



Crafting Effective Openings

two techniques for effectively opening a letter, claim packet, mediation brief, and similar documents

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Picture Your Readers as Prospective Buyers

Often you will be competing with many other things for your readers' time and attention. Ideally, you want to snare those readers with your opening paragraphs.

Picture your readers as prospective buyers perusing books on a shelf, looking for the one selection that will best inform or entertain them. They open the book to page one and start reading. If the book doesn't grab them quickly, they put it back and choose another. You want your readers to keep reading instead. You want each sentence, each paragraph, and each page to pull them further into the text. You want your "prospective buyers" interested enough to invest their time in your document, whatever that document may be. So your opening needs to grab them.

Hooking the readers is no less important in documents considered required reading. You won't have the readers' full attention if they're slogging their way through a tedious chore, wishing they were doing something else. If you hook them at the outset, draw them in, and give them a reason to care, they will be more attentive to the content throughout.

The examples that follow are based on cases from my paralegal job—a job unrelated to Firebelle Productions. Names and details have been changed to protect client confidentiality.

Hook Readers Early with a Compelling Opening

We can often benefit by thinking like fiction writers who understand that it's essential to hook readers early with a compelling opening. Plunge readers into the heart of the story right away.

Hooking a reader is about catching that reader from the outset: no explanations, no setup or slow windup to your story, but bang—straight into it. It's about going for the jugular, in a literary sense.

—Peter Rubie and Gary Provost
*How to Tell a Story:
The Secrets of Writing Captivating Tales*

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Plunge readers into the heart of the story right away.

You can't hook your readers until you make them care. Until you give readers a reason to care about the incident, your client, or whatever, the rest of the material won't matter. Plunge the readers into the heart of the story, and work in the details later.

Raise Questions that Beg to Be Answered

One way to keep readers hooked is by raising questions that beg to be answered. This example is from a letter to an insurance claims adjuster regarding a medical malpractice case.

On May 3, 2011, 69-year-old Sheila Ryan went to Coastal Eye Clinic for what should have been routine cataract surgery on her right eye. Unbeknownst to her until weeks later, Dr. Smith dropped a scalpel into her eye during the procedure, puncturing the posterior capsule and partially detaching the retina. Dr. Smith withheld this information from Ms. Ryan, sending her home post-surgery as if nothing unusual had happened. Nor did Dr. Smith return phone calls that evening when Ms. Ryan called to report a bloody eye and severe headache. When Ms. Ryan returned to Coastal Eye Clinic the following day, Dr. Smith said only that she needed emergency surgery because of "complications."

The first sentence in the example above tells readers that Ms. Ryan's procedure *should have been* a routine cataract surgery, but something clearly went wrong. That begs the question, What happened? Readers learn the answer in the second sentence, but now they are left wondering how bad the injury was and why Ms. Ryan didn't learn about it until weeks later. They must keep reading to learn more. Readers find out in the next sentence that Dr. Smith concealed the information, but they are left wondering why and how it affects the story. Thus by continually raising questions that beg to be answered, I keep the readers engaged.

Were I to include the first draft of Ms. Ryan's story next to this makeover, the eloquence and effectiveness of the technique would be even more obvious. But the young attorney who penned that first draft promptly deleted it before I could capture his creative endeavor. The primary difference, however, between his version and mine is that he faithfully described the chain of events as they occurred. So it was several paragraphs into his letter before readers would learn that Dr. Smith dropped a scalpel into his patient's eye. That slow windup doesn't build suspense. Rather, it annoys the readers who want you to get to the point.

The first draft began with background about the client, her employment situation, the activities she could no longer enjoy, and so forth. But there was no reason for readers to care about this information yet. Her losses become important only after readers know what happened to her.

Earlier I suggested picturing your readers as prospective book buyers when trying to write your opening. Alternatively, you might envision your audience channel surfing, stopping only long enough to see if you will suck them in quickly. A channel surfer would be long gone by the time my colleague had gotten through the slow windup he had used to begin Ms. Ryan's story.

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One can also draw on fiction writing principles to inject a hint of conflict into the story.

Let's look at another example of raising questions that beg to be answered. This example is from a mediation brief in a personal injury case.

Carl Grassley was a 63-year-old veteran and retiree of limited means looking for a safe, secure, and stable place he could call home when he moved into the trailer owned by Diane Martin. Little did he suspect when he signed the lease the danger that lurked beneath his feet. But he would soon find out the hard way when the stairs to the trailer shifted under him, causing Mr. Grassley to fall and sustain serious injuries.

The example above raises questions about why the stairs shifted and what serious injuries Mr. Grassley sustained. However, I've also drawn on fiction writing principles to inject a hint of conflict into the story. Several times before the incident, Mr. Grassley complained to Ms. Martin about the rickety stairs, but Ms. Martin claimed she didn't have the money to fix them. This obviously created conflict between the parties. But Mr. Grassley faced an internal conflict too—he could take his chances with the rickety stairs or return to the tents and homeless shelters he had relied on for so long. He didn't have the financial resources that would have given him more options.

Raising questions that beg to be answered is not an easy technique, and it's not easily sustained throughout a document. But if we start with a successful opening, the rest will flow more smoothly and readers are more likely to stay engaged.

Bracket the Story: Give a Thumbnail of the Beginning and the Ending

The example below contains the first two paragraphs of a mediation brief. First, I described the incident and the client's injuries in one clear, concise paragraph. Then I quickly transitioned to a new paragraph that provides an overview of her current symptoms and prognosis. This opening is not as compelling as the previous examples, in which my goal was to raise questions that begged to be answered, but it sets the stage for everything that follows in the brief. Readers know the beginning and the ending early. The details are filled in later.

On the morning of June 25, 2009, 53-year-old Becky DeHart went to the Summerset Square Apartment Community to look for an apartment. En route to meet the property manager, she tripped and fell due to a dangerous drain that was obscured from view. Ms. DeHart sustained injuries to her right foot, ankle, and knee, ultimately requiring surgery for each.

Now, three years after the incident, Ms. DeHart continues to have pain in her right leg, as well as compensatory pain to her overall musculo-skeletal system from consciously and subconsciously altering her body mechanics. Her doctor has indicated that these compensatory injuries are likely to have a permanent and progressive effect on Ms. DeHart's mobility and quality of life.

Another strategy is to bracket the story by giving readers a thumbnail of the beginning and the ending.



Readers must keep going to learn how the story gets from Point A to Point B.

The next example is also from a mediation brief. Like the last example, this one quickly summarizes the incident, then transitions to where the clients stand today. My goal was to focus on the horror of the incident and how badly Matt was affected emotionally, because this represents the bulk of the damages.

On December 21, 2010, Matt and Lucy Carter were returning home from a day of Christmas shopping when the unthinkable happened. Paul Baker, the motorist ahead of them on Interstate 280, had failed to properly secure a ladder to the top of his pickup truck. Without warning, the ladder flew off Mr. Baker's truck, striking the Carter's Corolla, severely denting the hood before it hit and shattered the windshield and showered Matt and Lucy with broken glass.

Both Matt and Lucy are eggshell plaintiffs whose preexisting conditions were aggravated by this accident. Each sustained musculoskeletal injuries. However, the most severe injury by far was the PTSD that Matt suffered as a result of what he describes as a "near-death experience" during which he feared he would be decapitated. Even now, nearly two years later, Matt is terrified of driving. He cannot drive on freeways or expressways at all. He does very little driving on city streets. When he does venture out, he startles easily, ever fearful of additional accidents. This incident and the resulting PTSD have dramatically affected his life, robbing him of his independence and causing him to withdraw from many of the activities he once enjoyed.



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