Where the beginning ends: Studying leads in literature in order to write attention-getting introductions

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Students need to be explicitly taught how to write an introduction that entices readers to continue reading.

Betcha can’t eat just one.
(Lay’s potato chips slogan)

In recent years, teachers have learned much about how students should be taught to write. The advent of the writers’ workshop has truly redefined how educators teach writing. In teaching the writing craft, Calkins emphasized the need for students to live the “writerly” life (1994). This means that students need to see life through a writer’s eyes. They need to always recognize writing opportunities. In addition, students must “read like a writer in order to learn how to write like a writer” (Smith, 1983, p. 562). Teachers can facilitate this process by helping students perceive themselves as authors, engaging them in reading, and by training the novice eye to examine text from a writer’s perspective.

In order for students to write like authors, they need to read like writers. McElveen and Dierking (2000/2001) emphasized the need for effective models to use in the direct instruction component of writers’ workshop. Literature offers clear models for students to follow (Kern, Andre, Schilke, Barton, & McGuire, 2003). Through literature, students can meet a writer or creator (Luken, 1995). By closely examining the skill the writer uses, students can begin to imitate that skill.

Writing introductions

This teaching tip stemmed from the need to assist my students in revising the introductions in their writing pieces. My students needed to be explicitly taught how to write an introduction that would entice the reader to continue reading. However, as an eighth-grade language arts teacher, I struggled with the issue of finding suitable and varied samples of attention-getting introductions for my minilesson. I wanted quality, authentic, adolescent literature samples. Showcasing adolescent literature is an effective technique for “hooking” students to reading for pleasure (Myers & Hilliard, 1997). I also wanted these samples to be from material my students would later have access to if they needed to see the example again. Thus, I compiled samples of attention-getting introductions for direct instruction on the craft of writing introductions from the books and magazines in my classroom library.

The minilesson

The objective of the lesson was to assist the students in crafting an attention-getting intro-
I began the minilesson with sharing and listening time. I told my students, "Take out the writing piece you are working on. Read the first part of your piece to yourself. Then read it again and put a mark at the point where you feel your beginning ends. That’s called the lead. A lead is the point where the reader has a good idea as to what your piece will be about."

Next, I had all of the students share their lead, reading only up to the point where they had put their mark. The students would read one right after the other. We did not stop to comment. At the end, I would ask the class, "Which piece do you think you’d be interested in reading? Why? Whose lead caught your attention? Why? What made that particular lead hook you into the piece?"

After a brief discussion, I continued by saying, "The first sentences of a piece of writing are particularly important. A lead is the writing term for these first sentences. A good lead is like that first tasty potato chip when you open the bag. After you eat that first chip, you’re hooked—you want more. You can’t have just one chip; you want to eat the entire bag of chips. The lead, like that first potato chip, makes the reader want to keep reading. A good lead gets the reader hooked into the writing piece and makes them want to devour the rest of the story. A beginning paragraph must grab the reader’s interest and attention or he or she will not read any further. The first paragraph in a piece of writing is usually called the introduction. If you just examine any text, you will find that in almost every case the first paragraph is a real attention getter. To capture your reader’s interest, there are numerous techniques you can use."

At this point I go over all the different types of introductions (see Figure 1). Then I ask the class, “Which lead caught your attention?”

### Literature connection

After a brief discussion on the different types of introductions, I read to the class several leads I compiled from a variety of quality, age-appropriate, and genre-specific sources. The types of writing pieces my students were working on influenced the examples I included. The examples in Figure 2 are mainly from short stories.
As I read the leads, I asked, “Which type of introduction did the author use? Based on the introduction, which piece would you like to continue reading? Why?” Then I continued,

Writing a good introduction often depends on what you decide to include in the body of the composition and on the conclusion you reach. Therefore, you may decide to revise your introduction after you have written and finished the rest of your piece.

**Writing connection**

Next, I had the class rewrite the lead in their writing piece in at least three different ways using a different technique each time. They had to share
all three versions with a partner. The partner told which lead was most appealing and why. Of course, the student author has the final choice on which lead to use in his or her piece.

**The jackdaw**

My jackdaw, the object that serves as a symbol for the lesson learned, was a bag of Lay’s potato chips. At the end of the lesson, I would hand each student a bag of Lay’s potato chips and tell them,

*When you go to write an introduction, think of a bag of chips. Cracking open a book, reading the first pages, and craving to read more is like opening a bag of chips and wanting to eat the entire bag. In writing, the introduction is the appetizer. Use it to entice the reader to dip further into your writing piece. Make your reader want to read more.*

**Other writing genres**

The models students are exposed to significantly affect what they compose (Galda & Cullinan, 2003). For example, to learn how to write poetry, students should read plenty of poems. I used this same technique of providing authentic samples of introductions for other writing genres as well, such as demand writing or research writing. For demand writing (the type of writing required on state tests), writing introductions is a useful skill. Teaching students to write introductions that begin to answer the writing prompt also helps direct the rest of their response on the given topic. For research writing, teaching students how to write an introduction that effectively introduces the topic, problem, and question is extremely beneficial. In addition, I occasionally slip in a student model (making sure to give the student credit). Treating student work the same as published pieces not only indicates how important and valuable I believe their writing is but also helps make students critical readers. Explicitly teaching students to identify the structure in what they read and use that structure in their own writing helps them realize what is contained in literature and in the composition process (Graves, 1994). Once you teach your students to write attention-getting introductions, I “betcha” you will want to read more than one student writing piece.

**REFERENCES**


