

Beginnings at Their Best:

How Award-Winning Writers
Keep Readers Reading

By Julie Pratt

SYNOPSIS

This essay explores the functions and qualities of beginnings in fiction and creative nonfiction. It identifies primary aims and opening strategies apparent in three dozen award-winning essays and short stories. It also examines how beginnings evolve as part of the overall work of writing.

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Introduction

“How do I begin?” This is a question that most writers have asked themselves. Experienced storytellers know that how they begin will determine whether their readers keep reading or decide instead that it’s a good time to clean the bathroom or walk the dog. They know that with all the competition for readers’ attention, there must be “something” that makes their stories stand out as worthy of people’s time.

That “something” is what this essay sets out to explore. What are the qualities that make a beginning effective? What does it mean to be effective, beyond enticing the reader to turn the first page? What are some of the strategies that award-winning fiction writers and essayists employ that make the judges keep reading? How are good beginnings created?

If these questions strike a chord with you, I hope you will read on. If not, it may be a good time to cut the grass or shovel the sidewalk, depending on where you live and what season it is. Or, better yet, write.

I’ll admit that I struggled at first with choosing a topic for this essay, a requirement for all third-semester students in my MFA program at the University of Southern Maine. My fourth-semester friends counseled me to just pick a subject that interested me, and everything would be okay. This one flew to the top of the list when my readers in one workshop said they really liked my essay – *once they got far enough into it*. Out in the real world, of course, readers aren’t forced by graduation requirements to slog through until they get to the good parts. So I decided I better figure out how to make the beginning one of the best parts.

* * * * *

My first task for this project was to decide what types of prose to read. In the interest of time, I chose short works (versus books) so that I’d have more beginnings to consider. I included both essays and short stories because I suspected that there would be sufficient similarities among the beginnings of essays (narrative ones, at least) and short stories to make a cross-genre approach worthwhile.

For the essays, I looked first to Robert Atwan, who has been editing the annual anthology of *The Best American Essays* for over twenty years. Atwan is responsible for culling what he deems the best essays down to a hundred each year. The twenty or so finalists are then chosen by

a guest editor. I read nineteen essays from the ones chosen by Susan Orlean in 2005, by Lauren Slater in 2006, and by David Foster Wallace in 2007. I aimed for a variety of narrative and persuasive essays, leaning more heavily toward the narrative. To ensure representation from smaller literary magazines, I added five essays from *The Pushcart Prize XXXIII: Best of the Small Presses*, edited by Bill Henderson and published in 2008.

For the short stories, I read nine selections from *The Best American Short Stories 2007*, edited by Heidi Pitlor and guest edited by Stephen King. I added three short stories from *The Pushcart Prize XXXIII*. My unscientific method for selecting these particular stories was to read the author bios and aim for a variety of ages and backgrounds.

Let me say a word here about “best.” I chose selections from the above anthologies because some very experienced editors and writers thought they stood out among the thousands published during the previous year. There is no objective “best,” of course. There is considerable debate about what even constitutes “good.” David Foster Wallace, in his self-described role as Guest Decider, cautioned readers that, “just about every important word on *The Best American Essays 2007*’s front cover turns out to be vague, debatable, slippery, disingenuous, or else ‘true’ only in certain contexts that are themselves slippery and hard to sort out or make sense of.” He acknowledged that his personal dislikes, such as memoir, made it easier to cut some essays from the final list than others. Other “deciders” shared similarly subjective criteria. Stephen King said he picked stories that provided “that sense of emotional involvement, of flipped-out amazement.” Lauren Slater said that many of the essays she selected “deal with loss, with death. This may in part reflect my own concerns as I journey around the sun for the forty-third time, but it may also reflect a growing demographic group that is coming to define this country: aging baby boomers.” Susan Orlean noted, “I realized after the fact that I’d chosen to include a number of essays that deal with the same subject – cooking, for instance.”

Despite the idiosyncratic nature of these anthologies, they seemed like a good place to start. I was right. By and large, I found the three dozen essays and stories I read engaging, well-crafted and worthwhile. I did not once think about cleaning the bathroom. Some appealed to my personal taste more than others, but all warranted inclusion in my examination of beginnings.

Best Foot Forward

What constitutes the “beginning” of an essay or short story? I think of the beginning as the launch pad. It’s a one-shot opportunity that lasts no more than a couple minutes or a couple pages, during which the reader decides whether or not to keep reading. It behooves the author, then, to use the beginning to put the story’s best foot forward.

Beyond establishing the writer’s skill, an effective beginning gives the reader a sense that something significant is at stake. Whether subtle or direct, the beginning conveys a problem to be addressed, an idea to be explored, or an experience or emotion to be better understood. The issue or problem may not end up being resolved or even be resolvable, but it feels worthy of our attention. Examples of the “stake” from the essays and short stories I reviewed include:

- Giving meaning to an earlier experience.
- Working through a crisis or overcoming a challenge.
- Understanding a puzzling situation or circumstance.
- Achieving something deeply desired.
- Exposing an injustice.

Another way of thinking about what’s at stake is that something feels off balance, enticing the reader to read on to regain equilibrium. Alice La Plante, author of *The Making of a Story*, writes: “Either things are out of kilter, or they will soon be; there’s an imbalance or a missing link, some mystery about what is happening that draws us into the story.”

Beginnings are also important in orienting us to time and place. LaPlante says a good beginning “immerses the reader in the physical world of the piece.” Early on, we want a sense of where we are and at what point in time, whether realistic or fantastical. While we don’t want belabored descriptions of setting, a few carefully selected sensory details go a long way in placing us in the scene.

A key function of beginnings in fiction is to get the story moving, according to Lawrence Block, author of *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit*. He says: “The worst thing about the openings of most stories by new writers is that they take more time getting started than an old Studebaker on a cold morning. I couldn’t tell you how many stories (submitted to the *Writer’s Digest* short story contest) began with the lead character getting out of bed, taking a shower, getting dressed, and going through a quarter or more of the two-thousand-word maximum length before presenting the reader with the story’s central problem.”

Instead, the beginning should move us toward the heart of the story or essay. It may start with action or with an engaging description of a situation or person. It will introduce the reader to one or more central characters and, in personal essays, to the narrator. Further, the beginning sets the pace and intensity of the piece, which should be congruent with the text that follows.

Of course, all of the above points make little difference if the quality of writing isn't of high enough caliber. According to Noah Lukeman, it's the quality of the prose – not the drama of the plot – that makes the strongest first impression on editors and other close readers. A literary agent and former editor for major publishing companies, Lukeman is the author of *The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying Out of the Rejection Pile*.

“Many writers spend the majority of their time devising the plot,” Lukeman says. “What they don't seem to understand is that if their execution – their *prose* – isn't up to par, their plot will never even be considered... A great writer can produce an amazing piece of writing with virtually no plot at all.”

There are no rules to assure good writing, Lukeman believes. Writing is art, after all. But his review of thousands of manuscripts has led him to the conclusion that there are ways to avoid bad writing. Mistakes that surface in the first few pages are often red flags for larger problems with the writing. Some of the most common ones include:

- Adjectives and adverbs that are overused and misused.
- Sound problems in sentence construction, echoes, alliteration and resonance.
- Style that feels forced, show-offish, exaggerated or ill-fitting to the story and characters.
- Hooks that are distinctly different from the writing that follows, feeling like a one-liner or gimmick, or that are disproportionate in terms of intensity.

All of these qualities contribute to the reader turning the page, which is the ultimate litmus test of a good beginning. Or is it? As creative writers, is our goal simply to appeal to the broadest possible audience? What other motivations shape a piece of writing and its beginning?

Primary Aims

Even with an artfully crafted beginning, some readers will put down a perfectly good piece of writing because they don't care for the subject, tone or style. The purpose of the beginning is not, after all, to trick readers into turning the page, only to feel misled and disappointed as they read on. Rather, a good beginning enables readers to make informed decisions about whether or not they *want* to read on.

Lukeman concurs that beginnings are more than marketing ploys. Good writers, he says, “don't write an opening for the sake of the opening, but for the sake of the story that follows.” An examination of beginnings, then, must first identify the beginning of *what*. For the purpose of this review, I grouped the selections I read by what I saw as their primary aims. By “primary aim,” I mean the motivation of the writer that drives the creation of the piece.

With few exceptions, the primary aims of the essays and short stories fell quite clearly into one of the following categories: (1) to assert a position; (2) to explore an idea, issue or phenomenon; (3) to reflect on personal experience; or (4) to tell a story. While I found some common *devices* for beginnings (e.g. use of an opening scene) across these groups, their *aims* tended to be distinct and discernible within the first paragraph or page. I have indicated the primary aim of each work in the bibliography and provided a few examples below.

(1) Assert a position

The four selections in this group are exclusively essays, since fiction, by design, leaves the “point” (if there is one) to the reader to decide. These essays call for – or at least strongly suggest – a particular course of action. Within the first page of each essay, the author introduces not only the subject, but his perspective on the subject, as Ian Buruma does in “The Freedom to Offend”:

“Like all forms of power, the power to advance the interests of vulnerable minorities is open to corruption... Its guardianship of civil behavior can slip into a form of intimidation, which interferes with free speech.”

In “Iraq: War of the Imagination,” Mark Danner opens with two quotes, upon which he develops his argument that the war was a huge blunder stemming from Bush's immense arrogance, as well as the inherent limitations of what we can know “on the ground,” which is further eroded and perverted as it's reported and interpreted up the chain of command:

“Today, if we went into Iraq, as the president would like us to do, you know where you begin. But you never know where you are going to end.” – George F. Kennan, September 6, 2002.

‘I ask you, sir, what is the American army doing inside Iraq?... Saddam’s story has been finished for close to three years.’ – President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran to Mike Wallace, *60 Minutes*, August 13, 2006.”

In “An Orgy of Power,” George Gessert opens with a confession, which sets the tone for a persuasive essay that is also personal and reflective: “I am reluctant to write about torture.” He uses the rest of the paragraph to explain why he is doing it anyway, though he’s not a journalist or expert on the topic. “In today’s world, almost everything connects with everything else,” he writes. The paragraph invites the reader to overcome her own reluctance to read about torture, to be as brave as the writer.

(2) Explore an idea, issue or phenomenon

In these eight essays, the authors set out to uncover or discover, rather than to convince. They begin with a sense of inquiry, and the reader is invited along on the expedition. The essays offer us illumination, not hard and fast conclusions.

For example, three of the essays explore particular physical and psychological conditions from varying degrees of detachment. In “Petrified,” drama critic John Lahr writes in the third person about the phenomenon of stagefright, incorporating real-life stories and commentary by experts, though no reflection of his own. In “Recalled to Life,” neurologist Oliver Sacks writes a first-person account of his observations of and relationship with a patient who suffers from aphasia, interspersing his knowledge of the condition as the patient’s story unfolds. In “Illness Is More than a Metaphor,” David Rieff explores end-of-life decisions and care within the context of the death of his mother, Susan Sontag.

While each of these essays opens with an individual’s story, we understand within the first page or so that the piece aims to enlighten us about a larger issue. Lahr and Sacks transition from the individual’s story to a clear statement of the condition they intend to explore. Rieff, on the other hand, weaves in the larger issues more gradually as he tells the story of his mother, though we know immediately that he’s describing a situation many of us have experienced with loved ones who are dying.

(3) Reflect on personal experience

This group includes eight essays, as well as four short stories that resemble memoir, all of which are written in the first person and are reflective in nature. In each, the narrator's personal experience may be indicative of a more universal one, but the trajectory of the piece remains personal. While the pieces are diverse in their opening strategies, they all contain an early indication that the narrator aims not only to tell you of his personal experience, but also to try to make sense of it.

For example, in the opening of Louis Auchincloss' short story, "Pa's Darling," the narrator tells us that her elderly father has just died. As she sits with newspaper clippings of his obituary on her lap, she establishes the reflective tone of the story when she says, "it seems a timely if unsettling opportunity to review my own life, no longer, I can only hope, in the shadow of his, unless it will be even more so."

In his essay, "George," Sam Pickering provides a lengthy account of the decline and death of his dog, reflecting on his own life and aging as he does. In the second paragraph, he sets the stage for this: "Despite the children's affection, George was only part of their lives, rich with new friendships and studies, summer camps and bright fall afternoons on playing fields. George was a bigger part of my life. He was my pal, the dog of my late middle years to sixty-two, that time when the long shadow slips over the horizon and rises in the mind, confining thought."

Paul Allen opens his essay, "Juice," in a jet en route home from Africa, where he's just spent three months studying Zimbabwean poetry. We read a half-page of his random thoughts about the place he's leaving and his anticipated re-entry, the kind many people have after being far from home for a while. Then he lands on what will be his main focus: "Why Zimbabwean poetry? I don't know, except that just shy of sixty, I'd been in a funk about poetry in general for a few years. I was hoping for rejuvenation." Caveats like "I don't know" and "maybe" and "I'm only just now realizing" are interspersed throughout the essay, giving readers the feeling that we're witnessing his insights as they unfold.

(4) Tell a story

This group includes eight short stories and four essays that tell a story, true or fictional, with little commentary, leaving interpretations and conclusions to the reader. If there is a "larger meaning" to the story, it's for the reader to decide. While many selections in the first three

categories employ stories as *means*, the story is the *aim* among this group. The openings, then, include details about the setting, characters and events that are integral to the story and engage the reader's curiosity about what's going to happen next.

For example, in her essay, "Operation Gomorrah," Marione Ingram describes how she survived World War II in Hamburg as a Jewish child, including the brutal bombing in the summer of 1943, for which the essay is named. In the first two paragraphs, she establishes the setting and introduces the main characters. She also injects this hook: Though she was usually an obedient 8-year-old child, "one day in late July my mother asked me to do something and I disobeyed her, and I shall be forever glad that I did."

In his short story, "L. DeBard and Alliette: A Love Story," Lauren Groff tells two stories – a personal one about the doomed love affair of an Olympic swimmer and a paraplegic polio survivor, as well as a historical one about the influenza pandemic of 1918. The one-page beginning describes the couple's first meeting on an ocean pier on a cold day, where he has just emerged from an invigorating swim. She "feels herself flush, and trembling, she smiles." He, on the other hand, thinks of her as "a nothing... and so, instead of the lightening strike and fluttering heart that should attend the moment of their meeting, all the swimmer feels is the cold whip of the wind, and the shame at his old suit."

In the middle of this description, wedged in a small break, is this: "It is March 1918, and hundreds of dead jellyfish litter the beach. The newspapers this morning include a story, buried under the accounts of battles at the Western Front, about a mysterious illness striking down hale soldiers in Kansas." These short "news reports" are injected periodically and intersect with the personal story later on.

In each of the pieces I read, the primary aim was discernible from the very beginning. I understood going in whether the writer's intention was to persuade, explore, reflect or story-tell based on what was said and how it was said. It established a sort of contract between the narrator and the reader that was maintained throughout the piece.

Winning Strategies

What beginnings are most effective, and why? Beyond putting the work's best foot forward and establishing the writer's primary aim, what particular strategies work well in launching a piece of creative writing? I approached this question by examining the overall effect – intellectual, psychological and emotional – that the beginnings achieved for me, the reader. This was a highly subjective assessment, of course. Other readers might have different reactions to some of the pieces, based on their own sensibilities.

I suspect that most readers, however, would find a pattern in the strategies, and that's what I set out to discover. I grouped the pieces by their overall effect, and chose the predominant effect when more than one was present. I found that the opening strategies and their effects were typically not bound by genre or primary aim, but could be applied across most forms of the prose I read.

The groupings, described below, are: (1) ominous, (2) mysterious, (3) peculiar, (4) familiar, (5) sensory, (6) provocative, and (7) humorous. I've noted the opening strategy of each piece in the bibliography. Within each category, I've identified below the beginning that I found to be strongest in putting the best foot forward of the story or essay, and why.

(1) Ominous

The overriding effect in these beginnings is that something has gone or is about to go terribly wrong, which creates danger for the narrator, characters or humankind. This was the most common of the strategies among the pieces I reviewed, used a third of the time, including seven essays and five short stories.

The winner in this category is Jo Ann Beard's essay, "Werner," the story of a man caught in a New York City tenement fire. With the qualities of literary journalism, it opens with these three paragraphs:

Werner Hoeflich spent the evening at his catering job, making white-wine spritzers and mixing vodka with Tab in a spacious apartment overlooking Central Park. There were orchids, thick rugs, a dog with blond hair. He walked home late from the subway afterward, along the gated and padlocked streets of the Upper East Side. The trees on his block were scrawny and impervious, like invalid aunts.

Once he had seen a parakeet in one of those trees, staring down at him, shifting from foot to foot. The bird had sharpened both sides of its beak on the branch and then made a veering, panicky flight to a windowsill far above. Most of Werner's metaphorical

moments were painterly – the juxtaposing of the wild bird and the tame tree, the shimmer of periwinkle, the splurt of titanium white that fell from it onto the pavement. He loved New York for its simple surprises, although in truth, Oregon and Iowa and Arizona and everywhere else had simple surprises as well. Canteloupe-colored sunrises, banded cows, Dairy Queens, all kinds of things that didn't include black plastic mountains of trash and the smell of dog urine.

But on that night it wasn't like that; it was cold and fresh on the dark streets. He rounded the corner and his building came into view, a turn-of-the-century tenement, where right about then – just before midnight, December 19, 1991 – another kind of New York surprise was taking shape. Deep inside the walls, three stories below Werner's apartment, a sprig of cloth-wrapped wire sizzled and then opened like a blossom.

I couldn't turn the first page of this essay fast enough. I've learned enough about Werner to like him. I feel placed in the world of an artist who appreciates beauty and surprises and does the menial work that people do to support their art. I feel the cold night air and visualize the upscale Central Park apartment, juxtaposed with the old tenement building. And just when it seems like the end of an ordinary day, I hear the sizzle.

Beard employs subtle foreshadowing when she describes the parakeet in the tree near the tenement that “made a veering, panicky flight to a windowsill far above.” Later in the essay, this is what Werner does as he leaps from his burning fifth floor apartment across an eight-foot wide alley through a window in the building next door. (An example of truth being stranger than fiction; I would have dismissed the event as unbelievable if this had been a short story.)

The essay sustained the high quality of writing it set in the opening page, with its attention to language, intensity and pacing, as well as artful unfolding of the character as he deals with the present crisis and reflects on his past life, which he's quite sure he's about to lose. For me, the beginning achieved Lukeman's gold standard: “At its best, it can be not only a propellant but also a statement of what you might expect from the text to come.”

(2) Mysterious

These beginnings evoke curiosity and the desire to find out what happens or get to the bottom of something, but without the fear induced in “ominous” beginnings. This strategy was used in two essays and three short stories. The winner in this category is an essay by Paul Zimmer called, “Hyacinthe and the Bear”:

Hyacinthe is dancing with the Bear outside my window again. I can hear them shuffling and rounding on the pavement. Hyacinthe is very old, and I can hear him

breathing hard. The Bear groans a little. How many nights have they been out there, turning their circles? Time inches along. How do you measure its passage? Calendars yellow and crumble away. Clocks grow old and stop forever.

How do you measure seven centuries? Count out loud slowly to seven hundred, and imagine one year each time you say a number. Spring, summer, autumn, winter; the good and the bad, the hot and the cold – think of all of this as you say each number. Yes, doing such a thing is impossibly tedious; yet if you were able to bring yourself to do it, you might gain a very small sense of the passage of seven centuries. Seventy decades. Six million, one hundred and thirty-six thousand, two hundred hours. How can conditions and events that occurred all those years and hours ago be recounted? Memories blanched by time, distorted, lost, gone into the cracks and crumbles of whatever rocks and residue remain. Documents translated, lost, found, retranslated, obscured, destroyed, lost again, faked and reinvented until they are utterly distorted or disappear altogether.

Arthur Schleisinger, Jr. writes: “The past is a chaos of events and personalities into which we cannot penetrate. It is beyond retrieval and beyond reconstruction.” What we have then is a barely reliable motley, a patching together of partial stories, hopes, lies, memories, records, imaginings, and opinions – not a complete record of the “truth,” just some things that suggest narrative, giving a small hint of a time and a place.

The opening paragraph piques my curiosity. Who are Hyacinthe and the Bear? What are they doing outside the narrator’s window, and why? How long has this been going on? In the next two paragraphs, the narrator prepares us for the impossibility of ever really “knowing” the past. The opening page also establishes the lyrical style and meandering progression of the essay, inviting readers to suspend their linear and logical thinking.

In the following paragraphs, we learn about the Cathers’ ancient and mysterious culture, of which little evidence remains other than spectacular ruins built on steep cliffs in the Pyrenees. The narrator, a retired man, summers in France and frequents the ruins. We eventually learn that Hyacinthe is a local eccentric, that Bear is an unknown hairy (as the Cathers were) man, and that they’re engaging in a circular dance the Cathers once did. The pair intrigues and scares the narrator. And then one night after he’s heard them dancing, there is a knock the door. He leaves it to the reader to decide whether or not he opens it (and to reflect on one’s own willingness to open such a door).

The surprise ending is seeded in the beginning, when he suggests that we can never obtain “a complete record of the ‘truth,’ just some things that suggest narrative, giving a small hint of a time and a place.” He set up the essay so artfully that I smiled at the end, rather than feeling betrayed.

Honorable mention in this category goes to Robert Polito for “Shame.” This essay has the shortest opening of all, just one line: “This all started with a photograph I saw perhaps once and never again.” Why “perhaps” only once – Is he not sure he saw it? And why never again? While photos are a common device for evoking memory, he adds an interesting twist by making it a missing photograph.

(3) Peculiar

Characters or situations in these beginnings immediately strike the reader as out of the ordinary, ranging from odd to fantastical. Five of the essays and two of the short stories employed this strategy. The winner in this category is Karen Russell’s short story, “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves”:

Stage 1: The initial period is one in which everything is new, exciting and interesting for your students. It is fun for your students to explore their new environment.

– from *The Jesuit Handbook of Lycanthropic Culture Shock*

At first, our pack was all hair and snarl and floor-thumping joy. We forgot the barked cautions of our mothers and fathers, all the promises we’d made to be civilized and ladylike, couth and kempt. We tore through the austere rooms, overturning dresser drawers, pawing through neat piles of the Stage 3 girls starched underwear, smashing light bulbs with our bare fists. Things felt less foreign in the dark. The dim bedroom was windowless and odorless. We remedied this by spraying exuberant yellow streams all over the bunks. We jumped from bunk to bunk, spraying. We nosed each other midair, our bodies buckling in kinetic laughter. The nuns watched us from the corner of the bedroom, their tiny faces pinched with displeasure.

This beginning did a good job of inviting the reader to suspend reality. More than in any other piece I reviewed, the title played a critical role, preparing me for the unlikely opening scene by stating that these were “girls raised by wolves.” Once I understood and accepted this premise (however far-fetched), the scene and the story that followed made sense.

The opening excerpt from the handbook tells us that the story has to do with acculturation. Other excerpts from the handbook are interspersed throughout the piece as this new group of girls becomes more “civilized.” The tension in the story revolves around the one girl who doesn’t adjust and what happens to her, as well as to the narrator. I read it as metaphor for what European Americans did to Native American children, but when I read the author’s note at the back of the book, I found that she intended it as fantasy. Not mutually exclusive, I guess.

(4) Familiar

These beginnings draw readers into the piece through a common experience or metaphor they can relate to. This was the predominant strategy in four essays.

Rebecca Solnit was the winner in this category for “Winged Mercury and the Golden Calf,” an essay about the problems caused by unfettered capitalism – the exploitation of people, devastation of the environment, and poverty for many to enrich a few. The essay opens with this analogy:

For a while in the middle of the twentieth century, economists liked to model their subject as ecology. They built elaborate systems of pipes, pumps and reservoirs through which water traveled, allegedly modeling the movements of money, wealth and capital. They were funny devices, stuck halfway between literal-mindedness and metaphor, and they begged many questions about the nature of economies and the nature of water. Since that time, water contamination and scarcity have become global issues, and water privatization a particularly heated one. But even if you left aside all the strange things we do to water, water has never exactly been a good model for economies, since the implication was that the flow of capital is natural, that money moves like water.

I was intrigued by the opening and essay overall because in my writing about public policy, I often struggle with how to engage people in subjects that they think are beyond them, that they typically ignore or defer to the “experts.” Solnit hooks us with the familiarity of the examples, stories and myths she employs. She re-tells the tale of the California Gold Rush, but with its less remembered dark side – its brutal abuse of people and the terrible mercury contamination it created. She writes, “Overall, approximately ten times more mercury was put into the California ecosystem than gold was taken out of it.” The story continues today in Nevada gold mines, where mercury is still used in the mining process, but is now released into the air rather than the water. She concludes, “For us, perhaps the golden calf is the belief that the current economic system produces wealth rather than poverty. It’s the focus on the gold to the exclusion of the mercury.”

Other strengths of the opening (and the entire essay) were the clear and accessible writing and fresh descriptions. For example, she never says “trickle down economics” though that’s what she’s talking about.

(5) Sensory

Strong sensory detail and verisimilitude are the hallmarks of these beginnings, placing the reader quickly in the piece. This was the predominant strategy used in two essays and two short stories.

W.S. Di Piero is the winner in this category for “Fathead’s Hard Times,” an essay about his deep and lifelong relationship to music:

When I’m standing at the opera – at ten dollars a ticket, it’s the best cheap show in San Francisco – I look along the balustrade and think on the kinds and degree of backache people will tolerate in exchange for a certain order of beauty. Regulars have to think things through in advance. The difference between the one-act *Salome*, a quick hundred minutes of sexed-up hysterics, and the nearly five-hour evening of the bitterly sweet *Così fan tutte* may entail significant medication. About the opera, I am a complete amateur, musically untrained, patchily familiar with the repertoire, but a concentrated listener and, like so many hounds attracted to ripe scents, a helpless softie. Mostly I roll in it. Nothing else in my life induces the dark elation I feel at a performance of *Don Giovanni* or *Così*. Passages in *Rigoletto*, *Peter Grimes*, and *Jenufa* melt me down; and while I’m losing my mind during *Butterfly* I give no thought to Pound’s crack in the *Cantos*: “Spewcini the all too human / beloved in the eyetalian peninsula / for quite explicable reasons.”

I know nothing about the opera, but I was taken in by the narrator’s delight and also his humility (“I am a complete amateur”), signaling that my own ignorance on the subject need not deter me from reading on. The words “standing,” “backache,” “helpless,” “concentrated listener” and “dark elation” all take on deeper meanings three pages later, when we learn of a painful and debilitating condition he developed when he was twenty years old and how music became his constant companion, along with the pain. The physicality and love of music he establishes in the first paragraph are sustained throughout the piece.

About two-thirds of the way through the essay, we learn the source of the title: The doctor who finally diagnosed his disorder (ankylosing spondylitis) “was rather surprised to see me standing upright. I *don’t* walk around looking at my shoes, and for this I’m grateful to, among others, David ‘Fathead’ Newman.” A local DJ played Fathead’s tune, “Hard Times,” every night at 10:00. Di Piero willed himself to stay up until the song played, walking a lot, rather than succumbing to his pain.

(6) Provocative

These beginnings raise ideas or situations that are likely to cause the reader emotional and psychological discomfort, but are engaging enough that at least some readers keep reading. Two essays employed this strategy.

The one I found most compelling and effective was “Teaching the N-Word,” by Emily Barnard. The context of the essay is her experience, as a black professor, teaching African-American autobiography to a small, all-white honors class at the University of Vermont. She opens with a poem called “Incident,” written in 1925 by Countee Cullen, which introduces her subject and personal perspective:

Once riding in old Baltimore
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His Tongue, and called me, “Nigger.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That’s all that I remember.

The beginning establishes the thread of the essay, which is the use of the N-word and its individual and social consequences. It’s an honest examination of her academic perspective juxtaposed with deeply personal experience, which yields more questions than answers, inviting readers into inquiries of their own.

Following the poem, the essay is arranged in eight sections, each beginning with a month and the year of the semester during which the class takes place. The sections read somewhat like a journal entries, reflecting on particular scenes and conversations with her students. The first and last sections focus on a student named Eric, which provide “book ends” to the piece.

(7) Humorous

These beginnings evoke a smile or laugh and signal that the piece is intended to be fun. This was the opening strategy for one essay and one short story.

The winner in this category is “Himmelen,” a short story by Heidi Shayla. The first two paragraphs show her dressed in high heels and a short skirt, “walking down the industrial stretch of Highway 99 on a Thursday morning, looking like a prostitute after a hard night... trying to ignore the truckers who blow their air horns at me and make gestures that aren’t worth repeating... wondering where the hell I left my common sense, because I certainly appear to have misplaced it.” In the third paragraph, we learn the reason for her present predicament:

That’s where it comes to the part where I said it’s a long story how I got here. Let’s just say it has something to do with a guy named Peder Shlolakov, who I now know to be a lowlife waste of my time, but until last night I thought was a law student from Gdan’sk, Poland, with a soft accent and way of pushing my name through his teeth so that it sounded as if it were part of his breathing: *Sar* on the inhale, *eena* on the exhale, Sareena. I’d never had a man breath my name before. I would have gone back to Poland with him just to spend the rest of my life beneath the dripping honey of his accent. But instead, here I am looking like something from the red light district, tripping past the wrecking yard where the morning sun glints off the rusting carcasses of old automobiles, and then past the livestock auction barns, the reek of hogs washing over me. All because of a jerk whose real name is Pete Schlotszky and whose only accent is one he made up in Roseburg while he worked as a mechanic in a garage owned by a cigar-smoking second-generation Polish American named Floyd.

Sareena is a woman looking for love “in all the wrong places,” dreaming of living in some exotic place far from her small town in Oregon, but ending up being charmed by a local janitor who builds exotic birdhouses. The match is aided by the ladies at the beauty salon where she works. It’s a made-for-TV story line, but the details are amusing and often unusual. The narrator’s voice, established in the opening and sustained throughout, was so fresh and endearing that it didn’t surprise me that the story won a Pushcart prize.

Closing Thoughts about Beginnings

Nearly all of the beginnings I reviewed felt natural, fitting, and deceptively effortless. I imagine, however, that most of these authors put a lot of careful thought into their openings, entertained multiple possibilities about where and how to begin, and revised the first few pages many times. I suspect that the beginning was often the last part to be finished.

“In the first draft of a story, no rules apply,” Jerome Stern writes in *Making Shapely Fiction*. “You write and write, ideas come, characters change, situations grow, dialogues take off, speeches become scenes, and surprises occur. You aren’t deciding where the story begins, where it ends, and where it will stop. It is not there yet. It is being created; it is creating itself.”

I find the same holds true for essays, particularly when my primary aim is to explore or reflect. Typically, some event or situation spurs me to start writing. It serves as a trigger, but often is not what the essay ends up being “about.” Sometimes, this event or situation remains as the opening; it has the emotional energy that inspired me to write, the kind that may grab readers as well. Other times, I end up moving the triggering event elsewhere in the piece. Occasionally, after much gnashing of teeth, I might part with it altogether because it no longer serves the story as it has evolved.

In many ways, this essay “created itself.” The triggering event was the comment from fellow students about what they felt was a slow start in one of my essays, and I did keep this “aha” experience as part of my opening. But the research and writing was an act of exploration. I started with an awareness of the problem and desire to improve my openings, but not with a specific hypothesis about what constitutes a good beginning. I strove for what Buddhists call a “beginner’s mind,” without preconceived notions of right or wrong ways to craft openings. I read a few – but not many – texts on beginnings. I then focused my attention on three dozen essays and short stories that had been already recognized as exemplary.

I spent most of my time examining and pondering what made their beginnings “work.” The framework of “primary aims” and “opening strategies” emerged as I read, thought and wrote about the pieces, individually at first and then overall. Since this essay will be the basis for a presentation at my final residency, I considered fellow MFA students as my primary audience and used the opening strategy of “familiar.”

I’m coming to understand the importance of *not* having a predetermined destination, to trust my muse to inspire each next step. Even my primary aim – to persuade, explore, reflect or

story-tell – may change as I immerse myself in the writing. I may start out with an idea I want to explore, only to find that it leads me on a more personal trajectory of reflection – or vice versa. A poet-essayist friend of mine says that when he sits down to write, he doesn't know if he'll end up with verse or prose.

Just as I don't know where I'll end up when I start writing, I can't decide how to begin the piece until I see the wholeness of it. Only at that point am I able to determine the opening strategy and particular devices that will serve as the best launch pad. If I do it well enough, my readers will not only be eager to turn the page, but also glad in the end that they did.

Essays and Short Stories Reviewed

Essay or Short Story	Primary Aim	Opening Strategy
Abraham, Laurie. “Kinsey and Me” (originally published in <i>Elle</i> ; BAE 2006)	Explore	Peculiar
Allen, Paul. “Juice” (originally published in <i>The Southern Review</i> ; Pushcart 2008)	Reflect	Familiar
Auchincloss, Louis. “Pa’s Darling” (originally published in <i>The Yale Review</i> ; BASS 2007)	Reflect	Mysterious
Ballantine, Poe. “501 Minutes to Christ” (originally published in <i>The Sun</i> ; BAE 2006)	Reflect	Peculiar
Jo Ann Beard: “Werner” (Originally published by <i>Tin House</i> ; BAE 2007)	Story-tell	Ominous
Beattie, Ann. “Solid Wood” (originally published in <i>Boulevard</i> ; BASS 2007)	Story-tell	Mysterious
Benedict, Pinckney. “Mercy” (originally published by <i>Tin House</i> ; Pushcart 2008)	Story-tell	Sensory
Bernard, Emily. “Teaching the N-Word” (originally published in <i>The American Scholar</i> ; BAE 2006)	Explore	Provocative
Buruma, Ian. “The Freedom to Offend” (originally published by <i>The New Republic</i> ; BAE 2007)	Persuade	Provocative
Crenshaw, Paul. “Storm Country” (originally published in <i>Southern Humanities Review</i> ; BAE 2005)	Story-tell	Sensory
Danner, Mark. “The War of the Imagination” (originally published in the <i>New York Times Review of Books</i> ; BAE 2007)	Persuade	Ominous
Di Piero, W.S. “Fathead’s Hard Times” (originally published by <i>The Threepenny Review</i> ; BAE 2007)	Reflect	Sensory
Gladwell, Malcolm. “What the Dog Saw” (originally published in <i>The New Yorker</i> ; BAE 2007)	Explore	Mysterious
Gay, William. “Where Will You Go When Your Skin Cannot Contain You?” (originally published by <i>Tin House</i> ; BASS 2007)	Story-tell	Ominous
Gessert, George. “An Orgy of Power” (originally published in <i>Northwest Review</i> ; BAE 2007)	Persuade	Ominous
Gordon, Mary. “Eleanor’s Music” (originally published in <i>Ploughshares</i> ; BASS 2007)	Story-tell	Peculiar
Groff, Lauren. “L. DeBard and Alliette: A Love Story” (originally published in <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i> ; BASS 2007)	Story-tell	Ominous

Hurd, Barbara. “Fine Distinctions” (originally published in <i>Fourth Genre; Pushcart 2008</i>)	Explore	Ominous
Ingram, Marione. “Operation Gomorrah” (originally published in <i>Granta; BAE 2007</i>)	Story-tell	Ominous
Iseri, Erica Keiko. “Overwintering in Fairbanks” (originally published by <i>North Dakota Quarterly; Pushcart 2008</i>)	Reflect	Peculiar
Jones, Jeff P. “Children of Cain” (originally published in <i>Passages North; Pushcart 2008</i>)	Explore	Ominous
Kyle, Aryn. “Allegiance” (originally published in <i>Ploughshares; BASS 2007</i>)	Story-tell	Ominous
Lahr, John. “Petrified” (originally published in <i>The New Yorker; BAE 2007</i>)	Explore	Peculiar
McCallister, Bruce. “The Boy in Zaquitos” (originally published by <i>Fantasy and Science Fiction; BASS 2007</i>)	Reflect	Ominous
Munro, Alice. “Dimension” (originally published by <i>The New Yorker; BASS 2007</i>)	Story-tell	Ominous
Orlean, Susan. “Lost Dog” (originally published in <i>The New Yorker; BAE 2006</i>)	Story-tell	Humorous
Peele, Lydia. “Sweethearts of the Rodeo” (originally published in <i>The Sun; Pushcart 2008</i>)	Reflect	Sensory
Pickering, Sam. “George” (originally published in <i>Southwest Review; BAE 2006</i>)	Reflect	Familiar
Polito, Robert. “Shame” (originally published in <i>Black Clock; BAE 2006</i>)	Reflect	Mysterious
Rieff, David. “Illness is More than a Metaphor” (originally published in <i>The New York Times Magazine; BAE 2006</i>)	Explore	Familiar
Russell, Karen. “St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves” (originally published by <i>Granta; BASS 2007</i>)	Reflect	Peculiar
Sacks, Oliver. “Recalled to Life” (originally published in <i>The New Yorker; BAE 2006</i>)	Explore	Peculiar
Selgin, Peter. “Confessions of a Left-Handed Man” (originally published in <i>The Literary Review; BAE 2006</i>)	Reflect	Ominous
Shayla, Heidi. “Himmelen” (originally published in <i>The Georgia Review; Pushcart 2008</i>)	Story-tell	Humorous
Solnit, Rebecca. “Winged Mercury and the Golden Calf” (originally published in <i>Orion; Pushcart 2008</i>)	Persuade	Familiar
Zimmer, Paul. “Hyacinthe and the Bear” (originally published in <i>The Georgia Review; Pushcart 2008</i>)	Reflect	Mysterious