

Openers: How To Engage Your Readers From the First Sentence

Open with a relevant anecdote.

Journalists often do this to put a "human face" on the subject they're describing.

✓ **Why an anecdote works:** Human beings learn through stories, which is why the anecdote is one of the most engaging and successful openers you can use.

✗ **Where an anecdote can go wrong:** Make sure the anecdote clearly relates to the paper! If the anecdote is too far off-topic, then you will have to perform mental gymnastics to get the paper back on track. Usually, this means the thesis gets delayed until page 2 or 3.

Open by describing the common perception of a key term: This works especially well if your paper will tackle a well-known concept, such as "masculinity" or "honor."

✓ **Why a key term works:** By presenting the commonplace understanding of a term, you implicitly signal that your paper plans to disrupt or complicate our habits of mind.

✗ **Where a key term can go wrong:** Opening with a dictionary definition is not inherently bad ("The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'corruption' as.....") It's just an overused convention. Rather than relying on Merriam Webster to tell you what most people think, try asking a few friends what they associate with Z concept or looking at some recent newspaper headlines. Use that information to help you summarize the typical perception of Z.

Open with an attention-getting fact or observation: Think of this as the "headline" introduction, much like the opening of many news stories. "According to the Centers for Disease Control, the number of Americans living with HIV will soon surpass...."

✓ **Why a fact works:** Like offering the common perception of a keyterm, this maneuver immediately tells your audience that something is at stake in your paper.

✗ **Where a fact can go wrong:** Make sure that your fact or observation has the potential to grab an audience's attention. Don't settle for a "surprising" insight that most reasonable people already accept. ("It might come as a surprise to know that the majority of the world's population opposes torture, even for political purposes.")

Open with an on-topic question:

"Why do so few Americans exercise their right to vote?"

✓ **Why a question works:** Questions, when they're good, invite critical thinking. so this opener is a way of getting down to business quickly.

✗ **Where a question can go wrong:** Be careful not to pose sweeping, melodramatic, or space-filling questions ("What is culture?"). Such questions are probably unanswerable, and they will allow your intro to get caught up in needless speculation.

Open with an overview that's relevant to the essay's argument:
"Orson Welles's signature film, *Citizen Kane*, tells the story..."

- ✓ **Why an overview works:** Like opening with a question, opening with an overview allows you to get to work right away in your intro. If you doubt your ability to add a human interest element via anecdote, image, or surprising observation, then use this method.

- ✗ **Where an overview can go wrong:** When using this method, be sure to avoid "cognitive egocentricity": the assumption that everyone else has read the same things you've read and thinks the same things you think. If opening with an overview, still aim to make your introduction inviting and mentally graspable to an uninformed reader.

- ✓ **Why setting the scene works:** Just as readers respond to engaging stories or anecdotes, so too will readers respond to sentences that engage the imagination and mind's eye. Both techniques make your readers draw closer, inspiring the "tell me more" instinct.

- ✗ **Where setting the scene can go wrong:** Just as the "dictionary definition" opener has become clichéd, so too have over-the-top, melodramatic openers that inflate the paper's significance or give a false sense of

the essay's scope. ("Civilization. It began with a few humans hunched over a campfire, as woolly mammoths circled the mouth of their cave....")

Open by setting the scene in a dramatic fashion (use sparingly!):

"A young woman poses for a picture beneath Tommy Trojan. She can hardly believe she's here at her dream school, after years of hard work and planning..."