

HOW TO BEGIN A STORY

Leslie Jill Patterson | adopted from the textbook *What If?* (edited by Anne Bernay and Pamela Painter)

A writer can begin a story in a variety of ways. It's crucial to choose the method that most appropriately raises the curtain on your narrative. Ask yourself: Do I want my story to open with the sound of voices—are the characters the key to this story, their voices important? Did a line of dialogue send your client down the path he's taken or shift the outcome of his life? Or is there a key character who needs to step into the spotlight immediately—to acknowledge his role in the story? Or should the narrative begin with an activity—say, your client engaged in doing something significant to this tragedy before the actual crime itself?

Here are some possible ways of kicking off a story. Or a closing or opening argument. Some of the examples below are opening lines to case narratives that I've written.

Don't forget that it's important to start in *medias res*—in the middle of something, when the action or story is already running full throttle. When reading these sentences, think about what may have already happened in the story. Finally, pay attention to the title's influence on the first sentence (because using subtitles in a written narrative or video can work in the same way).

When writing your opening or closing argument, experiment with different types of beginnings. How does the story change when you shift to a different opening?

With a Full Scene: Setting, Characters, & Dialogue: in medias res

He told them he loved them. Each and every one of them. He spoke without notes but chose his words carefully. Frank DeAngelis waited out the pom-pom routines, the academic awards, and the student-made videos. After an hour of revelry, the short, middle-age man strode across the gleaming basketball court to address his student body. He took his time. He smiled as he passed the marching band, the cheerleaders, and the Rebels logo painted beneath flowing banners proclaiming recent sports victories. He faced two thousand hyped-up high school students in the wooden bleachers and they gave him their full attention. Then he told them how much they meant to him. How his heart would break to lose just one of them.

—Dave Cullen, *Columbine*

I was in my office in downtown Denver, getting ready to leave for a meeting about college scholarships for students with disabilities, when I noticed the red message light on my desk phone flashing. I checked, on the off chance my meeting had been canceled, but the message was from my husband, Tom, his voice tight, ragged, urgent. “Susan—this is an emergency! Call me back immediately!” He didn't say anything more. He didn't have to: I knew just from the sound of his voice that something had happened to one of our boys.

—Susan Klebold, *A Mother's Reckoning*

On a June evening, the twelfth of June, 1994, Nicole Brown Simpson just finished putting her ten-year-old daughter, Sydney, and her six-year-old son, Justin, to bed. She

filled her bathtub with water. She lit some candles, began to get ready to take a bath and relax for the evening.

–Daniel Petrocelli’s opening in Sharon Rufo et al. v. Orenthal James Simpson

When Romon Banks started kindergarten, his stepfather cleared out the living room furniture, built a large rectangular pen where the sofa and coffee table used to stand, then hung blackout curtains for secrecy and installed a stereo system that could drown out the bloodiest howls—not because he and his neighborhood pals were fighting pitbulls, but rather because they were betting on the survival skills of their five-year-old sons. Home after school, and only a boy, Romon couldn’t know what he was looking at when he found the pen in the living room. He couldn’t know what survival would come to mean in only a few hours.

–case narrative

With a Description of a Person

Besides the neutral expression that she wore when she was alone, Mrs. Freeman had two others, forward and reverse, that she used for all her human dealings.

–Flannery O’Connor, “Good Country People”

When Mayland Thompson dies, he wants to be buried with the body of a twelve-year-old girl.”

–Kate Wheeler, “Judgment”

TYC workers warned us about Tyrone’s explosive temper: all hood slang and profanity, a rooster cocking the walk. But when he walked into the visitation room, we saw nothing but knobby elbows, a skeletal face—a boy rawboned as a starved dog.

–trial narrative

In 2009, during Brent Brewer’s resentencing trial in Randall County, Texas, the so-called expert sitting in the witness box was Dr. Coons—a man nearing seventy, shaped like an Army general and looking just as stern, with the corners of his mouth anchored into a frown. It didn’t matter that Coons had pronounced Brent Brewer a future danger back in 1991, sending him to death row, where, in the nineteen years since, Brent had not committed a single violent act. Coons’s “science” was based on the notion of “unreported criminal acts” in prison. Brent had probably committed plenty of those. Or he would sometime in the future. Coons couldn’t say what the crimes were—or would be—or who the victims were—or would be—because there would, of course, never be any record of these hypothetical crimes. So frequently did Coons visit Texas courtrooms to pronounce capital murder defendants a future danger based on such imaginary crimes that defense attorneys and reporters alike called him Dr. Death.

–habeas narrative

With a Line of Dialogue

“Don’t think about a cow,” Matt Brinkley said.

–Ann Beattie, “In the White North”

“Opportunities,” my father says after I bail him out of jail.

–Z.Z. Packer, “The Ant of the Self”

The night manager at the Walmart made a 311-call that night: “We’re got a guy here who’s drunker than Cooter Brown.”

–case narrative

With an Action

Me and my brother Loftis came in by the old lady’s window.

–Charles Johnson, “Exchange Value”

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work, I read it, and I couldn’t believe it, and I read it again.

–James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”

As if reenacting some catastrophic scene from the Garden of Eden, Joseph’s teenage mother, Hilda, introduced his thirty-nine-year-old father to crack the day they married.

–case narrative

With Narrative Summary (Background Information or Summarized Statement of an Event)

The Jackman’s marriage had been adulterous and violent, but in its last days, they became a couple again, as they might have if one of them were slowly dying.

–Andre Dubus, “The Winter Father”

When Madeleine Williams was four years old and her brother Sam was ten, their father killed their mother one night in early April.

–Edward P. Jones, “The Sunday Following Mother’s Day”

Everything Curtis Adams knows, he learned in kindergarten: by the time he turned five, he had survived more violence than most adults will ever witness.

–case narrative

With a Generalization (but it needs to be an interesting generalization)

My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America.

–Amy Tan, “Two Kinds”

The problem is credibility.

–Ron Carlson, “Bigfoot Stole My Wife”

In every library, there is a book that kills.

–Paul West, “Sinbad’s Head”

By the time I was ten, I had concluded that death was just a matter of moving furniture.

–Amanda Claiborne, “Jemma”

In San Antonio, on the West Side, hope is stubborn.

–case narrative