Writing a Clear Opening

Inquire: Set the Standard for Your Paper

Overview

Creating a clear opening is perhaps the most vital part of writing an effective paper. A strong opening will establish your thesis in a concise way, contextualize your thesis within a larger subject, and show the relevance that your thesis has to the audience. Accomplishing these goals, usually within the first paragraph, may seem intimidating. However, you will be on the right track if you simply keep your idea and the audience in mind while writing your opening.

Big Question: How do I make the purpose of my paper clear to my reader?

Watch: Let Your Reader in on Your Paper

In screenwriting, a general rule says that by the ten-minute mark of any movie, the audience should know what the movie is about, who the main character is, and whether or not they want to keep watching. In other words, the screenwriter and filmmakers prepare their audience for the story they are about to tell, and let the audience in on what to expect during the next two hours.

When writing a paper, the same idea applies. You want your reader to understand what you are writing about, the context of your topic, and why this is relevant to them. This information needs to be communicated clearly. If your reader is unsure about what you want to say or whether this information is even pertinent to them, you risk losing their attention and interest, even before you’ve had a chance to lay out your main idea. Creating a clear opening is arguably the most vital part of writing an effective paper.

A strong opening will establish your thesis in a clear, concise way, contextualize your thesis within a larger subject, and show the relevance of your thesis to the audience, usually all within the same paragraph. Your opening will also set the tone of your paper, so the manner in which it accomplishes these goals must take tone into consideration. Tone reveals your attitude about your subject and audience. Doing this effectively may seem intimidating. However, simply keep your idea and the audience in mind, and you will be on the right track to create a clear opening.

Think about a movie you have seen recently. By the ten-minute mark, did you know what the movie was about, who the main character was, and whether you wanted to keep watching?

What are some other ways you think a clear and effective opening can work for the benefit of a movie, or a paper? How have you introduced topics into discussions in other projects you’ve worked on?
Read: Opening Clearly

Overview: Relevance is Clarity

The clarity of your opening will largely depend on how well you are able to make your reader understand the relevance of the thesis. To establish this relevance, you must: 1) make clear what will be discussed; 2) define where the discussion stands in the larger context of the general subject; and 3) clarify why it is relevant to the reader. Your opening should also offer a general overview of the paper to prepare your reader for what is to come. This will allow the reader to start thinking in more concrete terms about the different aspects of the main topic.

A Clear Thesis Statement

A thesis statement is the key element of a paper, so state your thesis clearly. To successfully state your thesis, think about the central idea of your discussion in a concise, concrete, and understandable manner. Your thesis should be one to two sentences written in a straightforward manner that avoids vague or overly complex language. Remember, clarity is your goal here; avoid ambiguity. Your reader should know exactly what you are writing about and why. Even if your thesis is about a complex or specialized idea, and your reader has the specific knowledge to understand the concepts behind it, your thesis must be stated clearly.

Contextualize the Thesis

You should also make sure that you arrive at your thesis without taking any leaps, even if logical, from the general discussion of your subject. A key strategy to establish relevance of your thesis is to move from general to specific. Try to narrow the general discussion of your subject down to your thesis, which is specific, within three sentences. The general subject that starts your paper should be clearly defined, so your reader can have a clear sense of what you will write about. However, you don’t need to give a history lesson on your subject (unless, of course, your subject is about history).

Two effective strategies for creating context are to ask a rhetorical question, or make a general statement about your subject. But, any discussion that gets and keeps them reading will work. You want to captivate your audience; offer them an engaging or provocative idea to stimulate their interest. Your introduction then leads them into your thesis.

Write Towards Your Audience

Choose language with a specific audience in mind. The complexity and specificity of your language should match your intended audience, whether a general one or more specialized readers. Overly complex language in a paper meant for general audiences, especially when presented early and with undefined terms, will make it difficult for a general audience to understand, and thus care about, your discussion — no matter how interesting it may seem to you. The inverse of this also applies. If your paper is intended for a specialized audience, assume that your readers will understand specific terms and concepts. Defining these when unnecessary can take up space in your paper and muddy your discussion of more important ideas, causing the audience to lose interest.

Choose each word carefully. Understand the purpose of the language you use in your paper. Your audience will determine how you communicate your ideas and how much detail you need to include. With your audience in mind, opening your paper with well-considered language becomes a simple, but effective way to establish the relevance of your thesis to your intended reader, and thus gain their interest.
and attention. Remember, if you are to communicate an idea effectively, you must have a clear sense of the audience, even if you are writing to an audience of one.

Show the Path

In academic writing, your purpose is to influence the thinking of your audience and help them understand what you are saying and why. You prepare your reader for how you will explore your topic, typically through an overview of the sub-topics you will cover. Letting your reader in on where you will go with your idea can pique their interest in the discussion that will take place. They will begin to understand the progression of your thoughts and see the relevance of your idea.

Reflect: Build Relevance

Poll

Creating a clear opening usually involves establishing the relevance of your thesis to the audience. There are a few ways this can be done successfully.

Of these, which do you find to be the easiest to accomplish?

- Showing the context of your thesis
- Using language targeted toward your audience
- Giving an overview of your paper

Expand: The “Hook”

While crafting a clear opening should always be a priority, creating an opening that is also engaging can be just as important to a successful essay. Grabbing your audience’s attention and generating interest in your subject may be the first challenge you’ll need to overcome as you develop the discussion of your thesis. The role of the first sentence or two in your paper – sometimes called the “hook” – is to engage your audience. One of most reliable ways to gain your reader's interest is to be interested in the subject yourself. It is often the case, however, that your writing assignment is not about a subject that you are inherently interested in. On those occasions, there are a few techniques you can use.

Ask a Rhetorical Question

Why would you start your paper with a question? Well that does give one pause, doesn’t it? When you start your paper with a question, you jumpstart your reader’s interest. You invite the reader into your inquiry about your topic. The rhetorical question chosen guides your readers in the direction you want them to go when they think about your topic. Phrase it in a way that leads your reader to assume the answer indirectly, or answer it directly yourself with the next sentence or two of your thesis.

Begin with an Anecdote

Consider opening with a short story about a personal experience that leads into your thesis. This works best with issue-driven papers that involve social or moral implications, but can be effective with other subjects as well. A personal narrative within the introduction provides an empathetic link to the subject for your readers: a powerful tool for focusing their attention on how you want them to respond to your thesis. It is worth noting that this technique can also backfire if you rely too much on personal experience to support your thesis, so be sure to explicitly separate your subjective experience from your objective evidence.
State, or Subvert, a Fact

State an interesting fact or statistic about your subject to gain your reader’s attention. This method is pretty straightforward, as long as the rest of the introduction ties this fact into your thesis with a logical progression. It can also be just as effective and engaging to state a widely held misconception about the subject, then use your thesis to show why your statement is a misconception and not a fact. Either way, if you can immediately provide your reader with information they may not have known before, you will probably be able to grab their attention and keep them reading.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

How to Write Clear, Concise, and Direct Sentences

- An informative handout on writing clear and direct sentences
- Source: The Writing Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison

The Writing Center Introduction

- An article with practical advice and examples of good and not-so-good openings
- https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/introductions/
- Source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Beginning the Academic Essay

- An article with more examples and basic writing advice
- https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/beginning-academic-essay
- Source: Harvard College Writing Center, Harvard University

Lesson Glossary

thesis: the main idea of an argument or discussion
contextualize: to show the context or place in a larger subject of a specific topic
relevance: the connection between a topic and a reader that helps the reader to understand and identify with the topic
tone: the quality of a piece of writing that reveals the writer’s attitude toward the subject and audience, e.g., ironic, sarcastic, optimistic
rhetorical question: a question not meant to be answered or with an obvious answer used to create interest

Check Your Knowledge

1. You should have a good idea of who your audience is before you start writing your introduction.
   A. True
   B. False

2. Beginning with a personal anecdote can be especially helpful to appeal to your audience’s emotions.
   A. True
   B. False
3. You risk losing your reader’s attention if you don’t engage them in the introductory paragraph.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
1. A  2. A  3. A

Citations

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