

THE FIRST PARAGRAPH

A masterclass by Intrepid Times

The first paragraph determines whether or not an editor will give your writing a chance. In this masterclass, Jennifer and Nathan compare examples of successful opening paragraphs and show you how to write an introduction that counts.

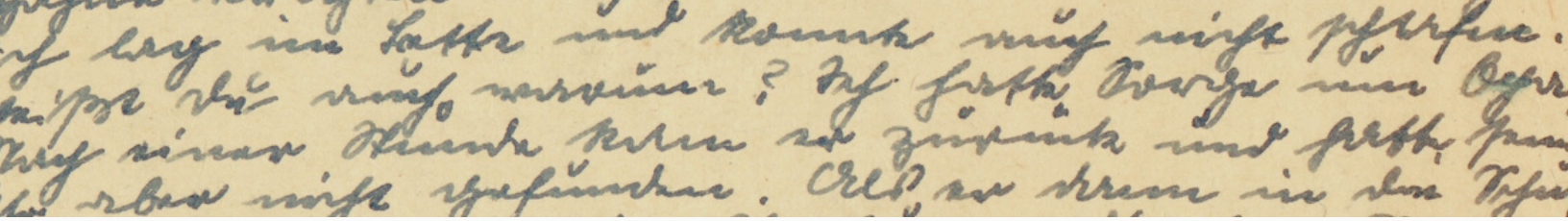


TIPS FOR A POWERFUL INTRO

- Start in the middle of the story when *things are already happening*
- Come back the next day and see if you can delete the first paragraph you wrote - often, this was just you getting warmed up
- Get excited - break the pattern and give the reader a reason to care
- Offer clues about the people and places, but don't too many give specifics just yet
- Lean on imagery -- appeal to the senses

"Get it down. Take chances. It may be bad, but it's the only way you can do anything really good."
William Faulkner





EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL OPENING PARAGRAPHS

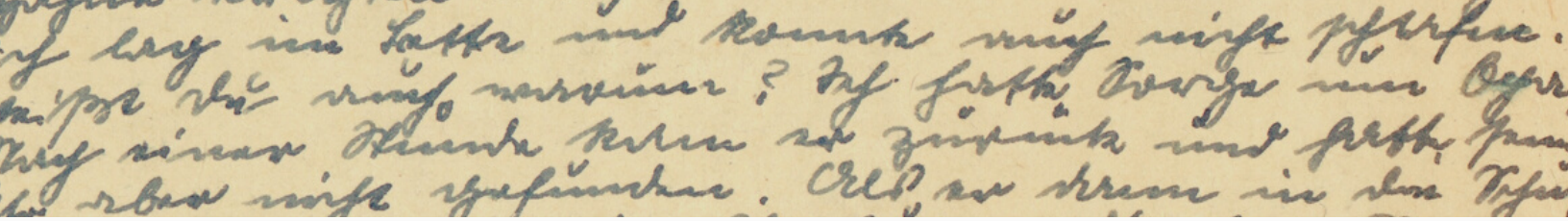
“In the ancient Sri Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai, I watch a lone worshiper conduct a ceremony known as puja amid a thickly swirling cloud of perfumed incense. He wears only white dhoti trousers, and his brow is streaked with turmeric paste and sweat. Eyes closed in quivering ecstasy, he clasps his hands across his heavily contracting chest in a gesture of prayer. Next, he lowers himself on bent knees, stopping just short of collapsing to the ground. In one fluid movement, he raises himself up, lifting his hands to the heavens and bowing his head to the earth. In a silent, graceful trance, he repeats these motions, again and again, as the sounds of the temple musicians swirl around him towards a shrill and feverish crescendo.”
Street Dancing with Shiva - Fiona Davies
https://intrepidtimes.com/2019/11/street-dancing-with-shiva/

“Buttoning up his shirt, he walks up the stairs to find me sitting with a beer in hand. His name’s Shantha, the owner of the guesthouse in Ranna, near Tangalle in the south of Sri Lanka. Just 20 minutes ago he had greeted me with a confused look, shirtless with a weed whacker idling in his hands. The arrival of a guest seemed to come as a shock to him, despite the fact that I’d booked in advance.”
Shantha the Rasta - Thomas Heaton
https://intrepidtimes.com/2018/11/shantha-the-rasta/

“Nothing says quite as much about the precarious relationship between human and nature as the sight of a man almost being raped by a dugong. One minute, we’re floating in a dinghy on peacock-blue water. The next, a six-foot dugong has sized our captain from behind and is prodding him enthusiastically with – well, let’s just say dugong physiology shares certain traits with elephants.”
For the Love of a Dugong - Imogen Lepere
https://intrepidtimes.com/2020/05/for-the-love-of-a-dugong/

Some Things These Have in Common

- Sets geographical context quickly and economically
- Is written from the perspective of the writer but is not about the writer
- Has tension and movement — something is happening
- Shows instead of tells — rich in sensory description
- All characters and details introduced are relevant for the rest of the story — please read the full stories and notice how the details given in the introductions matter throughout



MORE TYPICAL AND LESS SUCCESSFUL INTRODUCTIONS

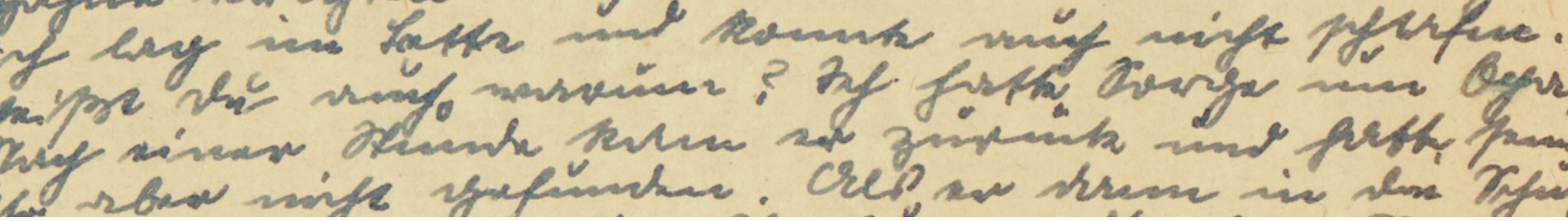
Here are a couple of typical examples of very common mistakes writers make, and are taken from Intrepid Times submissions that didn't quite make it. That does not mean these are by "bad" writers - merely that in these particular cases the introduction did not properly set up their stories for success. These are very easy mistakes to make and also easy to avoid when you know to look out for them. (Please note, some details may have been changed or removed to protect the identity of the authors.)

"Last summer I spent four months in Iceland as an au pair. During my week off, my parents visited and rented a car to drive all around Iceland. We started in Reykjavik and the golden circle, before heading South to stay in the house of my Icelandic family. The next day we spent time in the town of Vìk, then we hit the (ring) road again. After a stop in Kirkjubæjarklaustur for a short hike up to the waterfall, we finally drove more East than I had been before."

"I spent this weekend with MN, a German friend of mine who also goes to the National University of Ireland, Galway. For my twenty-fourth birthday, I wanted to escape Galway City, so that's exactly what we did. I took a three-hour bus to Dublin to pick up a rental car at 9:00 AM. (Can't rent a car in Galway unless you're twenty-five.) I then had to drive two hours back to Galway to pick up Max."

Some Things These Have in Common

- Too many details that are not relevant to the story — introduces facts and characters that are not relevant to the core story that is being told and are not upheld throughout the story.
- Is ABOUT the writer and what the writer did, not simply from the perspective of the writer.
- Mentions places without providing sensory descriptions of them.



EXCEPTION CASES

Writing is not about following rules! You can ignore some of the guidelines above PROVIDED you are doing so deliberately and with purpose. Here are a couple of examples of very different introductions that nevertheless WORK in their particular contexts.

Exception #1

“O destino enviou você para sua família?” Carla asked as we drove through the dim yellow fog in the port city whose name I never knew. I had been lost in thought and had not caught what had preceded her statement, but that word, destiny, brought me back.

“I don’t believe in that sort of stuff,” I said in jumbled Portuguese.

Carla held a thin cigarette between her lips. She inhaled and blew the smoke in the direction of her cracked window.

“But you’re a Buddhist,” she said and turned to face me. I kept my eyes on the road and hoped that she would be persuaded to do the same.

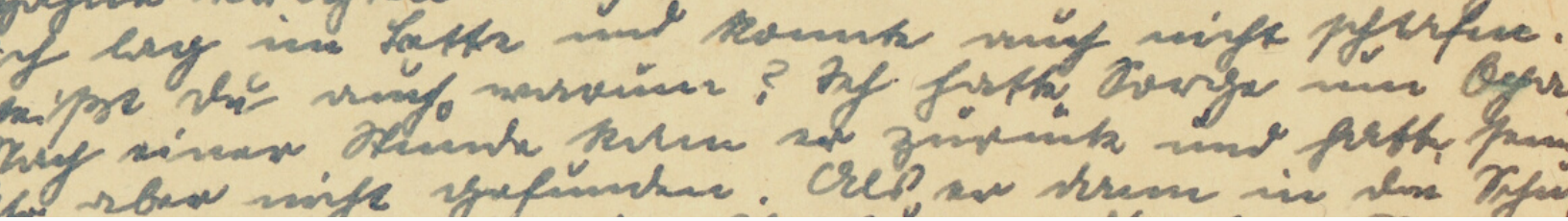
“That doesn’t have anything to do with mysticism. It’s grounded. It has nothing to do with destiny.”

Carla tossed the cigarette from the window and rolled it up. We slowed as we approached the city. The radio skipped as we left the highway behind and rolled onto the cobblestone streets of Angra Do Heroísmo.

“Then why did you come here?” Carla asked after a pause. “If you don’t believe in anything, what made you come all the way here?”

I thought about that for a few minutes and believed that I had a response, but after thinking on it more, I decided that I did not. I knew why I had left America, and I even knew logically why I had chosen Terceira Island. But that wasn’t what she was asking me.

My Azorean Ancestry - Cody Lampman
https://intrepidtimes.com/2020/01/my-azorean-ancestry/



Exception #1 (CONTINUED)

Instead of an opening “paragraph,” this story jumps right in with a dialogue. This doesn’t often work, but there are specific times when it does, including when:

- **There is an important connection between the characters**

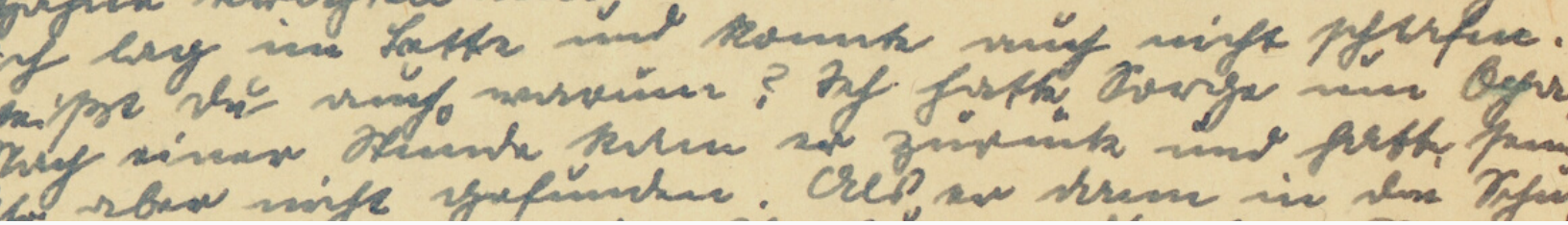
A dialogue necessarily involves at least two people, so if you’re going to start with a dialogue, make sure both will play a pivotal role in the way the story develops. In the above case, Carla is ultimately a key player in helping the writer complete his mission of discovering his ancestry and is important enough to dedicate the very first sentence to.

- **The dialogue offers clues about the “why” of the story**

If you’re going to use a dialogue, it needs to, like the other successful introductions above, offer a direction for the story, a clue as to the “why” that the reader will discover. In the above story, the dialogue shows us that the writer is experiencing a strong internal conflict that he feels the need to resolve, and that he can only do so in this particular place.

- **The story relies heavily on the inner or outer journey of the person through the place**

Good travel writing needs a strong context and a connection to place, but that doesn’t mean it can’t involve an inner conflict or journey on the part of the writer. In the above case, we see that it can work as long as the journey is inextricably grounded in the specific location. A dialogue works here because we are immediately thrown into the voice and conflict of the writer, which drives the whole story forward after.



Exception #2

"The Greek island of Chios is referred to as the Mastic Island due to its centuries-long cultivation of a rare tree resin. Masticha is a clear and sticky, sap-like substance derived from tiny incisions made into the trunks of the mastic tree. Trees producing mastic can grow in similar climates, but no one has ever managed to get them to produce the sap outside of this island. Due to its rarity and endless number of uses, great care has been taken to sustain it. It also explains why Chios isn't up there with the other heavy-hitting Greek tourist destinations like Crete and Mykonos. They've never needed tourism to bring income to the island. Mastic has provided economic stability since Greek antiquity."

Finding Authenticity in Chios - Erin Skahan
https://intrepidtimes.com/2019/09/finding-authenticity-in-chios/

Starting with a bit of history when writing a travel story often has the effect of leaving the reader bored or setting a tone that feels too serious or academic. However, it can be a great way to jump into a story in specific cases. It tends to work when:

- **The reader likely doesn't know much about the place**

Starting with a historical context is usually only interesting when the reader needs to know why a place is special. Introducing the historical background of, say, the Great Wall or the Pyramid of Giza would probably just insult the reader's intelligence, as they likely already know a great deal about these places. If a location has a special story to tell through its history, starting with that may work to bring interest to the first paragraph.

- **The historical information influences how and why the story is told**

In the above story, the fact that Chios is generally excluded from tourist circles is an important piece of information we need to know in order to follow the coming interactions with both the place and its people. It also helps us understand that this is a story worth telling since many don't know about this gem.

- **Parts of the story won't make sense unless you give some historical background**

In some cases, a story needs to include a bit of background in order to immerse the reader in what's to come. This is the case in the above story. If a place is deeply connected to its history, including it may be unavoidable. However, its importance may not dictate including it in the very first paragraph. You'll have to examine this on a case by case basis.

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