Writing Applications: Writing Effective Lead-ins

1. Read the following information about writing a successful lead-in. This information comes from http://www.pearsoned.ca/highered/divisions/virtual_tours/rogers/05_rogers_chap05_2e.pdf where the full chapter can be read.

Your readers begin to judge you as soon as their eyes focus on your writing. You create a document with an attractive appearance because you want your readers to form a favourable first impression. Your efforts to make a good impression should include creating a strong lead-in. Other writers call this a grabber (Green and Norton), a motivator (Bailey and Powell), or a hook (Wingersky, Boerner, Holguin-Balogh, Gossin, and Stancer), but all these terms express a similar underlying belief: you have only a few moments to capture the attention of your reader and to arouse a desire to read your document. Most of the time, you will not worry about writing an effective lead-in until you’ve generated a thesis, main points, and support and have outlined your essay. Then, you’ll want to pay particular attention to the beginning. Look to the content of your document to create the lead-in, the first words your audience will read. As you re-familiarize yourself with your content, be on the lookout for information that would capture your readers’ interest. Here are some ways writers often lead readers into documents.

**Telling a story makes a good lead-in.** Contrast these two ways of introducing the same essay.

**OK:** Using cosmetic surgery to disguise the appearance of children with Down’s syndrome does not increase their IQ, achievement test scores, or school grades.

**BETTER:** All through my pregnancy, I dreamed of my baby. When—after 17 hours of labour—I gazed into her face, my dreams for her were shattered as I realized she had Down’s syndrome. I wondered if the cosmetic surgery they were using in Germany to disguise this condition would help my beautiful baby be more successful at school. Right then I planned to research the topic. I found out that such cosmetic surgery did not increase IQ, achievement test scores, or school grades.

Sometimes an anecdote or a case study can make a powerful lead-in to an essay.

**Making a startling statement can be a good lead-in.** “Working shifts can ruin your marriage.” That really catches the reader’s attention. Your reader isn’t expecting such a claim, and he or she is therefore motivated to read the rest of the essay. You can also startle readers into attention by asserting an unexpected point of view. Here’s an example: “Most people think that attending daycare strains the emotional bond between children and their parents, but such child care actually promotes better parent–child bonding.” An opinion startlingly different from popular belief will spark interest.

**An apt quotation is a good lead-in.** A Goderich, Ontario, judge—in dismissing charges against a mother who had punished her 11-year-old daughter for messing her room and blaming her sister—said, “Parents are entitled to use a bell... There were welts, but I guess you expect to find welts when you use a belt” (Jourard).

That quotation is a strong lead-in to an essay opposing spanking. It is powerful because it has the immediacy of speech, and it hints at a story. Quotations can do that.

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"The state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation," said former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in an interview in December 1967. His statement has served as a lead-in for many essays.

Your dictionary is another effective source of material to quote. Quoting a definition can sometimes grab the attention of readers. "Blood money: Money gained at the cost of another person’s life, freedom, welfare" was the lead-in to Toronto health policy consultant Michael Rachlis' essay decrying a tax cut financed by reducing welfare payments. That quotation really grabs your attention, even if you disagree with Rachlis' opinion.

A question can make an interesting lead-in. Consider this essay lead-in: "Would you like to babysit 70 children for 45 minutes? Would you like to do that with your back to the children? How would you like to do it while driving a 40-foot school bus?" Jill Pamentel hooks her audience by asking those questions. Her questions make her readers concerned about children's safety. The questions help Jill persuade readers to support her quest to ensure that school buses are staffed with two adults: a driver and a monitor. Questioning is a powerful way to pull a response from your readers. It can really grab their attention and motivate their desire to find out what you have to say.

Other types of lead-ins, according to CAHSEE on Target, include the following:

Summary, or a presentation of who, what, where, when, and how.

Example: On September 15, 2001, an unidentified flying object was sighted in Gary, Indiana.

Picture, or a description of a scene.

Example: I can see it so clearly now—the night I awoke to curling black smoke and bright orange flames.

2. If you have any questions, now is a good time to STOP and visit an instructor or a tutor to get some help. Write any questions you may have below before you go.

Once you are ready, go on to #3.

3. Create a lead-in for each of the incomplete introductory paragraphs. Read through the thesis statement and the preview of the main points. Write a lead-in with a tone appropriate to the topic. Write your answers, along with the rest of the introductory paragraph, on a separate sheet of paper.

(1)

I decided to quit my job at a local sawmill, and come back to college, because management frequently assigned unscheduled overtime, always paid low wages, and often ignored safety regulations. (Thanks to Chris Barr.)

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Even in cars equipped with air bags, you should still wear your seat belt because you can avoid the neck and spinal-column injuries possible even at low speeds and the fatal injuries possible in high-speed crashes. (Thanks to Greg Henderson.)

To be a successful film actor, you need to know exactly what to do when you hear the words “Rolling,” “Speed,” and “Action.” (Thanks to Michael D. White.)

If you want to avoid the drunks you sometimes run into at parties, pay close attention to the way someone approaching you walks and talks. (Thanks to Aaron Smallbone.)

Air bags in cars reduce neither accidents nor insurance costs. (Thanks to Andrew MacLeod.)

4. Before reviewing your answers with an instructor or tutor, use the space below to write any questions you still have:

5. Once you have reviewed your lead-ins, take time to write a one-page reflection about what you have learned. What is the purpose of a lead-in? Why are good lead-ins important? What do good writers need to know about lead-ins?

6. Review your reflection with an instructor or tutor in the WRC, and see if the instructor or tutor has anything to add to help you understand what it takes to be successful on an in-class essay exam. Then, have that person sign and date this sheet.

7. Return this completed, signed sheet to your instructor.

Instructor/Tutor signature

Date

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