10. The Lead

The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn't induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead. And if the second sentence doesn't induce him to continue to the third sentence, it's equally dead. Of such a progression of sentences, each tugging the reader forward until he is safely hooked, a writer constructs that fateful unit: the "lead."

How long should the lead be? One or two paragraphs? Four or five? There is no pat answer. Some leads hook the reader with just a few well-baited sentences; others amble on for several pages, exerting a slow but steady pull. Every article poses a different problem, and the only valid test is: Does it work? Your lead may not be the best of all possible leads, but if it does the job that it's supposed to do, be thankful and proceed.

Sometimes the length may depend on the audience that you are writing for. Readers of *The New Yorker* or of a literary review, for instance, expect the writer to start somewhat discursively, and they will stick with him for the pleasure of wondering where he will emerge as he moves in leisurely circles toward his eventual point. But I urge you not to count on the reader to stick around. He is a fidgety fellow who wants to know—very soon—what's in it for him.

Therefore the lead must capture the reader immediately and force him to keep reading. It must cajole him with fresh-

ness or novelty or paradox, or with humor, or with surprise, or with an unusual idea, or an interesting fact, or a question. Anything will do as long as it nudges his curiosity and tugs at his sleeve.

Next the lead must do some real work. It must provide a few hard details that tell the reader why the piece was written and why he ought to read it. But don't dwell on the reason. Coax the reader a little more; keep him inquisitive.

Continue to build. Every paragraph should amplify the one that preceded it. Give more thought to adding solid detail and less to entertaining the reader. But take special care with the last sentence of each paragraph—it's the crucial springboard to the next paragraph. Try to give that sentence an extra twist of humor or surprise, like the periodic "snapper" in the routine of a stand-up comic. Make the reader smile and you've got him for at least one paragraph more.

Let's look at a few leads that vary in pace but are alike in maintaining pressure. I'll start with three columns of my own that first appeared in, respectively, *Life*, *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Look*—three magazines which, judging by the comments of readers, found their consumers mainly in barbershops, hairdressing salons and airplanes ("I was getting a haircut the other day and I saw your article"). I mention this as a reminder that far more periodical reading is done in America under the dryer than under the reading lamp, so there isn't much time for the writer to fool around.

I don't claim that these are the three best leads I could have found; I only know that they work. The first is the lead of a piece called "Block That Chickenfurter":

> I've often wondered what goes into a hot dog. Now I know and I wish I didn't.

Two very short sentences. But it would be hard not to continue to the second paragraph:

> My trouble began when the Department of Agriculture published the hot dog's ingredients—everything that may legally qualify—because it was asked by the poultry industry to relax the conditions under which the ingredients might also include chicken. In other words, can a chickenfurter find happiness in the land of the frank?

One sentence that explains the incident that the column is based on. Then a snapper to restore the easygoing tone.

> Judging by the 1,066 mainly hostile answers that the Department got when it sent out a questionnaire on this point, the very thought is unthinkable. The public mood was most felicitously caught by the woman who replied: "I don't eat feather meat of no kind."

Another fact and another smile. Whenever you're lucky enough to get a quotation as funny as that one, find a way to use it—preferably at the end of a paragraph.

The article then specifies what the Department of Agriculture says may go into a hot dog—a list that includes "the edible part of the muscle of cattle, sheep, swine or goats, in the diaphragm, in the heart or in the esophagus . . . [but not including] the muscle found in the lips, snout or ears."

From there it progresses—not without an involuntary reflex around the esophagus—into an account of the controversy between the poultry interests and the frankfurter interests, which in turn leads to the point that Americans will eat anything that even remotely resembles a hot dog. Implicit at the end is the larger point that Americans don't know, or care, what goes into the food they eat. The style of the article has remained casual and touched with humor throughout. But its content turns out to be more serious than the reader expected when he was drawn into it by a somewhat whimsical lead.

Here's another lead, from an article that was called "Does He or Doesn't He?":

> Until this year I have always wanted to smell as good as the next man. But now the next man wants to smell too good. The boom in male cosmetics is sweeping America at such speed—sales went over half a billion dollars in 1965 alone and are growing fast—that one of the country's most popular entertainers recently refused to tell the name of the scent that he was wearing. Too many other men, he explained, would also start to wear it.
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> That entertainer's secret would be safe with me. He could tell me the name of his scent tomorrow and I swear I wouldn't call up my pharmacy. Nor do I own a single face cream, and I've never been to any of the men's "hair stylists" for a tinting or a spray. I go to a funny old-fashioned barber who just cuts my hair and doesn't try to make me look younger than when I went in. If anything, his conversation sends me out older.

The last sentence does no real work—it's a tiny joke and not a very good one. But it propels the reader on to the third paragraph, where the article gets down to business:

> All of this makes me a member of America's newest minority group: an adult male untouched by rejuvenating lotions, fragrances and dyes. "A case of galloping vanity has hit men in this country," Eugenia Sheppard writes, "and any minute now there'll be masks, moisturizers, home hair coloring and hair sprays for men."
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> That minute is almost here. Hardly a day goes by when I don't read in the paper or see in a TV commercial some new evidence that . . .

The article goes on to document the growing American belief that a man who looks young and glossy is more compe-

tent than his visibly aging colleague. From there it veers off, in a turn just sharp enough to catch the reader off balance, to arrive at the sober point it intended all along to reach—that this is a crazy way for a society to operate. In style the unities continue to be intact: "I don't want to touch—or retouch—a hair of the gray heads that ponder my financial, legal and medical affairs. . . . I like to think that every one of their gray hairs was honorably earned, every facial line etched by a mistake that they will not make again." But the substance is far deeper than the reader anticipated when he was being pampered through the first few paragraphs. What remains with him is not the lead, but the point.

A slightly slower lead, luring the reader more with curiosity than with humor, introduced a piece called "Thank God for Nuts":

> By any reasonable standard, nobody would want to look twice—or even once—at the piece of slippery elm bark from Clear Lake, Wisc., birthplace of pitcher Burleigh Grimes, that is on display at the National Baseball Museum and Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. As the label explains, it is the kind of bark that Grimes chewed during games "to increase saliva for throwing the spitball. When wet, the ball sailed to the plate in deceptive fashion." This would seem to be one of the least interesting facts available in America today.
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> But baseball fans can't be judged by any reasonable standard. We are obsessed by the minutiae of the game and nagged for the rest of our lives by the memory of players we once saw play. No item is therefore too trivial that puts us back in touch with them. I am just old enough to remember Burleigh Grimes and his well-moistened pitches sailing deceptively to the plate, and when I found his bark I studied it as intently as if I had come upon the Rosetta Stone. "So *that's* how he did it,"

> I thought, peering at the odd botanical relic. "Slippery elm! I'll be damned."
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> This was only one of several hundred encounters that I had with my own boyhood as I prowled through the Museum, a handsome brick building on Main Street, only a peanut bag's throw from the pasture where Abner Doubleday allegedly invented the game in 1839. Probably no other museum is so personal a pilgrimage to our past . . .

The reader is now safely hooked, and the hardest part of the writer's job is over.

One reason for citing this lead is to point out that salvation often lies not in the writer's style but in some odd fact he was able to discover. I remember that I went up to Cooperstown and spent a whole afternoon in the museum, taking voluminous notes. Jostled everywhere by nostalgia, I gazed with reverence at Lou Gehrig's locker and Bobby Thomson's game-winning bat. I sat in a grandstand seat brought from the Polo Grounds, dug my unspiked soles into the home plate from Ebbets Field, and dutifully copied all the labels and captions that might be useful.

"These are the shoes that touched home plate as Ted finished his journey around the bases," said the label identifying the shoes worn by Ted Williams when he hit a home run on his last time at bat. The shoes were in much better shape than the pair—rotted open at the sides—that belonged to Walter Johnson. But again the caption provided exactly the kind of justifying fact that a baseball nut would want. "My feet must be comfortable when I'm out there a-pitching," the great Walter said.

The museum closed at five and I returned to my motel secure in my memories and my research. But instinct told me to go back the next morning for a final tour, and it was only then that I noticed Burleigh Grimes' slippery elm bark, which struck me as an ideal lead. It still does.

One moral of this story is that you should always collect more material than you will eventually use. Every article is strong in proportion to the surplus of details from which you can choose the few that will serve you best—if you don't go on gathering facts forever. At some point you must decide to stop researching and start writing.

An even more important moral is to look for your material everywhere, not just by reading the obvious sources and interviewing the obvious people. Look at signs and at billboards and at all the junk written along the American roadside. Read the labels on our packages and the instructions on our toys, the claims on our medicines and the graffiti on our walls.

Read the fillers, so rich in self-esteem, that come spilling out of your monthly statement from the electric company and the telephone company and the bank. Read menus and catalogues and second-class mail. Nose about in obscure crannies of the newspaper, like the Sunday real estate section—you can tell the temper of a society by what patio accessories it wants. Our daily landscape is thick with absurd messages and portents. Notice them. They not only have a certain social significance; they are often just quirky enough to make a lead that's different from everybody else's.

And speaking of everybody else's lead, there are several categories that I'd be glad never to see again. One is the future archaeologist: "When some future archaeologist stumbles upon the remains of our civilization a thousand years from now, what will he make of the jukebox?" I'm tired of him already and he's not even here. I'm also tired of the visitor from Mars: "If a creature from Mars landed on our planet tomorrow, he would be amazed to see hordes of scantily clad earthlings lying on the sand and barbecuing their skins." And I'm tired of the cute event that just happened to happen "one day not long ago" or on a conveniently recent Saturday afternoon. "One day not long ago a small

button-nosed boy was walking with his dog, Terry, in a field outside Paramus, N.J., when he saw something that looked strangely like a balloon rising out of the ground." Let's retire the future archaeologist and the man from Mars and the button-nosed boy. Try to give your lead a freshness of perception or detail.

Consider this lead, by Joan Didion, on a piece called "7000 Romaine, Los Angeles 38":

> Seven Thousand Romaine Street is in that part of Los Angeles familiar to admirers of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett: the underside of Hollywood, south of Sunset Boulevard, a middle-class slum of "model studios" and warehouses and two-family bungalows. Because Paramount and Columbia and Desilu and the Samuel Goldwyn studios are nearby, many of the people who live around here have some tenuous connection with the motion-picture industry. They once processed fan photographs, say, or knew Jean Harlow's manicurist. 7000 Romaine looks itself like a faded movie exterior, a pastel building with chipped *art moderne* detailing, the windows now either boarded or paned with chicken-wire glass and, at the entrance, among the dusty oleander, a rubber mat that reads WELCOME.
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> Actually no one is welcome, for 7000 Romaine belongs to Howard Hughes, and the door is locked. That the Hughes "communications center" should lie here in the dull sunlight of Hammett-Chandler country is one of those circumstances that satisfy one's suspicion that life is indeed a scenario, for the Hughes empire has been in our time the only industrial complex in the world—involving, over the years, machinery manufacture, foreign oil-tool subsidiaries, a brewery, two airlines, immense real-estate holdings, a major motion-picture studio, and an electronics and missile opera-

> tion—run by a man whose *modus operandi* most closely resembles that of a character in *The Big Sleep*.
>
> As it happens, I live not far from 7000 Romaine, and I make a point of driving past it every now and then, I suppose in the same spirit that Arthurian scholars visit the Cornish coast. I am interested in the folklore of Howard Hughes . . .

What is pulling us into this article—toward, we hope, some glimpse of how Hughes operates, some hint of the riddle of the Sphinx—is the steady accretion of facts that have pathos and faded glamour. Knowing Jean Harlow's manicurist is such a minimal link to glory, the unwelcoming welcome mat such a queer relic of a golden age when Hollywood's windows weren't paned with chicken-wire glass and the roost was ruled by giants like Mayer and De Mille and Zanuck who could actually be seen exercising their mighty power. We want to know more; we read on.

Another writer whose leads I admire is Garry Wills. Almost every chapter in his *Nixon Agonistes*, for instance, which originated as a series of magazine articles, begins with an arrangement of sentences that dazzle me with their gathering momentum and mordant truth:

> Spiro Agnew's career has about it a somnambulistic surefootedness, an inevitability of advance, that reminds one of Mencken's Coolidge, of the juggernaut of snooze. In an election-eve TV broadcast, Hubert Humphrey proudly displayed Ed Muskie, his monkish second-string Eugene McCarthy. Nixon, on the same night, sat alone, remasticating answers for Bud Wilkinson, his kept TV interrogator. No Agnew in sight. It was said that Nixon regretted his choice, his deal with Thurmond. But Agnew was a guided missile, swung into place, aimed, activated, launched with the minute calculation that marks Nixon. Once the missile was fired,

> the less attention it drew to itself the better—like a torpedo churning quiet toward its goal. Agnew has a neckless, lidded flow to him, with wraparound hair, a tubular perfection to his suits or golf outfits, quiet burbling oratory. Subaquatic. He was almost out of sight by campaign's end; but a good sonar system could hear him burrowing ahead, on course.

It's a fine lead, doing its job with precise detail, unexpected imagery and words as surprising as a rare bird. Wills is holding his reader in a tight grip but never patronizing him.

Another quality I like in a lead is a feeling of enjoyment. In the following piece Mark Singer, a writer for *The New Yorker*, lets you know from the start that he had a good time with this material and expects you to enjoy it as much as he did. What could be a more pleasant invitation? One of Singer's strengths is a sense of humor that turns up countless details that amuse him. But what makes his humor work is control. He gives the reader the same experience that he had: being surprised by an entertaining fact. He doesn't spoil it by pointing out that it's entertaining.

> In all sorts of circumstances, people in Brooklyn will commit murder. This fact fascinates Benjamin Shine more than it appalls him. Shine is a peaceable gentleman from Borough Park who would hate to be asked which he prefers—a sunny afternoon stroll alongside the Belt Parkway with his wife, Tillie, or a dukes-up double-murder trial. He is a self-taught student of the behavior of criminals, innocents, witnesses, lawyers, judges and jurors. He is a court buff. Most weekdays, a dozen or more buffs show up at the State Supreme Court Building on Cadman Plaza, in downtown Brooklyn. Shine attends as regularly as any back-seat jurisconsult in the borough.

Although Shine has lived in Brooklyn for most of his seventy-three years, he is no provincial. He acknowledges that the other boroughs of New York City have bred their own miscreants. Having spent the past dozen years watching criminal trials in Brooklyn, however, he has found it sensible and convenient to become a specialist. Consequently, he takes more interest in a corpse that has been deposited in an airshaft in Flatbush than in one that has turned up in the trunk of an automobile at LaGuardia Airport or in a vacant lot near Hunt's Point. Shine realizes that in addition to murderers there are anti-social types out there who have the capacity for rape, theft, burglary, kidnapping, arson or aimless mayhem—at times, of course, overlapping occurs—but he devotes most of his attention to homicides. He is not ghoulish, merely curious. "Where there's murder," he often says, quite accurately, "you know something's doing."

And yet there can be no fixed rules for how to write a lead. Within the broad principle of not letting the reader get away, every writer must approach his subject in a manner that most naturally suits what he is writing about and who he is. In proof of which, I'll close with the lead of an article on rugby written by Richard Burton, the actor. Its second sentence is one of the longest I've ever seen, but it is under control all the way. Besides, it sounds very Welsh, and if that's how Welshmen talk it's how they ought to write:

It's difficult for me to know where to start with rugby. I come from a fanatically rugby-conscious Welsh miner's family, know so much about it, have read so much about it, have heard with delight so many massive lies and stupendous exaggerations about it and have contributed my own fair share, and five of my six brothers played it, one with some distinction, and I mean I even knew a

Welsh woman from Taibach who before a home match at Aberavon would drop goals from around 40 yards with either foot to entertain the crowd, and her name, I remember, was Annie Mort and she wore sturdy shoes, the kind one reads about in books as "sensible," though the recipient of a kick from one of Annie's shoes would have been not so much sensible as insensible, and I even knew a chap called Five-Cush Cannon who won the sixth replay of a cup final (the previous five encounters having ended with the scores 0–0, 0–0, 0–0, 0–0, 0–0, including extra time) by throwing the ball over the bar from a scrum 10 yards out in a deep fog and claiming a dropped goal. And getting it.