

## Leave “Once Upon a Time” to the Novelists

Forget the once-upon-a-time format. Only on rare occasions is this arrangement useful for presenting conclusions and recommendations against which your reader is strongly biased.

For example, consider the jaded TV viewer who’s about to change the channel to find something more intriguing during the on-the-hour station break. Quickly, the producer slides into a teaser: The wife finishes her phone call, kisses her husband goodbye, and walks out to the car parked in the garage. The garage door rises as she presses the button. From out of the shadows, a gruff voice demands that she keep her mouth shut as brutish hands claw at her throat. She gasps for breath, then slides limply to the garage floor.

Commercial. The rest of the movie circles back to let us guess “who done it.”

If you use this arrangement, you purposefully try to keep your readers blindfolded, forcing them to follow your reasoning slowly and deliberately. If we did X, then Y would happen. If we tried to do A, then B might happen. If we then tried option C, then D might ruin us. Therefore, it follows that EFG appears to be the best course of action. With this suspenseful format, you as the writer completely control how much or how little you want to reveal to the readers and in what order.

Such an arrangement usually annoys busy readers, who want to control their own time. Their reaction is, “Tell me what your main point is, and I’ll decide if I want to hear more.”

If, on the other hand, you think your readers are so biased against what you have to say that you have to sneak up on their blind side, then you might well choose the once-upon-time format. You hold up the reader’s first cherished idea, then refute it. Next, you hold up the reader’s second most cherished idea, then knock it down. Finally, you present the only remaining option—your conclusions and recommendations—and hope you have left the reader no alternative but to accept your position.

Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.

Unless your document is so short or of such great interest that all readers will feel compelled to read every single detail, avoid this arrangement. Novelists and screenwriters get away with such a structure, ... but most business writers create far less intrigue.

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