

How to Write Payoff Leads

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BOOM! It hit me like a bombshell. I was rocked from head to toe. I couldn't believe it was real. Why on earth had he asked *me* to do it — and *how* could I?

The jarring missive from OWAA Craft Improvement committeeman Ed Park asked me, a guy who's never studied journalism or read anything on the subject, to do a piece on how to write leads! And how could I find time to write for posterity instead of pay, when I was already behind on three assignments for my favorite outdoor magazine?

When the shock finally wore off and I weighed this strange request, I decided to comply — primarily because my thoughts on the subject might accidentally help some new outdoor scribe. And to me, no objective could be more important.

It's no secret that the lead or opening of any good outdoor piece should first of all seize immediately the complete attention of the reader. It should grab him with the quickness of a steel trap and hold him long enough to make him want to read the rest of the piece. I guess a good lead is a lot like the glittering icing that sells the cake, or the chic clothes and hairdo that make you stare twice at a woman, or the fine checkering and engraving which makes a gun irresistible at first glance.

When I think about it, I'm also sure that a really good lead must be straightforward and honest, an accurate advertisement of what you're going to serve up in the rest of the piece. And above all else it must be on top of a good solid piece of writing. In any kind of an outdoors piece, phoniness stands out like a sore thumb. Pretty icing might sell a bad cake, chic clothes might sell a witch of a woman, and fine engraving might sell a cheap gun — *once*. But the strongest lead will not sell a shallow, poorly organized, or mediocre outdoors piece. You can be dead sure that today's savvy editors are going to look inside the *whole* story before they buy.

Looking back through my most recent stuff, I found that most leads range in length from one to a half-dozen paragraphs for articles averaging 4000 words. I don't think there's any magic formula for lead length, except that long leads must contribute directly to the accomplishment of the central objective of the article as well as seizing and holding the reader's attention.

Three types of leads have been kindest to me and I now use them almost exclusively. I'll call the first of these the *action* lead; the second, the *suspense* lead; and the third, the *mood* lead. I may use any of these types of leads on top of a how-to, a where-to-go, or an adventure piece.

An exciting action photo of a hunting or fishing scene captures the reader's attention at first glance. I try to design my action leads to do the same thing. The leap of a big fish, the explosion of a covey of quail, a sudden encounter with a trophy buck or bull — these are the kinds of exciting moments most readers go afield in search of, and like to read about. The action lead gives the reader this kind of dessert — *immediately and without messing around*.

Here's an example of an action lead I used in a recent how-to bass story for *Sports Afield*:

A blur of bronze fury completely engulfed my plug, drenched me with a spray of white water and nearly turned me upside down in my floating innertube seat. It all

happened so fast I didn't even know I was in shock until the waves had subsided and yards of line had been stripped from my reel. At that moment, the biggest bass I've ever hooked with a top-water plug reached for the sky . . .

After a couple more paragraphs on fighting and landing the big bass, I made the point that top-water plugging, done right, can give a man many such moments. Then I went into the how-to body of the piece.

What I think of as the suspense or "ghost story" lead is designed to grab the reader by immediately appealing to his natural lust for high adventure underlined by danger and an unknown outcome. Here's an example of such a lead I used with an elk adventure piece which *Sports Afield* will publish soon:

It had been light for an hour — but only half light. Swirling dark clouds swallowed the tops of the whining pines and pelted my parka with buckshot rain. And below the ceiling, an eerie mist shrouded the forest with a dim ultraviolet glow. The loud wails of a coyote pack echoed from the rugged slopes above. But something more sinister radiated from the blue supercharged mist — a foreboding, chilling suspense. What it was, I didn't know, but I could feel it coming — a blood-curdling experience that would rock me to the depths of my soul.

I then told of hearing thundering hoof beats and being in the path of a big herd of stampeding elk.

Finally, once in a while I use what I think of as the mood lead, one designed to immediately sweep the reader back into one of those quiet and revered corners of the outdoors he has visited or dreamed of many times before. I used this type lead with a recent how-to deer piece also run by *Sports Afield*:

Deer hunting holds many magic moments — like pre-dawn moonlight and a frost-covered trail, the hooting of an owl and the bouncing of a startled deer somewhere out in the gold-tinted darkness, the slow-breathing birth of day, and the good feel of your old familiar gun or bow as your eyes search for deer.

Deer hunting is also that spine-tingling excitement

which comes when you finally bag that elusive buck with a well-placed rifle or shotgun slug, or with only wood, string, and a sliver of metal. In fact, this has to be one of the greatest moments that all hunting has to offer. I'd like to share with you some of my experiences while hunting deer with hopes you'll find something in them to help you bag your buck this season.

I hope outdoor scribes will find something in this brief discourse on writing leads to help you bag more and bigger outdoor mag markets in the year ahead. Good leads are easy to write if you'll just keep them exciting, relevant — and on top of a good solid piece of writing.