



Teaching Notes - Planning

Introduction

The opening paragraph is the writer's first impression on the reader. Its primary function is to create a sense of suspense, hook the reader and invite them to read on. Although the creative response is written for assessment in an examination, writing for the 'reader', rather than the examiner, should be the focus of students.

Practice - Key Outcomes

Teachers should prepare students to understand the impact of well-constructed opening paragraphs so that the following **key outcomes** are evident in all or most students' opening paragraphs by the time of the final assessments:

- a clear engagement with the reader through a confident exposition of character, place, incident or reflection
- carefully outlining particular features of plot line without allowing too much of the whole text impact at this early stage
- an awareness that sometimes what is omitted is just as effective as what is included
- using a 'voice' / persona (if adopting the first-person) that is appropriately mature at this level and that can engage the reader's interest through thoughts and feelings
- having the confidence to use a subtly chosen range of literary features to support the maturity of 'voice' and tone of the text
- ensuring that the reader is genuinely intrigued/hooked by the opening paragraph so that they wish to read on.

NB. The 'natural' end to an opening paragraph will sometimes take the form of a cliffhanger in order to hook the reader to continue reading. Cliffhangers are also discussed in the section dealing with effective endings to narratives.

All the practice in writing opening paragraphs that meet these outcomes should lead to students being able to draw on previous practice to develop spontaneous texts under the pressure of the final assessment.

Resources – potential activities

Learning Focus 1 – Describing 'Place'

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that a narrative can be introduced through a powerful description of a particular place
- understanding that a sense of place can be used to frame a mood and/or character
- being able to use a description of place to create expectations in the reader.



Resource 1 - The Place as Character

This resource focuses on the way that a description of place can be used to set the mood for a narrative. The language aspect focus is on the appropriate use of adjectives.

Teaching suggestions

- Students should be introduced to the idea of describing a place to set the scene for a narrative in the opening paragraph.
- A wide variety of place descriptions can be taken from published literary texts and studied by students to discuss the effect on the reader.
- Language analysis of description can focus on a variety of features (variety of sentences, use of verbs etc.) but **Resource 1** is focused on the appropriate use of adjectives.
- The first exercise can be completed alone or in pairs with the results discussed including alternative words from students and/or a similar piece written from their own perspective.
- The second exercise gives a lot more scope for individual and/or group creative writing. The example response is just one perspective and students may deal with the words and the subject matter in very different ways.
- The main focus should be that a description of place can effectively set the tone for the text without anything significant happening within the narrative in terms of plot-line.

Learning Focus 2 – Describing a Character

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that a narrative can be introduced through a powerful description of a particular character
- understanding that a strong depiction of character can be used to set the tone for the whole narrative
- being able to use a description of character to capture the reader's interest.

Resource 2 – Introducing a Character

This resource gives students a clear idea of how a narrative can be introduced with the description of a character. The impression given by the description is more important than knowing the finer details of identity.

Teaching suggestions

- Students could work alone or in pairs for this activity.
- Teachers can use many different descriptions of character from literary texts in order to analyse the way that writers can create a portrait in words for the reader.
- **Resource 2** makes the students select words carefully from a given list before being given a prepared answer. They can compare their own choices with the original and then see if they can find alternative ways of describing the character using the same template.
- A further activity asks students to write short opening paragraphs with specific subject matter. There are some example responses for students to study and discuss.
- Alternative titles can be set by teachers as an additional activity and then students asked to consider how the whole narrative may be developed from that point.



- Remember to highlight the point that all the descriptions in the resource give no names and do not seek to suggest any particular narrative plot-line. The key is to present the description and intrigue the reader to wish to know more.

Learning Focus 3 – Focusing on an Incident

Learning Outcomes

- understanding how to recognise significant sections / shifts in a narrative
- being able to analyse a text in order to understand the writer's structural intentions
- developing more strategies to become even quicker at writing effective plans

Resource 3 – Describing a Dramatic Event

This resource guides students through opening a narrative with the description of a dramatic incident. Clearly, this can ultimately be seen as part of a description of place or character when all the skills have been practised. The aim here is to make the student focus on bringing a scene to life in different ways.

Teaching suggestions

- Ask the students to recall a dramatic event they witnessed – this could be something from their personal lives or a news story. Explore the difference between being personally involved in an incident and being an observer. The detached observer can describe the emotions of others but does not allow personal feelings to affect the description.
- Ask students to describe an event from two perspectives: (a) directly being involved (b) observing the event in a detached way – either can be effective perspectives in a narrative.
- **Resource 3** focuses on the detached observer perspective. Ask students to complete the first exercise and compare their results with the examples.
- Discuss how this approach can engage the reader – use the 'Key Effects' in support.
- Ask students to attempt their own description using one of the suggested ideas or one of their own.
- Students can then share and discuss their results in pairs.
- Ensure that students understand that the ability to describe an event in this way does not have to always be in an opening paragraph and is just one more skill to use in the final assessment.

Learning Focus 4 – Developing a Given Opening Sentence

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that a given opening sentence has to be plausibly developed
- being able to develop alternative creative links to the same sentence
- being able to write an effective opening paragraph using a given sentence

Resource 4 – The Opening Sentence Option – make it work!

This resource helps students to understand how the opening paragraph for the component option that gives an opening sentence can be made to be very effective in catching the



reader's interest.

Teaching suggestions

- Discuss the possible pitfalls of choosing the option that gives an opening sentence. The main problems tend to be narratives that pack too much into the opening paragraph. This happens as students expanding on an initial idea too far and do not think beyond the opening paragraph.
- Choose any title and ask students to write the next two sentences. In groups, ask them to discuss the relative quality of the sentences in terms of how they develop the initial line.
- Use **Resource 4** to develop this practice further. The resource asks them to rank opening paragraphs. There is an obvious 'winner' but the discussion about the others will ensure that students carefully analyse the structures.
- Gather feedback on the relative merits of the different paragraphs and how successfully they leave the reader intrigued. Apart from (E) it may be interesting to see if there is a clear rank order – and why!
- This should lead to students having a stronger understanding of how to use a given opening sentence more effectively in final assessments.
- There is a further activity that gives some alternative titles. These can be used in a variety of ways, e.g. setting different groups of four students to write an opening paragraph in 5-6 minutes – then comparing and discussing the results.

Learning Focus 5 – Intriguing the Reader

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that the same title can be interpreted in different ways
- being able to summarise the key stages of a narrative

Resource 5 – Hooking the Reader

This resource looks at final sentences to hook the reader's interest. Students have to make decisions about whether given sentences appropriately end opening paragraphs.

Teaching suggestions

- Discuss the principle that the writer has control over the way the reader engages with a text by the detail and content as well as the structure and tone.
- Use **Resource 5** to encourage students to work alone or in pairs on matching given sentences to two different paragraphs.
- Some of the sentences can fit both paragraphs and this is accommodated in the way the resource responds to the student's choices.
- It may be fruitful to discuss why the sentences hook the reader in terms of the structure, e.g. the interrogative, the assumption of something more to learn etc.
- A further exercise asks students to write their own short paragraphs ending with one of the given sentences.



Learning Focus 6 – Beginning with the End

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that shifts in time are an effective tool in helping to control the effect of the narrative on the reader
- being able to use what would conventionally be thought of as the end of a narrative, as the main focus of the first paragraph

Resource 6 – Let's Start at the End!

This resource looks at the different ways that students can use an 'ending' as a 'beginning'. This approach will usually incorporate a focus on character, place, incident or a combination of all. The key is for the students to realise that narratives do not always have to be chronologically linear.

Teaching suggestions

- Discuss with students the different ways in which novels and films reshape time in order to ensure that a particular perspective or level of understanding is presented to the reader/ audience. The most obvious is the use of flashback in film or the way that alternate chapters in novels can relate concurrent but different narratives from the perspective of different characters.
- Introduce the idea of the main focus of an opening paragraph being a time of reflection, e.g. looking back over a life or an incident.

This aspect of playing with time will be looked at again in the section dealing with narrative voice. Here, we are just focusing on its use in the opening paragraph. However, if this section is covered first, it can be revisited.

- **Resource 6** focuses on the way the use of present and past tenses (with conditional) help structure the reflective nature of such a first paragraph. Students can work alone or in pairs to analyse the use of tense.
- A further activity asks them to write in a similar style using one of the given ideas in the resource.