

The Lead Paragraph—How to Hook the Reader in 25 Words or Less!

Directions: Read the passage below, then complete the activity that follows.

In a news story, it's called a lead. In a novel, it's the prologue; in a TV screenplay, the teaser. No matter what you call it, the introduction is one of the most important parts in a piece of writing. If the opening is boring or unfocused, too long or too short, the reader won't bother to read any farther. An effective opening, on the other hand, delivers a one-two punch: It grabs the reader's attention, and it suggests the main idea or theme of the story to follow.

Dear Bette Green,

*Some people stay the same after reading a book. But your book tossed my brain all around. The risk you took in writing *The Drowning of Stephen Jones* makes me want to take a risk . . . change the way I think. That's why I'm in this facility. I've had trouble changing. Because of books like yours, I now want to speak out against racism and people who hate people without even knowing them.*

—David

David's letter surprised the judges twice. First, his use of language caught our attention. It was both interesting and conversational. David's phrase *Your book tossed my brain all around* reflects his voice, the

way he might talk to the author if he met her in person.

Second, David revealed something private about himself in writing *That's why I'm in this facility*. We could not resist. We had to read on to learn more. And in fact, David's letter did answer why he had been incarcerated in a juvenile detention center. Sharing something personal about yourself in a letter can be difficult. But that's not the only way to deliver the one-two punch. Three other ways to hook the reader's attention include beginning with:

- an anecdote that relates to a character or event in the book;
- a before-and-after comparison;
- an interest or quality you share with the author or one of the characters in the book

Example:

It is mere ink on paper. That's all. Just a "by-the-way-I-have-to-remind-Herbert-to-buy-milk-at-the-supermarket" scribble. But it lifts you up and throws you crashing to the ground. By jotting down ideas of life and love into a forty-six line poem you, Andrew, stormed into my safe bedroom chamber and arose me from my deep sleep. You taught me there is a difference between being alive and living.

—Jane

ACTIVITY—TALK, THEN WRITE

Discuss why the passages below aren't quite as interesting or as focused in theme as those above. Second, rewrite each passage to make it more interesting and more focused. Use one of the suggested "hooks" identified above.

1. My name is Ben and I am a young writer. I write sci-fi and fantasy. I have started to write many stories but have been sidetracked by new ideas. I have to say your book *Wolf in the Shadow* greatly changed the way I write. I like your juicy details. I once started to write a story about a guy who died in Greek times and came back to life in modern times. (to David Gemmel)
2. Hi, I am in ninth grade in Lawrence Middle School. I love to read and to ice skate. In school, we are getting the opportunity to write to an author that wrote a book that inspired us, or changed the way we thought about certain things. I decided to write to you about *Child of the Owl*. (to L. Yep)
3. I know you are busy writing books and everything so this letter won't be very long. I loved your book. I love how Huck went down the Mississippi. Overall, it was really quite an amazing adventure and a good book. (to Mark Twain)