

Homework

12-Week Course of Study:

24 Ways to Write Articles

Lesson 6

FRAME & FLASHBACK PLANT AND PICK-UP SERIES CYCLE

By Professor Dick Bohrer, M.Sc., M.A.

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24 Ways to
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Articles

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FRAME AND FLASHBACK

The same material that you would use in a chronological narrative will go into the frame and flashback.

But here we start at the final crisis, interrupt the story to tell its beginning and then return to finish the crisis and end the story.

Essentially, this is a story within a story—a flashback within a frame.

You begin as close to the climax as you can get. You want to hook the reader so he'll stay with you to the end. But you have lots to tell—how the hero got into the pickle he's in, how his problems intensified, how all the ingredients that are leading to the crisis fell into place.

So you begin with your hero racing three police cars through back-country roads. He's shouting. Sirens are screaming. His motorcycle is roaring. We know something bad is going to happen. Then his wheels begin to spin on gravel. In that pause before the final blow, we leave the scene. Using a good transition sentence, we veer back to how all this began.

And that transition sentence is an art in itself. It comes out of the problem and it searches for an answer that will fill in all the reasons why our hero is in that predicament.

"Oh, man, how did I ever get into

this fix?" is one way.

Or you might break abruptly and say, "Dan never dreamed when he got up that morning that this would be the last day of his life."

Or, "The day had started quietly enough."

What you're trying to do is flashback so that you can trace the origins of the developing action. The flashback is told chronologically. We see the problems rising from their beginnings. They lead us back to the climax we've just left. The flashback must be kept moving. It can't dominate the story. You must keep it as short as possible so the essential and final action of the story will be the main event.

Now here comes a secret the big guys never tell.

Do make sure that the first verb of the flashback is in the past perfect tense. This is the sentence that follows the transition sentence. It begins the telling of how the day had started. Use only one past perfect tense verb (it has the "had" helper with the past participle—had started). From there on, use the past tense. Never overuse the past perfect.

One other thing frame-and-flashback does for a writer is give him something to do in the middle of the story. He's gotten it going with a unique, hopefully compelling, hook.

Now what does he do? The flashback takes care of that.

When the flashback catches up to the initial action you used to start the story, simply go on and tell the outcome. It's easy.

Gifted writer Joseph P. Blank wrote an article about a family whose car skidded on black ice out in the Idaho countryside late at night. The story opens with the car overturned in a river and the wife diving repeatedly to release her husband and children still trapped. The windows of the car are closed and she can't find the door.

She realizes that the children have stopped screaming.

Numbed, bewildered, she stood in the marrow-chilling water, listening to the silence, feeling her face stiffen from the cold. She was alone.

She protests to God that she doesn't want to be alone. She has to do something. She wades around the car and climbs up the nearby bank, only to realize that she was on the opposite bank from the road. She scrambles back toward the water and twists her ankle and falls. As she sits up, she notices the blinker lights are still flashing under the water.

All gone. My four beautiful children. And Ben. Ben is dead, too. What point is there in going on living? she asks.

At this point, we've reached bottom. All is lost and there's no hope. The writer breaks off and starts the flashback right here.

It had been a lovely Thanksgiving.

See? Our professional writer practices our style. He begins his flashback with a past perfect tense verb (had been). He goes on to tell where the family had gone and that they are now returning home.

An hour away from their house with the wife driving, the car hits black ice. It leaves the road, hits a rock and flips over onto its roof and into the river. We follow the wife and learn how she squeezes through a window and escapes. We're now back to the point of departure.

The writer drops the wife and goes to the husband. In his groping he feels a pillow that's wedged near the brake pedals and thinks it's his wife—dead.

He proceeds to rescue the children.

He discovers his wife is still alive and they get the kids out of the car. Dad climbs up to the road in the frigid winter night to flag down a car. No car comes.

Then one does come, but it sweeps on past him. Ben is frantic. He couldn't stop the tears of despair. But the car comes back and the family is taken into town to warmth and comfort and care.

The article continues its way chronologically to the end with the mother walking around the rooms of her own home so grateful to be alive.

She had learned of the uncertainty of life. Her family had been taken from her, then returned. She knew that this day was a rare gift.

This is such a satisfying style for a feature writer to use. It enables you to

capture all the drama of an incident and to sustain the interest. So often, in inverted pyramid style articles, we have the drama at the outset and only details from there on. Here we have our cake and can eat it all the way to the end.

If you were going to do Little Red Riding Hood in frame-and-flashback, you would start with "Grandma, what big eyes you've got." Somewhere between the eyes and the mouth, we give Little Red a squirt of self-doubt and have her wonder how she ever got into such a mess. Then we use our past-perfect tense verb and tell the reader how it all happened.

With Cinderella, we would start as the clock is beginning to strike or as her coach turns back into a pumpkin and she must run barefooted back to her cinders.

Now, think through your own life. Have exciting or dreadful things happened to you or to your loved ones? Tell us about it using this method.

Set the scene.

Joseph Blank in his lead told us that Phyllis was standing in neck-deep water. The weather was 10 degrees below zero and a 40-mile-per-hour wind was slashing at her face.

He tells that half the car's wheels and a little bit of the chassis were all that showed above the black water. We know where our character is and what she's up against. It's all right there in the first paragraph.

The second picks up the action and describes what she's trying to do as

she tries frantically to rescue her little ones.

Apply this principle to one of the two stories that follows. Take us to a high point of dramatic action and then stop dead.

Give us the transition sentence and then the past-perfect tense verb sentence. Bring us through the origins of the problem and then come back and go on to the end. See if you don't find this is easy to do—and satisfying.

Teen-agers fly in to rob jewelry store

BELLEVUE, Wash. (AP) Members of a teen-age gang flew here from Southern California, made off with as much as \$300,000 worth of diamonds and jewelry in a brazen daytime jewelry store robbery, then flew home, police say.

Authorities said they are piecing the story together with the help of a 15-year-old boy from Los Angeles who was arrested at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

Detectives speculate the gang is part of a crime ring using the same tactics across the nation. The FBI has joined the investigation.

The four youths who Bellevue police say robbed the Black Starr & Frost store in the Bellevue Square shopping mall Thursday ranged in age from 12 to 18.

Three of them caught a flight to Southern California shortly after the robbery while the fourth was

arrested, police said.

Gang members apparently rented a van and a station wagon when they flew into Seattle, police said.

The station wagon, apparently used during the robbery, was later found in an underground parking lot in Bellevue and the van was abandoned at the airport an hour later, said Bellevue police Detective Marv Skeen.

Using information gained from the arrested boy, police sent descriptions of the other three alleged robbers to authorities in Los Angeles.

"We believe a couple of them got off the plane and made it to a taxi," Skeen said. "As soon as a cop got to the taxi, it took off."

The robbers strolled into the jewelry store shortly before 6 p.m. Thursday, displayed a gun and ordered a customer and the assistant manager to lie on the floor, smashed several display cases with hammers and fled with diamonds, rings and chains.

"They got a lot," said store manager Dan Faulkner. "They got their share and then some. . . . We've got three empty showcases."

The robbery was similar to ones in Tacoma and Northern California, Skeen said.

The detective said he believes the ringleader scouts potential targets and then purchases airline tickets so the youngsters can fly into the area and pull off the robbery

quickly.

Joyce Fowler of my class at Liberty did another good job on "Teenagers fly in to rob jewelry store." Here it is:

Problem near crisis

A squad car in the area was already on the lookout for four teenagers who robbed a jewelry store near in the mall. The two policemen saw Mark's van whiz by and followed him several cars back.

Mark was so busy looking for the airport signs that he didn't pay much attention to the rear-view mirror. He was sure that every cop in Bellevue was looking for him, but he couldn't find the airport.

"I can't believe they left me. Those—" He didn't finish his thought. He had told the guys he wasn't very good at remembering directions and that at least one of them should ride with him in the van.

Deep anxiety

His flight was scheduled to leave at 6:30.

It was now 6:15. He was lost and nervous, and the van's gas tank was getting close to empty.

Transition sentence

"How in the world did I ever let him talk me into this?" he asked himself.

Past perfect tense verb begins flashback

Sure, it HAD SOUNDED like a blast when Gina suggested it. He was challenged by the adventure of

pulling off a day-time robbery—a big one, an exciting one. This wouldn't be like the others—the liquor store, the old peoples' houses—no, this one would be on the news everywhere.

It was brilliant. Four teenagers ripping off all that jewelry! Gino had worked everything out “real smooth,” he said. Mark, Andy, Juan and Bo would fly from Los Angeles to Bellevue. They'd rent a car and a van, then head to the jewelry store in the mall.

After cleaning out the place, they'd drive back to the airport and catch a flight back to L.A. He even supplied them with a gun, hammers and plane tickets to do the job.

Sure enough. Gino was right. The Black Starr and Frost store was a pushover. The clerks were idiots and the store was loaded with expensive items.

Mark helped clean out three display cases. They took diamonds, rings and chains. He was sure they'd lifted more than \$300,000 worth of jewelry at least—that's what Gino had figured they could get.

He'd done this kind of set-up before. It was fool-proof, he said.

Now Mark cursed Gino for forgetting one small detail—telling him how to get back to the airport without following Juan.

Weaving through traffic, he glanced at his watch again. 6:18. “I gotta stop somewhere fast and find

out how to get to the airport!” he thought. He saw a convenience store on the right and decided that would be the place.

He pulled up at the gas pump, got out of the van and pumped \$10 worth of unleaded. Then he went inside. A middle-aged woman stood behind the counter. Mark tried to be polite.

“Hello, ma'am. I'm on my way to the airport and I'm sorta lost. Could you please tell me how to get there from here?”

End of flashback

The woman smiled and offered simple directions that Mark could understand. He thanked her and walked out to the van. It was only when she heard the tires squeal out of the lot that the woman realized he hadn't paid for the gas. She immediately called the police with a description of Mark and the van.

Mark followed the signs and parked the van. He glanced at his watch again. 5:25. “Man, I gotta run so I—”

Shock/climax

“Hold it right there, son.”

Mark stopped in his tracks. He knew Gino wasn't so smart after all. As he felt the handcuffs lock around his wrists, he shook his head.

End

“How in the world did I ever let him talk me into this?”

This is not a perfect example of the style because we're not in a frenzy when we flash back to beginnings. Also, the flashback is too long. But it has a sense of pace, the dialog is good, the narrative flows and the timing is apt. Her ending sentence is a repeat of her transition sentence. That's unusual. Most stories end far away from the point of transition.

Now, it's not enough to know a new technique. I'm expecting you to accumulate these ideas and hold them like arrows in a quiver you carry everywhere. You've got a writing assignment? Test it. Would it go better in conversational or frame-and-flashback? Could you do a tale-retold or a buckshot? Plant and pick-up or chronological reverse?

Think structure. Write clearly. Have something to say and you've got it made.

Who buys frame-and-flashback?

Everyone. Because it starts with a dramatic telling of a good story, it stirs immediate interest. Every editor loves a story and he knows every reader does, too. In fact, every editor believes he is the composite reader—what strikes his interest will interest everyone else.

That's why you write good queries. And more important, that's why you write good articles. These days, every writer's magazine and every writer's conference will teach a person how to write a powerful query letter. I got tons of them when I edited "Moody Monthly" in Chicago. But when I got

the manuscript, I tore my hair. If we bought five out of a hundred, we considered ourselves fortunate. In fact, that magazine in its latter days, having been burned so long, went to making assignments for most of its articles. It may have taken 10 percent from free lancers, but we used to take 90.

Most of the writers knew nothing about structuring their article so that it read well and sustained interest. Many writers sort of meandered their thoughts across the page. What power they might have had was lost because they hadn't thought their topic through and they knew nothing about word economy.

They didn't know how to edit their own copy before it left home. They didn't know that editors don't like lots of adjectives and adverbs. They didn't know that they didn't have to say everything twice.

Frame-and-flashback fits hand-and-glove with action stories. Don't use it for discussions of marriage enrichment or busing or pet insurance.

Keep your eye on your local newspaper for drama. Do follow-up research. Make phone calls. Interview the principles. Attend court sessions. Clip every article that appears. Query an editor on what you've got and ask his interest and direction.

Don't tell him you'll write it in frame-and- flashback, that you'll write a suspended interest lead, go to a climax and then flashback to pick up the beginning of the story before going back to the climax and then to the

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: FRAME AND FLASHBACK

end. He won't have read this text. Tell what you want to say, how you will research and present it and why you are qualified to write it. That's all he needs to know.

If an editor is interested and if he

gives you direction, do follow through and write and mail the article. Some writers seem to collect letters from the editor and then lose interest.

But you—you go for the gold.

PLANT AND PICK-UP

It's the feature story that has a point, that goes somewhere and that arrives that editors like.

Each section is important. The opening really hooks the reader. The mid-section really feeds the reader. The end clinches, strong and true, and the reader walks away with something for his tomorrow.

Plant-and-pick-up articles do just that. They plant something important at the beginning and really pick it up and apply it at the end. They state the theme in a key word in or near the lead, and they pick up that identical word at or near the end. Plant-and-pick-up ties an article together and convinces the reader that you really stuck to your topic.

Detective story writers plant a motive or a gun early on in their fiction and when they need it later, it's there. It may figure in the crime or it may be part of the solution. That's the principle here. Picking up an item the reader knows is there strengthens your conclusion. He overlooked it at the beginning, but he's doubly impressed at the end. He sees you, the writer, as an artful conniver, and he respects you for it.

It's in articles of this kind, perhaps, that the feature writer comes closest to writing fiction. You're telling a story. You'll have a narrator—probably yourself. But you may wish

to tell your story from a character's point of view. You'll have something at stake—something the hero must have or must do or must not do.

Someone has a goal and either achieves it or is frustrated so he doesn't achieve it. You'll have a hero who's human and able to fail. You must know what threat will try to keep him from his prize and you must know what prize he'll win. You hint at these as your article begins.

But plant-and-pick-up is deliberate. You might merely wish to mention one word up front and then repeat it in back (as already mentioned). Or you may wish to pick up a phrase as I do in the article that follows. In it, I tell the story of the day I tried to teach my own son accordion lessons. His teacher had moved out of town, and my wife elected me to take over.

But I knew from the outset that it wouldn't work. It all became so ludicrous I began taking notes on his assignment pad. He was eight at the time. And how he could think up all those outrageous protests and excuses so fast—I'll never know. I've turned the same notes for this article into a short story as well (an important angle every writer must adopt). I try to get the most mileage out of one set of notes. "Yeahbut, the Rabbit" appears in my EASY ENGLISH and in the Sell Your Homework: Stories lessons.

THE DAY THE ACCORDION FELL

His accordion teacher had moved out of town. His mother said I was the natural choice for a successor. She pointed us upstairs to his bedroom and said one word: "Git!"

Plant

"I bet you a hop, skip and a jump you can't teach me that thing," my eight-year-old said.

At stake: My reputation

"I accept that challenge," I said. I'd majored in music theory in college.

We went into his room, and I got the instrument out of its plush-lined suitcase.

"Here. Put this over your head," I said.

"I know how," he mumbled.

The prize

"You should be glad you can get to learn music. Not every eight-year-old gets to take accordion lessons."

"Yeah, but this belt chokes me." Joel pulled at the straps across his shoulders. "Don't it go any lower?"

"Doesn't it--"

"You know." A tone in his voice indicated his level of enthusiasm. It was minus something.

"Well, you should speak correctly." I leaned over and pulled on the buckle. "That better?"

"Ouch!" he winced. "You're hurt-

ing me."

"Oh, I didn't hurt you." I tugged at the straps. "How's that?"

"But I'm hot."

"It is warm in here." I got up and opened a window. "Any better?"

"Yeah, but my back hurts. You don't know how it feels. I can't play this thing. It hurts too much."

"Oh, it doesn't hurt," I loosened the straps. "If we make it too loose, it'll slip down to the floor."

"Ouch!" he shouted as the accordion fell off his lap. "It just did. Oh, my toes. They hurt."

"If you were sitting up straight, it wouldn't have fallen." For some reason I was getting a little hot myself. "Are you going to start playing?"

"Yeah, but my toes hurt."

He pushed down on one of the buttons on the end, but there was no sound.

"Where's the music?" he snapped.

"You've got to push the buttons at both ends at once." Ask a reasonable question and you get a reasonable answer.

He pushed both sides to the middle all at once and it made a loud screech.

"OUCH!"

"Now what's the matter?"

"It pinched my stomach."

"Well, can't you hold your stomach in?"

"Yeah, but then I can't breathe. And, besides, my fingers hurt. Everything hurts. My back hurts, my toes hurt and my fingers hurt."

“And my ears are beginning to hurt from all your complaining, young man.”

Was this I talking?

He doodled with his fingers on the buttons, but still no sounds came out.

“I asked you where the music is!” he shouted.

“Push both sides in at the same time.”

“They are in.”

“Then pull them out.”

“But it’s too hard.” He groaned.

“Pull!”

“I can’t. It’s too heavy.”

“Well, I’m getting tired of all your fussing. Are you gonna play it?”

“Yeah, but now I’ve got a runny nose.”

“I’m gonna give you one more minute to get to playing that thing!”

“Learn this whole thing in one minute?” He started crying. “I can’t play it that fast.”

“You start playing!”

“But my toe. It hurts!”

“Play!” I was shouting.

“You’re getting me all hot,” he complained. “I can’t breathe. I’m too hot.”

“Are you gonna play?”

“Yeah, but my nose is running again.”

“Yeah but, yeah but, yeah but. Is that all you can say?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Well, I’ve just had it. Your mother asked me to teach you how to

play this accordion and I’m not gonna do it. We’re gonna pack this old thing up in its suitcase and give it away. I don’t care if I never see—”

“You mean you’re not going to teach me?”

“Teach you? I couldn’t teach you how to fly!” I slammed the case shut and locked it.

“Whoopee!” he shouted. “Then I win the bet.”

“Bet? What bet?”

The pick up

“You bet me a hop, skip and a jump that you could teach me how to play that thing and you couldn’t do it.”

And with that, he slipped out of the room and down the stairs.

“Now, just one minute, young man,” I shouted. “Now, just one minute—”

But by this time, the front door slammed and he was out running free.

It’s not surprising. This kid has grown up to be a success in life.

Now, what did we do? Our lead paragraph showed it was a family situation.

We have a dominant mother and an amiable father who is rather proud of his degree in music and who thinks this assignment will be a snatch. Without thinking he accepts the challenge of his youngster. Papa’s going to have fun, but the kid is in dead earnest.

What’s at stake? Not only papa’s reputation but hours and hours and

hours of practice time down the road that will rob this boy of baseball and time with the gang.

All the way through the article, the boy fights back. His words seem innocent enough—"Yeah, but"—but they're not.

At every utterance they signal rebellion. The father is eternally the father until he begins to unravel at the edges. He realizes at first that he's losing ground. But once the avalanche starts to come loose, he's gone and so is his degree in theory and any kind of sweet Christian patience and longsuffering he ever thought he had.

We planted "a hop, skip and a jump" in the beginning and picked it up at the end. It provided unity to a slice of life chronological narrative. The reader is satisfied. We've come full circle.

This article could have been used in the chapter on conversation. It shows you can recreate a scene with two people talking without having to use the tags (he said, she said). And it could have been used in slice of life. This just shows you that many of these structures are merely variations on a theme.

But it's the variations that will help you write good features. Every narrative you write can be different. Editors won't say you're caught in a rut.

All right, here's another technique. How will you use it? Whatever you do, use it naturally. Don't make your structure obvious. People downgrade formula writers because in some cases the formula is bigger than the story.

Use finesse—the light touch.

It works.

A SERIES

We could call this method "ganging" because you bring all elements of your research together and present it to the reader as a package. You might be looking into bills your legislature passed in its last session with the idea that you will let the public know what's been going on.

After an introductory paragraph or two, you will list each one and condense its significance into one or two paragraphs in common language. That's all there is to it. You'll end when the last entry ends with no need for a concluding paragraph or summary statement.

Antonia Fraser, a noted English biographer, gathered love letters well-known people had written to their intimates. Her opening two paragraphs state that her primary purpose has been to give delight to readers, adding that the pleasure of old letters is that they don't need to be answered. "They may, however, provoke inspiration," she says.

Her letters were from English writer Richard Steele to Mary Scurlock, his future wife and written in 1707; French actress Sarah Bernhardt to a devoted friend in the 1880s; Zelda Sayre to her future husband, American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1919; American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne to Sophia Peabody, during their courtship in 1839; writer Doro-

thy Thompson to novelist Sinclair Lewis, who had asked her for a divorce in 1941; Benjamin Franklin in his 70s to Madame Brillon in her 30s; Napoleon Bonaparte to his wife Josephine in 1796; and German composer Robert Schumann to Clara Wieck, whom he would later marry.

If you have a green thumb and know your flowers, you can present a series of annuals to grace milady's garden on a spring day.

Swimmers preparing for the Olympics, horses being groomed for the Derby, Asian foods available in local markets, kiddylit books for the twos and threes, six things you must do and four things you must not do when you have an accident.

The prospects for articles using the series method should get you started at once writing up what you know best.

Having an accident, unfortunately, is all too common an event. Therefore, editors and readers will have lots of interest in finding out things you must and must not do.

An article by Paul W. Kearney presents six things you must do:

- 1. Stop immediately.**
- 2. Count ten before saying anything. Don't argue.**
- 3. Get assistance for the injured.**
- 4. Notify the police immediately if there is an injury. Some states require it if there is any kind of property damage.**
- 5. Exchange identification.**
- 6. Make a record of all pertinent facts.**

The four things one must not do are:

- 1. You need not furnish full details to the police.**
- 2. You need not admit fault.**
- 3. You are not required to sign anything at the scene for anybody.**
- 4. You are not required to state whether or not you are hurt.**

We thank him for giving us that list, and these are things that many of us have known all along. The author sat down and wrote them up and sold the article. We, who know as much, only sit down.

Robert Paul Smith turned to old household utensils no longer in use. He named the carpet beater used to whang dust out of a carpet hanging over a clothes line.

He told of the coal bin in the cellar where loads of coal were poured like cement through a cellar window so the man of the house could shovel lumps of coal into the large furnace that heated every house. I have vivid memories of my small widowed mother in her housecoat scooping shovelfuls of coal into the red maw of our furnace on a cold morning in New Jersey when I was 7.

The buttonhook was used to close shoes before laces became common.

The icebox held blocks of ice the iceman brought to the house every day or so in a wagon pulled by an old horse. We kids used to hop on the wagon, searching for shards of ice left on the floorboard.

The soap scrap saver used to hold the

final bits of soap too small for the bathroom. It was swished through the water to make suds when we washed dishes.

The rumble seat opened on the back side of roadsters and provided open air seating for two lithe passengers. You had to be agile to step on the bumper and scoot yourself in feet first. Some people called it the “mother-in-law seat” where the poor woman was supposed to sit because she wasn’t wanted up front in the cab.

That article was a series. I could

have written it because I was there then. But it never occurred to me that anyone would be interested. Right there is the nail we must hit on the head. We’ve got to be the kind who think of things others overlook, who write articles and get them published because the other people who know as much are just sitting around.

Now the next kind of article is the cycle where you write as if you were playing baseball.

CYCLE

With baseball, everything starts and ends at home plate.

The same is true when you write an article using cycle structure. You end where you begin. You begin with a problem, search for a solution and return “home” with the answer.

Or you present a character who has a problem or a dream and you take him touring for a solution. You bring him back to the point where the story began. That may be a geographical point. It may be any point. It may even be an aha! experience when he realizes that he’s known the solution all along.

Are you recreating a tragedy from news stories and features you’ve researched? Take one of the characters mentioned and tell his story as he leaves on a trip, becomes involved in the catastrophe, survives and then returns home. (That’s what happened in *Gulliver’s Travels*.) Perhaps his plane was hijacked. Perhaps he was mugged, won a fortune, fell in love.

Is a child lost? Use the cycle to find him.

Does an unreachable quest tantalize a character? Use the cycle to chronicle his victory and his return. Sir Francis Chichester’s “Around the World with Gipsy Moth IV” began as he left Plymouth, England, in his tiny sailboat for a trip around the world. Ten months later, he returned with his job done. He had completed his cycle.

Take “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” She leaves home, has her brush with fate and returns home a better girl. So does Cinderella. So does Jack in “Jack and the Beanstalk.”

The whole point of the cycle story is that you can go home again. But there’s a caution. Don’t let your cycle take too long. Keep the action moving. And remember, threat will often keep the cycle story from flagging. Make it important for the character to reach his goal and to get home. Let something be at stake. His anxiety will keep the reader interested.

Mary Roelofs Stott in her article, “A Whisker of Pride,” had a vision, a holy grail. She reaches for it and returns. Every word counts. Study her style. It’s lyric. It’s heady with color. It’s tough with restraint. Hers is a womanly humanness, dignified yet warm, uncertain yet dogged.

This article is one of my favorites. I gladly share it with you, hoping that, as you read and reread it, you’ll catch her torch.

Here she is:

A WHISKER OF PRIDE

Growing up is a discarding of dreams—the not-to-be triumphs, the too-dizzying heights, the still-distant horizons. They come in the golden rush of childhood, but they cannot stay. They won’t telescope down to

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the ordinary strictures of time laid out for the chores that need doing.

Yet sometimes, in the long years of burdens, there's a madcap, will-o'-the-wisp moment when—like a child—we can grab at a sparkle in the sky. Reach high for such moments; don't let them pass. For once they are gone they may not come again, and we will have missed a brightness.

All last summer I waited for such a chance, a tiny dream teasing in my mind. Finally it came.

A mile and a half across from our vacation place on Parry Island in Ontario's Georgian Bay lies Palestine Island, a long, dark slope of rock slabs and pine trees. In the evening the sun sets beyond Palestine in a running fire of gold and rose, and then, through a crook in the trees, the distant Carline Rock Lighthouse shines down the night like a blue star.

On a Palestine cliff in a straight line across from our beach is a white house, looking small as a cardboard toy, surrounded by shadows. Only rarely does some unseen hand light a lamp so the windows gleam as if a spark of sun had caught in the glass. I had been watching that house over the years; now, suddenly, a desire arose in me—without rhyme or reason, utterly inappropriate—to swim the dark waters to its isolation.

But, of course, it was ridiculous. I am a grandmother.

I have five children. In the world's

eye I have done nothing all these years but housework, and we all know that is not conducive to the body beautiful. Although I had come to love swimming and each summer vacation tried painfully to teach myself the art, it really hadn't worked. Once, when someone told me I was swimming in 20 feet of water, I almost drowned from sudden hysteria.

But that tiny dream kept buzzing through my thoughts. So I began to practice regularly--until 'Mother's daily dip' became a family joke. I never missed a day, even in storms, sometimes emerging almost strangled from the banging waters.

All the time I was waiting—waiting for strength, for confidence, for a calm day not too cold, and for a scarcity of folks to argue me out of it.

The summer passed without those conditions. Wistfully, I gave up the dream, telling myself I was really too old anyway. Then, late on the last afternoon of vacation, when I was standing on the shore looking out over the water toward the distant, brooding house, the moment came.

The bay was empty of boats since most of the cottagers had already departed. All my family had left, too, save my youngest son. When I dipped my foot in the water, I was surprised it was no colder. The wind of the last two days had died, and the waves were rolling in, easy and gentle. Across the bay the sinking sun was laying a path of gold to my feet,

inviting me, urging me, and suddenly, in a lonely calmness, I knew this was my chance into the unknown of what I could do.

I ran back to the cabin where my son was practicing his guitar and rapped on the window.

“I’m swimming to Palestine,” I said.

A chord broke off in midair. “Are you crazy?”

“No, serious. Get the canoe, life-jackets, a coat and towel. I’ve got to hurry. There’s only about an hour of daylight left.”

I whirled back to the shore and eased into the gold path of sunlight. I swam carefully, testing myself. My muscles felt supple and sure and I breathed easier.

The sun was skidding into the horizon, dimming my path, when my son, bewildered, paddled up and asked if I was all right.

“Fine,” I said, meaning my head included, and swam on, at intervals varying my strokes from breast to back to left and right side.

The darkening distance ahead seemed to stretch implacably, and then the sun went down completely and my path disappeared in the black waters. I had not realized how the cold of the deeper water would eat into my marrow. A layer of numbness ringed my body, and doubts began to arise. Could I finish? Should I keep trying? Was I being foolish?

My son asked me urgently, “Are

you cold?”

“No!” A firm lie.

“Are you tired?”

“No!” Another lie.

“Don’t you want to turn back?”

“No!” The truth this time.

I swam on, counting strokes, watching for my son’s paddle when he pointed it, showing how I was off course.

Then I would straighten my line, doggedly trying not to cough or choke, though once a spray of unexpected wake caught me wrong. I no longer looked toward the white house. It stayed too far away, fading into a glimmer shrouded by night.

On and on, and then a little roughness of water and I realized I was in the main channel. I almost laughed. I must be getting there. Overhead the stars were coming and I watched a scrap of twinkling as though it were a bird leading me on.

Another hundred backstrokes and suddenly I slid into warm, quiet water. I turned over and looked up, and the white house was above my head, a silent, watching presence. Almost languidly I breast-stroked into that view, closer and closer. My foot felt the hard cliff shelving under the water and I stood up, and my son was laughing, wrapping my head in his shirt, drying me with a towel, saying over and over, “What a wild, crazy mother you are.”

And oh! I was proud. I had swum to Palestine!

Well, of course, the world with a

great whoosh flip-flopped me from the black rock of Palestine back to my winter kitchen and my winter chores of dinner by the clock, proper clothes with functioning zippers and accurate laundering. And that moment of shining pride faded and dwindled until only a whisker remained. And one morning, doing dishes, I wondered if I would forget entirely.

Then, through the window, I saw on my lawn a cobweb from the night—an old lady’s cap, we used to call it. And dew hung on it—sparkling drops laced in sunlight like jewels . . . like jewels dropped from a wind off . . . off Palestine, of course! I smiled in my mind, for I knew then there would be no forgetting. That whisker of pride was mine forever.

What can be said? She leaves her kitchen, reaches for her grail and returns to her kitchen again. She’s Galahad with an apron on and we love her doggedness.

You were not conscious of the cycle. She concentrated on the going out, but there was a coming home again. She called it a “flip-flop,” but she did come home. We knew she would make it, but we laughed with her son and say with him ourselves, “What a wild, crazy mother you are.”

So, what can you do with this new technique?

All of us practice the cycle. Look at us. We leave home and go to school or work and come back home. We go to

the store and come back home. We attend church or a community sing or some event downtown and we come back home. We are always going out and coming back. We may have a goal, like Mary’s Palestine; we may not. We may go one place; we may go many. But we always come back.

What can you do with this?

As a kid, I loved sea stories with my Horatio Hornblowers sailing to the far-aways to outwit the French. My heroes were constantly leaving and returning. I paraphrased John Newton’s letters for Moody Press and he was constantly going and coming. The Seven Dwarfs of Snow White went to work every day and came home. Everybody’s doing it!

Use cycle as another arrow in your quiver. If you’re to get an interview with a politician or a prize-winning housewife and you need an angle, try cycle. Each of us has a goal. Go back to the roots, the origins of the desire and trace the gold brick road that led to that person’s OZ.

You’re writing a romance? Use cycle. You’re writing an adventure? Use cycle. You’re researching the lifestyle of the mole? Use cycle. A child commits a serious crime? Use cycle. A scientist disputes an accepted theory? Use cycle.

You want to sell?

Structure!

Think of cycle as a baseball field. You begin at home plate and run the bases, coming back to home plate—the place where you began.

I used cycle on an article published

in a national magazine. A church in my city had developed a method of home Bible study that was bringing results in a time long before studies of that nature became common practice. I called my article: "I Was a Home Bible Study Drop-in."

Notice its use of the cycle method. Notice also the flow of conversation and of the business of normal life that helps make the characters human.

Home plate

My wife had just finished dessert when she said to the Browns, "I can't help being frightened at the turn of world events. Any thinking person is alarmed." She was speaking for both of us.

We'd gone to our neighbors for dinner. We do this a lot in our neighborhood. We're real friendly. And we liked the Browns. Oh, they're churchy, but they're good people.

Anyway, when Sue said that, Kay Brown knocked us for a loop.

"Have you ever thought of seeing what the Bible says for times like these?" she asked.

"The Bible?" I yelped. "That old book?"

"Careful, Bill," Ted Brown said to me, laughing. "It's still the world's best seller."

"Well, what could the Bible say to people today?" I asked.

"That's just it," Kay said, moving her empty dessert plate out of the way and putting her elbows on the

table. "We've thought of starting a small home Bible class just to discuss together with a small group of friends how the Bible can help us solve the problems we face these days."

"Church?" I yelped again. "No thanks!"

"Wait a minute, Bill," Sue said. "I think that would be interesting."

"Interesting?" I sneered.

"Yes, interesting. I've always wondered what the Bible was all about, but we've never been a church family. When would we meet?"

"We could decide that as we see who can come and when would be the best time for all of us, Sue," Kay said.

"We'd come, wouldn't we, Bill?" my wife asked me. I could see she was really interested.

"Sure," I said. "We'll come, honey."

First base

We talked about it some more, just the four of us, and we decided who else in our block might be interested in coming, too.

"Let's not have it too large," Kay said. "How about five couples?"

"With six as the limit," Ted said.

That sounded good to me. Any more than that would begin to be a mass meeting.

When Sue asked again what night we should meet, I put Kay and Ted on the spot.

"Let's make it Wednesday," I said.

“About 7:45.”

I knew they always—and I mean always—went to prayer meeting on Wednesday at 7:45 p.m. If they were interested in my interrupting my busy schedule to study their Bible, they could change their schedule to fit mine.

I knew they wouldn't want to, because prayer meeting is a fetish to most Christians. They wouldn't want to miss it and I wouldn't come any other time. That would cancel out this Bible study and get me off the hook. Mother always said I was clever.

“Wednesday would be fine with us,” Ted said.

“Wha-what?” I gulped.

“Sure, why not,” Kay said. “7:45 would be fine.”

And so it was decided.

When Wednesday night came along, I told our sitter we probably wouldn't be back till midnight. I figured this would be a one night stand and we'd all get it out of our system.

We got there around 7:35, expecting it wouldn't start till 8:20 or later. This sort of thing never does.

The Browns must have been busy, because every couple we'd mentioned had come. The coffee was on, ash trays were out, people were laughing and chatting. I couldn't help thinking that this might be interesting after all.

When Ted started talking about what we were there for, I glanced at my watch. I was astonished. He started on time!

He mentioned how we'd talk the other evening about seeing what the Bible had to say to people living in these times and how we'd planned this class.

He said that since the Old Testament pointed forward to Christ and since the New Testament brought out the life and teachings of Christ, he thought it would be a good idea to study the Gospel of Mark.

“Its style is clear and easy to read,” he said, “and the book is short but comprehensive.”

We all thought that was a good idea. I went along with them. I'd already learned more than I knew when I'd arrived.

Ted asked for someone to read the first eleven verses. We were each given a copy of the Gospels in modern English, so it was easy to read. I even volunteered to do the reading.

This was the Bible? Where were the cobwebs? I didn't say that out loud, but I sure thought it.

Ted suggested someone reword what I'd read and someone did, and then I asked, “How come God says He was well pleased with Christ? What did He do?”

And then we started talking about who He was—uh—is and what kind of person someone has to be to bring pleasure to God. And we talked about John the Baptist and what he was like.

And I asked, “How did this John the Baptist baptize? Did he sprinkle or did he dunk?”

“What does the text say?” Ted asked me.

“It doesn’t,” I said.

“Well, let’s let it go at that,” he said. “Let’s just stick to the text and study what it is saying.”

“Okay,” I said. “No offense.”

So we read the eleven verses over again and talked some more about it and—before we’d even gotten started, Ted said it was time to quit.

“We said we’d spend an hour,” he said, “and the hour’s up. How about some hot coffee, Kay, and have we got any cake?”

And there it was—over. At 8:45. On time.

“This was great,” I said between big mouthfuls of chocolate cake. “Let’s do this every week.”

And Sue and I talked about what we’d learned all the way home and half way into the next week. We even forgot what argument we were on.

The next week we got as far as “fishers of men.” That was a new wrinkle. Christ met those fishermen right where they were and gave their fishing a new dimension altogether. That made sense, I thought, and I said so.

“You know, this is just what happens,” I said. “You meet the best fellas when you go fishing. They’re the salt of the earth. Why, I remember last summer, when we were up at Cultus Lake out in eastern Oregon. The kid we met on the boat dock turned out to be the son of the governor.”

“That’s interesting, Bill,” Ted said, “and we appreciate the contribution;

but let’s stick directly to the text because we really don’t have too much time.”

“Roger,” I said. “That makes sense.”

We talked some more about the difference meeting Christ makes in the life of any person, not just those fishermen.

I thought about that all the next week.

Then we got into how He cast out the unclean spirit. That sort of tripped me up, but I didn’t mention it. Maybe it was just the word “unclean.” I felt a lot of my life was unclean . . .

The next week we got into Peter’s wife’s mother and how Christ healed all the diseases. And I was okay until we got to the leper saying to Jesus, “If you want to, you can make me clean.” And He said, “I want to. Be clean.”

I turned my face away from the others at that point and I didn’t say another word that night.

Sue said to me on the way home, “What’s the matter? You sick or something?”

“No,” I said.

After we got rid of our sitter, I told Sue I wanted to do some thinking and not to wait up for me.

Second base

I thought, all right. Around two o’clock, I guess, I broke. I wanted the same Christ who cleaned up that leper to clean me up too, and I told Him so.

And you know? The most peaceful feeling came into my heart. I went to bed and slept like a child.

Sue noticed a difference the next day and I told her what had happened.

And I told everybody at the class the next week. Ted and Kay were real glad too.

That night we got to Jesus' forgiving the one who was sick of palsy for his sins.

I asked, "What's the difference between asking Christ to clean you up and having your sins forgiven?"

Kay said, "Neither of those two men could help himself, could he? The leper couldn't make himself clean and the palsied man didn't have the strength to get up and walk."

"Right," I said.

Then Ted said, "The Lord brings each one of us to this place, Bill, and notice, both incidents are mentioned. Coming to Christ for cleansing is good, but He wants to show us that it was necessary for Christ to die for us. He was executed because we have sinned. When we tell Him we personally want to stand in the good of that, the effect is that His shed blood cleanses us from our sin."

And then he said, "Oh, but it's 8:45. Time to quit."

Sue and I stayed later that night. I had to get the matter settled. And Sue did too.

And you know what? That night we both were saved! I can say that word now without cringing, because

I know what it means. It was like being born all over again. And Ted said that was the way the Lord put it in another Gospel.

The baby-sitter was asleep on the couch when we drove in. I wanted to tell her what had happened, but Sue said it was late and to take her home.

At breakfast the next morning, I told Sue, "Honey, find out today where the Browns go to church on Sunday. Maybe we could go with them."

Come to find out, they went to the same church I pass every day driving to work. I'd seen the sign for years, but it was just a name to read as I drove past.

Well, you'd think we were long lost cousins to hear the way people carried on over us when the Browns took us to church on Sunday. I never knew a church could be so friendly. Everybody came up to us after the service. They couldn't have been putting on an act.

And the pastor greeted us so warmly. He said he was thrilled that we'd come to know the Lord Jesus as our own Savior. He even said he'd been praying for us.

"How did you know about us?" I asked him, surprised.

"Ted has told a number of us about you," he said. "You see, we have a class that meets once a month made up of those who are holding Bible classes in their homes. We talk about how each class is coming along and we pray together for those who

are showing an interest in God's Word."

"Well, how do you like that!" I said to Sue. "Here's a group of people who cared enough about us to pray for us."

"I like it," she said.

"Thank you, Pastor," I said. I guess I choked up a little.

We went to all the meetings at the church after that. We just couldn't get enough of the Bible. We kept on going to the Browns each Wednesday night too. Tom Sherman accepted the Lord. We're still praying for his wife. Two of the other couples have come to know the Lord also.

Third base

Finally, we decided that it would probably be best to keep the class at Browns for the unsaved, with those of us who have found the Lord phasing out into another class for young believers. We went to the one at the Johnson's home over a couple of streets from our house. The pastor suggested to us one Sunday evening after church in late August that we consider enrolling in a night course at a nearby Bible school. He said we would really profit from the concentrated Bible study given there.

So when classes opened the next month, we were there. We found ourselves in classes under godly teachers with other adults as students. Many of them had been saved recently just like us. We went all that winter and through the spring se-

mester. In fact, we plan to go for three years and get our diplomas.

In June after school was out, the pastor asked if Sue and I would like to enroll in the church's leadership training class with the idea of having a home Bible study of our own.

We got really excited about that. Now that we were beginning to get our feet on the ground spiritually, we felt it might be time at that to have our own class at home.

The pastor taught the leadership class himself, and at the first session told us of the problems we would face in a Bible class with the unsaved because there is such a gulf between believers and the world. Socially, we're at odds, and spiritually we don't talk the lame language.

He said the home Bible class method looked easy because no one who comes has to prepare except the leader. It's a principle of sharing, not lecturing. But we who would do the leading had to be prepared, so that it would not be a group of untaught people pooling their ignorance.

The pastor said he was glad some of us were taking night Bible classes. He doesn't believe in putting leadership in the hands of the unstable.

He emphasized over and over again during the twelve weeks or more we took the leadership class that we had to be filled with the Holy Spirit as the practice of our lives.

"It is not the prerogative of the class leader to convert members of the class," he said. "The atmosphere

must be made conducive where the Holy Spirit can do His office work.”

He said we weren’t responsible to learn any intricate little formulas to use at certain moments to bring people to a decision for Christ. The home Bible class method is a very natural exchange of personal convictions at the level of everyday living. And it’s spontaneous.

“The leader must have godly scriptural convictions,” he said, “and he must be able to ask questions and stimulate interest that will cause others in his class to think and participate.”

One thing he told us answered my question about what if people won’t participate.

“Don’t be afraid to read long passages of Scripture with not too much comment,” he said. “And don’t worry if the class does not see things you see. Let them read the Gospel of Mark. It is the first time for most of them.

“It is not the amount of discussion. It is the amount of Scripture to which they are exposed. Let the unsaved read. Don’t be afraid, Bill, if they are not discussing. And when they do discuss, be careful they don’t go off on tangents.”

Like I’d done when I first started at the Browns.

Home plate

Well, Sue and I were delighted with these leadership classes, and we

prayed during those months that the Lord would use us through a class in our home to reach our unbelieving neighbors. He put the Millers on our hearts. They live across the street and two houses down.

We invited them over to dinner near the end of August. We got to taking politics and the state of affairs, and you know what Betty Miller said?

“I really get upset then I read the newspapers these days,” she said. “Any thinking person would be alarmed.”

And you know what my Sue said?

“I agree with you, Betty,” she said, moving her empty dessert plate out of the way and putting her elbows on the table. “Have you ever thought of seeing what the Bible says for times like these?”

We began at home plate in the middle of a conversation after a dinner. We did not move to first base until a decision had been made. Bill agreed to come to a Bible study at Ted’s house.

On first base, we had the discussions from the study, the give and take, the efforts to get off track, and the points that struck home.

We moved to second base with Bill’s asking God to clean him up as He had done with the leper. We stayed there as we saw the change in his life and attitude.

We moved to third base when he and Sue decide to attend classes and learn for themselves how to evangelize.

SELL YOUR HOMEWORK: CYCLE

We moved back to home plate when the Millers came over for dinner and brought up the same subject Sue had when the article began.

We end with the same statement Kay had made when we first put our foot on home plate.

Now your articles don't need to end on the same statement that began them, but home plate is home plate and you must come back to the place where you began.

When you know the recipe, you can bake the cake.

When you know the structure, you can write the article.

You can even sell your homework.

In our next lesson, we will study the cumulative method, repetitive statement, catalog and surprise ending, four more structures—like arrows in your quiver—you can use to hit a bull's eye.

Professor Dick