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Great Beginnings

Has this ever happened to you? You pick up something to read, peruse a paragraph or two, and then decide to put it down. Of course it has, we've all had that experience. Readers can be fickle. They don't want to waste their time reading something that doesn't interest them. And the way most readers determine their level of interest is by reading the beginning and seeing if they like it.

When you think about creating a good beginning for a piece, there are three important criteria you want to meet. A good beginning:

- **Catches the reader's attention.** Somewhere in your first paragraph, maybe even in the first sentence, you've got to come up with something that hooks your reader, something that says "Hey, this is a good piece you're really going to enjoy!"
- **Makes the reader want to read more.** It's not enough just to hook your readers, you've got to reel them in and get them to read the rest of your piece. Your beginning has to have something in it that makes them curious about what's coming up next.
- **Is appropriate to purpose and audience.** Readers want to feel like the beginning of your piece is an invitation to an interesting and enjoyable experience. You don't want to start your piece in a way that makes people feel disrespected. They also don't want to feel that you're just wasting their time or being silly.

The beginning is the most important part of a piece of writing. Why? Because if the beginning isn't good, readers will never get to the middle or the end. Readers can be very judgmental. They are quick to evaluate a piece as being good, bad, or in between. And often, they make that evaluation after reading just a few sentences. Don't let them get away. Give them a beginning that keeps them glued to your every word. Give them a beginning that reaches out, grabs them by the collar, gives them a good shake, and says, "Hey you, reader, you need to read this!"

Not-So-Good Beginnings

Strategies you might consider not using. Without disparaging in any way, shape, or form the creative genius of any writer living, dead, or hereinafter to be born, I respectfully request that certain beginnings no longer be used. (Please note: There's not a one of us, myself included, who hasn't used each and every one of these beginnings at some point in time. Now that we're all experts on the best ways to start a piece of writing we can, of course, laugh at these simple lapses in writerly judgment. But let's not forget that we've all had them, too.)

1. The “telephone call” beginning.

Hi! My name is Steve. Blah, blah, blah...

Unless I'm calling someone on the phone to get them to buy something from me, (or writing a piece about telemarketing) there is no legitimate reason why this beginning should ever be used.

2. The completely unnecessary beginning.

In this paper, I will be telling you about blah, blah, blah...

I should always trust that my readers are smart enough to figure out on their own what my piece is about. Telling them ahead of time doesn't win me any points. And, if my piece turns out to be about something different, then I've really gotten myself into a pickle, haven't I?

3. The “non-beginning” beginning.

One day, blah, blah, blah...

While this may be the well-intentioned opening of many an earnest yarn, it is not properly a beginning at all. It doesn't do anything; it just sits there on the paper, staring at us, thinking: “Couldn't come up with a real beginning, could you?” We could all spare ourselves this indignity by simply trying any other beginning at all (as long as it's not on this page). So let's just do it, shall we? Similarly weak variations on the “non-beginning” beginning include “Once...” and “One time...”. Though not quite as bad, but still rather unexciting, the following beginnings may be used on an extremely limited basis and only in desperate situations (such as official prompted writing assessments for state tests): “Last year...”, “Last week...”, “A year ago...”, “Last month,...”, “A month ago,...”, “A week ago...”, “A day ago...”, “A few days ago...”, “A couple of days ago...”, and so on.

A Glossary of Good Beginnings

1. Interesting description. Ashes filled the air when I was around the camp fire. Crackle, crackle it went.

2. Sound. Boom! The trunk slammed. Bang! The car doors slammed as we got out of the van.

3. The past in the present. It is April 10, 1912. The Titanic is going to travel all the way from England to America.

4. Exclamation. Yeah! We're going to Disneyland tomorrow! Yeah!" I yelled about as loud as I could.

5. A thought. I'm in big trouble now, I thought to myself.

6. A complaint. It seems like we never go swimming at Fife pool!

7. A surprise. Wow! I was doing my back hand-spring and I landed it!

8. A question. Have you ever been an Editor-in-Chief? Well I'll tell you, it's a big job!

9. Sound, repetition, and simile. Screech, screech, screech! The first time we tried to play the recorders it sounded like a lion running his claws down a chalkboard.

10. Exclamation, repetition, strong feelings. Chores! Chores! Chores! Chores are boring! Scrubbing toilets, cleaning sinks, and washing bathtubs take up a lot of my time and are not fun at all.

11. Extremely strong feelings. The very first time I saw asparagus I hated it. I had never even tried it before and I still hated it!

12. A series of questions. Touch of the flu? Egg in her hair? Poor Ramona!

13. Scary, exciting, or intense moment. . . . I tried to run, but I couldn't. The monster seemed like it was growing by the minute! And then, the most horrible thing was about to happen — I screamed and sat bolt upright in bed. I gasped swallowing huge amounts of air.

14. Main idea. I will always love my grandparents' beach house. The way the waves role over the gooey sand and the way the sand weaves in between your toes. The way we pick up barnacle-covered rocks and watch the sand crabs scurry away. The way we dig for clams and end up knee deep in the never ending sand.

15. Something interesting to come. It all started on an average day. I didn't think anything unusual was going to happen, but boy was I wrong!

16. Conversation. "We're moving." That's what she told me. I couldn't believe it! I had just made the basketball team and was making more friends. "What!" I exclaimed.

17. Reveal something unusual. "Company halt!" yelled the drill master. My mom stopped and went into position. Her dog tags clinked as she moved.

18. An unsettling description. A flash of lightning illuminates the harsh emptiness of the night. In an orphanage children cry mournfully. They are starving.

19. Unusual image of a character. Simon Wilken was snacking down on a plum with great gusto.

20. Anecdote. On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, "Shift your fat behind, Harry. But slowly or you'll swamp the darn boat."

21. Describe the setting. The deafening crowd was packed into the Kingdome on the sold-out Buhner Buzz-Cut Night. Hundreds of people were outfitted in brand new buzz-cuts and were enjoying the Mariner game.

22. Address the audience. You walk into the dentist's office. You sit down. You try to read a magazine. But it's no use. You're scared and there's nothing you can do about it.

23. "Show" feelings. I sat in my desk, sweat dripping down my face. I shut my eyes tight, then opened them. I looked at my watch, 11:27. Three minutes! Three minutes until I heard a sound, a sound that would set me free for three months of total nothingness.

24. Comic story. "Oh my God!" I exclaimed, "What's John doing out there? Why is he on his hands and knees, Mom?" I looked out the big kitchen window wondering if my eight-year old brother was all right. He was looking distressed. Then he threw up.

25. Challenge the reader. Colin Greer, the President of the New World Foundation, a civil rights organization in New York, has something to say about your character.

26. Focus on something important. In my old, battered, black wallet I carry many things. A letter from a friend. My lunch ticket. My social security card. Many other tidbits and items as well. There is one thing however, which I prize above all my possessions. It is a photograph.

27. A list. The sweat on your brow. A layer of dust on your face. Out in the woods. Somewhere. And on a horse. Of all the places in the world, I feel best on a horse.

28. A scenario. Right now I want you to pretend you are in a store. As you walk around, you see that some products are much more inexpensive. Now, look at the labels on these cheaper items. You will probably notice that many of these labels say, "Made in China," or "Made in Honduras." Have you ever stopped to wonder why products made in these countries are so much more affordable than the things manufactured right here on American soil?

29. Fantasy or fairy tale-type language. In yesteryear, when Moby Dick was just a tadpole, and the seas rolled and thundered over the jetties and onto the shore, I searched for my first sand dollar still hidden somewhere in the ever stretching Long Beach Peninsula.

30. Simple action to complex realization. I walk up the hill with my friends, then turn into our cul-de-sac, go to the front door, put the key in the lock, turn, and step in. The house breathes a kind of spooky hello as I set my books down and go to the kitchen where the inevitable note is waiting: "Have a snack. Be home soon. I love you."

31. Startling statement. A great crime was committed against a people in 1942. This was the signing of Executive Order 9066 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which called for the eviction and internment of all Japanese Americans.

32. Thesis. Education is a key element in developing the skills necessary for a successful life. Too often, students are more involved earning a paycheck than spending time on their academic studies. Students need to realize that their high school classes will prepare them for a brighter future.

33. Something outlandish. I am a dynamic figure, often seen scaling walls and crushing ice. I have been known to remodel train stations on my lunch breaks, making them more efficient in the area of heat retention. I write award-winning operas. I manage time efficiently. Occasionally, I tread water for three days in a row.

34. Fast action. I raced inside, slamming the front door behind me. I plopped my backpack on the floor and dashed for the kitchen. Our cat, asleep in the hallway, quickly awoke and scurried out of harms way. I knew I only had a few precious seconds before my brother, coming in through the back door, beat me to the kitchen and nabbed the last of mom's brownies.

35. A saying. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said that "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of simple minds." He said it almost 200 years ago, but perhaps it bears repeating today to our senators and congressman who act as though our country can continue to spend money it does not have.