

Leaving A Trail: Beginning With the End in Mind

By Jim Davis, NVWP

I think the end is implicit in the beginning. It must be. If that isn't there in the beginning, you don't know what you're working toward.
~Eudora Welty

When I ask students what's hardest for them about writing, two complaints usually top the list: "I don't know how to get started;" and, "I don't know how to end it." During my first few years of teaching, I gave students the sage advice of "hook them" at the beginning and "restate your main idea" at the end. This, of course, sounds a lot like the five-paragraph recipe that leads to an inedible mess.

This was bad advice for many reasons: one, most students don't know how to "hook" anyone, and two, the "restating" almost always morphed into "regurgitating." I'm still shocked by how many students will write THE EXACT SAME SENTENCE in their first and last paragraphs.

Once I diagnosed the problem, I started searching for a cure and found one while reading *Sports Illustrated*, as I've done every week since I was in elementary school when our TV went on the fritz and my parents decided not to replace it. I missed out on *The A-Team*, but I subconsciously learned a lot about writing while reading about my sports heroes each week.

I started to notice that many of the feature articles and profiles started and ended with the same idea or anecdote. Circular endings are nothing new, especially with fiction, but I seized upon the idea and gave it a new term—breadcrumbs—to help with students'

non-fiction. I took the term from *Hansel & Gretel*, who leave a trail of breadcrumbs in the forest to find their way home (and yes, I conveniently ignored the fact that birds gobble up the crumbs in the fairy tale and the kids remain lost in the woods).

Here's a good example of a recent "breadcrumb" from *Sports Illustrated's* "Super Bowl Preview" issue. In a sidebar on veteran Green Bay cornerback Charles Woodson, author Matt Gagne opens with:

Without pushing the product or making even a single pitch, Charles Woodson has become the ideal spokesman for a venture commissioner Roger Goodell forbids him from talking about: TwentyFour by Charles Woodson, the Napa Valley wine label that the cornerback-turned-entrepreneur introduced in 2008. For NFL players, endorsing alcohol is a no-no. But Woodson, the 13-year veteran in search of his first Super Bowl ring, is proof that some NFL players, like fine wine, improve with time.

The article then turns to football and the impact Woodson's leadership and play has had on his teammates during their Super Bowl run. At the end, though, the author returns to the wine analogy to reinforce his point: "'He's not slowing down at all,' [teammate Tramon] Williams says. 'He's getting better with age.' For connoisseurs of Packers football, there's no finer wine" (Gagne).

BREADCRUMB INTRO

"Bob Marley was on the stereo, the NBA playoffs were on the TV, and the Pittsburgh Steelers' offensive line was in the water. Leadership is demonstrated through gestures big and small, and on a free weekend last May during the Steelers' organized team activities, quarterback Ben Roethlisberger made a major splash. He flew them all of his offensive linemen to Atlanta on his private plane, drove them an hour to his lake house, took them on his wakeboard boat, gave them rafts, jet skis, and inner tubes, and watched the hilarity that ensues when 300-pounders play aquatic bumper cars."

BREADCRUMB CONCLUSION

"The other favorites—the Giants, Panthers and Titans—are all sunk. The Steelers, buoyed by their inner-tubing offensive linemen, are happily afloat."

—Lee Jenkins
Sports Illustrated

Examples of breadcrumbs can also be found scattered about non-sports publications, such as *Entertainment Weekly*. Staff Writer Dave Karger started an article about fashion mogul Tom Ford's directorial debut this way:

Tom Ford must be tough on his house-keeper. "I'm a little embarrassed you're in this office because it's a...mess," says the famed fashion designer as he surveys his London workspace—which, by the way, is immaculate, with dozens of black binders perfectly lined up on bookshelves and a sleek laptop sitting on an uncluttered desk. "It's a wreck," he says. "No, no, it's a wreck!" One of the world's best-known control freaks may now have found his true calling: movie director.

At the end of article detailing Ford's making of *A Single Man*, Karger comes back to the director's fastidiousness:

For all his confidence, even Ford—who'd like to make a film every two or three years—realizes that having final cut on his posters may be a ways off. "It's not like I've made 20 movies and they've all been great," he says. "This is my first film. The next one might be an absolute disaster." Not likely—a real control freak wouldn't let that happen.

Lest I be found guilty of what Kelly Gallagher calls the "Grecian Urn Approach" in his book *Teaching Adolescent Writers*, I knew I had to do a lot more than just show students a beautiful piece (like a Grecian urn) and expect them to be able to make one. So, here's how I go about showing them how to use a breadcrumb to begin and end their essay without getting lost in the forest.

First, I found several examples of breadcrumbs in *Sports Illustrated* and *Entertainment Weekly*, cut them out, and glued the introductory and concluding paragraphs to separate 5 x 8 index cards. I also cut out and glued small pictures from each article for some visual appeal and to make the next step a little easier. I found enough examples (15) so that each student could have one paragraph in a 30-student classroom.

In class, I give each student an index card, tell them they have either an introduction or a conclusion, and ask them to find the student in class who has their complementary intro or conclusion. This gets students reading and comparing introductions and conclusions; it also gets them up and out of their seats. After five minutes or so, I start to help those who can't find their partner.

Once all the pairs are matched up, I ask them what they notice about the two paragraphs. Usually, someone will say that they don't think it is a very good intro because they don't know what the main idea of the piece is. This gives me a good opportunity to talk about how "real-world" writing doesn't follow stringent rules that the main idea must be in the first paragraph. In fact, many feature articles wait until the end to make their point. Soon, someone will mention that they see a connection between their introduction and conclusion, something that will be echoed by other pairs.

Then, I give them the term breadcrumbs to explain the technique of having an ending that returns to the beginning. I ask students to share some examples of the intros and conclusions. As they share the examples, I start to make a list on the board or chart paper of how the essay was started: anecdote, analogy, setting the scene, shocking fact or statistic, quotation, etc. In this way, we are collecting ideas about effective ways to get started.

I share several additional examples via a Power-Point presentation (which I'd be happy to share with you, if you email me at davisjm4@gmail.com). Some of these examples are of my own writing and then examples from my students. My favorite is this one from

BREADCRUMB INTRO

"Flash and the Temps, the rock band fronted by Dwayne Wade, doesn't go on tour, preferring to perform exclusively in his rec room. The Temps consist of whichever of Wade's relatives and friends happens to grab the Guitar Hero World Tour video game instruments first...Even though he admits he's no virtual-reality virtuoso, Wade is the band's lead guitarist—and bass player, and drummer, and lead singer. 'I move around depending on the song,' he says. 'I like to do it all.' "

BREADCRUMB CONCLUSION

"The Heat needs those [players] to emerge quickly...While Wade enjoys playing different instruments now, that doesn't mean he'll always want to be a one-man band."

—Phil Taylor
Sports Illustrated

a student last year (let's call her Maggie), who was writing an analytical essay about archetypes in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*.

Maggie's beginning started with an epigraph mimicking the way Krakauer opened each chapter of the book, so she's already off to a nice start:

Every genuine boy is a rebel and an anarchist.
~John Andrew Holmes.

Boys have always been portrayed as the swashbuckling adventurers of the human race. From Robin Hood to John Wayne, people view the male species as tough and wild. A peculiar type of boy goes to the extreme: the rebel. Dangerous and interesting, these individuals possess a spirit different from the average person's. Christopher Johnson McCandless, from Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, reveals himself as the rebel of all rebels, excluding himself from society and protesting authority.

And here's Maggie's conclusion, which returns to the "rebel" breadcrumb she left herself in the intro:

Rebels easily fascinate those around them with their powerful intensity. They hold fast to their ideals and beliefs, bending for no one and nothing. These qualities usually manifest themselves in young men: James Dean, Johnny Cash, even John Lennon. Perhaps boys prove themselves as inherent risk-takers, prone to adventure and independence. Whatever the case, Chris McCandless was a rebel. A genuine boy.

I thought it was a powerful end to an excellent essay and a perfect example of William Zinsser's advice in *On Writing Well*: "The positive reason for ending well is that a good last sentence—or last paragraph—is

a joy in itself. It gives the readers a life, and it lingers."

Here's another great example from the same assignment by a student we'll call Charlotte, who used her love of music to come up with this beginning:

A note out of place does not make for a beautiful tune, but when the note is rearranged, it can make a beautiful harmony. Chris McCandless, a young man who left his great life and well-to-do family to live in the wild of Alaska, had a very mysterious personality. Many people thought he was an idiot and a rebel for going on his quest ill-prepared.

Charlotte's coda returns to the music of the intro:

Chris finally found a place where he created a beautiful harmony with himself and nature, where he lived the end of his life with complete peace and serenity with his discovery.

After sharing multiple examples, I give students an assignment to find a magazine or newspaper article that contains a breadcrumb. It must be from a piece of nonfiction, since this is what they have to write in school the majority of the time. Students bring these to class and share more examples of good intros and conclusions with each other.

The next step is for me to model a breadcrumb in front of them. I've found over the years that the less I prepare for this, the better the lesson goes. Students LOVE to see me struggle putting my thoughts and words together. Is it uncomfortable at times? Yes, but it shows students that writing can be tough—even for so-called experts. Since I teach juniors, I usually use an SOL released prompt or an SAT timed writing prompt. Not the most authentic of writing situations, but ones where the breadcrumb concept will come in particularly useful.

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—Student example
from "Into the Wild" essay

The latest prompt I used for modeling purposes was from an SOL released test that asked students to "Think of a time when your ability to laugh helped you to get through a difficult situation [and] write about what happened." Before putting pen to paper, I did a think-aloud that went something like this:

"I taught in California a couple of years ago in a really rough school. I won't bore you with the details, but it took all the strength I could muster to go to work every day. One day, I had to break up a fight by picking up a student and carrying him out over my shoulder. The only way I survived was by eating lunch with some teachers I really liked and they would help me get through the day. Maybe there's something I can work with there as an intro. How about this: "Lunch has been the highlight of the day for many students, but little do they know how crucial this time is for teachers as well."

Then I stop and ask students what they think: Is that a good intro? Does it grab their attention? One thing I really want to demonstrate is that the opening sentence is almost never the main idea, and this intro has nothing to do with laughter—yet. I've noticed that one bad habit students have is opening their essay with their main idea, a mistake I call "throwing me in the pool." I don't mind getting wet, but I need a second to get acclimated to the temperature.

I explain to them what the main idea and support would be for this essay, and then brainstorm some ideas for what would make a good closing. Of course, I think about it some ahead of time, but I don't write it ahead of time, because this would just be another Grecian urn example; they need to see the urn getting made.

Once they've seen me struggle to put together a breadcrumb, I ask them to pick an essay they've already written for me and revise it to include a bread-

crumb intro and conclusion. This allows them to practice without having to start a new piece of writing. Usually, students select a piece that they started with the main idea in the opening sentence, or one that regurgitates the intro in the conclusion. Once students have seen the professional examples and watched me model one, they are usually able to come up with a breadcrumb that is a marked improvement over the original intro and conclusion.

For further practice, I make it a requirement that they try the concept on their next writing assignment so that they give it another shot. After that, it's just another tool in their writing toolbox they can use when they see fit, but I've gotten positive feedback from several students that they appreciated the idea, because it helps them kill two birds with one stone.

If only Hansel and Gretel had some stones like that to shoo the birds that ate their breadcrumbs, maybe they wouldn't have been lost in the forest, bewildered like so many of our students are when trying to write powerful introductions and conclusions.

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