

WHAT'S THE STORY?

Excerpt from Introduction to Issue 74, Winter 2021 of Creative Nonfiction, by Lee Gutkind, editor.

I like to review my students' work - and my own, too, for that matter - as if I am going into the piece cold, with little knowledge of either subject or narrator. The first thing I consider is the lede. **Is the opening paragraph or page (often a story or scene) compelling?** To use the old journalist's term, are readers, at least initially, hooked?

The lede - the opening gambit - has to lead somewhere, introducing readers to the substance of the piece and hinting at its purpose and what readers might learn if they continue forward. Readers are busy, and there's tons of material to which they might - or might not - devote precious time. Do they want to read about, let us say, the loneliness and isolation on a farm somewhere in the Midwest? Or bricklaying, or diamonds, or incest, or Christianity? Perhaps, if your lede is compelling enough, richly told enough, the reader will stay interested even if the subject doesn't seem particularly suited to their taste.

Story and substance - that's pretty much what creative nonfiction is all about. Sometimes I draw lines on the page for my students, showing them what they are doing - or not - with this basic structure. (To be sure, lots of great pieces of nonfiction don't adhere to this pattern. Maybe readers will be entranced, sold, by the sheer eloquent power of the prose, for one thing.)

Your mission as a writer is to keep readers interested, involved, and intrigued as you take them on a journey; they must be delighted and excited to travel with you, wherever you take them. You want them to be riveted.

And the key word: Clarity. No matter how important your story, how skillful your structure, how powerful your prose, unless you are writing so that readers understand both what you are saying and what you mean, you may lose them.

Clarity should be as important to creative nonfiction writers as story and theme. And yet, because of our familiarity with our own stories, we often take for granted or overlook the need to give our readers the information they need.