

Part 2: Beware of Dead Ends and Detours!

You're driving down a road and suddenly the pavement ends. You can go no farther. You have no choice but to turn around and find another route. Guess what? The same thing happens when you are writing. You start an idea (start down a road) but you never fully explain what you mean by that idea or you don't provide an example of what you mean. Look closer:



Dear Judy Blume, After reading your novel, I felt different about myself. That really surprised me. I didn't know that simple words on paper or characters who exist only in your imagination and now mine could have that effect on me. KATIE

Why is this a dead end? Sure, it's great use of language (*characters who exist only in your imagination and now mine*), but the writer never explains what he or she means by "different" or "effect." How is the author—the reader of this letter—to know what happened to Katie?

Here's another scenario. You are cruising down a highway, radio blasting and singing along. At this rate, you're going to reach your destination a hour ahead of time! All at once, you veer off the road into a field. You keep driving but the going is rough—your car is bouncing and the tires are kicking up dust clouds. Unless you somehow get back on smooth pavement, you'll blow a tire or run out of gas before you reach your destination.

This, too, happens when you are writing. You state an idea or opinion. You explain what you mean by that idea or opinion by providing details or even examples. So far, you're cruising! But then you get off the track. Some of your details or examples you add are irrelevant. They don't have anything to do with your main idea. It leaves the reader wandering about in a field, lost. Here's an example:

Dear Tom Brokaw, I now know why you called your book The Greatest Generation. My grandfather, too, is a veteran of the Second World War. He was bombardier pilot shot down over Germany in 1945. His courage in surviving behind enemy lines was a story he had never told to us grandkids, until I read your book that is. As I was talking about the real soldiers in your book, he suddenly began to talk about his experiences during the war—his fear of dying, the hunger pangs that knifed through him as sharp as the winter wind while hiding from German Nazis behind enemy lines. Like the men in your book, he believed that risking his life was a small price to pay for the freedom of Europe. Years later, he climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. One of the climbers in the tour group was a German pilot during the war. They embraced and someone took a photograph of them, high on that mountain, side by side. TONY



Two former enemies who meet on Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa is an interesting story. But it is a detour from the main idea the writer was developing, specifically the courage and commitment of his grandfather during the war. That doesn't mean the writer can't include the detail about Mt. Kilimanjaro, but Tony has got to somehow find his way back to the main road. He has got to link the Mt. Kilimanjaro "detour" to the main highway of ideas in his essay or drop it altogether.

Avoiding road blocks and detours are easier once you are aware that they exist. A good driver pays attention to the road signs along the highway. A writer has to keep an eye out too for the bumps in the road.