

What is an opening paragraph?

You are, no doubt, familiar with writing opening paragraphs for papers. For instance, you may have been told that an opening paragraph should act as a funnel, starting from a more general point of contact with your reader and moving toward the specific statement of your thesis or main idea. But what might an opening paragraph look like in a first-year course that introduces you to academic writing? In this setting, the opening of that funnel does not have to establish common ground with a huge, general audience (“We are all individuals”); instead, it can address an audience of educated readers looking for intellectual engagement and debate (We are all individuals, but there is always the constant pull of conformity preventing us from being totally individualistic”). This semester, you will adapt that funnel and the other things you already know about introductory paragraphs in order to create openings that are effective within the particular context of academic writing and intellectual debate.

In academic writing, your opening paragraph functions as a kind of a road map that helps guide your reader through your paper. Your readers this semester include your classmates and your teacher, all of whom are familiar with the class assignments and the readings from the textbook. It is important to practice writing your papers as well for readers who are less familiar with the material. If you imagine yourself explaining a particular issue using examples from particular readings to someone who is interested but a bit confused about the whole topic, you will get into the habit of including the specific details and explanations that help your readers see what you want them to see.

What follows is a description of one way to construct an opening paragraph that will address the needs of these readers. You have many other choices as a writer for how you will structure this initial relationship with your readers (see the Webpage version of this handout for links to other sample opening paragraphs) but this model is useful in explaining the key elements that most often characterize effective opening paragraphs in W031, W130, and W131. Effective opening paragraphs

1. Orient readers to the topic
2. Introduce and establish relationships among the key sources being used in the paper
3. Establish a thesis or theory that will give the essay focus and purpose.

1. Orienting the Reader

It's a good idea to begin your paper by orienting your reader to the topic you will be discussing in your paper. Sometimes you can accomplish this with a pithy sentence or a quick example that reveals the essential problem, question, or debate you plan to tackle: "A person's social class will determine the kind of education he or she is offered unless that individual finds some avenue of escape from the system." Since your teacher will be asking you to explore a larger issue such as education and social class by drawing on ideas and examples from the assigned readings, you can also give the paper an immediate sense of focus and purpose by introducing your topic in the context provided by the key readings you'll be working with in the paper. You might begin by giving the author's full name and the title of the most important essay you'll be using, followed by a brief, two to three sentence summary of the essay. Summarizing is not an easy task! Since there is always more to say about an essay than can be included in a couple of sentences, you must make choices about what information to provide for your reader. A good way to think about your choices is by asking yourself how that reading helps you address the assignment topic. For example, if the assignment were asking you to talk about the relationship between social class and education, your orienting sentences should show what each reading reveals about that topic:

In Mike Rose's essay "I Just Wanna Be Average," Rose argues that he did not get the education he deserved because the school labeled him as working class. Rose recounts his struggles in vocational education and the defense mechanisms he and his classmates employed in order to cope with a curriculum that didn't challenge them. What are the consequences for society, Rose's essay asks, if certain segments of our population achieve less than what they're capable of achieving?

This is not a complete summary of Rose's essay, of course, but you must select the details that are important for your paper. A detail such as Rose's sadness over his father's death may not be an important link to the assigned topic. Consequently, you must work on revising your sentences, or eliminating summary sentences that, finally, are not relevant to your discussion.

2. Creating Relationships Among Essays

It's easy to fall into a listing pattern when you introduce your essays. Here's an example:

The first essay I'm going to use in my paper is _____ and it is about _____.

The second essay I'm going to use is _____ and it is about _____.

And so on.

Opening paragraphs that rely on a listing structure are monotonous and usually don't help your reader see how each author's ideas work *together* in your paper. The next essay you introduce may confirm or challenge Rose's findings, provide a new perspective on the topic, and thereby extend and complicate your own views. Another essay may help you to see something about social class and education that you did not see in Rose's essay. To clarify this point, and to give an example of how to connect essays in the opening paragraph, let's return to the example of education and social class and build on the three sentences about Rose. Say you decided to incorporate "Achievement of Desire" by Richard Rodriguez. Some good questions to ask first are these: What is the relationship between Rose's essay and Rodriguez's essay? Do these essays have similar things to say about education and social class? Do they challenge one another? What you say next will depend on your interpretation of the material. An orientation of Rodriguez's essay in relation to Rose could look like this:

While Rose's essay focuses on how a person should but often does not benefit from education, Richard Rodriguez acknowledges what a person can lose by obtaining an education. Rodriguez's essay, "Achievement of Desire," helps explain why some students who come from the lower classes experience academic failure. Like Rose, Rodriguez recounts his experiences in school; the values and practices of mainstream American culture pulled him away from his family's customs and traditions which created ambivalence about education.

Each essay provides an additional layer of meaning for you to explore and analyze. By introducing Rodriguez through a detailed contrast and then comparison to Rose, you get away from a listing structure and your paper begins to develop a shape. Let's look at what we have so far:

In Mike Rose's essay "I Just Wanna Be Average," Rose argues that he did not get the education he deserved because the school labeled him as working class. Rose recounts his struggles in vocational education and the defense mechanisms he and his classmates employed in order to cope with a curriculum that didn't challenge them. What are the consequences for society, Rose's essay asks, if certain segments of our population achieve less than what they're capable of achieving? While Rose's essay focuses on how a person should but often doesn't benefit from education, Richard Rodriguez acknowledges what a person can lose by obtaining an education. Rodriguez's essay "Achievement of Desire" helps explain why some students who come from the lower classes experience academic failure. Like Rose, Rodriguez recounts his experiences in school; the values and practices of mainstream American culture pulled him away from his family's customs and traditions which created ambivalence about education.

The opening now demonstrates that you are seeing relationships between readings, you are involved in serious academic inquiry, and you are accomplishing the goals of the course.

3. Establishing a Thesis or Theory

The relationships you create between the essays you're using often provide the springboard to the thesis or theory that will guide the entire paper. By identifying how a general issue such as education and social class takes on a particularized and original life when considered in the context provided by Rose and Rodriguez, and by thinking about how Rodriguez's experiences relate to Rose's, you will have begun to develop a theory that explores this topic in complex and revealing ways. Your theory, then, is your own discovery—your interpretation—that comes out of synthesizing other authors' ideas as well as your own life experience in relation to a particular issue, question, or debate. It is common to see the theory stated in the last few sentences of the opening paragraph.

(For a more in-depth discussion of theory, see the handout “What is a thesis or theory?”)

Frequently asked questions:

- **Should I use quotations in my opening paragraph?**
Opening paragraphs can be effective with or without quotations. It is particularly important to use quotations sparingly in the opening paragraph. Long quotations are best used and explored in the body of the paper. There may be, however, a sentence or part of a sentence that contains a key idea or key term that will be essential in your discussion. If so, feel free to use a brief quotation in your opening paragraph.
- **How long should my opening paragraph be?**
There is no hard and fast rule about the length of an opening paragraph, but since the papers you'll be writing in W130 are four pages long, opening paragraphs should be no shorter than a half page, and no more than a full page in length. Papers that adequately orient the reader to three essays are usually not complete until they're about three quarters of a page in length.
- **Why is revision so important?**
When students begin the course they are more comfortable writing in a linear way, that is, from beginning to end, opening paragraph first, followed by the second paragraph, and so on. Consequently, students can spend a lot of time worrying about the perfect opening paragraph even before they have begun to explore their ideas. This is a difficult habit to break as most of us are used to doing things in a

linear order. However, if you are to become a successful writer in the academic community, you must think of revision as your most valuable tool. You might begin by assembling some of the basic elements you plan to include in your introduction but wait until you have worked through a draft or two before you try to hone those opening sentence. Once you explore various quotations by positioning them next to one another to see what they reveal, you can begin to think about your opening as fluid, not set in stone. Writing is a process of discovery, so don't let a new idea that you've uncovered today slip by because it doesn't fit with yesterday's original plan. Writing is recursive: it is a back and forth process of rethinking, reseeing, and revising. It's useful to have a rough theory in the early stages of writing, but think of it as a working theory, a theory in process.

Example #1

The Power of Friction

To create a work of art a sculptor must utilize opposing forces to define its structure. Molding, stretching, and re-stretching its form creates tension and friction that makes the process arduous and painstaking. But in the end, these conflicting forces are what make the work beautiful and unique in its essence. The beauty of art is in the ultimate harmony of its discordant notes; not despite the differences but because of them. This unsettling power of art “[that] make[s] everyone a little nervous and unsure” is what Dorothy Allison describes in her essay “This Is Our World” as the deepest and richest form of engagement. (45). Allison vividly expresses her idea of art as being an intellectual and emotional catalyst that requires the complete devotion of the viewer. Sven Birkerts describes this same “vertical engagement” in his essay, “The Own Has Flown,” as the process by which unsettling or thought-provoking materials force an individual to become aware of himself outside the movement of time (75). This upsetting power grabs the viewer and engages his mind, body, and soul to produce a “deep time” that transcends distractions and resonates with the profound wisdom of eternity (75). The awareness that is produced through strenuous and often upsetting mental engagements does not come naturally to anyone. It requires patience. Barbara Mellix learned to accept this resonating wisdom in her essay “From Outside In” when she found harmony in the union of Proper English and her own dialect despite their apparent inharmonious nature. Mellix became aware of the “generative power” and began to harness the infinite power of her own imagination when coupled with the English language. Human empowerment is achieved in the acceptance of these opposing forces as occasions for growth, change, and fulfillment. The friction in these moments shows us who we are currently and who we could be, only if the uncertainty is understood as an opportunity and the anxiety we experience is channeled into a positive force for personal transformation.

Example #2

Class Movement: The Illusion of Inclusion

In his essay, “The Transformation of Everyday Life,” Richard Florida presents a comparative analysis of today’s social and economic structure with that of the 1950’s organizational age. At the center of this comparison is the issue of identity. One of Florida’s driving contentions is that, although true of the organizational age, it is no longer our social ties that define our identity, but rather we now “[define] our identities along the varied dimensions of our creativity” (201). This, however, was not the case for Julie Charlip. In her essay, “A Real Class Act,” Charlip examines the psychological influence of one’s social class and the effect of one’s background on her ability to negotiate class identity. Although Charlip’s father owned his own business, his middle-class income prevented his family’s inclusion with the area’s upper class. The contradiction in her father’s job title and economic status frustrated Charlip’s efforts to identify her family’s class. Charlip’s real life experience clearly disproves Florida’s claim of a society empowered by self-defined identity and acutely depicts society’s gravitation toward group identity. What is it that drives individuals to become associated with a particular class? Striving to unravel the complicated and fascinating allure of group identity, Susan Willis presents a case study of the Disney World culture in her essay, “Public Use/Private State.” Willis argues that by submitting to the programmed environment that is Disney World, its visitors exchange personal control for the illusion of belonging. It is Willis’ belief that this exchange occurs without the conscious approval of its victims. However, it is the relative ease with which one can belong at Disney World that draws millions to its gates each year. Personal control is a small price to pay to belong when compared to the high cost of obtaining a desired social class identity. Each social class bears its own rules and expectations for inclusion, as well as a unique set of stereotypes enforced not only by those outside the class, but by those within the class as well. Adhering to the expected pattern of behavior provides an individual with a sense of belonging to his class and labels him with the stereotypes of his position. It is the psychological branding of these stereotypes that frustrates the process of upward class mobility and limits the opportunity to belong to the realm of illusion.