

Write your own adventure

By Wes Fleming #87301

JACOBELLIS V. OHIO MIGHT NOT BE something that pops into your mind every time you sit down to write, but it's something I think about on a regular basis. This 1964 US Supreme Court case gave us one of our most famous court-related clichés, one which many of us are intimately familiar with: "I know it when I see it."

Justice Potter Stewart was, of course, making a statement on the nature and portrayal in pop culture of pornography, but his words have repercussions in all walks of life. Magazine readers, for example, can't always say what identifies a great article, but they always know it when they see it.

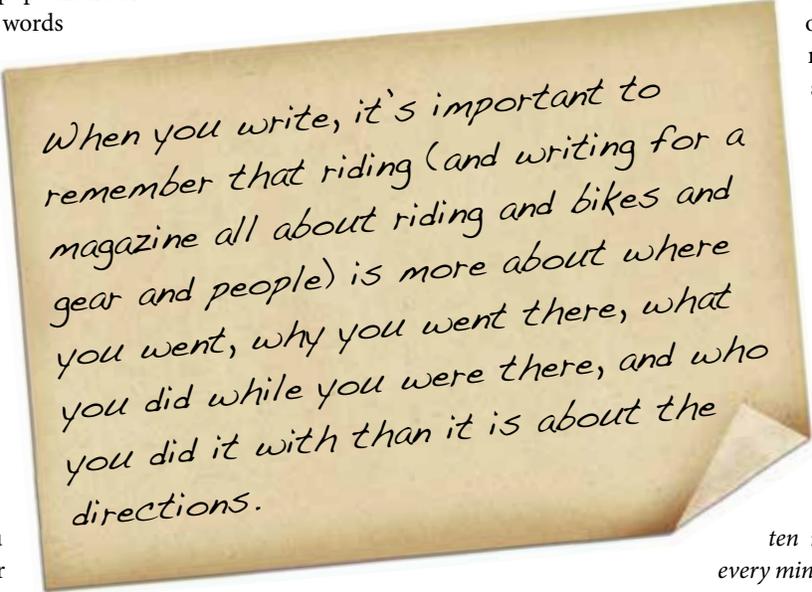
In the first column in this series, I looked at using active writing to spice up your prose – or at least to make people think you're a better writer than you think you are. Another way to do these things is by altering what you write to take into account what somebody else – your stalwart readers – will find interesting.

Riding a motorcycle can be a solitary experience. You're tooling along US 95 somewhere in Nevada, not a care in the world. The sun is shining, the air is clear, Led Zeppelin is blasting in your helmet, and suddenly you realize how much you think everybody else you know that rides would enjoy knowing about what you're doing at exactly that moment.

Once you've returned home, you sit down at your keyboard to express

that moment, and what comes out is this:

From my hotel near the National Atomic Testing Museum just off South Las Vegas Boulevard (better known as The Strip), I headed east on NV 592, also known as E Flamingo Road. I eased onto the ramp and merged into traffic on I-15 north. I stayed on the Las Vegas Freeway until it intersected with US 95, which I then took west, following that road through Las Vegas as it turned north. Reno was just seven hours away.



When you write, it's important to remember that riding (and writing for a magazine all about riding and bikes and gear and people) is more about where you went, why you went there, what you did while you were there, and who you did it with than it is about the directions.

In and of itself, there's nothing inherently wrong with the above paragraph. You've no doubt read paragraphs like that in motorcycle or travel magazines more times than you can possibly remember.

The problem is you *don't* remember. If you wanted directions from Las Vegas to Reno, you would do what I do: ask a local, consult a map, rely on Google, or tell your GPS to take you there. When you read a passage like that, it's not the east-north-west-north on which roads you want to know about, it's the National Atomic Testing Museum, it's VEGAS BABY! and it's why the rider's going to Reno that you want to know about. Those are the things that

are going to grab your attention.

When you write, it's important to remember that riding (and writing for a magazine all about riding and bikes and gear and people) is more about where you went, why you went there, what you did while you were there, and who you did it with than it is about the directions. The difficult thing about all this is that this is exactly why many people feel like they don't write well. Paragraphs such as the above example are as laborious to write as they are to read, and the more difficult something feels, the more poorly we think we perform. Paragraphs like that are difficult to rewrite, because the best way to rewrite them is to throw them out and start from scratch.

I chose the Silver Sevens Hotel and Casino specifically because it was within walking distance of the National Atomic Testing Museum; I tried to spend ten minutes in the museum for every minute I spent playing the conveniently located slots on the ground floor of my hotel. It was every bit as moving as I'd hoped it would be, and worth every penny of the \$20 admission price. The permanent exhibit on atomic culture brought back a lot of hard memories, but seeing the display on "Duck and Cover" evoked some laughs, too.

In the above paragraph, you probably noticed I didn't tell you a single thing about what roads I was on or which direction I went on them, but what I'm trying to convey there are the thoughts and emotions involved while still giving you enough detail to know where I was and what I was doing.

In all likelihood, I'd follow up a paragraph like that with a paragraph like this:

After leaving the museum, I looked at my map and realized I'd need to take the direct route - a seven-hour blast up US 95 - to Reno, rather than the two- or even three-day scenic route up US 395. I needed to be at my girlfriend's place by 8 p.m. that night for the dinner party she'd planned; taking the path through Inyo, Sierra and Stanislaus National Forests and Death Valley and Yosemite National Parks wasn't an option. After a day of rest under Jolene's tender care, I spent the better part of a week exploring some of those places as well as Tahoe National Forest and Lake Tahoe.

While portions of that paragraph might verge on oversharing, you do have to admit it's a lot more interesting to read than the very first example paragraph that gave the turn-by-turn breakdown of the trip from Las Vegas to Reno. If I was editing that paragraph, I'd probably take out all the forest and park names and shorten that sequence a bit, but as a writer, I'd want everybody to know where I went during that week I spent at my girlfriend's place.

In a perfect world, then, your words inspire your readers to grab a map of Nevada to see the difference between US 95 and US 395. In that same perfect world, you don't need to describe the hammering bleakness of the ride up US 95 because the reader can simply soak up the heat-generated haze in that awesome photo of the weird aircraft you took during a fuel stop near Area 51.

You did get that photo, didn't you? Come back next time for some tips on how to get those great travel photos that really put your contribution over the top. ☺

Wes Fleming #87301 has been riding motorcycles for 20 years, writing and editing for longer than that, and worshipping Jack Riepe since conception. He's been known to both drag a knee and dangle a participle, but only in his younger, more daring days. If you have suggestions for future topics for this column, reach out and suggest away at wflaming@bmwmoa.org.

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