

How to Write an Opening Paragraph

Imagine being introduced to someone who acts like a complete jerk to you. Add on to this that the kid is a complete know-it-all who doesn't know when to shut up; plus, he thinks you are a total moron and treats you like you are an idiot. Try to imagine yourself going home and saying, "Hey Mom, I met this really cool guy today. I think we are going to be good friends. Can he come skiing with us tomorrow so I can listen to him all the way up to Quebec and back? He's really interesting. He told me so."

The reality is that this kid might get your attention, but I doubt he would be able to keep your attention because you might not be so eager to hear all he has to say.

When writing, don't be that kid!

The opening paragraph introduces not only your topic but it also introduces you. If the reader likes and respects you they will keep reading even if your main thesis is lost in a jumble of irrelevant details. By the same token, if you capture their attention and engage their senses--see, feel, touch, hear, smell and taste--in a meaningful and relevant way they will want to read what you have to say; they will give you, the writer, the benefit of the doubt. A good opening paragraph gets you in the door. A good writer gets to stay in the house!

Here are some "Techniques for a Good Open."

Think of a TV drama, a documentary, or a sitcom. There is always a short scene to start the show. Its sole purpose is to make you curious and interested enough to wait through two minutes of commercials before the real show starts. The opening scene should not give away the ending but rather prepare you for the show itself; it points the reader in the direction your story or essay is going and hints at how it might unfold--but make sure you get where you intend to go. A family flying to Disney World for winter break might be disappointed if they ended up in Newfoundland--be as clear and concise--and specifically focused--as you can be. Don't try to "sound smart" and promise anything that you don't intend to deliver. Let your thesis (stated as the last line of the opening paragraph) be as narrow and specific as what you intend to write about. Always go back to your thesis when your writing piece is finished and be sure it is clear, concise, memorable and compelling and captures what you wrote about in your body paragraphs.

With that in mind, here are a couple of time honored opens!

1. Drop Your Reader into a Scene. This can be an actual physical happening or even a scene from a piece of literature. Paint a vivid and compelling picture of that scene; attach a few pithy and interesting thoughts then end the paragraph by stating your theme." The thesis can be either a statement or a question that needs to be answered. Here is an example by a noted author

speaking without the "I" in his voice. Be sure to include plenty of images and actions and be sure the scene includes the who, what, when, where, and why details your reader needs to read.

e.g. Every day at 10:30 AM it's the same: Kids dressed in pressed pants and Abercrombie shirts whip lacrosse balls at a shell shocked youngster in front of an oversized net. Their language would make a sailor blush. The smallest kid out there raises his middle finger behind the back of the large and lurking "upper schooler"--the obvious bully. Far off to the side two teachers are lost in conversation, oblivious to the teasing, taunting and mayhem going on in front of them. All of this is happening at one of the most prestigious prep schools in the country. **It has to make you ask: who are these schools hiring, and are they qualified to teach our most precious resource--the children of America?**

[The setting of the scene is in normal font. **The stating of theme is bold.**]

2. Allow Your Reader to Enter the World of Your Imagination. Take them on a journey through your thinking; invite them to join you on this journey. In this type of writing, you need to include the "I" in your voice because you are asking your reader to join you--you in all your glory and decadence. Here is how Thoreau invites his readers to speculate on buying a farm. It is certainly not easy reading. Thoreau had no interest in writing to a lazy audience; Thoreau challenges us intellectually, socially, politically and philosophically. As a willing reader we know and respect that there is more than ever meets the eye on his writings:

e.g. AT A CERTAIN season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live. In imagination I have bought all the farms in succession, for all were to be bought, and I knew their price. I walked over each farmer's premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry with him, took his farm at his price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind; even put a higher price on it--took everything but a deed of it--took his word for his deed, for I dearly love to talk--cultivated it, and him too to some extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on. This experience entitled me to be regarded as a sort of real-estate broker by my friends. Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a sedes, a seat?--better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a house not likely to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village was too far from it. Well, there I might live, I said; and there I did live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life; saw how I could let the years run off, buffet the winter through, and see the spring come in. The future inhabitants of this region, wherever they may place their houses, may be sure that they have been anticipated. An afternoon sufficed to lay out the land into orchard, wood-lot, and pasture, and to decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the door, and whence each blasted

tree could be seen to the best advantage; and then I let it lie, fallow, perchance, **for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.**" Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*: "Where I Lived, and What I lived For"

[The setting of the scene is in normal font. **The stating of theme is bold.**]

3. Engage Your Reader in an Intellectual Journey: If you are excited by the possibilities of your essay, the odds are there are readers out there who will be excited as well. In this approach, which is best suited to a lengthy and complex essay, use a series of questions or statements or speculations that make your reader want to answer, question, or ponder them with you. In the opening below, we see Ralph Waldo Emerson (another Concord writer!) introducing his legendary essay, "Self Reliance" in which Emerson invites us into his intellectual world—first by the selected quote and then by letting us in on his philosophical explorations of what it means to be a true and original thinker and why it is important to be "self-reliant."

e.g.

"Ne te quaesiveris extra."

"Man is his own star; and the soul that can
Render an honest and a perfect man,
Commands all light, all influence, all fate;
Nothing to him falls early or too late.
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still."

Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher's *Honest Man's Fortune*

Cast the bantling on the rocks,
Suckle him with the she-wolf's teat;
Wintered with the hawk and fox,
Power and speed be hands and feet.

ESSAY II Self-Reliance

I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instill is of more value than any thought they may contain. **To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and**

traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

[The setting of the scene is in normal font. **The stating of theme is bold.**]

[Notice in this opening that almost the entire opening paragraph is a stating of the theme. There is a lot that Emerson introduces us to in this paragraph. Likewise, the essay that follows is many pages long.]

Point of View: To I or not to I? That is the question. The last thing to consider is what point of view should you write from in your essay. Writing from a first person point of you is a matter of personal preference or it is the preference of the teacher—and (for better or worse) it is best to do what the teacher wants; but in the world of writing whatever works best is the best thing to do. I feel stupid sometimes when struggling to keep the "I" voice out of my writing, so my basic rule is that if it feels natural and right, I use the "I" voice; however, if I am struggling to insert myself and it does not feel natural, I do not use the "I" voice. Ultimately, my readers and critics do the deciding for me, for is they who decide whether it works for them or not.

All three of these approaches are tried and true methods for introducing the body paragraphs of an essay. There is no one right or wrong way to craft an opening paragraph, but setting the scene and stating the theme is never the wrong way to start an essay.

Practice and perfect. This always works.