

## Episode 23 - Do this one thing on your college essay in 8 seconds or else

### Intro:

Back in the saddle for Episode 23 my friends. And this week, let's talk about a crucial thing you must do for your college essay in an episode titled, Do this one thing on your college essay in 8 seconds or else...

I'm reading a statistic right now which simultaneously blows my mind and makes perfect sense. According to a study from Microsoft, the average human attention span is now 8 seconds. That is less than the nine-second **attention span** of your average **goldfish**.

By the way, in the time it would have taken you to read my last 2 sentences, you would have passed 8 seconds. Why am I telling you this? Because you have mere **seconds** to grab the attention of college essay readers. And assuming your college essay title or headline, pulls them in, you only have a few seconds left to grip them with your first sentence.

It's one of the best pieces of copywriting advice I've ever been given. "As often as possible, start your paragraphs with sentences that hook readers and drive them deeper into the copy." Why? Because - after the headline - the first sentence in any paragraph is what gets read most often. After that point, customers usually skip to the next section unless they feel compelled to keep reading. That means your job, as the writer, is to entice them into each segment, so they will consume as much of your copy as possible.

That sentence must speak directly to the needs and desires of your audience and your content must deliver on its promise.

Journalists call it the lede, the first sentence (or paragraph) is meant to bring the reader into the piece, to make it irresistible, to get the article read.

This simple word of advice makes good copywriters legendary.

With it, you're going to increase sales. Without it, you're finished.

It's deceptively plain, and easily ignored.

We already know if nobody makes it past your headline, nobody reads your content or sales page. This makes [the headline the most important element of your persuasive copy](#).

What's the 2nd most important element?

You've already read it ...

## **The first sentence**

Every ad, article, sales page, or blog post you write must begin with one hell of an opening sentence.

That sentence must speak directly to the needs and desires of your audience and your content must deliver on its promise.

And in the case of the first sentence... if you lose your reader there, you lose everything. Remember...8 seconds is all you have. Make it count!

By the way, I heard a great story about the importance of the first line. Years ago, I'm reading another article about writing. There's a guy who loves books. And he said he travelled a lot. Even though he read reviews, if he saw 3 books which caught his eye in the airport magazine and book store, he had a rule for which book he picked while running for his flight. Assuming the cover and title caught his eye, he'd open to the first page and read the first line only. His criteria was, does this first line stop me in my tracks and make me want to read more. Do I HAVE to know what's happening based on the first line. If so, he'd grab the book and buy it while running to catch his plane. And this is the type of first sentence you want in your college essay. Imagine you had 10 college admissions officers running late. And they had 8 seconds to stop and read your first sentence. The question becomes, is your first sentence powerful enough for them to stop, grab your essay, and take it with them even though they're running late.

## **Who To Model**

As I've mentioned in prior episodes, I keep something called a swipe file. In the swipe file, I keep any writing which catches my eye. headlines, first sentences, quotes, stories, etc. and in my first sentences section, I've got quotes and layouts from Readers Digest. Reader's Digest follows a formula, which I'll tell you now...

## **Reader's Digest opening sentence examples**

- **Interrupting ideas - startling statement or surprising twist**
- **The shocker- holy shit did he just say that?**
- **News - events happening right now**
- **Preview - teaser of what's to come**
- **Quotation**
- **Story**

## **Reader's Digest Examples**

- **Along with gravity and potato chips, Tylenol is one of history's great accidental discoveries. (Why is this sentence so addictive? Gravity and potato chips don't go together. And the word "accidental", and how it ties in with one of the most popular medications)**
- **Not to be rude, but 240,000 Americans would be out of work if not for Charles Walgreen's middle finger. (This is a contrast technique to hook the lizard brain in. They combine 240,000 Americans job prospects with one guy's middle finger. It doesn't register, so the brain HAS to know!)**
- **When the DNA results came back, even Lukis Anderson though he might have committed the murder. (This is gripping mystery. The implication is a person who didn't commit the murder now thinks he did based on a test.)**
- **At first, Michael Surrell didn't see the black smoke or flames shooting from the windows of his neighbors' home. (We get dropped right into a highly volatile situation. no wasting time, no chit-chat, right to it. And readers respect this)**

Other famous writers take great care and effort to nail the first sentence. [In an interview with the Atlantic](#), Stephen King admits he can spend months, or even years, on writing the opening lines for a new book. Think about this, a guy who writes thousands of pages spends a majority of his time thinking and crafting the opening sentence. This guy sold millions of books. So when he speaks about writing, we should drop what we're doing and listen.

Another tip you can use for opening sentences is called a Pattern Interrupt. A **Pattern interrupt** is a technique to change a particular thought, behavior or situation. I also like to call it redirecting attention. People sit much of their lives in an unconscious daze. Their brain works on autopilot for many things. And one of the tasks is the brain looking for and identifying boring or mundane stuff and either ignoring it or breezing through it. Pattern interrupts jolt people out of their slumber state and force them to pay attention. Examples of this in real life include:

- Explosions in movies
- Somebody in a speech clap real loud, or yell something
- when you're driving along and a car swerves towards you out of nowhere
- A crashing sound in a cafeteria

Pattern interrupts may break focus or help a reader refocus. The idea being, once you set their focus in place, you have their attention. And you bring their attention into the rest of your college essay.

Writing provides an opportunity to build pattern interrupts. With college admission's officers breezing through hundreds of essays, you must stand out. And a powerful first sentence with a pattern interrupt does that.

## **Start with a big Idea**

Another name for a Big Idea is the hook. The hook is so aptly named, because it pulls you in. You must hook the reader to keep their interest going. In a prior episode, I talked about the title or headline of your essay. The goal of the title or headline is to pull the college admission's officer into your first sentence. The goal of the first sentence is to pull them into your second sentence, and so on.

### **Before and After First Sentence Examples**

There's an old Volkswagen ad with a VW Beetle photo with the first sentence of "Lemon." It's not what you expect when you see a car ad. Your lizard brain detects a contrast, and sends it up to the higher brain levels to analyze. What is the ultimate goal of a first sentence by the way? You want to make it easier for the reader to continue reading than throw away. This is the effect you're going for. You want the brain captivated and locked in to what you're going to say next. The first sentence should mesmerize the reader and make them crave your next sentence.

### **Chop the first paragraph/bury the lede**

A powerful first sentence gets your reader engaged immediately. In journalism, they have an expression, called don't bury the lede. The lede is the impact, or noteworthy item of the story. Burying the ledge means you begin a story with mundane details to the reader while postponing more essential points or facts.

Here's a simple test to see if your burying the lede. If you were to cut the first paragraph out, and lead with the 2nd paragraph, would the story start off with a bang? What about cutting the first 2 paragraphs and leading with the 3rd. And so on. Your job is to lead with something impactful. A fact, a shocker, a big idea, a quote, something of vital importance or attention grabbing which drags the reader into the story and keeps them going.

By the way, a powerful first sentence is not limited to your college essays. In prior episodes, I've talked about college admissions officers viewing LinkedIn profiles of college candidates. LinkedIn gives you the opportunity to write blogs and content. And just like the college essay, these blogs and posts give you a chance to get more eyeballs on your profile. And it all starts with a powerful first sentence.

### **Call To Action**

Writing is tough. And even harder is crafting a first sentence which demands to be read. So I've got a special offer today. I've written a few books, blog posts, and other articles for over 20 years. So here's today's offer, for podcast listeners only. I'll give a brief review for your college essay, the headline, the first sentence, and the overall structure.

To get this, call 1-800-234-2933, that's 1-800-234-2933. Leave your contact information with my assistant. And mention the college essay review offer. And I'll provide a brief college essay review.

The college essay gives you another chance to shine with colleges. So if you're interested, take advantage of this offer, I have limited spots for the week. One more time, that's 1-800-234-2933