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Openers

It is in the hard, hard, rock-pile labor of seeking to win, hold, or deserve a reader's interest that the pleasant agony of writing again comes in.

—John Mason Brown

What gets my interest is the sense that a writer is speaking honestly and fully of what he knows well.

—Wendell Berry

Say you're at the doctor's, and you've just picked up a copy of *Newsweek*. You idly browse its pages. With your mind on automatic pilot, your eye checks out one article after another, searching for anything intriguing. Since you're hungry for something good, and you're expecting your name to be called, you're ruthless. You give each story maybe three sentences to prove itself, and that's all, but experience—or impatience—has convinced you it's enough. In that brief span your mind answers probably all of these questions:

“Does this story attract me?”

“Enough to read on?”

“Is the writing easy, or will I have to work here?”

“Is the style fresh or just so-so?”

“Does the writer seem smart? well-informed? spirited?”

So it goes with everything you read. The problem is, though, you as a writer are subject to the very same testing. You, too, will generally be given only three or four sentences to prove yourself. Granted, if you're writing a school essay, your reader—your instructor—will finish the piece regardless of its merits; but if you have convinced her in your opener that this means *work*, you've probably lost her, just as she'd lose you if the roles were reversed. She's only human, after all, and first impressions prove hard to shake. Instead of looking for the good, she'll look for the bad, if only to justify her initial impression. Besides, she'll know from experience, like you, that the quality of an opener tends to forecast what follows. If, at the very outset, a writer seems bored, unwilling to use his imagination, indifferent to his reader, and unclear in his thinking, he's apt to remain that way. But if his opener reveals passion, a clear, perceptive mind, and a flair for drawing in the reader, the odds are he'll stay true to form.

From the reader's standpoint, then, your opener is critical. But it's equally important to *you*, for openers have a way of governing how the rest of the piece gets written. A good opener gives you momentum, confidence, and an extra incentive to make the remaining paragraphs worthy of the first. There's also a practical explanation. A good opener normally includes a good thesis—bold, fresh, clearly focused. And a good thesis tends to argue itself because it has a built-in forward thrust. It's like a good comedy situation: it ignites.

One way to test an opener is for *directness of approach*. An essay, like a house, can be entered by the front door or the back door. Were you to check the opening paragraphs of a random set of undergraduate papers, you'd find that the most skilled writers usually elect what I call the *front-door approach*. They march into their subject with breathtaking assurance, clearly eager to share their opinions. And you can see why. They know what they think—and why they think it. Let me illustrate. Here's the opener from a super undergraduate essay on Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *I Henry IV*:*

Prince Hal is as hard to crack as a walnut. "I know you all," he says of Falstaff & Co. in his soliloquy ending I.ii, but what friend—what reader even—can speak with equal confidence about Hal himself? His true nature seems finally to be as riddling as Hamlet's or Cleopatra's; indeed, he seems

*In this chapter, and in the chapters on "Middles" and "Closers" that follow, my examples of student writing all deal with Shakespeare's plays. I chose these examples partly for their eloquence, partly because Shakespeare is our most universal author, and partly for purposes of continuity.

at times to be a hybrid of those two characters: infinitely various, theatrical, cunning past man's thought, loving, brutal, equivocal—the list goes on. It's little wonder that Hotspur, so childishly open and simple, often surpasses Hal as the reader's favorite. It's also little wonder that we are hard pressed to decide whether Hal is actually likable or merely admirable.

Less experienced writers, on the other hand, choose the *back-door approach*, the long way in—like this:

In the second scene of the first Act of William Shakespeare's *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*, Prince Hal presents a soliloquy which serves as a crux of this play. Although this play would appear by the title to tell of King Henry IV, actually the principal character is the King's son, Hal. The play reveals what seems to be a remarkable change in character for the Prince and follows his exploits in a civil war waged against his father. . . .

This opening paragraph—essentially a plot summary—continues for another four sentences. Would you be eager to read on? Would you even be awake to read on?

It's clear why writers like this one elect the back-door approach:

- They haven't taken the trouble to formulate a point of view, so they have little to argue, hence little reason to argue it. What's the point of coming to the point when you don't *have* a point?
- Because they have little to say, they fear their reader. They know he's apt to expose their bluff. So they instinctively delay a confrontation with him as long as possible—often right down to the last sentence.
- They haven't yet learned to value their reader's time. In fact, they haven't learned even to *consider* their reader, at least in any systematic way, for they're still preoccupied with merely getting ideas on paper.
- They have a vague notion that they're supposed to be writing for the World, not for a well-informed reader. And even though common sense tells them otherwise, they cling to that notion since it lets them rationalize flagrant padding. In the opener above, for instance, our writer gives us the full name of the author (instead of just "Shakespeare"), the unwieldy complete play title (instead of just *I Henry IV*), and the Act and scene laboriously written out (instead of just "I.ii").

Below is another example of the back-door approach, but this one is more sophisticated, more adroit, in its use of a smoke screen. The writer begins with some cautious reconnoitering of the surrounding terrain—a gambit known as Establishing the Large Critical Overview—but unfortunately

discovers only mists and goblins known as Grand Generalizations. This student grasps how the thing is supposed to *sound*, certainly, but having zero to say, she must content herself with an empty gush—lovely, for sure, but still empty. It's *The Art of Saying Nothing Profoundly*:

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, admired for its poetic style and intriguing characters, has remained a classic for over three centuries. The character of Hamlet is probably one of Shakespeare's most perplexing and most pleasing. He is easily identified with because of his multi-faceted personality and his realistic problems.

When the student came in for a conference, I helped her to read her opener from the reader's perspective. The experience was eye-opening. Gradually she began to realize that an essay is only as good as its thesis, that the first four or five sentences are make-or-break, that a back-door approach is transparently evasive, and that it's a delightful challenge to wake up your reader. She proved an apt learner. Her very next paper showed it. Instead of rewriting the piece on Hamlet, which now sickened her, she decided to start afresh on another character in the play, King Claudius, whom she found interestingly problematic. This is how her new essay began:

He killed his brother. He married his brother's wife. He stole his brother's crown. A cold-hearted murderer, he is described by his brother's ghost as "that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (I.v.42). The bare facts appear to stamp him an utter moral outlaw. Nonetheless, as his soliloquies and anguished asides reveal, no person in *Hamlet* demonstrates so mixed a true nature as Claudius, the newly made King of Denmark.

Below are some more good openers, all by this student's classmates, most of them written well into the semester after the class had begun to discover what makes an opener click. Note the directness in each case—the front-door approach. Note, too, the concrete detail, the sense that the writer knows precisely where he or she is going, and the salesmanship—the *verve*—in the phrasing. I'll quote the entire first opener, but to conserve space I'll quote only the initial sentences of the other two:

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the servant is really a lord, and the lord's wife is really a page, and the schoolmaster is really a suitor, and the crazy suitor is really a wise old fox, and the perfect beauty is really a shrew, and the shrew is really a perfect wife, and things are not as they seem.

Even the play itself pretends not to be a play by putting on a production within a production. In it, three characters are being duped by this rampant role-playing. By the examples of Sly, Kate, and Bianca, Shakespeare acquaints us with the effects of wealth, love, and power, respectively, and shows how the emergence of an inner (perhaps truer) character can be said to have been tamed. However, the “taming” occurs only as a result of the manipulation of the supposers by the posers. Moreover, while things are not as they seem because of the dual-roled characters, neither does the “taming” suggested by the title ever really take place.

The occult element leavens Shakespeare’s works with a pinch of the unknown and an implication that it should remain so. His artful but often annoying ambiguity seldom allows more than a fleeting glimpse at a forbidden terrain before it is bulldozed out of sight by convenient rationales. Several examples of Shakespeare’s significant use of the occult immediately come to mind: the witches in *Macbeth*, the antics of Titania and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the Ghost in *Hamlet*, and the figure of Owen Glendower in *I Henry IV*.

“He that walketh with wise men shall be wise; But the companions of fools shall smart for it.” King Solomon’s proverb appears reversed in *King Lear* for it is a wise Fool who accompanies and counsels a seemingly foolish king. In the play, the Fool assumes myriad roles—that of teacher, loyal servant, comedian, and often the punitive voice of Lear’s own conscience.

Don’t you know these writers had fun?

So much for examples. Now here are a few tips to run your eye over as you sit down to write your next opener. Keep in mind, as you read them, that openers are a challenge for *everybody*, and that even skilled writers will sometimes spend as much as a third of their writing time tweaking their opener into proper shape.

1. Before starting to write, do two things. *First*, ensure that you have a strong thesis. There’s a good way to tell if you have one, but it takes courage. Write on some notepaper, “I contend that—” and complete the sentence. Now study what you’ve written. If somebody else’s essay were arguing the same thesis, would *you* be intrigued by it? Is it complex enough, or controversial enough, to allow for lengthy exposition? Have you really stuck your neck out, or are you pussyfooting? *Second*, have on hand a list of concrete details and apt quotations, and be ready to use them. Remember, if you lead off with a string of abstract generalizations, your

reader may impatiently mutter “Sheesh” and tune you out. But if you lead off with concrete details, your reader will think, “Hey, this person has really done their homework. What an eye for detail!”

2. Like most writers, you may choke at the very thought of beginning, for writing involves confronting, head on, all of one’s verbal and mental inadequacies. You may, as a result, find yourself making a dozen false starts. If so, try doing what a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter once advised me to do. “Pull yourself back from your desk,” he said, “take a deep breath, and say to yourself, ‘OK, now, what is it I’m *really* trying to say?’ Then simply say it—*talk* it. I got that tip from an old hand when I was a cub reporter many years ago. It works.”
3. If you follow this procedure and still feel discouraged with your opener, let it stand as it is, roughed out (if even that), and return to it after you’ve finished the first draft. There’s no rule that says you must write every paragraph sequentially. Remember, writing involves discovery. Once the first draft is finished, you’ll probably have found several points that deserve top billing. You may even discover—as I have demonstrated to many a student through the years—that your *second* paragraph is your real opener.
4. Use the front-door approach. Idle chat will destroy your credibility.
5. Use natural, simple prose—the simpler the better. You can come back later and add grace notes if you have a mind to (“punitive” in the *Lear* example above was doubtless one such afterthought), but initially keep it *simple*. Simple prose is clear prose. And simple prose, if smooth and rhythmical, is readable prose. Let your ideas alone do the impressing. If they look banal to you, there’s only one remedy: *upgrade them*. Don’t try to camouflage their weakness with razzle-dazzle rhetoric. You’ll razzle-dazzle yourself right into a bog of bull.
6. Unless you have good reason to do otherwise, make your opener full-bodied. If it’s splinter-sized—a mere two or three sentences long—and lacking point, your reader may conclude that you’re short on ideas and are only going through the motions. Experience will have taught her, as it’s probably taught you, that those conclusions are usually dead on. (Of course there’s always the glorious exception that makes a dictum like this look silly.) On the other hand, if your opener is barnlike, your reader may conclude that you lack a sense of proportion. You can just hear her groan: “Has the author no mercy? Why put *everything* in the first paragraph?”
7. Consider opening with a dramatically brief sentence—say, four or five words long. It will compel you to begin with a bold assertion, give your grateful reader a handle on the sentences that follow, and offer her the enchantment of surprise, since most opening sentences run considerably longer—in the neighborhood of 15 to 25 words.

8. If possible, organize your opening paragraph so that the biggest punch—the strongest statement of your thesis—comes at the *end*. (Note the *Taming of the Shrew* example above.) Such an organization has three advantages: it lets you build toward a climax; it gives you a great entry into your next paragraph, because of the springboard effect; and it saves you from repeating yourself.