

# INCLUDING AUTHORS’ INSIGHTS IN INSTRUCTION

HOOK THE READER. All the authors I spoke with know that truth cold, perhaps having learned it the hard way, with rejection slips or frank comments from editors. They know that all the hard work of researching, planning, and shaping their rough drafts will go out the window if they don’t invest time crafting compelling openings. They are aware that their audience—children—may be the toughest critics of all. As sixth grader David says, “If I don’t like the opening sentences, I put the book back—even if I liked another book by that author.”

In this chapter we continue to examine drafting, the process of transforming what’s in our heads and our notebooks into polished prose readers can’t put down. We’ll first look at leads—how they help students determine where to go from there and how developing a compelling lead sets the bar high, making every sentence that follows live up to the lead’s power. I’ll then take you through several craft lessons on techniques that help writers bring color and cadence to their ideas, including using the “show, don’t tell” maxim and the use of sensory images, strong verbs, and specific nouns. We’ll then end the chapter by looking at strategies for crafting endings that are every bit as powerful as the opening lines.

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*I'm not worried about whether I use the right word.*

*I worry about whether I use the best word.*

—Patricia McKissack

*I am going to tell you about snakes.*

*You will learn about Columbus in this paragraph.*

*In my report I will compare and contrast plant and animal cells.*

These leads are typical of students in grades four and up, even though they sound like the work of primary-grade writers. Why does this stilted writing persist? Because in school they have learned that the lead's function is to establish the topic. Our job, then, is to have students understand that above all, the lead must compel the reader to continue reading. They also need to understand that the lead must do "real work," as William Zinsser states in his book *On Writing Well* (p. 56): "It must provide 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."

The best way of guiding students to appreciate a lead's function is to have them analyze opening sentences and paragraphs in books, magazines, and even newspapers. Once they identify the elements of successful leads, they can then practice applying the techniques to their own nonfiction pieces.

## READING LIKE A WRITER

Cindy Potter, my teaching partner, rolls into the classroom the two-tiered cart, once again brimming with nonfiction picture books and chapter books. Our sixth-graders look at us dubiously. "We're going to learn about leads," Cindy announces after we organize students into pairs and ask each duo to select a book from the cart.

"Read just the opening of the book. Leads can be as short as one or two sentences and as long as a paragraph. Then use the questions on the chart to discuss the lead," Cindy tells students (for questions, see page 116). They spend five to seven minutes reading and discussing. She then asks pairs of students to take turns explaining to the class why they thought the lead was terrific or boring. Students state the title of the book and read aloud the lead.



After each presentation, classmates evaluate the lead, explaining why it did or did not catch their attention. According to sixth graders, great leads make you read on because they:

- raise questions that make you wonder;
- contain an anecdote that fascinates;
- create a mood that appeals to you;
- open with information that's new to you;
- introduce an unusual setting;
- have action that intrigues.

If time is an issue because you have only a 45-minute period, then schedule two or three paired presentations each day and limit classmates' queries and comments to one or two. A 90-minute block offers greater flexibility; you can reserve 45 minutes to hear seven or eight paired presentations each day.

The paired analyses that follow come from notes I took during sixth and eighth graders' presentations. I've included the title, author, lead, and a summary of each presentation.

**Book:** *Lives of the Athletes: Thrills, Spills, (and What the Neighbors Thought)* by Kathleen Krull

**Lead:** James Frances Thorpe's tribal name was Wa-tho-huck, which means "Bright Path." "I cannot decide," he once said, "whether I was well named or not. Many a time the path has gleamed bright for me, but just as often it has been dark and bitter indeed" (page 11).

**Summary of Eighth-Grade Partners' Comments:**

- The quote from Thorpe made us want to know the bad and good in his life and how he felt about these.
- The quote set you up for learning about both parts of his [Thorpe's] life.

**Book:** *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* by Julius Lester, paintings by Rod Brown.

**Lead:** They took the sick and the dead and dropped them into the sea like empty wine barrels. But wine barrels did not have beating hearts, crying eyes, and screaming mouths (page 1 of unpagged picture book).

**Summary of Eighth Grade Partners' Comments:**

- We got choked up.



- We wanted to read on right away. We learned what the slave traders did—they had no feelings.
- In two sentences Lester grabbed our hearts.

**Book:** *Women of Hope: African Americans Who Made a Difference* by Joyce Hansen

**Lead:** Alice Walker is the youngest of eight children in a Georgia sharecropper family. When she was eight years old, one of her brothers accidentally shot her in the eye with a BB gun. She lost sight in that eye and, with her confidence shaken, she withdrew into herself (page 25).

**Summary of Sixth-Grade Partners' Comments:**

- She [Hansen] picked a gross story that made us wonder if she ever got over this.
- We learned this was about Alice Walker. We wanted to know more about her and why a short bio was written about her.
- We wondered how her brother felt and what happened to him.

Throughout the year, students pore over leads in nonfiction and fiction. It's a lesson worthy of repetition because it heightens students' awareness of the lead's importance while exposing them to a range of techniques for opening a piece, such as:

- a question
- a fascinating fact
- a brief story or anecdote
- a quote
- an action
- a brief dialogue
- a memorable image

## A DEMONSTRATION LESSON ON LEADS

After a week or so of having students study leads written by professional writers, weave in lessons in which you model writing leads yourself, and then have students try their hand at it. When I teach, my end goal is to have students routinely write two to four alternate leads after they have completed a first draft of an essay, article, book review, interview, or other genre.



Here's how I begin the modeling:

I put on an overhead transparency a draft of a piece I've written. Here's the lead I share: *A brown bear for a berry-picking companion was not what I expected.* I compose three alternate leads, thinking aloud so that students can hear my thought process:

(1) *The brown bear loping towards me was not the company I had hoped for while picking blueberries.* (2) *The handful of ripe blueberries never made it to my mouth when I noticed the brown bear charging toward me.* (3) *I closed my eyes, then opened them to check whether the brown bear loping toward me was a mirage.*

Next I point to my chart paper, on which I've written questions based on the nuggets of advice authors shared on pages 110–111. I invite students to use them to evaluate my lead.

### Questions That Help Students Analyze Leads

*Did you learn what the piece is about?*

*What did the author do that grabbed you?*

*What made the lead boring?*

*What did the lead make you wonder?*

*What details does the lead include?*

*How could this lead be improved?*

*Which lead would you choose? Explain why.*

Next, I tell students to refer to these questions as they compose and mull over their own leads, on their own and with peers. I keep the questions on display, and give each student a copy of them to put in their class writing folder. You will also use questions such as these with the following variations on the demonstration lesson:

- Share writing and alternate leads by former students and invite the class to discuss these.
- Ask students in your class if you can read some of their alternate leads to everyone. Students can also read aloud and discuss their leads with a partner or small group of three or four.



A fifth grader works on leads.



# Mini-Lessons on Leads

As with features and structures and virtually every aspect of composition, professional writers craft their leads intuitively. In other words, it's not as though they glance at a menu of types of leads and give one a trial run. Instead, to paraphrase Patricia McKissack, they play with the lead and play with it until the shoe fits.

Elementary and middle-school students, however, need a certain amount of deliberate practice with various kinds of leads. Once you see that students understand them, and can use them in their writing, the need for practice sessions fades away.

Each of the seven mini-lessons that follow shows you how to give students this practice. The basic structure of the lessons is:

- teacher brainstorms possible leads;
- teacher thinks aloud her process;
- teacher invites students to collaborate on writing a lead; and
- students evaluate their collaborative leads using the questions on page 116.

If the class or a group of students requires additional practice, invite partners to collaborate writing leads. *As soon as possible, move students from practice to their own writing.*

## MANAGEMENT NOTE

When the class collaborates on writing a lead, students often will offer many topics for the lead, and then endlessly debate over which topic to work with—unless you step in. I give them two minutes to decide; if the class cannot reach consensus in two minutes, then I select one. However, I always add all the topics they've pitched to the class chart, as students like to refer to them when they're searching for writing topics later.

## MINI-LESSON

### Pose a Question

#### **Purpose**

To pose an irresistible question in the lead that readers want to have answered

#### **First Day**

I jump right in to brainstorming.

#### **Robb's Modeling**

I write my topic on large chart paper. Then I brainstorm two to three ideas and use



these to pose a question. Here's what I write while fifth graders observe:

**Topic:** Picking Blueberries

**Brainstorm:** metal pot half filled with ripe berries; bear walks toward me.

**Lead:** What would you do if a brown bear loped toward you as you picked blueberries and dropped them into a metal pot?

**Robb's Think-Aloud:** *I thought the bear was the key to hooking readers because this is an unexpected event. I used loped because it showed what the bear's walking looked like to me. The question set me up for writing what I did and getting the reader to consider what he would have done in my shoes.*

### **Second Day: Students Collaborate**

I invite students to suggest topics and then choose one.

**Fifth-Graders' Topic:** Harry's run-in with leeches

**Brainstorm:** Field trip to get pond plant samples; Harry collected leeches. He put them on his tongue and showed the teacher.

**Lead:** What happened to Harry when he plastered his tongue with leeches he caught at Blandy Pond, then showed his black tongue to Mrs. Robb?

**Students' Observations:** *We liked this because it made you wonder what happened to Harry. It gave details of where we were and what Harry did. The only thing it didn't have was what everyone else did. We could add that soon after the question.*

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## MINI-LESSON

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### Lead With a Fascinating Fact

#### **Purpose**

To model how to stimulate readers' interest with an unusual fact

#### **First Day**

##### **Robb's Modeling**

**Topic:** The Hunting Habits of Crocodiles

**Brainstorm:** Egyptian plover walks into croc's mouth and picks food between its teeth without being harmed; huge jaw muscles snap tight to clutch prey, muscles that open jaws are weaker; can stay submerged for more than an hour.

**Lead:** A crocodile's razor-sharp teeth and powerful jaws can clamp down on an



unsuspecting duck in a few seconds. Yet, when that same crocodile wants its teeth cleaned, it lets a tiny bird, called an Egyptian plover, walk into its mouth, pick food morsels between its teeth, and never once clamps down with its huge jaws!

**Robb's Think-Aloud:** *I picked this fact because crocodiles are known for their powerful jaws, which they use to catch and eat small and large animals. I thought the image was strong and the fact so interesting that you'd want to learn more about them as hunters.*

## **Second Day: Students Collaborate**

**Seventh Graders' Topic:** Anaconda's Eating Habits

**Brainstorm:** Anacondas kill prey by squeezing—can swallow a small deer or pig whole and not eat again for several months; don't chase prey—wait in the water for deer or sheep to come to drink.

**Lead:** The moment the fawn dipped her mouth into the pond to lap water, a fifteen-foot anaconda seized the fawn's neck, coiled itself around its small body, and began to squeeze.

**Students' Observations:** *We liked starting with a gross fact—something different from the way people eat. There's a lot of information in the lead—the size of the anaconda and how it kills the deer. We wanted to make readers wonder what the snake would do next. That helps us because we know what to write next.*

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## MINI-LESSON

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### Lead With an Enticing Anecdote

#### **Purpose**

To show how to use an anecdote—a brief story—to introduce the content and set the tone of a piece

#### **First Day**

##### **Robb's Modeling**

**Topic:** First Haircut

**Brainstorm:** 14 years old; cut one pigtail under my ear; lost nerve to cut the other; parents prized my long hair.

**Lead:** I could hear Dad's voice saying, "Be proud of your long hair." But my four-



teen-year-old mind hated the pigtails that reached beyond my waist. I raised my mom's sewing sheers and cut one pigtail just beneath my ear.

**Robb's Think-Aloud:** *I tried to show the contrast between my dad's feelings about my hair and my own. I also tried to make the reader wonder how I resolved this situation—that's what my memoir will be about.*

### Second Day: Students Collaborate

**Fourth Graders' Topic:** Sharks Near the Shore

**Brainstorm:** Sharks spotted near the shore; my dad in the water; can't hear lifeguards' warning shouts.

**Lead:** "Sharks!" shouted the lifeguard. "Everyone out of the water!" Men and women headed for the shore, but my dad continued to swim.

**Students' Observations:** We wanted to make you [the reader] scared. You think, why did everyone leave but not the dad. That's what the story will be about. The lead kind of makes you know what you will write about. There were details—the ocean, sharks, lifeguards, and the dad.

### ANECDOTE DEFINED

Think of an anecdote as a small scene that illustrates the main thrust of your piece. If you are writing about your friend, you could include an anecdote that highlights a personality trait. Or, if water pollution is your topic, you might open by telling how you felt coming upon dead fish stacked on the shore of a river.

## MINI-LESSON

### Lead With a Quote

#### Purpose

To demonstrate how a quote can introduce a topic and arouse readers' curiosity

#### First Day

##### Robb's Modeling

**Topic:** Lies and Friends

**Brainstorm:** tried to get in with the popular group who couldn't stand Bella by saying that she was the one who told the teacher on Janie—Janie cheated on a big test and someone told on her



**Lead:** You'll regret that telephone call," my brother said. "Telling a lie about Bella will turn against you."

**Robb's Think-Aloud:** *I like starting an essay with a quote because it quickly sets up the points that I am trying to make. But, the quote doesn't give my position away—you don't know if I get in trouble and learn a lesson or if I get Bella in trouble and get the group to like me.*

## **Second Day: Students Collaborate**

**Eighth Graders' Topic:** School Dress Code

**Brainstorm:** too limiting; shorts too long for some, short for others; don't like colors; want to express our individuality.

**Lead:** Yesterday, while studying in the library, I heard Mrs. Rockwood tell the librarian, "I'm tired of monitoring whether students are abiding by the dress code."

**Students' Observations:** We thought that an essay on this subject would be more effective if we could use something a teacher said to support our ideas. We could use arguments about why teachers are tired of this to support where we stand. The quote also lets you know what the topic of the essay will be.

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# MINI-LESSON

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## Lead With an Action

### **Purpose**

To show how action can add excitement to the lead and draw the reader into the piece

### **First Day**

#### **Robb's Modeling**

**Topic:** To Fly

**Brainstorm:** blue flying cape; tricycle for a start; tries to fly by jumping over the handlebars of a moving bike

**Lead:** Blue cape flying behind her like a sail that caught the wind, my friend Elaine pedaled her tricycle furiously, built up speed, and leaped over the handlebars.

**Robb's Think-Aloud:** *My friend Elaine and I wanted to fly in the worst way. We agreed to wear our capes, ride our tricycles, then jump in the air and fly. I chickened out and watched Elaine try—and fall quickly to the ground. I wanted Elaine's actions to make you wonder what*



*happened after she leaped. I purposely didn't bring myself into the lead because I wanted to present Elaine's daring to make her dream real.*

## **Second Day: Students Collaborate**

**Eighth Graders' Topic:** Handling a Black Snake

**Brainstorm:** Mr. Legge warns students about never picking up a snake unless he's there; Bobby and Jim sneak in the empty lab at lunch and pick up black snake; snake hisses and bites Bobby.

**Lead:** Jim lifts the tank's lid and Bobby grabs the black snake behind its head, pulls it out, and screams.

**Students' Observations:** *We like the way you didn't really know what happened. The screams could be from getting caught by a teacher or getting hurt. We want to let the reader wonder about it. There are lots of details—teacher leaving, the two boys, what they did.*

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# MINI-LESSON

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## Lead With a Brief Dialogue

### **Purpose**

To show how a person's inner thoughts or a brief exchange between two people can hook a reader

### **First Day**

#### **Robb's Modeling**

**Topic:** Letting a pet die

**Brainstorm:** cat Leonora is thin; won't eat or drink; won't open eyes; time to put her to sleep—19 great years

**Lead:** "Is she purring?" Dad asked as he bent down to look at the cat.

"No," said Anina. "She won't open her eyes. She always opens her eyes and looks at me—but not this morning." Her voice choked with sobs.

**Robb's Think-Aloud:** *I wanted this dialogue to set a gloomy tone. Having a sense of hope at first, then having the hope disappear helps create that tone. It's also more real, because my young daughter would have hope. The question the dialogue sets up is what will happen to this cat and family? Dialogue is an effective way to introduce characters, give some background,*



and set the situation. Dialogue is a good way to start a personal essay or memoir or even a magazine article.

## **Second Day: Students Collaborate**

**Sixth Graders' Topic:** Team Player

**Brainstorm:** Wally wants to be a forward on the soccer line; he wants to make goals. He always leaves his position and leaves a space wide open.

**Lead:** “Play your position,” Greg hissed.

Wally hated playing halfback.

“Pass the ball!” hollered Greg. “Get back into position!”

“This goal is mine!” said Wally, wanting to make a goal and get cheers.

**Students' Observations:** We think the dialogue uses Wally's thoughts to show where he is and why he's made his decision to leave his position. It will help this essay, which is on the importance of being a team player, because we can use what Wally does to explain our points. You don't know if Wally makes the goal or not—that makes it suspenseful.

### **Stephen R. Swinburne's Examples of Leads**

Share these tips and examples of leads from Stephen R. Swinburne's books with students. They provide good models of leads that grab the reader and announce the content:

**Begin With a Question:** Do you know that emperor penguins lay eggs when it's 80 degrees below zero?

**Begin With a Dialogue:** “I feel like a large caterpillar this morning,” said George as he tumbled out of bed.

**Begin With an Interesting Fact:** Sloths don't poop in a tree.

**Begin With an Unusual Image:** The wind blew so hard it lifted the butterfly high above the waves.

**Begin With Action:** The pack of wolves woke, stretched and set off at a trot to hunt.

**Begin in the First Person:** On a frosty winter afternoon in Vermont, I find a set of tracks at the base of a rugged wall of rock.