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Author(s): Betsy S. Hilbert

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# It Was A Dark and Nasty Night It Was A Dark and You Would Not Believe How Dark It Was a Hard Beginning

Betsy S. Hilbert

One of the nicest things about college teaching is that periodically everything ends, and then there is a new beginning. One semester finishes with a thud, and another starts in a bright new batch of everything, including my intentions. On opening day, I write my name on the blackboard: Call me Professor. I do my practiced song-and-dance routine (with a few jokes thrown in, to lighten things up) to another group of new same faces, telling them about the rules, the possibilities of the course, and about the things we will do together. September again; there are empty spaces once more in the grade book.

Now I am alone with the first writing samples, opening another composition in the midnight silence of paper-grading that is an English teacher's consistent meditation. This is, approximately, essay number fifty-eight thousand, three hundred and twenty-one that I have graded—twenty-seven years of teaching community college composition, twelve classes a year, thirty students a class, six major papers per student, on average. Oh, I have measured out my life with comma splices. But each new opening paragraph is another beginning. If the work repeats itself endlessly, at least the students' voices are continually new.

The opening sentences of those beginning samples speak, as usual, more eloquently of their authors than about their subjects:

It is to be said that reading for pleasure expands the horizon of a person's way of thinking.

In High school I had attended many, socalled, Honors classes. One of which happened to be English.

I consider English an essential subject in the advancement of human growth.

I am an English professor's nightmare.

Worse nightmares I have had. It is clear, from the first day, that these students are trying to decide how to address both me and their writing. The

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Betsy S. Hilbert is a professor of English and Chair of Independent Studies at Miami-Dade Community College.

forms, the formalities, elude them. Introductions trouble them. Some sign the top of the page and then announce again in the first sentence "Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_." Some address me directly, as in "Teacher, I've been out of school for fifteen years." Some dispense with any introduction whatever, using their titles as the first lines of their essays. They are all trying to trust the promise of the course, that they will learn not only how to write their beginnings, but how to begin writing. The two activities are separate but interconnected.

"How do we start?" my students ask. I hand them the old saw about rolling a piece of paper into a typewriter and staring at it until drops of blood appear on your forehead. I tell them about hook openings and funnels, about set-the-stage openings, contrasts, and apt quotations. We pass around the only generally workable piece of advice about writing an opening: there is no requirement for writing the first paragraph first. Unfortunately, however, the "don't write the opening first" advice is an overgeneralization too, because for many professional writers having an opening sentence means having a start. John Gregory Dunne reports how an opening sentence can usefully drive the work:

On June 6, 1982, the *New York Times Book Review* asked a number of writers to describe their work in progress. I did not have a work in progress, only a contract for a work in progress, but no matter: if a writer is asked to describe a work in progress, perhaps the work in progress might actually progress. And so for the *Times* I wrote: "This summer I am going to Central America and will be working on a novel called *The Red, White and Blue*. The trip and the novel are not related, but who knows? . . . All I know about *The Red, White and Blue* is that Scott Fitzgerald considered a similar title for *The Great Gatsby*. What will it be about? About 600 pages, I hope."

The result of this fabrication was that my publisher invited me to lunch at The Four Seasons to discuss the work in progress, and the progress I was making on it. The night before the lunch, I sat down at my typewriter in a suite at the Carlyle Hotel that a movie company was picking up the tab for in the misplaced hope that I was paying more attention to the screenplay I was allegedly writing than I was to the novel the producers did not know I allegedly had in progress. In a spasm of fear, I wrote the following sentence: "When the trial began, we left the country." An hour or so later I had reached the point where I could note in my diary the next day, "Lunch w/JE [my publisher]—showed her 1st 3–4 pp RWB." And thus began four years at the factory. (51)

Dunne's final version ran close to his prediction: 710 pages. Professional writers can judge how long a finished piece will be, within a certain range, and within that range they are willing to let a piece take its own shape and distance. But learning to trust one's creation is a problematic procedure. (Even God, from all reports, had difficulties with that one—justifiably so, as it turned out.) Students want to know at the beginning, at the moment of assignment which is really the beginning of a student essay, exactly how many

words I require. Are 478 words enough for a 500-word essay? (Exactly what is a 500-word essay, anyway? Textbooks seem to refer to “the 500-word essay”—there is even a composition text by that name—as some kind of special literary genre. Is the 500-word essay anything like the one-minute waltz?) Students are terribly worried about how long the assignment has to be well before they begin writing, and my telling them not to consider length is a lie. The truth is that I am decidedly anticipating more than three sentences per composition, and the students have a right to know approximately what I’m expecting.

Expectations establish the beginnings of literary texts in crucial ways. The opening creates an immediate relationship among reader, writer and text, setting the parameters of the experience to follow. An opening that has not established tone or mood, vague distant thunder of storms approaching, a sense of style and of scene, has not fulfilled its purpose. (Or, in the case of some modernist prose, fulfilled its purpose only too well in playing with the reader’s expectations of what openings should be.) The gun must be brought on stage in Act I, or it can never be fired later.

“Write an opening paragraph that makes me want to read the rest of your essay,” I plead with my students. “How?” they whimper.

That worrisome sense of expectations, extraordinarily similar to the sense of being a participant at an extremely formal occasion, harries beginning writers into severe self-consciousness. Writing, after all, is an act of public performance. The writer puts on a mask with the face of a narrator, or the essay-voice, and steps from behind the curtains to face the audience. But even while the *writer*-mask is on, there is still the awful suspicion that the *person’s* fly is open. Behind the performer’s make-up is the agony that accompanies all self-presentation, experienced or new; no wonder that stage fright and writer’s block bear remarkable similarities. Any writer who has ever faced a blank sheet of paper can empathize immediately with the basic writing student in Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, who writes ten successive opening sentences, carefully crossing out each one and trying again, disintegrating (in Shaughnessy’s terminology) slowly from the first fresh, interesting—albeit incorrect—sentence, into a painful paralysis of halting diction and failing spirit (8).

It is hard to remember, in the fullness of a teaching career which practices endless reading and writing, how strange and unnatural both of those activities are, and how much they require a psychic relinquishment of everyday existence. Writers must give themselves to the text; readers, to a world in which they have no control, a world they never made. Both enter the dreamlike state of telling and listening. Practiced readers or writers can trust that they will come back—different, perhaps, but at least back. College students, however, though they well understand stories, sleep, and television (which is a kind of sleep), may still have trouble with the release of emotional or ideological self

that written text requires. They have been through so few deaths and rebirths of their own that they often cannot release their holds on selfhood enough to trust they will return, whole and undissolved, in time for supper. Writing, like reading, is a great act of letting go.

So much depends on first impressions. If a student's first impression of his/her own work engenders nothing but a deep mistrust of any ability to go further, the process is inclined to failure. We know that professional writers are often helped by using journals to develop material, but the journal is not successful only because it enables writing in a relaxed manner. A journal works partly because the writer *owns* the journal—has control over it, and sometimes even a lock to keep out other members of the family. The journal assigned in writing class—a journal that is therefore the teacher's, not the student's—doesn't always work as well as textbooks promise, because its ownership has shifted from student to teacher. One has to be secure on one's own ground, to have the psychological equivalent of Virginia Woolf's room of one's own, to write with any kind of confidence. Moreover, because any act of writing, fiction or nonfiction, as well as any kind of reading, is a venture into unknown territory, a solid opening both increases curiosity and assuages uncertainty.

Experienced writers use preliminary notes as methods of seeking guidance, discovering what they're going to say as they see what they write. Insecure composition students cling to their thesis statements and sentence outlines as itineraries, like AAA Triptiks, from which they cannot deviate. Fear of the unknown is a major reason why composition teachers find the techniques of prewriting so difficult to teach, and why the rigid, five-paragraph, thesis-directed format seems such a treasure to developmental writing students. They seize that solid, inarguable form, that preconceptualized structure, like Dumbo the baby elephant clutching his crow's feather, never conceiving that without the talisman he could truly fly. External structure is always a great comfort in a doubtful situation.

There is, besides the fear of finding out what one really thinks, another major difficulty in beginning writing: the certain knowledge that the words on the page will never be as wonderful as the words in the writer's head. This, of course, is the way of the world; each new beginning betrays possibility. Before a work is begun, it exists in the realm of the imagined, with all its splendor unsullied; it is a perfect, magnificent fantasy. But the moment something takes existence, it becomes part of the messy material world—never quite what it was in its creator's preconceptions. Babies that were never born are angels still; the real ones are a lot more difficult to live with. An essay on paper is never quite as marvelous as when it was first conceived. For that reason, there is a strong tendency never to begin—it is one of the major sources of procrastination—not so much to avoid work but to avoid facing the truth of what happens to our ideas when they take real form. Never committing, never engaging, is the safest position.

Folk wisdom is not much help in the specific situation of helping beginning writers, because there are as many sayings about how a bad beginning makes a good ending as there are about how a good beginning leads to a good ending. Essential folk wisdom actually seems to advise one to wait and see how things turn out, then construct an epigram appropriate to the situation. The only workable direct advice about beginnings seems to be that it is generally best to stop worrying about whether the start will be good or bad, and simply start. Stan Vanderbeek, a wonderful filmmaker of beloved memory, once listened patiently as I subjected him to an hour of my moaning about how the writing wasn't progressing, how editors didn't understand me, how I was blocked, constipated, wrung-out, strung-out, and no longer capable of putting two words together in any meaningful way. At the end of it all, Stan smiled. "Get off your ass," he said.

When does writing begin? Edward Said insists that a novel begins in intention, for "beginning is not only a kind of action; it is also a frame of mind, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness" (xv). He reminds us that our attitudes toward acts of creation, toward writing as we understand it, are decidedly culture-bound: "the desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition in the West) is inimical to the Islamic world-view. The Prophet is he who has *completed* a world-view; thus the world *heresy* in Arabic is synonymous with the verb "to innovate" or "to begin" (Said 81).

How does writing begin? In P. D. James' mystery novel, *A Taste for Death*, there is an opening moment between two characters, the poet/detective Adam Dalgliesh and an aged grand dame whose son has just had his throat cut:

There was a paperback on the round table to the right of her chair. Dalgliesh saw that it was Philip Larkin's *Required Writing*. She put out her hand and laid it on the book, then said:

"Mr. Larkin writes here that it is always true that the idea for a poem and a snatch or line of it come simultaneously. Do you agree, Commander?"

"Yes, Lady Ursula, I think I do. A poem begins with poetry, not with an idea for poetry."

He betrayed no surprise at the question. He knew that shock, grief, trauma took people in different ways, and if this bizarre opening was helping her, he could conceal his impatience, (96)

My students worry over their openings. So-Han firmly laminates a funnel opening onto her three-part thesis sentence, a pattern she learned some years back and clings to as a bit of order among my distressing urgings that she "be creative." Miguel, from Venezuela, begins each essay with his central point, every time; he is studying engineering and doesn't believe in wasting material. Sandra attempts a hook opening, and slips:

On that occasion I lost the battle. I remember it well. It was a summer, warm and lazy. Marge and I were sitting on a step talking.

But Bob succeeds, in a great, wonderful leap:

The more I have thought about college and where to go and what to do,  
the more I like my dog better.

At the beginning, a writer must trust the sense of the work. He or she must believe that it can be written. He or she must be secure, above all, that no one will laugh or sneer, or at least that when the critical red-pen voices come, they will strike without slicing. The writer must understand, also, that not everything devolves on this one piece now under construction: the conclusion *will* arrive; there will be other openings yet to come. When those conditions are met, it is possible—most of the time—to pick up a pencil.

But a teacher of writing must never get too confident. A few years back, my friend Susan Fawcett was teaching a basic writing class about transitions, and the students, many of whom were not native speakers of Edited American English, were listening intently, absorbing the differences between “therefore” and “however.” The class took extensive notes. Susan was pleased with their diligence. A few days later, when the next batch of assignments arrived, she discovered that one student had very carefully begun the first sentence of his composition with a perfect opening phrase: “On the other hand . . .”

“But that is the writer’s life,” says Dunne. “You write. You finish. You start over again” (57).

## Works Cited

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### Doctoral Student Assembly of NCTE

The Doctoral Student Assembly will be meeting in Washington, D.C. at the spring Convention of NCTE. This affiliate group has official membership status within the NCTE and is specially designated for those graduate students who are contemplating or carrying on English doctoral studies. Its stated purpose is “to provide a support system for doctoral students as well as to promote networking among doctoral students.” A national newsletter is published twice yearly with semi-annual meetings conducted at the two major NCTE conventions. Membership fees are \$5.00/year and may be mailed to Cheryl Christian, 12417 Wycliff Lane, Austin, TX 78727. Please make checks payable to DSA-NCTE.