How to build a piece around an insight

When to lead with the finding instead of the problem

Gates. Relevance: secondary. Credibility: secondary. **Proof: primary.** Safety: no. Access: no.

The reader decides the structure. A reader who already feels the problem wants it named precisely. A reader who doesn't feel it yet has to be shown something they can't dismiss before any problem framing will land.

Questions this guide answers

- When should an article lead with a problem, and when should it lead with a finding?
- What support does an insight-led article need immediately after its claim?
- How can we choose between problem-first and insight-first structures before drafting?

The symptom

The piece was good and nothing happened.

Internal praise. A few shares. A comment from somebody who used to work there. No inquiry, no call where a prospect quoted a line back, nothing in the pipeline that traced to it. Six weeks later the marketing meeting reaches the content item and the honest report is that it…performed.

So the firm writes another one, and the opening move is identical. Name the problem the audience is assumed to have, walk through what it costs them, offer the guidance. That's a sound structure, and the audience nodded, which is the part that makes this hard to see. Agreement and movement aren't the same event.

Somewhere in the same stack is a piece that opened by announcing the firm's deep experience in the sector.

Why it keeps happening

The problem-first structure works, so it becomes the only one.

Reasonable enough. Firms were told for a decade that content should be helpful rather than promotional, and leading with the reader's problem is how you do that. It reads as help. It also assumes the reader shows up already carrying the problem, and when they don't, naming it produces polite agreement attached to nothing.

Then there's the fallback, which does more damage. A firm that wants a piece to establish expertise says so outright. We have deep experience in this area. Our team has worked with dozens of firms like yours. That sentence has never changed a reader's mind about whether the firm knows

anything, because every competitor publishes a version of it and readers learned to skip the paragraph years ago.

We've sat through a lot of marketing meetings where the proposed fix for a piece that didn't land was another piece exactly like it. And we've published the insight without the evidence more than once. That's a column. It travels, people enjoy it, nothing happens, and you spend the following month wondering why.

What the buyer is doing at the Proof gate

Watching. An insight-led piece is a demonstration, and the buyer gets to watch the firm notice something. Being told the firm notices things is a claim of a different kind, and it's the kind that gets discounted the moment it's made.

Which is why the evidence half isn't optional. An insight without evidence is an opinion, and opinions are free. The buyer has plenty already and no particular reason to prefer yours.

Szent-Györgyi put the whole problem in one line: *Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought.* Same documents. Same data. Same lens. The pattern library is what thinks the different thought, and a piece that shows the pattern library working proves more than a credentials paragraph ever has.

There's a machine reading now too. A distinctive finding gives a summary something specific to carry and a source worth retaining. Check whether it actually does. A widely-shared problem statement gets absorbed into the general answer with nobody's name attached.

The correction

Before you draft, write the finding in one sentence. Then ask whether a competent competitor would already agree with it.

If they'd agree, you have a problem piece, and it should be built as one.

Problem-Implication-Solution. Name a specific problem. Trace what happens if it goes unaddressed. Give guidance somebody can act on Monday. This reads as help rather than pitch, and it's the right structure when the reader already knows they have the problem and needs it named precisely. Name the problem before you present the solution, explain where clients commonly misdiagnose it, and point out what even strong teams miss. Done well, that helps the reader see more clearly. Done badly, it's a firm showing off.

If they'd argue with you, you have something else.

Insight-Evidence-Application. Lead with the finding. Prove it. Then give the application. This structure demonstrates expertise rather than claiming it, and it's what a reader needs when the finding is surprising and they don't yet know the problem exists.

Order carries more weight here than anywhere else. Evidence comes second, immediately, before any application. A reader who meets a surprising claim and then waits three paragraphs for support has already decided what to do with the claim, and it isn't in your favor.

And the evidence has to be checkable. A number with a source. A documented case. A pattern named specifically enough that a reader can hold it against their own experience and find out whether you're right. *In our experience* fails every one of those, because there's nothing in it a reader can test, and the firms leaning hardest on the phrase tend to be the ones with the least to show.

Whether the finished draft sounds like everybody else's is a separate check, and it happens later. This one happens before the first sentence exists.

Before and after

Before. *We bring deep experience helping firms in this sector build content that resonates with their buyers.*

After, opening excerpt. Committees rarely disqualify *a firm during the meeting where the decision gets made. They do it in the twenty minutes beforehand, while somebody skims two proposals nobody had time to read properly. That's the room your executive summary is written for, and here's what survives it.*

That opening has made a claim. The next paragraph has to earn it: show the documented comparison, interview or decision record that supports the finding, and say what it does and doesn't establish. If all you have is a hunch about the twenty minutes before the meeting, don't present the timing as a measured fact. Then give the application: put the buyer's situation, the comparison and the supporting evidence in an executive summary that can stand on its own. Finding, support, useful move. The opening alone isn't the finished example.

Run this on your own material

Pull the last three pieces you published. For each one, write the core finding as a single sentence, the way you'd say it out loud to somebody who asked what the piece was about.

Then decide honestly whether a competitor would argue with any of the three.

If all three draw agreement, you've been writing problem pieces, which is fine as long as it was a decision and not a default. If one would start an argument, go back into it and find the evidence. When the evidence isn't there, that's the piece to rebuild first, and it's usually the one the firm was proudest of.

Signals you've cleared it

Advance when the finding survives compression to a single sentence and a competent competitor would push back on it. When the evidence sits inside the piece rather than inside somebody's head. When a reader repeats the finding back with the proof still attached, which means it can be carried into rooms you'll never be in.

Hold when the finding is true and everybody already agrees with it. That's a problem piece wearing an insight's clothes, and any evidence you bolt on will read as padding. Hold when the only support is the firm's own confidence. Hold too when the application arrives before the proof, because you're asking the reader to act on something you haven't yet given them a reason to believe.

Where this connects

Engagement Success in an AI World · When the World Stopped Reading, on noticing as the thing that stays scarce.

Research Library · Entry 18, expertise, pattern recognition and judgment.

Next move · Go to *How to show expertise instead of claiming it*.