

Writing First Sentences and Paragraphs to Make a Great Impression

By John Torre

"When you start with what's at stake for the buyer, you earn the right to their attention."

— Jake Sorofman



The heart and soul of written promotions is known as the "Body Copy." Even if you've labored long and hard to come up with a killer headline and deck copy, if the *meat* of your promotion fails to hold your reader's interest and causes him to stop reading — you won't sell anything.

The body copy of most successful promotions has three main functions:

- 1) To keep the reader's eyes riveted on the page** — which means you're focusing on benefits, writing in a tone and voice that resonates with the reader, and maintaining the appropriate tempo to stimulate the reader's interest over and over again.
- 2) To ramp up the reader's dominant buying emotions** — whether you focus on fear, greed, anger, revenge, or anything else that tugs at the reader's heartstrings, you want her to feel a growing sense of urgency, to get progressively more excited as she makes her way through the copy.
- 3) To convince the reader that your product or service is the answer** — that your product, and your product alone, is the single best way to satisfy his needs, wants, and desires.

Of course, there are other components of body copy we could talk about, including length, logic, presentation of proof, testimonials, the close, a strong call-to-action, and on and on. But there are two that tie everything together — two things that are so indispensable and obvious that it's easy to overlook them — *sentences* and *paragraphs*. And when it comes to sales copy, the most important of these are *first* sentences and paragraphs.

Why are first sentences and paragraphs so important? It's because if you fail to hook your readers right from the start, they will abandon your promotion and never get to see the rest of your hard work. This is true for printed copy, and even more so for online copy, where you have mere few seconds to capture your reader's interest before she moves on to something else.

What we're going to focus on today, therefore, are the types of sentences that work well in opening a promotion, and what your opening paragraph should accomplish.

Opening Sentences

Some years ago, one of America's most well-known copywriters, John Caples, copied down the opening sentences from every article in an issue of *Reader's Digest* — 35 articles in all. What he wanted to find out was how the editors of the world's largest circulating publication handled the problem of holding the reader's interest once that interest had been sparked by a title or headline. He condensed what he found into the following six general categories of opening sentences:

1) Interrupting Ideas — An interrupting idea is a statement or twist on an accepted idea that is designed to break through the boredom barrier that exists in the reader's mind regarding the subject matter. For example, an article on deodorizers entitled, "It Makes Bad Air Good," began this way: *The hit of the annual Chemical Show held in New York City a few months ago was a pair of skunks housed in a plastic cage. Who wouldn't want to read more?*

2) The Shocker — A shocking opening sentence takes the interrupting idea a step further. These kinds of sentences are intended to open a reader's eyes in a dramatic fashion and "shock" her by providing information she would have never considered. Examples include: *In the next 59 minutes, 100 Americans will suffer a devastating BLOCKAGE of blood flow to the heart or brain. And ... If you follow doctors' orders and are over 60, there's a 60% chance that you will be the VICTIM of a medical or surgical disaster.*

3) News — An opening sentence that provides news your reader wasn't aware of is an excellent way to garner immediate attention. For example: *There's a reason why — at a staggering \$900 per pound — raw Coenzyme Q10 may be the single most VALUABLE nutrient on the planet: 300 studies by 200 researchers in 18 countries have PROVEN beyond a shadow of a doubt this Nobel-Prize-Winning substance really can help.*

4) Preview — Preview opening sentences are designed to give your reader a brief preview of the article or sales copy that is to follow. Examples include: *If you're shocked at how much Washington's super-spenders went overboard last year, you'd better hang on to your wallet! Also ... Forget about the gym, because here are some easy, do-at-home moves scientifically designed and proven to quickly firm up your most stubborn areas!*

5) Quotation — An opening sentence that features a quotation by, or an endorsement of, a celebrity or well-known guru in the subject matter adds immediate authenticity to what follows. Take this promotion for Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*: *John D. Rockefeller, Sr. some years ago said: "The ability to deal with people is as purchasable a commodity as sugar or coffee. And I will pay more for that ability than for any other under the sun."*

6) Story — John Caples found that over half of all the *Reader's Digest* articles began with a sentence that introduced a story. And for good reason — everyone loves a good story. Story openings immediately engage your reader and put him right into the narrative. Examples include: *One night last autumn, a visitor in New York noticed lights burning in a church on lower Fifth Avenue. ... The time was one A.M., the place a police station on Chicago's South Side. ... As dawn broke over Boston Harbor one day last fall, the tugboat Irene-Mae waddled out into the Atlantic on a strange mission.*

Here are some observations from John Caples that he noticed about the various first sentences of the *Reader's Digest* articles

he reviewed: (1) *They are fast-paced*; (2) *They are telegraphic*; (3) *They are specific*; (4) *They have few adjectives*; (5) *They arouse curiosity*. Keep them in mind when deciding which approach to use for your next assignment.

Opening Paragraphs

If none of the opening sentence approaches seems to be working for you, try simply opening your promotion with a paragraph that supports the same "Big Idea" you expressed in your headline and deck copy. For example, if you capture a reader's attention with a headline about retirement income, you can be sure of at least one thing about that reader: She wants more information about financial security after she leaves the workforce. Since you've captured her interest with your headline, she will likely stay with you through at least the opening paragraph. This provides you with a great opportunity to further pique her interest. Let's take a look at a few examples:

Headline: HOW TO PROVIDE A RETIREMENT INCOME FOR YOURSELF

Opening paragraph: *This new Retirement Income Plan makes it possible for you to retire at any age you wish, 55, 60, or 65. You may provide for yourself a monthly income of \$1,500, \$2,000, or more.*

Headline: NOW, FROM JOHNSON & JOHNSON, TOYS THAT ALLOW BABIES TO MASTER NEW SKILLS

Opening paragraph: *Your child is growing bigger. Brighter. More curious and eager to learn every day. That's why Johnson & Johnson Child Development Toys are designed to change and grow with your child. To encourage his skill development every step of the way.*

And one more ...

Headline: YOU CAN MAKE BIG MONEY IN REAL ESTATE SALES RIGHT NOW

Opening paragraph: *Business is booming at CENTURY 21. And so are careers. CENTURY 21 offices have helped more people to achieve rewarding careers in real estate than any other sales organization in the world.*

Notice how each paragraph supports the headline that captured the reader's attention? Remember: When you pique a reader's interest with a certain idea as expressed in the headline, you will lose her if you introduce a totally different idea in the first paragraph. Stay on topic and adhere to these three simple rules:

1. Make it short — a long first paragraph discourages readers before they even get started.
2. Continue the thought expressed in the headline's "Big Idea."
3. State in a few words the most important benefit or benefits the reader can expect from buying your product or service. Think in terms of addressing their unspoken questions, *What do I get?* and *What will it do for me?*

Engaging first sentences and paragraphs will help you accomplish the three main functions of body copy as described above.

Use these approaches to pique your reader's interest and you will compel him to read the rest of your copy and purchase your product or service.

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