

Kicking off an Essay

You've been assigned to write a five-page paper. Your goal is to:

- A. Fill five pages with random blather
- B. Inform, Entertain or Persuade

Sure, you might be thinking something snotty, but you know “B” is the correct answer (and what you’d rather see as a reader). But, when you sit down to write, it’s not always so easy—especially when there are enticements that undermine good writing—showing off everything you know, throwing in a smorgasbord of ideas with the hope that one resonates, not devoting adequate time, or not organizing your ideas around a goal. If you succumb to these or other temptations, the result can be a bunch of ideas orbiting around a topic—not an essay that uses words judiciously to make a case that something is true or important. At a minimum, you need to convince your reader that what you write is worth the time it takes to read it. Writers use lots of tools for keeping readers on the hook—providing new important information (or a new take on old information), being just plumb ornery, wit and humor, but it boils down to one big one: be interesting. If you as a reader stop reading (or keep reading but stop paying attention), it may be that the subject doesn’t interest you, but it’s also possible that the writer has failed in his or her duty to keep you interested.

As a writer, you can’t make a reader care about what you care about—but if you’re working with ideas that are of interest to your reader, you can do a lot to keep him or her involved. Paramount is how you structure and present information. You’ll note that most published articles follow a similar structure at the beginning. Academic papers have introductions and thesis statements that can tediously ramble on for pages, but professional journalists talk about **ledes** and **nuts**—usually just the first and second paragraphs of an article or essay, although either can be a little longer. The lede really has two purposes: draw the reader in and create a context or framework for what will follow. Ledes might help the reader understand why the article is relevant or tell the reader where the writer is coming from. The “nut” states what the writer intends to prove or show over the course of the article. Often, when student writing goes awry, the problem is in the critical first few paragraphs.

From: *The New York Times*, April 24, 1995

A Designer Helps Get Books Off Retail Shelves

By MARY B. W. TABOR

In the fall of 1991, a new novel by Cormac McCarthy arrived on Chip Kidd’s drafting table with some serious history to overcome.

Despite spectacular reviews, none of Mr. McCarthy’s previous books, all published by Random House, had ever sold more than 2,600 copies. So Mr. McCarthy decided to try his luck with Alfred A. Knopf, Random House’s sister publisher at Advance Publications.

Mr. Kidd’s job was to create a dust jacket that would seduce readers into at least picking up the novel. So, in a single afternoon, using a black-and-white photo from his odds-and-ends collection, Mr. Kidd, who was then 26, produced a stark but evocative jacket for “All the Pretty Horses,” a story of a teen-ager crossing the border between Texas and Mexico. The book was a critical success, winning the National Book Award for 1992. But it was also a popular hit, selling half a million copies in hardcover and paperback.

“I think Chip Kidd is a genius,” said Amanda Urban, Mr. McCarthy’s agent....

