

Karen, we couldn't eliminate our lead character before the end of the movie. After we made that decision, it was clear that the movie had to begin before plutonium plant worker Karen became whistleblower Karen Silkwood.

We had one other major problem, one that always faces screenwriters. What do you do in the middle of the movie? In the middle of any movie complications ensue and the whammies mount up. In the middle of *Silkwood*, Karen becomes a political human being. Well, that's boring to watch. How could we show this process without turning off the audience?

The answer was to make the movie very domestic, about three people in a house. Martin Scorsese says the dream movie scene is three people in a room. We had that: Karen, her roommate, and her boyfriend, Drew Stevens. These three people, all going in different directions, gave us a huge amount of material to play against the story that we wanted to tell: *A young woman becomes political.*

Because I started out as a journalist, I believe that if you just keep reporting, eventually you will come to know the structure that your story should have. A certain moment will come when you have figured out how to start, what to put in the middle, and what can wait until the end.

My move from print to film was gradual. Every nine months I took three months off from screenwriting and worked on a novel. After three years I had written my novel, *Heartburn*, and one of my scripts had been made into a film. *Silkwood* and *Heartburn* both came out in 1983. Twenty years later it is a lot easier to see *Silkwood* than it is to find a copy of *Heartburn*.

Too few journalists become screenwriters. I say to all the would-be screenwriters: *Become journalists.* And I'll say to working journalists: *Do not stay journalists. Become screenwriters.*

## To Begin the Beginning

DENEEN L. BROWN

The hardest thing about the beginning is the blank screen. Writing is like scraping off a piece of yourself; people can see beneath your skin. I sit at my computer with a container of Slim-Fast bars on my

left, a box of Godiva chocolates on my right, and books surrounding me. Many of those books are short story collections. The screen stares and the cursor blinks nothingness, taunting me. It says, "Ready, set, go! What are you going to write this time?"

I sit down to write, but I want to rise above the story, as if I am going to tell the story to someone sitting in front of me: I summon a voice strong enough to say, *Sit down and listen to me.* The beginning is important, because you are establishing a relationship with the reader. You are asking to be invited in for a while. Tom Wolfe wrote in his introduction to *The New Journalism*, "Why should the reader be expected to just lie flat and let these people come tromping through as if his mind were a subway turnstile?"

Beginning to read a story should feel like embarking on a journey, starting toward a destination. The writer must decide what larger meaning the story represents and lead the reader to that. Is it about fear? Is it about shame? Pain? Love? Betrayal? Hate? Faith?

As I consider how to begin, I ask myself: What is the story about? What's the theme? What can I use to place a character quickly in a scene? How can I tempt the reader? How can I allow a reader to enter the subject's thoughts, share her feelings?

I wrote a story about a woman who went to an abortion clinic the very day that John Salvi attacked it, so she couldn't get her abortion. Later, she sued the state for the cost of raising her child. I spent a couple of days with her, and then went back to the newsroom and talked with my editor. He said, "What is this story about?" I said, "Well, it's about this woman who went to the clinic . . . and now she is suing the state." He repeated, "What is the story about?" And I repeated, "Well, it's about this woman . . ."

"No," he said. "It's about choice." I thought about that. In the end, every scene of my story focused on the central theme of choice.

Here are other questions to ask yourself as you begin: What would you write if you were not afraid of your editor? If you didn't care whether the story appeared on the front page of the newspaper or was published at all? If you were telling the story to your mother on a long-distance telephone call? If you had enough space to run with the full dialogue of your characters, letting in the truth of how people really speak? The full truth of what you saw?

Where would you begin if you were an omniscient narrator? As journalists, we must give ourselves permission to be reporters *and* writers. We must write our stories as natural storytellers would, letting the fingers fly across the keyboard, writing what the muse tells us to write.

Don't even stop for punctuation, just let the words fly, because you know that particular story better than anyone else in the country. You have tracked down every detail and read all the documents.

Each sentence in your story should build on the one before, tugging the reader through the material until she is hooked. I often begin with the tensest moment I've encountered in my reporting. I start the story on a pinpoint but then spread out. Start with a tight shot and then pan wide. Films often begin with the most intimate moment; then the camera pulls back. I begin with the specific and then explain the story. Not only must your story have a beginning, middle, and end, but each scene needs its own beginning, middle, and end.

I once sent a story to my editor, Phil Dixon, and he returned it to me, saying, "This could run on the Metro page or even the front page. But you haven't evoked the soul of the place." I walked away from him thinking, "If it's good enough to go on the front page, then put it in the newspaper and let me move on." I had no idea what he was talking about. I sent him several other beginnings for the story, and he kept returning them, saying, "No, this isn't it."

I finally came to believe that he meant: Don't just tell me what so-and-so said and what so-and-so *felt*. Tell me what so-and-so *meant* to say and *why* she said it, and what had brought her to this point in her life that would *make* her say it. He meant: *Create multidimensional stories and characters. Go deep.*

Thinking about Phil Dixon's phrase, *evoke the soul of a place*, led me to the idea that good stories are like good songs. Like Aretha Franklin songs, they ebb and they flow. Like James Brown, they repeat themselves; they grunt and grind, rise and fall. Sometimes they just scream. The beginning of the story is the first note of the song. Finally, that story Dixon had rejected so many times was published with this beginning:

Jessica Bradford knows five people who have been killed. It could happen to her, she says, so she has told her family that if she should get shot before her sixth-grade prom, she wants to be buried in her prom dress.

Jessica is 11 years old. She has known since she was in fifth grade what she wanted to wear at her funeral. "I think my prom dress is going to be the prettiest dress of all," Jessica said. "When I die, I want to be dressed for my family."

In the last five years, 224 children younger than 18 have been killed in the District [of Columbia] either as targets of shootings

or as bystanders. The carnage has been taken in by children who live close to the gunfire, such as Jessica, and by some children removed from it.

As they've mastered Nintendo, double Dutch and long division, some children have sized up their surroundings and concluded that death is close at hand. So, like Jessica, they have begun planning their funerals.

Each one of us has a storytelling voice deep inside. We've been listening to stories since we were knee-high, and we know how stories should be told. In her book *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, novelist Margaret Atwood writes, "The story is in the dark. That is why inspiration is thought of as coming in flashes. Going into a narrative—into the narrative process—is a dark road. You can't see your way ahead. . . . The well of inspiration is a hole that leads downward."

Go deep into the darkness and find the story.

## Narrative Distance

### JACK HART

*Narrative distance* describes the stance of the writer as the story's narrator. Also called *psychic distance*, it's a concept learned from John Gatchers' *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. The book is aimed at fiction writers, but it also applies to what we do. Whether or not the writer will edit, he or she is choosing a narrative distance—deciding how close to stand to the action in each scene. Changing this distance is analogous to a documentary filmmaker using close-ups and long shots.

Mid-range narrative distance is like watching from a bopping balloon. The writer describes the scene from about ten feet away and eight feet off the floor. For example, *She stood, walked across the living room, and opened the door open. Snow was falling.*

We can get a little closer, moving onto the protagonist's shoulder. *She pulled her head under her flushed hair, pushed her hands against the cushion, and rose from the couch. She slipped through the living room into the foyer and pushed on the door. It creaked open. Wind hissed, and she*