

Titles and First Lines

The focused meaning may, in fact, become the title. When I was freelancing magazine articles, I would start writing an article by brainstorming 100 to 150 possible titles, in fragments of time as the research was winding down. Each title was a window into the draft I might write.

To brainstorm, you have to be willing to be silly, knowing that in this freedom may lie an important insight. If I was assigned to write a paper on roommates, I might start with titles that would remind me of experiences—and problems and conflicts and satisfactions—I had with roommates.

My Roommate for 43 Years
 My 40 Army Roommates
 Why We Had a Fistfight
 My Roommates Smell
 Snores
 Snores and Bores
 Don't Room with a Philosopher
 Familiarity Breeds Familiarity
 Ten Rules for My Roommate
 How to Drive a Roommate Crazy
 Talk's OK—But at 3 AM?
 My Roommate's Snake
 My Roommate's Brother
 Why I Murdered My Roommate
 Why I Murdered My Roommate—and Was Acquitted
 Roommate or Cellmate?
 Cheese, Toothpaste, and Computers
 The Music Wars
 Jazz Rock Folk Classical
 Rocking to Mozart
 One Roommate and Four Alarm Clocks

When His Lover Stays Overnight
 The Importance of Privacy
 No Passion Please
 Living in My Roommate's Plant Jungle
 The Poster Wars
 Borrow My Boyfriend, Not My Jeans
 What's Hers Is Hers; What's Mine Is Hers

You could go on and on, and so could I. I may, for example, write a humorous column about my wife, my roommate for 43 years, in the form of advice to freshmen meeting their roommates for the first time. I could write a nostalgic essay, with some bite, about the roommate with whom I had a fight. I might even write about my experiences in an army barracks with 40 roommates or in a foxhole in combat with one. I am not restricted to my list. I might find myself writing about some of the office mates I've suffered and how they suffered me.

Join me in the game of titles. I used to do 150 or so at a run. And what if number 3 of 150 is the best? Well, now you know it! The discarded titles may turn up as lines in the article or as starting places for other articles.

The fragments of language that focus meaning often become the first lines of a piece of writing. As a journalist, I am a great believer in writing the lead—the first line, the first paragraph or three, the first page—first. Let's see what happens if I write a few leads for that roommate column:

As our grandchildren go off to college for the first time, those of us who have the same roommate for 40, 50 years, or more should share our cohabitation wisdom.

Selective vision—or elective blindness—is the first quality a student should develop in facing a college roommate for the first time.

I do not see the ironing we brought from New Jersey in 1963 that adorns one corner of our bedroom, and Minnie Mae, of course, will eventually learn not to mention my . . .

My first college roommate and I got along after we had a genuine, male, prancing-around, dirty-words fistfight in our closet of a room.

Now, seeing freshmen arrive in cars hung with furniture, I realize their adjustment won't be to calculus, rhetoric, the philosophy of Hegel, but to fitting into a small room with a stranger who will get larger, louder, more difficult every day.

I've heard of people who keep in touch with their college roommates decade by decade and I've heard of hostage victims who grow fond of their captors, but one of the good things about getting old is that I will never ever have to have a roommate again. I hope.

Perhaps in the nursing home, but I won't talk about that yet. And I am happy to have a mate, but it is fortunate we live in nine rooms, not one.

The first great lesson of college is that someone with a sense of humor—or sadistic need to cause trouble—has locked you and your roommate into a small space for a long year.

Now I have had a roommate for 41 years, and we are still working out all those trivial issues of territory that are so important to the human animal. As a full-grown, white-bearded sage, I have some wise counsel for first-year college students who face the first test of university life: I am supposed to live with . . .

~~The first great lesson of college is that someone with a sense of humor or sadistic need to cause trouble has locked you and your roommate into a small space for a long year.~~

~~Now I have had a roommate for 45 years, and we are still working out all those trivial issues of territory that are so important to the human animal. As a full-grown, white-bearded sage, I have some wise counsel advice for first-year college students who face their first test of university life. I am supposed to live with . . . roommate.~~

What have I been doing? Playing my way into an essay, trying on beginning points, voices, ideas the way you try on clothes before a party. Each lead gives me a direction in which I might go. The entire piece of writing grows out of the beginning that establishes the following:

- the question in the reader's mind to be answered in the draft
- the authority of the writer to answer it
- the direction of the draft
- the pace of the writing
- the form
- the voice

BUT WHAT ABOUT ALL THE OTHER GOOD STUFF?

There are two kinds of good stuff. One kind can be used to support and advance the focus of the story, to clarify and communicate your meaning. The other is material that will draw the reader's mind away from your message.

Supporting Material

Every piece of information, every literary device, every line, and every word must support, develop, and communicate the meaning. Each comma, verb, statistic, reference, descriptive detail, transition, summary sentence should relate in a direct way to the central tension of what is being written.

The melody by itself is hardly enough. The meaning, focused and sharpened, needs all the supporting material to reveal its full significance and to make the reader react emotionally and intellectually.