4 Openers

What gets my interest is the sense that a writer is speaking honestly and fully of what he knows well.

WENDELL BERRY

It is in the hard, hard rock-pile labor of seeking to win, hold, or deserve a reader's interest that the pleasant agony of writing again comes in.

JOHN MASON BROWN

Suppose you've just picked up a copy of *Newsweek*. You begin idly leafing through its pages. With your mind on automatic pilot, your eye instinctively checks out the opening paragraph of one article after another, searching hopefully for something to arrest it. Since you're impatient to get to something interesting, you're a bit ruthless. You give each story only four or five sentences to prove itself, and that's all; experience has taught you, though, that that's usually enough. In the space of those four or five sentences your mind makes a number of small, half-conscious calculations. With computer speed, you reach conclusions on most of the following questions:

"Does this story have intrinsic interest to me?"
"Should I bother investing some time now to find out more about the subject?"
"Is the writing clear and easy, or will I have a hard time following what this writer is saying?"
"Does his style show verve, or is he just going through the motions?"
"Does he seem to be well-informed?"
"Do I think I like this writer as a person, or does he put me off by something in his manner?"

So it goes with virtually everything else you read in your daily life. The point is, though, that you as a writer are subject to precisely the

same sampling procedure as the authors you read. You, too, will generally be given only four or five sentences to prove that you are worth a hearing. Granted, if you are writing an undergraduate essay, your reader—your instructor—will go on to read the whole piece regardless of its merits; but if you have convinced him in your opener that he isn't interested in what you're selling, you probably will have lost him for good. He's only human, after all. First impressions are usually indelible. Instead of looking for the good, he'll be looking for the weaknesses, if only to justify to himself his initial impression of your essay. Besides, he'll know from experience, like you, that there is a pretty close correlation between the quality of an opener and everything that follows. If, at the very outset, a writer shows himself to be bored with his subject, unwilling to use his imagination, indifferent to his reader, and unclear in his thinking, he's likely to remain that way. But if his opener reveals an enthusiasm for his subject, a fine perceptiveness, a flair for appealing to his reader, and a clear mind, the odds are that he will continue true to form.

Purely from the reader's standpoint, then, your opener is of paramount importance. But it is equally important to you as the writer, for openers have a way of governing how the rest of the piece will be written. A good opener will give you momentum, a sense of confidence, and an extra incentive to make the remaining paragraphs worthy of the first. There's also a very practical explanation, however. A good opener invariably has a good thesis—bold, interesting, clearly focused—and a good thesis tends to argue itself because it has a built-in forward thrust. It's like a good comedy situation: it ignites.

One of the best ways to test the effectiveness of an opener you have written is to check it for directness of approach. An essay, like a house, can be entered by the front door or by the back door. If you could examine the opening paragraphs of a random set of papers, you'd notice that the most skillful writers usually elect the *front-door approach*. They march into their subject with bold directness, obviously eager to share what they think about their subject. Below is an example, from an undergraduate essay on Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *I Henry IV*:*

* In this chapter, and again in the subsequent related chapters on "Middles" and "Closers," the examples I use of student writing all deal with Shakespeare's plays. I elected this policy principally because Shakespeare is our most uni-

> Prince Hal is as hard to crack as a walnut. "I know you all," he says of Falstaff & Co. in his soliloquy ending I.ii, but what friend—what reader even—can speak with equal confidence about Hal himself? His true nature seems finally to be as riddling as Hamlet's or Cleopatra's; indeed, he seems at times to be a hybrid of those two characters: infinitely various, theatrical, cunning past man's thought, loving, brutal, equivocal—the list goes on. It's little wonder that Hotspur, so childishly open and simple, often surpasses Hal as the reader's favorite. It's also little wonder that we are hard pressed to decide whether Hal is actually likable or merely admirable.

The less experienced writers, on the other hand, invariably favor the *back-door approach,* the long way in—like this:

> In the second scene of the first Act of William Shakespeare's *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth,* Prince Hal presents a soliloquy which serves as a crux of this play. Although this play would appear by the title to tell of King Henry IV, actually the principal character is the King's son, Hal. The play reveals what seems to be a remarkable change in character for the Prince and follows his exploits in a civil war waged against his father. . . .

This opening paragraph—essentially a plot summary—continues for another four sentences. Would you be eager to read on? Would you even be awake to read on?

Upon analysis it's clear why inexperienced writers such as this student usually elect the back-door approach:

- They haven't taken the trouble to formulate a strong thesis, so they have little to argue and hence little reason to come right to the point—for what's the point of coming to the point when you don't *have* a point?
- Because they have little to say, they are afraid of their reader—they know he's apt to see through their bluff. Thus they instinctively delay a confrontation with him as long as is humanly possible (which often means right down to the final period).
- They haven't yet learned to value their reader's time. In fact,

versal author, but also for purposes of continuity. I trust that the intrinsic readability of these examples will offset the repetitiousness of the subject matter, but please pass them by if Shakespeare grows tedious to you.

they haven't learned even to *consider* their reader in any systematic way, for they are as yet preoccupied merely with getting ideas down on paper.

- They have a vague notion that they're supposed to be writing for the World, not for a well-informed reader, and even though common sense tells them otherwise, they cling to that notion since it gives them a way of rationalizing flagrant padding. In the opener above, for instance, the student gives us the complete name of the author (instead of simply "Shakespeare"), the unwieldy complete title of the play (instead of simply *I Henry IV*), and the Act and scene laboriously written out (instead of simply "I.ii").

Below is another example of the back-door approach, but this one is more sophisticated, more clever in its adroit use of smokescreen techniques. The writer begins with some cautious reconnoitering of the surrounding terrain—a gambit known as Establishing the Large Critical Overview—but unfortunately discovers only mists and goblins known as Grand Generalizations. This student knows how the thing is supposed to *sound,* certainly, but having zero to say, she must content herself with a lovely, empty gush. The result is an epitome of The Art of Saying Nothing Profoundly:

> Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* admired for its poetic style and intriguing characters, has remained a classic for over three centuries. The character of Hamlet is probably one of Shakespeare's most perplexing and most pleasing. He is easily identified with because of his multi-faceted personality and his realistic problems.

When the student came in for a conference, I helped her to read her opener from the reader's viewpoint. It was eye-opening to her. Gradually she began to realize that an essay is only as good as its thesis, that the opening four or five sentences are absolutely crucial psychologically, that a back-door approach is transparently evasive, and that there is no substitute for imagination. She proved to be an apt learner. Her very next paper showed it. Instead of rewriting the piece on Hamlet, which now nauseated her, she decided to start afresh on another character in the play, King Claudius. This is how her new essay began:

He killed his brother. He married his brother's wife. He stole his brother's crown. A cold-hearted murderer, he is described by his brother's ghost as "that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (I.v.42). The bare facts appear to stamp him an utter moral outlaw. Nonetheless, as his soliloquies and anguished asides reveal, no person in *Hamlet* demonstrates so mixed a true nature as Claudius, the newly-made King of Denmark.

Below are some more good openers, all by this student's classmates, most of them written well into the semester after they had begun to discover what makes an opener click. Note in each case the directness of address—the front-door approach. Note, too, the concreteness of detail, the sense that the writers convey of knowing precisely where they are going, and the salesmanship—the verve—evident in the phrasing. I'll quote the first opener in its entirety, but to conserve space I'll quote only the initial sentences of the other two:

In *The Shrew*, the servant is really a lord, and the lord's wife is really a page, and the schoolmaster is really a suitor, and the crazy suitor is really a wise old fox, and the perfect beauty is really a shrew, and the shrew is really a perfect wife, and things are not as they seem. Even the play itself pretends not to be a play by putting on a production within a production. In it, three characters are being duped by this rampant role-playing. By the examples of Sly, Kate, and Bianca, Shakespeare acquaints us with the effects of wealth, love, and power, respectively, and shows how the emergence of an inner (perhaps truer) character can be said to have been tamed. However, the "taming" occurs only as a result of the manipulation of the supposers by the posers. Moreover, while things are not as they seem because of the dual-roled characters, neither does the "taming" suggested by the title ever really take place.

The occult element leavens Shakespeare's works with a pinch of the unknown and an implication that it should remain so. His artful but often annoying ambiguity seldom allows more than a fleeting glimpse at a forbidden terrain before it is bulldozed out of sight by convenient rationales. Several examples of Shakespeare's significant use of the occult immediately come to mind: the witches in *Macbeth*, the antics of Titania and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Ghost in *Hamlet*, and the figure of Owen Glendower in *I Henry IV*.

"He that walketh with wise men shall be wise; But the companions of fools shall smart for it." King Solomon's proverb appears reversed in *King Lear* for it is a wise Fool who accompanies and counsels a seemingly foolish king. In the play, the Fool assumes myriad roles—that of teacher, loyal servant, comedian, and often the punitive voice of Lear's own conscience.

So much for examples. Now here are a few tips to run your eye over as you sit down to write your next opener. Keep in mind, as you read them, that openers are hard for *everybody*, and that even a skilled writer will sometimes have to spend as much as a third of his total writing time trying to get his opener into proper shape:

1 Before actually beginning to write, do two things. First, ensure that you have a strong, tightly focused thesis. There's a good way to tell if you have one, but it takes courage. Write on some note paper, "I shall argue that—," and complete the sentence. Now study what you've written. If somebody else's essay were arguing this thesis, would *you* be intrigued by it? Is it complex enough, or controversial enough, to allow for lengthy exposition? Have you really stuck your neck out, or are you merely pussyfooting?

Second, have on hand a list of concrete details and apt quotations, and be prepared to use them. Remember, if you lead off with a succession of abstract generalizations, your reader may impatiently mutter, "Bull," and tune you out. On the other hand, if you lead off with a number of concrete details, your reader is apt to be thinking, "This fellow has really done his homework. What an eye for detail he has!"

2 Like most writers, you may choke at the very thought of beginning, for writing involves squarely confronting one's verbal and mental inadequacies. You may, as a result, find yourself making half a dozen false starts. Should this happen, try doing what a Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter once recommended to me. He said, "Pull yourself back from your desk, take a deep breath, and say to yourself, 'OK, now, what is it I'm *really* trying to say?' Then simply say it—*talk* it. I got that tip from an old hand when I was a cub reporter many years ago. It works."

3 If you follow this procedure and still feel unhappy with your opener, let it stand as is, roughly blocked out, and return to it after you've finished the first rough draft. There's no rule that says you must write every paragraph sequentially. Remember, writing involves discovery. Once the first draft is finished, you'll probably have discovered several points that really belong in your opener.

4 Use the front-door approach. Idle chat is a confession of an empty brain.

5 Use natural, simple prose—the simpler the better. You can come back later and add small touches of elegance if you have a mind to ("punitive" in the *Lear* example above was doubtless just such an afterthought), but initially keep it *simple*. Simple prose is clear prose. And simple prose, if smooth and rhythmical, is readable prose. Let your ideas themselves do the impressing. If they look banal to you, there's only one remedy: rethink them. Don't try to camouflage their weakness with razzle-dazzle rhetoric. You'll razzle-dazzle yourself right into a bog of bull.

6 Make your opener full-bodied. If it's splinter-sized—a mere two or three sentences long—your reader is apt to conclude that you are short on ideas and thus are only going through the motions. Experience will have taught him, as it's probably taught you, that these conclusions are usually justified. (Of course there's always the glorious exception that makes a dictum like this look silly.) On the other hand, if your opener is barn-like, your reader is apt to conclude that you lack any sense of proportion. He'll take one look at it and groan, "Has the author no mercy? Does he think he has to put *everything* in his first paragraph?"

7 Consider occasionally using a dramatically brief initial sentence—say, 4 or 5 words in length. It will compel you to begin with a definite assertion, give your grateful reader a firm handle on the sentences that follow, and offer him the enchantment of surprise. (Most opening sentences seem to run in the neighborhood of 18 words.)

8 If possible, organize your opening paragraph so that the biggest punch—the strongest statement of your thesis—comes at the *end*. (Note the *Shrew* example above.) This particular organization has three advantages: it enables you to build toward a climax, it gives you an easier entry into your next paragraph because of the springboard effect, and it saves you from having to repeat yourself.

5 *Middles*

My style of writing is chiefly grounded upon an early enthusiasm for [Thomas H.] Huxley, the greatest of all masters of orderly exposition. He taught me the importance of giving to every argument a simple structure.

H. L. MENCKEN

When you begin an essay, you may have clearly in mind exactly what you're supposed to be doing and how best to do it. If so, you're fortunate. Most people don't. The entire concept of essay-writing is fuzzy to them. This chapter is for the bewildered majority: it's an attempt to bring into sharp focus the *what* and the *how* of the business. The *what* part of it I'll explain with the help of an analogy, out of which I'll draw up a concrete checklist of reminders. The *how* of it is rather more complicated because it involves the very process itself. At the risk of putting you to sleep, what I'll do is follow an imaginary advanced student right through the various stages of writing an essay, after which I'll provide you with a model short essay written by an actual student. This will enable you to see what the finished product might look like.

What, you may ask, has all this to do with "middles"? Well, you are going to see that the middle section of an essay is inseparable from the opening, since it consists of the development of the opener's thesis; and you will see that the middle is also inseparable from the process whereby the thesis is arrived at, since it amounts to a coherent retelling of that process.

First, the *what* of it. When you write a term paper, a final examination, or even a lab report, you are engaged in what's elegantly called "expository" writing. Expository writing might be defined as "informative writing." Its primary goal is to *explain*.