finds this structure creates a conclusion that's too vague, so he switches stuff around — now it's the dialog that he opens with, which then zooms out into a description of the bar and the events that led him there, ending with his own reflections.

How about adding another, final morsel of dialog right at the end? Or, rather, drawing the curtain on the scene with a moving evocation of the dark, shadow-filled room? There's no real way to know any of this without having an end-point to work toward, and without actually writing (and rewriting) it.

On good days, writers might pull off a scene with minimal tweaking, but one can't count on it. It may sound annoying, but it's in fact a blessing in disguise: unlike on a real stage, with real actors, here you get to reenact the scene as many times as you wish.

A question of place

There really isn't a sure way of knowing in advance where the ideal spot for a scene might be.

Just like the structure of the scene itself, how and where to place it in the overall architecture of your post is also a matter of experimentation. Last week, Cheri mentioned some of the considerations to keep in mind: are you following a chronological order? Are you basing your post on a series of flashbacks interspersed with present-day reflections?

Have you created a poetic mishmash of moments that transcends traditional ideas of temporality? There really isn't a sure way of knowing in advance where the ideal spot for a scene might be.

Consider how different Jesse's scene would feel in different junctures of his narrative. He could start with it, sending the heavy guns first, using his key moment as his hook. His readers would be engaged from the get-go, and he'd quickly establish the tone of his post. Later on, he could refer back to it if he wanted, and use it as a recurring narrative unit to give the piece as a whole a stronger sense of cohesion.

The opposite direction is an equally valid option. Ending on a powerful note will have a major effect on how readers remember the post and what they think of your writing. If the moment you depicted there really conveys the emotion you were aiming for, you will have great control over the overall timbre of the piece.

Or, consider the option of placing your key scene about two thirds of the way into your post, a spot that's often ideal for a narrative climax. It gives you enough time to build up tension and make your reader know what the story's all about, but still allows for a calm, reflective ending.

Read like an editor: when you play around with the position of your scene, be sure to re-read the post in its entirety.

If this sounds like too many options, don't worry — more often than not, a given post will only have a couple of moments that really make sense for your scene. One thing to keep in mind: when you

play around with the position of your scene, be sure to re-read the post in its entirety. It's impossible to assess a section's effect in a vacuum, and thinking about this one scene will help you with giving the entire post a clearer focus and better-defined contours.



10 minutes to curtain! [Image](#) by [Joe deSousa](#) (CC BY 2.0)

Digging in: final notes

What's next? We don't want to end this four-week course without giving you some concrete next steps. While scene-building could fill up an entire course on its own, here are some leading questions that will help you in gathering the materials you need for a scene that works (if you'd like general advice on description and storytelling, [this piece](#) is a nice place to start).

- **Setting:** Where are we? In what city, village, or other community is this story

taking place? Are we indoors or outdoors? What season are we in? How's the weather? What kind of light does this place have? What are the three most notable features of this space? Are there any objects that immediately draw the attention of anyone there? If you'd like even more guidance, try [this helpful article](#) which contains twelve elements that will help you construct a convincing setting.

- **Character(s):** Who's in this scene? How many people are there, and which of them matter the most for what takes place? For those characters that play a vital role in your scene, how do they look? What are they wearing? How do they talk? Do they have any trademark gestures or tics? What mood are they in?
- **Action:** What happened to these characters just before this specific scene began to unfold? What do the people in it want? Why are they there? How do they move in space while this scene plays out? If the action you narrate is conversation-based, what's the tone of the conversation? If you're describing non-verbal events, break them down into their smallest particles — how does each one affect what comes next? At the end of the scene, what is different compared to when it started? How long — in real time — did it take for all of this to happen?

Once you're in possession of at least some of these

basic tidbits, the real fun begins. It's now time once again to zoom in, select what works, and discard what doesn't. Then repeat. And repeat. As you probably realize by now, the process behind good storytelling constantly fluctuates between this expansive, maximalist mode, and moments of cutting down, of simmering and concentrating. Just like us, a narrative breathes: it inhales, exhales, and, occasionally, coughs and sneezes. The one thing that matters, in our bodies as in our writing, is not to stop.

5

REVISING ON YOUR OWN

We wanted Writing 201 to be practical and relevant. With a focus on angles, hooks, moments, and scenes — rather than traditional craft topics like point of view and character development — we wanted to help you improve posts you're writing *right now*, no matter your topic or genre. We also wanted you to think critically about your work: to view your writing up close and from afar — and to figure out what makes you *you*, or what makes your subject unique.

Some ideas to consider:

- Form a small workshop group and [create a](#)

[collaborative blog](#) (which you can make private) to share drafts, before publishing on your own sites.

- If you don't want to create or join a workshop group but still want to engage with *Daily Post* readers, dip into the [Community Pool](#), which we host each Sunday.
- If you want to branch out into a different community, consider an online writing group like [Scribophile](#).

Other ways you can gather feedback:

- [Contributor](#) user role: if you know and trust the bloggers you're working with, add them to your blog as contributors so they can preview your drafts before you publish them (note that the contributor role is restricted — contributors can't edit or publish posts, nor upload media).
- [Request Feedback](#) tool: Send a feedback request and secret link to a draft to anyone using the Request Feedback tool, and compile comments right in your dashboard.
- [Skype](#): With this communication tool, chat in real time — one-on-one or in groups — via voice or text. Forward a draft to others, and then schedule a virtual workshop time.

Apply Writing 201 on your own

The best thing about this course? You can revisit

these workshops again and again. Each lesson is packed with ideas and tips, which you can apply to any piece you work on in the future. If you're stuck on a personal essay, return to the first workshop on [finding your unique angle](#). If you need help with your opening, revisit week two words of wisdom on [intros and hooks](#).

We ordered the four workshops in a certain way, but can use the material as you see fit. Perhaps you don't need help on your introduction, but hope to tease out a [key moment](#). Or maybe you're experimenting with your first short story and want to jump directly to Ben's tips on [setting a scene](#). Dip in however you like — you'll always be able to revisit [Writing 201](#) in the [Blogging U. section](#) of *The Daily Post*.

Angle, hook, moment, scene: tips at a glance

While we recommend diving into each workshop individually when looking for inspiration, here's a cheat sheet of questions and takeaways from each week:

What's Your Angle?

What's your take on a topic? How do you differentiate your story from every other comedy, tragedy, memoir, or quest? The answer is in the specific *angle* you use to tell your tale.

- What makes you *you*?
- What's your take on a common topic?

- What original details do you see in your story?
- Mine your own personal history: find fodder in childhood experiences, dreams, fleeting encounters, and interests.
- Identify new details and angles by looking closely at familiar items.
- Use objects as a way “in” to your stories.

Intros and Hooks

Your opening lines are your first chance to hook readers — or to lose them. How do you command a reader’s attention from the beginning?

- Craft a compelling opening: what is the key question your readers can’t refuse, asked in a way only you can?
- Think about your favorite movies for inspiration. How do they begin? What’s the opening shot?
- Pick up one of your favorite books. Read the first paragraphs, and translate the authors’ lines into a question or two.
- Consider different formats: simple, shocking statements. Paragraphs rich with detail, but without giving away too much. Descriptions of mood. An introduction to a character’s voice.
- Don’t start from the very beginning; don’t bury the lede.
- Length means nothing: a great opening can have more than sixty words. Or just six.

Finding Your Key Moment

Sometimes the meat and heart of a post is misplaced. How do you pinpoint your story's "aha!" moment? What are things to think about when considering the structure of your piece?

- View all of your writing — from drafts to published work — as eternal works-in-progress. "Art is never finished, only abandoned."
- Present a big idea by zooming in and thinking small.
- Consider universal themes: personal and emotional takes on topics like loss, death, friendship, family, and love always garner responses because readers can relate.
- Take cues from the art of filmmaking and consider plot points of your favorite films: does your own piece have a cinematic moment?
- Tear your work apart (literally): print your piece, cut it up into paragraphs, and move parts around. Split up your story to see what you have — and what's missing.
- Consider the best structure for your piece: chronological or thematic?
- Follow in the footsteps of master writers: use notes, outlines, charts, diagrams, and other tools to sketch out your story.

Setting the Scene

Take a step back to look at the big picture: how do

you transform a meaningful moment into a scene that can anchor your entire post?

- Scene-building isn't a step restricted to fiction. The best nonfiction is rich with scenes.
- Drama is at the heart of a scene: human drama requires a minimum of one person — preferably someone your readers care about.
- Make sure your characters are rooted in space — *somewhere* with a specific set of spatial features.
- Something always happens in a scene — some discrete unit of narrative energy must be spent.
- How much do you show? How much do you tell? It's a balance, and we recommend "writing with a spoon in your hand" — keep tasting, correcting, and adjusting.
- Inserting a scene: where does it go in your post? Play around with the position (and always re-read a post in its entirety after making structural edits like this).

Thanks for making it this far! We hope you've enjoyed the course. Above all, write well.