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A Hook By Any Other Name...

OPENING SENTENCES IN ESSAYS

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Are you acquainted with the white screen of despair? I'm talking about that scary, empty Word document you just opened in an attempt to write your paper. In my experience, sometimes the first line is the hardest.

All throughout our early academic careers teachers exhort us to "hook" the reader. But once we move on from silly onomatopoeia openers like "boom!" and "crash," or even rhetorical questions such as "Do you know what makes my dog the best dog?" (*hint*: it's his tail, his spots, and his proclivity for playing fetch), it can be difficult to construct a nuanced and meaningful opening line.

What I'm here to tell you is that there's nothing to be worried about. When I began my cadet career, I thought I had it all figured out. But learning to transition from the writing style I had been taught previously to a more formal, academic style threw me for a loop. Evidence of this could be found in my clumsy, awkward opening sentences. **It took me a long time to figure out how to "hook" the reader without being heavy-handed or superficial.**

Unsurprisingly, that had a lot to do with learning from the masters. Now, I'm not talking about the stuffy academics sitting in wood-paneled rooms, devising new ways to make you squirm. **I'm talking about the visionary director George Lucas and award-winning musician Kendrick Lamar.**



Key Principles for Opening Sentences

It might not seem like it, but an essay is really just a narrative. Sure, it's all dressed up in formal language and beholden to various organizational conventions, but it's still a kind of narrative.

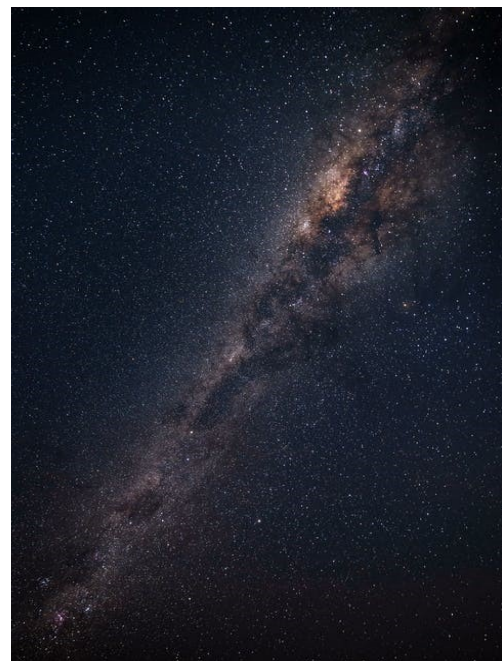
Once we understand that fundamental concept, comparing how we "hook" readers in essays with the various ways other media "hooks" us becomes incredibly valuable. It means you can find inspiration for styling your own essays in whichever artforms you love most, from music to film—just like I have. The examples from Lucas and Lamar I discuss in this guide are "hooks" that have grabbed me and held my attention to the very end. What makes them so successful as openings?

Three things. First, they contain an **implicit question**. They make you wonder right off the bat what is going to happen next. Second, they have **style**. Maybe you've never seen or heard anything quite like them, or maybe they just seem to get something *exactly* right; regardless, they capture your attention. Finally, they suggest something **new**. Being entertaining has a lot to do with being fresh, and whoever said an academic essay shouldn't entertain its readers?

Imagine this: A thunderous John Williams score set against a backdrop of the infinite blackness of space. The camera pans down, and we see an enormous planet right in front of our faces and others beyond it. Everything is motionless. Then, action! A small ship speeds through space, pursued by an astonishingly huge ship. Lasers fly back and forth! The audience is entranced.

This is of course the opening scene of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*. We know it's an incredibly effective introduction, but why?

1. It contains an **implicit question**, or in this case several. The audience immediately wonders where they are in space. Which planets are those? Then, we wonder about motivation—what's precipitating this conflict? Why is the bigger ship pursuing the smaller? What is really going on here?
2. It has **style**. The colors are vibrant. The set pieces are symmetrical and seem artistically arranged. The action as represented by the camera is smooth.
3. It is **new**. Most audiences in 1977 had never seen such a thing before. As a result, they're immediately invested.



Next: Kendrick Lamar. His third studio album *To Pimp a Butterfly* opens with the lines...

Hit me! / When the four corners of this cocoon collide / You'll slip through the cracks hopin' that you'll survive / Gather your wit, take a deep look inside / Are you really who they idolize? / To pimp a butterfly

What makes these opening lines effective?

1. The **implicit question** emerges in relation to "you" (who?), along with the question of what "to pimp a butterfly" actually means. What cocoon is he referring to? Why is survival just a 'hope'? What does it all mean?
2. It has **style**. It has unexpected rhymes and vivid imagery—the lyrics all work together to begin a story that piques the listener's curiosity.
3. It is **new**. While Lamar draws on many different styles to create his sound, he makes sure his audience hasn't ever heard anything quite like this.

Academic Examples to Consider

Below are some examples of opening lines from my own academic writing. None of them are perfect, but look through them and see if you can spot the components this guide describes...

Public intellectuals and pop culture elites often search for ways to describe the spirit of their time.

Joan Didion, a student of the silent 50's and an onlooker of the tumultuous 60's, articulates a relationship between stories and reality in America.

Through her poem "Brazil, January 1, 1502," Elizabeth Bishop is a witness in imagination to the colonization of Brazil.

The mythic realism of the new American West finds a particularly potent expression in John Ford's *The Searchers*.

The bottom line: every essay is different, but if you study these examples—and your own favorites from art, music, and film—you will be well on your way to crafting interesting, nuanced opening lines of your own in college essays.