

Writing Good Openers

Based on materials in *Right Words, Right Places*, by Scott Rice (Wadsworth, 1992).

How many times do your papers bog down because you do not have an effective opener, one that will catch the reader's interest, signal where you are going with your subject, and—most important—give you the momentum to keep writing? Knowing what you are going to say is sometimes not enough. Perhaps you write a sentence that sounds good, but then hit a wall. It doesn't lead anywhere. Maybe you have too much to say, too much unruly material to organize effectively, especially if you have done your research. Of course, there is always that old standby, the opening generalization or topic sentence, but it may seem too sweeping, or too abrupt, or too predictable, or it may lead nowhere after the first paragraph. Worse, your paper already begins to sound like all the others you have written.

You are looking for interest and momentum, a beginning that will entice the reader and carry you well into your subject, but your repertoire of openings may be limited. As the following examples show, professional writers have found a variety of solutions to this problem. They collect opening ideas and strategies, each with its own kind of power, and one way they explore a topic is to riffle through their collection of openers. As Constance Weaver of Western Michigan University has said, "Attention to how to say helps writers find what to say." The following are a few ideas you can use to start your own collections:

General-to-Specifics

Human beings have always been migratory. Sometime between 100,000 and 400,000 years ago, man's predecessor, *Homo erectus*, had spread from China and Java, to Britain and southern Africa. Later, Neanderthal types spanned Europe, North Africa, and the Near East; modern *Homo sapiens*, originating probably in Africa, reached Sarawak at least 40,000 years ago, Australia some 30,000 years ago, and North and South America more than 20,000 years ago. Excluding Antarctica, Paleolithic man made his way to every major part of the globe. Except for species dependent on him, he achieved a wider distribution than any other terrestrial animal. Since this propensity to migrate has persisted in every epoch, its explanation requires a theory independent of any particular epoch. My own view is that the abiding cause is the same trait that explains man's uniqueness in many other ways: his sociocultural mode of adaptation. . . .

— "The Migrations of Human Populations," *Scientific American*, Sept. 1974.

This paragraph illustrates the opening strategy you have probably been taught most often in school: the topic-sentence-first opener. Generalization-first openers have the advantage of clarity. They immediately orient the reader, giving an overview before descending to specifics. The first sentence generalizes; the rest of the paragraph illustrates. The author has not stated anything too obvious, only announced his

intention to explore a rich subject. The remainder of the article focuses on modern migrations, ones caused by economic and technological inequality, and far larger than any in the past.

Specifics-to-General

In the Norwegian fishing town of Tromso, 225 miles above the Arctic Circle, retailers keep their Coca-Cola not in coolers, but in "warmers"-to prevent it from freezing. In Spain, a Coke dispenser sits on the deck of the Fortuna, King Juan Carlos's yacht. And across the globe in South Korea, baseball fans in the bleachers have a Coke and a squid.

The sun never sets on Coca-Cola Co.'s empire. The company sells roughly 47% of all the soda pop consumed world-wide, more than twice as much as its nearest competitor, PepsiCo Inc.

— Michael J. McCarthy, "The Real Thing," *Wall Street Journal*, 19 Dec. 1989.

The first paragraph is structured around a series of proper nouns, the repeated brand name of Coca Cola and the place names that illustrate the breadth of its "empire." It is this breadth that is the implicit unifying thesis, although the idea is not introduced explicitly until the second paragraph.

The suds of a shampoo, the lather of a shaving cream, the head of a glass of beer--each of these commonplace sudsy objects exemplifies a material whose properties are far from common. Each is an aqueous foam, an impermanent form of matter in which a gas, often air, is dispersed in an agglomeration of bubbles that are separated from one another by films of a liquid that is almost, but not entirely, water. Although aqueous foams have been a subject for scientific investigation since the 17th century, much remains to be learned about the complex chemical and physical phenomena that interact in even a single foamy bubble.

— "Aqueous Foams," *Scientific American*, Mar. 1990.

Tadpoles, herring, basking sharks, flamingos, mallards, and blue whales form an unlikely family. The group ranges from the smallest free-living vertebrates to the largest, and includes amphibians, fishes, birds, and mammals. These organisms are all suspension feeders: they eat by processing massive volumes of water through their feeding apparatus and filtering out small organisms and other fragments of organic material.

— "Suspension-Feeding Vertebrates," *Scientific American*, Mar. 1990.

Both of these articles begin with a list: the first of familiar things and the second of seemingly incompatible ones. Both lists raise immediate questions: What is there left to know about anything so familiar? and, What is the connection between creatures so unlike? Both articles use lists successfully to get the reader's attention, then exploit the list's natural momentum to move naturally to definitions and the body of the discussion. Lists, especially longer ones, have a built-in energy and help establish the topicality of one's subject ("Here is all this reality that needs explaining!"). They are also natural openers for specifics-to-general treatments.

Narrative Openers

In June immense schools of small, silvery fish called capelin enter the hundreds of bays that dot the eastern coast of Newfoundland to perform a fascinating ceremony. The males and females separately approach the gravel beaches and are borne ashore in waves so laden with their bodies as to be virtual walls of fish. There, on the gravel, the females lay their eggs and the males fertilize them; then most of the fish die. . . .

— “The Spawning of the Capelin,” *Scientific American*, May 1990.

After this account of the annual ritual of the capelin, the article goes on to discuss the fish's life cycle and the ecology in which they survive, including their role in feeding. The more intricate, unusual, and even fragile a ritual, the more questions it raises about why it should continually repeat itself. Opening with a generalized narrative, which we usually express in English with the present tense, raises immediate questions: What happens after most of the spawning fish die? What did the spawning fish do before they hit the beach? Such a beginning, with all of its mystery, propels both writer and reader into the explanation, which will include a more precise detailing of the event and an account of the larger network of which it is a part.

With engines on full afterburners, an F-111 jet dives toward the floor of the Nevada desert. After descending from an altitude of nine kilometers to only 100 meters, the jet levels off. It is traveling slightly faster than the speed of sound (Mach 1.2). The F-111 tears through the air, generating shock waves that kick up clouds of sand. . . .

— “High Performance Parachutes,” *Scientific American*, May 1990

A narrative opening creates immediate drama. Something is happening, and our natural instinct is to follow its outcome. We can postpone an explanation even while our curiosity grows (not until the sixth sentence does the writer disclose what the plane is doing). As it turns out, the jet releases a test capsule containing a newly developed parachute designed to slow automobile-sized objects from supersonic speeds to 70 kilometers an hour within the first 50 meters. The writer uses the narrative opening as a concrete and energetic way of introducing his topic, an explanation of the events and technology that led to the development of such a parachute. Narrative openings enliven expository writing, writing that explains and informs. Being active and concrete, they seize the reader's imagination where abstract generalizations give us little to visualize.

Sometimes a good idea comes to you when you are not looking for it. Through an improbable combination of coincidences, naiveté, and lucky mistakes, such a revelation came to me one Friday night in April, 1983, as I gripped the steering wheel of my car and snaked along a moonlit mountain road into northern California's redwood country. That was how I stumbled across a process that could make unlimited numbers of copies of genes, a process now known as the polymerase chain reaction (PCR).

— “The Unusual Origin of the Polymerase Chain Reaction,” *Scientific American*, Apr. 1990.

Familiarities like the first-person pronoun and the indefinite you are often considered to detract from our authority when we write about serious subjects. In this case, however, the writer chooses to lessen the usual distance between writer and audience that prevails in scientific literature. Scientific writing often takes readers through the steps of an experiment, allowing us to be "observers." Mullis, however, invites an even closer involvement, taking us through a narrative of his intellectual adventures as he makes progressives strides toward solving the problem of gene copying. Instead of a dry explanation of the chemical process, we get a story, one filled with drama and interest.

Opening with Questions

Can a machine think? Can a machine have conscious thoughts in exactly the same sense that you and I have? If by "machine" one means a physical system capable of performing certain functions (and what else can one mean?), then humans are machines of a special biological kind, and humans can think, and so of course machines can think. And, for all we know, it might be possible to produce a thinking machine out of different materials altogether--say, out of silicon chips or vacuum tubes. Maybe it will turn out to be impossible, but we certainly do not know that yet.

In recent decades, however, the question of whether a machine can think has been given a different interpretation entirely. The question that has been posed in its place is, Could a machine think just by virtue of implementing a computer program?

— "Is the Brain's Mind a Computer Program?" *Scientific American*, Jan. 1990

Questions are good attention-getting openers for both readers and writers. For us as readers, they engage us immediately, asking us to respond, to search our own minds for some kind of provisional answer. For us as writers, they suggest a natural way of proceeding, either by giving our own answers immediately, or by postponing them until we summarize conventional thinking on the subject. They also make effective transitions within and between paragraphs, especially in informational and persuasive writing.

Opening with Delayed Revelations

He was born in a London slum, he lacked a university education, and he was unemployed except for a six-year stint as a telegraph clerk. Yet by virtue of his talent and sheer force of will, Oliver Heaviside became one of the leading Victorian physicists. He clarified and extended the circuit principle that made long-distance telephony possible and foresaw television, over-the-horizon radio, and several aspects of Einstein's theory of relativity.

Although Heaviside was greatly esteemed in his time, he is now almost forgotten . . .

— "Oliver Heaviside," *Scientific American*, June 1990

Delayed revelation here prepares for a surprise, setting the reader up for the "yet" statement: "he" came from very unpromising circumstances, ones that would never forecast his eventual achievement. This

kind of opening is a popular way to establish that there is often "news" in familiar topics (many electrical engineers and physicists, the prime audience for the article, would know of Heaviside's accomplishments even if they did not know of his personal life). By postponing identification of the subject, the antecedent of "he," the writer also sidesteps any prejudices and other preformed opinions that might interfere with the reader's response or receptivity.

Opening with Quotations

"Colors," said Leigh Hunt, a 19th-century poet, "are the smiles of Nature." Just how does an observer distinguish one smile from another? To a great extent the answer lies in the three classes of cone-shaped, color-sensing cells in the retina of the eye. Each class responds differently to light reflected from a colored object, depending on whether the cells have within them red, green, or blue pigments . . .

— "The Genes for Color Vision," *Scientific American*, Feb. 1989

On May 15, 1898, the intrepid Arctic explorer Frederic A. Cook made the following notation in his journal: "The winter and the darkness have slowly but steadily settled over us. . . . It is not difficult to read on the faces of my companions their thoughts and their moody dispositions. . . . The curtain of blackness which has fallen over the outer world of icy desolation has also descended on the inner world of our souls. Around the tables . . . men are sitting about sad and dejected, lost in dreams of melancholy from which, now and then, one arouses with an empty attempt at enthusiasm. For brief moments some try to break the spell by jokes, told perhaps for the fiftieth time. Others grind out a cheerful philosophy; but all efforts to infuse bright hopes fail."

We now know that the members of the Cook expedition were suffering from classic symptoms of winter depression, a condition related to a recently described psychiatric disease known as seasonal affective disorder, or SAD. As the journal entry makes clear, recognition of the association between depression and the onset of winter is not new. But in recent years there has been growing interest in SAD and in two behavior disorders, carbohydrate-craving obesity (CCO) and premenstrual syndrome (PMS), that share some of the symptom. . . .

— "Carbohydrates and Depression," *Scientific American*, Jan. 1989

Short or long, quotes make lively openers. Hunt's metaphor of rainbow as nature's smile lends itself to an easy transition. The writer (a molecular biologist) asks a simple question that even a non-specialist might raise--how do we distinguish these "smiles"?--then launches into an explanation of how the eye perceives color. This account, to remind specialists and inform the rest of us, prefaces a discussion of the most recent genetic discoveries concerning the evolution of color vision, the purpose of the article. Using the quote from poetry is not only a thematic boost; it is a friendly way to open, a suggestion that the subject may be of interest to broader audience than that of molecular biologists and geneticists.

The lengthy Cook quotation serves at least two purposes: it presents "the classic symptoms" of winter depression, and it helps establish the scope of the problem, its historical and geographical distribution. In other words, the quote establishes the magnitude and importance of the subject--not a bad way to get the interest of an audience (many of whom will have experienced at least a few of the symptoms). Lengthy quotes are risky even in mid-text, and so the users often excuse them. In an opener, long quotes may also postpone identification of the subject, a tactic that can stimulate either the reader's curiosity or impatience, depending (of course) on the quote. In any event, such a lengthy opening quote would be suitable only in a longer paper.