

CHAPTER

8

Introducing the Essay

IN THIS CHAPTER

Summary: Examine effective techniques for introducing the subject of your essay

KEY IDEA

Key Ideas

- ★ Practice with the topic and purpose you will present
- ★ Develop your assertion and how you will appeal to your specific audience
- ★ Read professional introductions and commentary
- ★ Practice writing effective introductions

Composing has its peaks and valleys, ups and downs, circuitous and bumpy highways and byways, and getting from point A to point Z can be like walking or driving backward. However, the important thing is to arrive at your destination with both you and your reader safely intact.

One of the important steps to help smooth out the literary ride is to create a clear, informative, and interesting opening paragraph. By now, you have had experiences with many English instructors who have correctly told you that an introduction has a specific job to do. And, by now, you must feel that you're fairly expert at constructing these opening salvos for your essays.

However, humor your trainers, and take a few moments to review what you've been taught in the past. **Specifically the introductory paragraph or opening should indicate:**

- What is to follow;
- The topic you will address;
- Your position on the subject;
- Why the reader should be at all interested in the subject;
- Why your reader should pay any attention to your take on this subject.

“Composing is not a linear process, though what it creates has linear form.”

—Anne Berthoff,
The Making of Meaning

KEY IDEA

In other words, you, the writer, have to make your intentions clear, grab your reader's interest and imply the significance of your subject.

You've also practiced many times over the "formula" for the construction of the opening paragraph. **An introductory paragraph must contain an introduction to the subject plus any needed background information, such as dates, statistics, scenario, etc., plus an indication of the organizational pattern of the essay plus a thesis statement.**

Okay. So, supposedly, you know what your writing job is and how it should be accomplished. If that is true, why bother strengthening your skills for writing the introduction? Why? Because you're maturing as a writer, and you want to be treated and taken seriously as an adult writer with something interesting to say about important topics. There's more to the writing life than three-word sentences and five-sentence paragraphs. There's a whole world of adventurous openings just waiting for you to write them and curious readers whose interests can be piqued.

You're also familiar with the old cliché "You can't judge a book by its cover." But, let's be honest here. No matter how hard we may try not to, we DO draw immediate conclusions about people, events, presentations, etc., based on the initial impression or impact on us. And, when it comes to writing, a reader is quick to throw down or ignore a text that does not capture his or her attention within the first few lines. Therefore, YOU, THE WRITER, have to grab the attention of your intended reader in that introductory paragraph or section.

We say introductory paragraph or section because the length of your introduction depends on the length of the entire text. A short essay needs one opening paragraph, perhaps two at times. However, a longer work such as a research paper demands several paragraphs, and a book may require an entire chapter or two. No matter the text and the length of the introduction, it is important to ease your reader into the subject. Get them comfortable in the passenger seat and strap them in for the ride.

There are several techniques for introducing the subject of your essay. These include:

- **Analogy** _____ Present a comparison between your subject and something with which your reader is most probably familiar.
- **Anecdote** _____ Choose a brief incident that relates to your subject and tells the story.
- **Dialogue** _____ Include a brief piece of conversation that is related to your subject and that will lead to your assertion.
- **Explicit and direct statement of the assertion** _____ Go right to the subject and assertion of your essay and state it clearly. This type of opening is especially useful for those writing assignments that are reports, essays in science or history, or for essay assignments that present difficulties to both you and your reader.
- **Interesting fact or detail** _____ Choose an interesting historical reference, a statistic, or a specific detail and indicate how it is related to your subject.
- **Question** _____ Ask a broad question and indicate how it could be related to your subject/assertion. The question can be a regular question for which you will provide an answer, or it could be rhetorical.
- **Quotation** _____ Find a quotation that is related to your subject and indicate how it is related to your thesis. Quotations can come from within the text being discussed or from another source.

- **Startling remark** _____ This should be a real attention grabber. However, make certain that it is actually related to your subject and your assertion about it.



Remember that no matter which opening gambit you choose to employ, that introduction should be one that is specifically tuned to your subject, assertion, purpose, and audience.

How The Professionals Do It

Let's take a close look at a series of introductions written by professionals. Writers of fiction and nonfiction frequently use the same techniques to involve their readers. Just as we often jump to conclusions about individuals or situations based on first impressions, so, too, do readers often jump to conclusions about continuing to read a work. It is imperative for an author to capture and coerce his or her reader to be actively involved from the beginning. Take a look at these examples, both fiction and nonfiction, and concentrate on the writer's craft as you read.

J. D. Salinger from *The Catcher in the Rye*

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you really want to know the truth.

Comments: (question)

This first person opening draws the reader into the passage by posing an implied question on the part of the reader—if you really want to hear about it—and then by answering it—I don't feel like going into it—thereby raising the reader's curiosity. Stylistically, the speaker mixes literary allusion and colloquialisms, indicating a complex character. The concept of truth hints at the thematic elements of the novel.

Mark Twain from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly, Tom's Aunt Polly she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas, is all told about in that book—which is mostly a true book; with some stretchers, as I said before.

Comments: (dialogue)

Here is one of the most famous openings in all of American literature. Twain's first person narrative is made immediately compelling as Huck introduces himself to the reader. The reference to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and to Twain, himself; the informality and regional English; plus Huck's obvious desire to tell his story, all provide a sense of time and place and draw the audience into the story.

Rita Mae Brown from *Rita Will: Memoir of a Literary Rabble-Rouser*

My mother was mucking stalls at Hanover Shoe Farm outside of Hanover, Pennsylvania, within a shout of the Mason–Dixon line, when her water broke. Had the hospital not been nearby, I would have been born in a manger. Perhaps I came into the world knowing Jesus had already done that, and since he suffered for all of us I saw no reason to be redundant.

Comments: (anecdote)

Ms. Brown's first person anecdote introduces herself to the reader as a straight-talking, ironic and humorous individual. It also lets the reader know that this is going to be a type of memoir.

F. Scott Fitzgerald from *The Great Gatsby*

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

"Whenever you feel like criticizing any one," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores.

Comments: (quotation and anecdote)

This opening employs a quotation and an anecdote to introduce the themes of the novel and the narrator. The reader infers that judgment, consequences, communication, vulnerability and victimization will all be important in this work.

Jane Austen from *Pride and Prejudice*

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters.

Comments: (explicit statement)

The opening sentence is also the assertion upon which the novel is developed. There is no doubt in the reader's mind about the subject matter or focus of the novel. The pleasant surprise is the understated humor in the first paragraph which alludes to a witty and wry tone toward the subject.

Thomas Jefferson from *The Declaration of Independence*

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Comments: (direct plus explicit)

In his opening, Jefferson is forceful and direct. Without hyperbolic language, or interesting tales and references, he makes it clear to the world the exact purpose and assertion of his declaration.

Richard Wright from *Native Son*

Brrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiinnng!

An alarm clock clanged in the dark and silent room. A bed spring creaked.

A woman's voice sang out impatiently: "Bigger, shut that thing off!"

Comments: (dialogue)

This tidbit of dialogue, as emphatic as the alarm clock itself, emphasizes the demands made on the main character who has yet to be met. The brevity of the introduction and the simplicity of syntax and diction establish the elemental quality of the work.

Albert Camus from *The Stranger*

Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY. FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday.

Comments: (startling remark)

Certainly this novel opens with a startling observation. Perhaps it is the objectivity of the speaker that is so shocking and compelling that we must read on. On another level, the opening is analogous to the entire existential movement: death, uncertainty, isolation, the inadequacy of communication and the absurdity of time and life, are the basic tenets of the philosophy Camus will explore in the novel.

Calvin Trillin from "Comforting Thoughts" in *Enough's Enough (And Other Rules of Life)*

First I read a study in Meriden, Connecticut, which indicated that talking to yourself is a perfectly legitimate way of getting comfort during a difficult time. Then I saw an item about research at Yale demonstrating that stress seems to be reduced in some people by exposing them to aromas of certain desserts. Then I started talking to myself about desserts with aromas I find soothing. Then I felt a lot better. Isn't science grand?

Comments: (interesting facts plus rhetorical question)

Mr. Trillin's citing of the two research studies and his use of the rhetorical question to end the opening paragraph easily and humorously indicate the subject, the assertion and the tone the essay will take.

Louisa May Alcott from *Little Women*

"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

"It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

"I don't think it's fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things and other girls nothing at all," added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

"We've got father and mother and each other," said Beth contentedly, from her corner.

Comments: (dialogue)

Totally dependent on dialogue, this opening introduces four diverse characters with incredible economy. Each personality is defined, the conflicts are enumerated, the ideal is presented, and the reader is given the opportunity to identify with the speaker of his choice.

David Sedaris's Opening of "Diary of a Smoker" in *Barrel Fever*

I rode my bike to the boat pond in Central Park, where I bought myself a cup of coffee and sat down on a bench to read. I lit a cigarette and was enjoying myself when the woman seated twelve feet away, on the other side of the bench, began waving her hands before her face. I thought she was fighting off a bee.

She fussed at the air and called out, "Excuse me, do you mind if we make this a no-smoking bench?"

Comments: (dialogue plus anecdote)

David Sedaris uses this first person anecdote that includes dialogue to introduce the reader to both his subject and his assertion. It is obvious to any reader that Mr. Sedaris is not at all happy with those who would impose their no-smoking mania on others.

Camille Paglia from "Rock as Art" in *Sex, Art and American Culture*

Rock is eating its young. Rock musicians are America's most wasted natural resource.

Comments: (analogy plus startling statement)

Containing two startling analogies, this quite brief pair of sentences is the opening salvo to an essay in which Ms. Paglia will obviously be arguing in favor of the importance of "rock."

Opening Paragraphs

As a first example, the writer for our Mark Twain prompt has written the following three opening paragraphs.

A

Honesty and *politics*. For the cynic in each of us, these are two mutually exclusive terms. Each time we hear a politician say, "I want to be perfectly clear," we know to take what is said with a grain of salt. Mark Twain plays with our political cynicism in "A Presidential Candidate," an essay that parodies the stereotypical campaign speech.

B

We've all heard the following before, haven't we? "Trust me. I only want to be your public servant. I will always work for the common good of all." It's so familiar and so shallow that the political cynic in each of us responds, "*Sure* we should. *Sure* he does. *Sure* he will." Aware of this cynicism, Mark Twain plays with our political suspicions in "A Presidential Candidate," a parody of the typical campaign speech.

C

Barely 51 percent of those eligible to vote did so in the last presidential election. Do you wonder why? Perhaps it's the result of voters distrusting politicians. Mark Twain plays with this cynicism of the electorate in "A Presidential Candidate," an essay that parodies the stereotypical political campaign speech.

Comments

Opening **A** uses a brief quotation to introduce the context of the essay; whereas, opening **B** employs a rhetorical question and two bits of dialogue to grab the reader's attention and to indicate the subject. Last, opening **C** presents an interesting, if not startling, statistic and a rhetorical question to engage and lead the reader to the assertion. After thoughtfully considering each of these introductions and the purpose of the essay, our writer has chosen to use opening **B**. This is a choice that could certainly be changed in a writing situation that allows for revision. However, in a timed essay exam, opening **B** would be our first AND final choice because it lends itself most directly to both the assertion and the tone the writer wishes to take.

For our second example, the writer for the "Dover Beach" prompt has composed the following three opening paragraphs.

A

"Ah, love, let us be true to one another!" says Matthew Arnold. What a line! One can almost hear him asking his beloved what her sign is. And yet, this impassioned and shameless plea for requited love works, and it works because of the diction, poetic devices, and imagery Arnold presents in "Dover Beach." The poor girl doesn't have a chance.

B

From "calm to clash, from light to darkling, from sea to land," Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach" is a study in contrast. This contrast is necessary to convince his love to be true, and it is developed throughout the poem by an increasingly negative progression of examples. This organizational pattern is enhanced by the form and structure of the lines. Arnold also appeals to the senses to bring his love to see the urgency of his desire and passion. The metaphors and allusions all reiterate his position, that love and lovemaking are the only things of certainty in an ignorant and hostile world.

C

It seems there is nothing new under the sun after all. Whenever young men are endangered by war, they are driven to counter the threat of death with the experience of life. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois says "the opposite of death is desire" and this seems especially appropriate to remember when reading Matthew Arnold's poem, "Dover Beach." Through poetic devices, symbols, and repetition, the poet argues for love and fidelity.

Comments

All three opening paragraphs include author, title, and genre. Each addresses the major points of the prompt and indicates the writer's understanding of task and text. Opening **A** refers to a quotation from the poem to help establish the voice of the writer. The tone of the essay is clear and engaging. Opening **B** immediately makes reference to the entire poem with specific details and delineates the direction the essay will take. It is clear and academic and indicates a level of confidence on the part of the writer. Opening **C** links one literary work with another and incorporates an outside quotation to illustrate an analogous insight about the poem.

In a timed situation, the writer would be most comfortable developing example **B** because it already has established the format of the essay. Sequence and progression help to control literary analysis and keep the writer on track. Example **A** might be more fun to write, but it could be difficult to maintain tone, and the desire to be clever could get in the way of the task. Likewise, opening **C** could prove limiting because of its focus on the last stanza as the controlling idea. Each of these openings would be suitable for an untimed essay, but for this, opening **B** is the choice.

Student Samples

Professional writers make their living doing this kind of stuff, but what about the ordinary student who is stuck writing an essay in answer to a specific assignment or prompt? To find out, read the following student samples.

Student A

The culmination of moral reconciliation and spiritual awakening is most evident at the end of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon. This gradual enlightenment, rather than a sudden epiphany, is portrayed through Milkman, the heroic character of the novel.

Comments

This brief, but on-target, introduction indicates a student writer who is in control of his or her subject. Not only does the writer state the subject and purpose of the essay, but he or she also employs mature diction and presents insights using phrases such as *moral reconciliation and spiritual awakening*, and *rather than a sudden epiphany* to point out an inherent contrast.

Student B

In her op-ed piece, "Pretty Poison," Maureen Dowd examines and modifies Anna Quindlen's earlier insight into the categorized life span of a woman, that is, "pre-Babe, Babe, and post-Babe." Reflecting on the new "Botox-injection craze," Dowd facetiously updates Quindlen's classifications to, "pre-Babe, Babe, Botox-Babe, and Cher." Ms. Dowd employs a variety of rhetorical devices to expose the absurdity of the female ideal of presenting herself as a younger, more attractive woman than she believes she is.

Comments

This introduction clearly presents both the subject and purpose together with the writer's definite attitude toward Ms. Dowd's and Ms. Quindlen's topics that this student refers to with quotations from the op-ed column. Using words such as *craze*, *facetiously*, and *absurdity*, the reader also becomes aware of an upcoming "prickly" analysis of the columnist's presentation.

Student C

The reader of Norman Mailer's passage walks away with great empathy for Benny "Kid" Paret and a better understanding of what it was like in that arena the night of his massacre. Mailer's diction, syntax, and use of specific animal imagery recreates this event with a dichotomous tone and a sense of the bestiality of the "sweet science."

Comments

Here is a student who has a definite point of view and is not afraid to make that point of view known to the reader who is brought immediately into the essay. The writer's tone is obvi-

ous from the very beginning with the use of words such as *massacre*, and *bestiality*, and, the thesis incorporates the prompt without a bland restatement of its purpose and object.

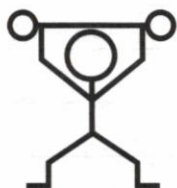
Student D

In sixth grade, when most boys fantasize about becoming famous baseball players, I dreamed, among other things, about being a contestant on Jeopardy. Athletics interested me, but I suspected that fame and fortune would be more assured if I pursued the game show route. Now, six years later, I was actually auditioning for Teen Jeopardy. At last, I would have the opportunity to mentally spar with the other contestants and relate my own droll anecdote to Alex Trebek. Dreams can come true.

Comments

This is an intriguing opening to a personal essay. The student's use of anecdote immediately sets the informal and personal tone of the essay as it piques the reader's curiosity. Will the writer's dream come true? What happened on *Teen Jeopardy*?

Total Workout



Enough of just looking at others. It's time to stretch and maximize your own opening skills.

Go to your writing folder or portfolio and choose THREE opening paragraphs.

- Either rewrite or copy and paste each of the openings on a separate sheet of paper and answer the following questions:

1. The subject of the essay is _____
_____.
2. My purpose is _____.
3. My audience is _____.
4. My assertion is _____.
5. I used the following opening technique(s) in my opening _____
_____.
6. I believe the opening is good just the way it is. ____ yes ____ no
7. If you answered "no" to question 6, what technique do you think would be a better choice? _____.

- Choose ONE of the introductions and complete the following:

1. Using three different techniques, rewrite the opening THREE different ways below.

Technique _____ Rewrite: _____

Technique _____ Rewrite: _____

Technique _____ Rewrite: _____

2. Which technique do you think works best? _____
3. Why do you believe this method is best? _____
4. Ask one of your peers to read each opening and see whether or not he or she agrees with your choice.
5. Do you think revising your introduction would make your essay even better?
 ____ yes ____ no. Why? _____



Can you feel the burn? Well, before you cool down, here's another item to consider when deciding on your opening. If you are given a writing assignment that involves several classes and several steps, from planning to first draft to peer review to revision, you can take a great deal of time to consider and reconsider your introduction. This is the time to experiment and to be creative. However, in a timed situation, you will have to think quickly and decisively. The more practice you allow yourself in the untimed essays, the better you will be in the stressful and demanding timed writing environments.

You can read the complete essays by our two sample writers at the end of Chapter 10.