



Openings (Introductions)

For Literary and Non-literary Papers

What is the writer's goal in the opening?

The opening is not a mere trick or gimmick to “kick-off” the essay. Of course, an opening should arouse the audience's interest, but the opening should create an honest, appropriate expectation of what is to come. Besides gaining the reader's attention, the opening should also reveal how a topic is narrowed. Without focus, a paper could drift or could be attempting to cover too large a subject.

What to Avoid:

- Freshman Omniscience
 - The question “Why do good people suffer?” has plagued mankind since the beginning of time.
- Groveling
 - As a mere freshman in college, I doubt that I will be able to contribute anything terribly insightful to the great mass of criticism already written about John Milton's masterpiece Paradise Lost.
- Unfocused Restatement of the Assignment
 - The question of the narrator's point of view as it relates to the structure of James Joyce's “The Boardinghouse” is an interesting one to examine.
- Wimpiness
 - In this paper, I would like to try to examine the nature of virtue in Spenser's The Faerie Queen.
- The Glaringly Obvious
 - Jane Austen is a good writer because she writes about things she knows about.
- Questions Without a Context
 - What is the extent to which contemporary American democracy can be reconciled to the notions promulgated in the influential Federalist Papers? What, specifically, have we changed, and what have we preserved of these early perceptions of American democratic thought? Why? This paper will seek to answer these questions.
- Hiding Behind an Unknown Source
 - It is felt that, “the source of Hamlet's frustration lies in his puerile fascination with his mother's activities.”
- Echoing the Title
 - Problems of Television Programming
 - The problems of television programming are....
 - Literary Criticism
 - This is a term which....



What can a writer use to “open”?

**1. A Quotation.

a. Non-literary papers:

John Kennedy said, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” That attitude led to the idealistic formulation of both the Peace Corps and Vista in the early sixties.

b. Literary papers:

Key sentence or phrase type of opening—quoting a key sentence or phrase from the work and then showing how that quotation fits the ideas of the work.

It was the watch, the compass, the stick—the three lifeless mechanics with which for nine hours had fended the wilderness off; he hung the watch and compass carefully on a bush and leaned the stick beside them and relinquished completely to it.

With this single sentence, William Faulkner provides the key that unlocks a poignant and significant message in his short story “The Bear.” The struggle between civilized man and the subsequent merging of man with nature are all relevant ideas in this story, which take on focus and depth once Faulkner’s preceding statement is understood.

2. Anecdote or narrative.

Medical Journalism – With and Without Upbeat

As a veteran writer of medical and psychological articles for the mass-circulation “slicks,” I have a fellow feeling for the violinist who rebelled after having been with an orchestra for thirty years. One day, so the story goes, he sat with his hands folded during rehearsal, and when the conductor rapped on the podium with his baton and demanded furiously, “Why aren’t you playing” replied, with a melancholy sigh, “I don’t like music.” Sometimes I feel like sitting at my typewriter with my hands folded. I don’t like popularization. It has gone too far. The little learning--with illustrations--which the magazines have been pouring into a thirsty public has become a dangerous thing....--Edith M. Stern, Saturday Review.

**3. Wording from the original question for a literary paper (helpful for in-class essays)

Question: Using the four main characters in Othello, show how Shakespeare is describing different degrees of jealousy and suspicion.

William Shakespeare’s play The Tragedy of Othello is one of suspicion and jealousy. In the course of events, the “green-eyed monster” causes the humiliation of some, and the deaths of others. Shakespeare uses several major characters--Desdemona, Cassio, Iago, and Othello--to show different degrees of suspicion and jealousy.

4. Questions to isolate the topic.

Can we reconcile the doctrine of military force--the idea of killing men in war--with a moral purpose?

**5. Springboard opening. (acknowledging views of others but springing off them into your own.)

a. Non-literary papers

Often America is called the “land of the free and the home of the brave,” but those who argue that case conveniently forget the network of governmental spy agencies which have successfully infiltrated our society.

b. Literary papers

The following was written by Theodore Pollock and appeared in “On the Ending of The Grapes of Wrath,” in A Companion to the Grapes of Wrath. Ed. Warren French. Clifton, N.J.: Augusts Kelly, 1972. (It appeared on page 224.)



Although *The Grapes of Wrath* has been accepted by students and critics as a respectable--even praiseworthy--addition to the literature of social protests, it has only reluctantly and somewhat embarrassedly been treated as a work of art. The ending in particular has proved a source of disaffection among careful readers, who find it either offensively sentimental or not really an ending at all. It seems to me that John Steinbeck wrought more with his ending than at first may be apparent, and I should like to consider, therefore, a theme that threads its way throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*--an important theme that is successfully and artfully concluded at the book's close--the theme of reproduction.

6. Statement of proposition.

America's advertising industry is moving into a commanding role in our society. Its executives are becoming masters of our academic destiny, the engineers behind some of our most successful political campaigns.

7. Presentations of factual background.

Nearly 1500 colleges offer courses in creative writing; and everyone and his brother seems to style himself a "poet" or a "novelist."

8. Startling fact to dramatize the issue.

Monolingualism Is Obsolete

Last year, only one out of ten American high school graduates had studied a foreign language. In spite of the publicity recently given to the teaching of foreign languages in primary and secondary schools....

****9. A striking contrast may heighten the point to be made for a non-literary paper.**

American Children are Spoiled

Not too many decades ago, young children were early taught the difference between what they were and were not allowed to do. Today, many American parents treat their children as if they could do no wrong. The most obvious manifestation of this change....

a. For a literary paper

William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *Othello* are two contrasting plays. *Twelfth Night*, for example, is a light-hearted comedy that has little fear, hurt, or pain; it just releases and amuses the reader through its use of jokes and puns. On the other hand, *Othello* is a play overflowing with tension, anxieties, and suspense, a play that keeps a reader constantly on the edge awaiting the dramatic ending.

Although these two plays deal with very different uses of tone, atmosphere, and technique (comedy versus tragedy), Shakespeare has made them unusually similar in one way--love. Love, which is deep-rooted in both of these works, brings out amusement, conflict, and even death. That aspect of love that is similar to both is the distorting power of love. *Othello's* Desdemona and *Twelfth Night's* Olivia are good examples of how love can distort and twist reality.

****10. Writing a brief plot summary to help lead to the major interpretation the paper wants to explore for a literary paper.**

John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* is a story of a poor, uneducated family named Joad, who, because of their behavior, speech, and actions, are ostracized from the mainstreams of life. When the novel was written in 1949, critics thought its characters were "bedraggled and bestial" (Shockley 233-234). But I believe they are a self-respecting group who are strong because of endurance of the mother Ma Joad. Thus, she is the strongest and most effective character in the novel.

(From Shockley, M. *Steinbeck and His Critics*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1957.)

Examples illustrating literary papers are starred **



****11. Using a generalization or brief statement of “theme” for a literary paper.**

Love is a strong passion that may easily affect a person’s actions and thoughts. It can make someone happy, sad, or even excited. Thus, love can twist reality into different shapes, making someone bend with it and even act contrary to his own personality. In both Twelfth Night and Othello, William Shakespeare uses this distorting power of love, especially to characterize two women, Viola and Desdemona.

****12. Classic Funnel.**

Start with a broad, general statement and with each successive sentence get more specific, finally arriving at the thesis at the end.

a. For a non-literary paper:

All across the United States, college campuses offer film series which have been very popular with the students. The College of Charleston is no exception. Each year the College has shown movies ranging from Dumbo to Texas Chainsaw Massacre. This season also promises to be a success because of the wide variety of movies, the low cost of admission, and the convenience of the show times.

b. For a literary paper:

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is the only one of Mark Twain’s various books which can be called a masterpiece. I do not suggest it is his only book of permanent interest. But it is the only one in which his genius is completely realized and the only one which creates its own category. There are pages in Tom Sawyer and in Life on the Mississippi which are, within their limits, as good as anything which one can compare then in Huckleberry Finn; and in other books there are drolleries just as good of their kind. But when we find one book by a prolific author which is very much superior to all the rest, we look for the peculiar accident or concourse of accidents which made the book possible. In the writing of Huckleberry Finn Mark Twain had two elements which, when treated with his sensibility and his experience, formed a great book: these two are “the Boy and the River.”¹

(T. S. Eliot, “An Introduction to Huckleberry Finn,” in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, ed. Sculley Bradley et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), p. 328.)

****13. Definition but not merely one derived from a desk dictionary.**

“Alienation,” a term once confined to philosophy, law psychiatry and advanced literary criticism, has entered the daily vocabulary. Newspaper editorials refer without quotes or elucidation to the alienation of the slum dweller, the drug addict, and the vanguard painter; popular fiction writers rely on the reader to recognize the symptoms of alienation as a motive for adultery or murder. Alienage, or strangeness, is understood to be not only a condition (as of foreigners) but a process. As they say in the health drives, it can happen to anyone. (Harold Rosenbery, “It Can Happen to Anyone”)

The examples used for this handout came from the following:

Barnet, Sylvan and Marian Stubbs, A Practical Guide to Writing. Boston: Little, Brown, 1977.

Berke, Jacqueline. Twenty Questions for the Writer. New York: Harcourt, 1972.

Harvard Writing Center. Boston, MA. (Tutor: David Wright).