A strong storyline needs to be concise, arousing, and expressible in a sentence or two.
— Carl Sessions Stepp, Writing As Craft and Magic

His advice really can be applied to any kind of writing that the writer hopes someone else will read. Every blog, every story, every essay, every memo needs a single dominant reason for being written. And the right time to take a crack at establishing that reason, or story line, is not when you sit down with stacks of disjointed files or notes to write. Instead, the best time is immediately after completing some initial background work.

What Stepp calls that “expressible sentence or two” has another name, well known to most journalists. It is called a focus statement. It may sound a bit bookish, but its purpose is precise: A focus statement establishes a story’s direction, not only in the way that story will be written but in how it will be reported. The focus statement dictates what information the reporter gathers.

Again, the need for focus can be applied to any kind of research. Think of it as a blueprint for your work. Just as blueprints sometimes change for houses, so too do focus statements sometimes change for writers, should research lead them in a new direction. But the writer who forges ahead with no focus is something like the runner who careens off trail on an uncharted shortcut through the woods. She’ll likely get to the other side but not without an assortment of cuts and scrapes.

By establishing a story line early – by writing a good focus statement – a reporter, or researcher, can save a lot of time and report in greater depth while doing so.

A good focus statement does several things:
1. It summarizes the story.
2. It sets the story’s course.
3. It “sells” the story, not by hyping it or exaggerating, but by keying on details that engage or surprise.
4. It sets a story’s tone and approach.

Verbs propel focus statements in the same way that action drives most good writing. Something has to happen. The carefully chosen verb conveys what that something is. Specific information engages. The focus statement wants to reach beyond generality to say something specific.

WEAK

It's hard to quit smoking as many smokers know. This story will tell of one smoker’s efforts to do so.
This statement lacks detail and direction. It’s short, but it lacks specifics. The writer has an idea but no clear approach of how to deliver it.

**BETTER**

* Jane Seymour’s husband died of lung cancer in his early 40s, but she still smokes. She’s tried to quit cold turkey. She’s tried the patch. She’s tried hypnosis. But this college athlete turned business executive can’t beat her addiction. Like tens of thousands, Seymour has found that willpower is not enough to quit. This is her story.

* * *

**WEAK**

It’s been a year of change for this fast-food chain. A look at how things are different.

**BETTER**

When the economy tanked in 2007, Checkenlittle tanked with it, barely avoiding bankruptcy. But now the fast-food chain has scaled back its menu, lowered its prices and started marketing aggressively with social media. It’s back in the black, too. A look at how Chickenlittle grew its base in bad times.

See the difference?