DEAR WRITER: LETTER THREE

Top and Tail

Looking at Beginnings and Endings

Courage is the first essential—Katherine Anne Porter

Dear Writer,

You will often hear me speak of the kinds of courage required by the task of writing. One sort of courage is that needed to take a cold look at the first and last sentences of paragraphs of your story. Having looked at these you sometimes need the courage to delete them.

Look at your first paragraph which is a description of the night and the graveyard, and which leads up to the scream. (You will by now have decided that the scream does not need to be 'blood-curdling' and that the idea of its splitting the night like lightning brings in an unlikely image which we could do without.) My question is: Do you need any of this first paragraph at all? But this, you will say, is what sets the whole story off; this scream that seems to come from the graveyard in the middle of the night is what the story is all about. How can I leave it out? Why should I leave it out?

All I am suggesting at this stage is that you look at the story without that

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paragraph. The story now begins: ‘Amelia Grove sat bolt upright in her chair’. This is a much more promising beginning. I am interested in it at once. I wonder who Amelia is, why she is sitting, and what causes here to sit up suddenly. I say it is promising, but I think it could be improved. (I hear you groan). How would it be if you just wrote: ‘Amelia sat up’. How would it be if she had a name which was not so quaint? What if the first thing you wrote were: ‘Barbara sat up’? Why did you want to tell the reader that her full name was Amelia Grove? You did this to let the reader know roughly the age and a little of the personality. She is a bit of an old busybody, and the name signals some of this information. Names must be consistent with the character’s age and type up to a point, but when a writer relies heavily on the name to tell the reader what the character is like, the writer is in danger of creating a poor caricature, and of becoming lazy about the real sketching of the character, of writing a stock character.

The material in the first paragraph, which I suggest you abandon, is the material going through your mind when you begin to write the story. You think: ‘I will set this story in a graveyard at midnight and the trees will be spooky and the tombstones will be creepy, the shadows eerie. Then a piercing scream will be heard.’ You are free to think this, and you probably need to think this, but you do not need to tell it to the reader all at once as you have done.

I warn my new students that when they find themselves beginning a story with the description of a scene, they need to beware in case they are boring the reader with the writer’s own private thoughts on how to begin, how to change gear from what we call the real world to the world of fiction. The first rule of writing anythign at all is not to be boring, and this gear-changing is particularly numbing for the reader.

Look at some opening sentences by four modern writers who do not waste time changing gear in this way.

> *Soon after my mother died, I packed my things and went to live in her home at the estuary.*— Georgia Savage
>
> *I was the only man among nine women.*—Gerald Murnane
>
> *I met my husband at the airport, and there he told me some things that wiped the smile off my face.*—Helen Garner
>
> *Before this journey is over I intend to speak to the woman.*—Elizabeth Jolley

I chose those opening lines at random from books on the shelf next to my writing table. It so happens that all four writers have begun their stories in the first person. In my next letter I will discuss the question of whether you write a story in the first or the third person.

Before leaving the matter of surgery for ‘The Scream at Midnight’, we must look at the final paragraph. The writing is much stronger, simpler and more self-assured than it was in the first paragraph, as though the story itself has given you courage and practice. But you should consider removing that final sentence: ‘Thank God!’ she sighed at last as she gently closed the front door and stood for a long time in the darkened hallway’.

Here you have written a kind of stage direction which is unnecessary. Try ending the story where you say: ‘The car seemed to slow down for just a moment. Then it speeded up and was gone’.

You need to be brave to remove the beginning and the ending of your story. If you are brave enough, your story will begin to change and improve. Rumer Godden said: ‘It takes a lot of courage to be a writer’.

Look at this ending to Eudora Welty’s story ‘A Visit of Charity’.

> Marian never replied. She pushed the heavy door open into the cold air and ran down the steps.
>
> Under the prickly shrub she stooped and quickly, without being seen, retrieved a red apple she had hidden there.
>
> Her yellow hair under the white cap, her scarlet coat, her bare knees all flashed in the sunlight as she ran to meet the big bus rocketing through the street.
>
> ‘Wait for me!’ she shouted. As though at an imperial command, the bus ground to a stop.
>
> She jumped on and took a big bite out of the apple.

Writers are sometimes puzzled and anxious about how to start a story. Well, I think it is important to realise that no matter what your first effort at starting looks like, the main thing is to start. Remember you can always change it. You are in charge of what you are writing, and you can alter, delete, add in any way you wish. Christina Stead once got her story started by writing the first part in French—she didn’t leave it in French, but she had made a beginning.

With best wishes,
Virginia