

How Histories Begin: A Note on the Writing of Openings

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AS EVERY HISTORY PROFESSOR SOON DISCOVERS, undergraduates often have trouble writing effective openings for their book reviews and research papers. Some students hand in essays that begin with anodyne general pronouncements (“Throughout history, some things have changed, while others have remained the same”), while others hand in essays without any proper opening at all. This problem is compounded by the fact that many professors have learned to write through a process of trial and error: as a consequence, their grasp of the difference between good and bad writing is largely intuitive, and can be difficult to communicate effectively to students.

Not too long ago, as part of my research for an article on the work of French semiologist and theorist Roland Barthes, I found myself considering the ways in which historians introduce their works to their audiences.¹ Using evidence from a selection of classic works in the field of British history, I criticized Barthes’ analysis of inaugurations in historical discourse, and presented a counter-analysis of my own. Unfortunately, much of this research was cut from the final version of the article for reasons of space—but one of my colleagues then suggested that I should present my findings to other history professors, in order to help them help their students come up with effective openings for their written assignments.

In the pages that follow, then, I will briefly discuss the five basic types of openings employed by a selection of British historians over the past four hundred years. To judge from these examples, there are five basic types of historical openings: locative; motive; illustrative; argumentative; and reflective. Of these five, the first two types—the locative and motive—are probably the most useful and worthy of emulation by contemporary history students, while the last two types—the argumentative and reflective—are the least. The third type of introduction—the illustrative—can be used with effect, but only if students clearly understand its purpose.

Locative Openings

Of these five types, the *locative* opening is the quickest and most economical. A locative opening simply tells the reader when and where the topic took place, who was involved, and what happened. Its model (at least in British history) is the Authorized or King James Version of Genesis, Book 1, Verse 1: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” With just ten words, the author of Genesis informs the reader when the topic took place (at the beginning, before anything else), who was involved (God), and what happened (the creation of heaven and earth). Henry Hallam’s opening to his *View of the State of the Middle Ages* is more verbose than Genesis, but follows the same pattern: “Before the conclusion of the fifth century,” it says, “the mighty fabric of empire which valor and policy had founded upon the seven hills of Rome was finally overthrown in all of western Europe by the barbarous nations from the north, whose martial energies and whose numbers were irresistible.”²² For his part, Michael Howard begins *The Franco-Prussian War* with a sentence of almost Genetic simplicity: “In the summer of 1870, the kingdom of Prussia and her German allies totally destroyed the military power of Imperial France.”²³ Like the author of Genesis, Howard spends the rest of his book merely providing the details missing from that opening sentence.

A locative opening does not necessarily have to spell out what comes next—especially if the matter of utterance lasted longer than the seven days of Creation or the ten months of the Franco-Prussian War. Edward Gibbon, for example, begins *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* with: “In the second century of the Christian era, the Empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind.”²⁴ This tells the reader when (the second century C.E.) and where (the Roman Empire), but only suggests the decline and fall that is to come. Similarly, A. J. P. Taylor begins *English History 1914-1945* with: “Until August 1914 a sensible, law-abiding Englishman could pass through

life and hardly notice the existence of the state, beyond the post office and the policeman.”⁵ Once again, this tells us when (August 1914) and where (England), while foreshadowing one of Taylor’s principal themes—the growth of the British state during the period of the World Wars.

Motive Openings

Historians who write about lengthy time periods often do more than just foreshadow and imply their central themes: instead, they may make these themes the focus of their introductory statements. Instead of concentrating on the topic, *motive* openings concentrate on the writing itself—but like its locative counterpart, a motive opening is plain and direct: the historian tells the reader what is going to happen. Lord Acton, for example, introduced the central theme of his *Lectures on Modern History* with just eighteen words: “Modern history tells how the last four hundred years have modified the medieval conditions of life and thought.”⁶ R. H. Tawney was a little wordier, but equally forthright in his introduction to *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*: “I must begin these lectures with an apology. Their subject is historical. It is the attitude of religious thought in England towards social organization and economic issues in the period immediately preceding the Reformation and in the two centuries that follow it.”⁷ For his part, William Stubbs was able to introduce both his topic and much of his analysis and argument in the first line of *The Constitutional History of England*: “The growth of the English Constitution, which is the subject of this book, is the resultant of three forces, whose reciprocal influences are constant, subtle, and intricate.”⁸

Illustrative Openings

Both locative and motive openings have the virtues of straightforwardness and simplicity. With a locative opening, the historian gives the reader a clear indication of what they plan to talk about. With a motive opening, by contrast, the historian gives the reader an equally clear indication of what they plan to say on this subject. But not every historian wants to begin their work in such a plain-spoken manner. Some have sought to liven up their work and capture the reader’s attention with an *illustrative* opening—that is to say, by first relating an interesting quotation or anecdote and then explaining its wider significance—in a historical equivalent of beginning a story *in medias res*.

One of the best examples of an illustrative opening in all of British history can be found in George Dangerfield’s *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, which begins as follows: “The Right Honourable Herbert Henry

Asquith was enjoying a brief holiday on the Admiralty yacht *Enchantress*, bound for the Mediterranean on some pleasant excuse of business.” The story then goes on:

He had put in at Lisbon to dine with King Manoel of Portugal, and his reception in this precarious capital had been very gratifying. The *Enchantress* then headed for Gibraltar, and was rolling its valuable political freight about half-way between that rock and Cadiz when news was received that Edward VII was seriously ill. The yacht turned hurriedly and made for home, and was well past the Bay of Biscay when, at three in the morning of May 7, 1910, a second message arrived. “I am deeply grieved to inform you that my beloved father the King passed away peacefully at a quarter to twelve to-night (the 6th). GEORGE.”

The Prime Minister, sad and shaken, went up on deck and stood there, gazing into the sky. Upon the chill and vacant twilight blazed Halley’s Comet—which, visiting the European heavens but once in a century, had arrived with appalling promptness to blaze forth the death of a king.⁹

The full significance of these ominous events becomes clear only as the story progresses. The death of Edward VII and the portentous appearance of Halley’s Comet mark a watershed in modern British history: the end of the Victorian and Edwardian period, and the beginning of a four-year crisis in which civil war, class war, and even sex war in Great Britain and Ireland were averted only by the outbreak of the Great War in Europe.

Few historians have been lucky enough to be able to begin their histories with a fully-fledged omen, especially one in the form of a comet. But many others have plunged their audience into the middle of the story, just as Dangerfield does. William Camden, for example, begins his history of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I with the death of her predecessor: “The death of Queen Mary having been certain hours concealed,” he says, “the first news thereof was brought to the Bishops and Nobility in the Parliament-Chamber, (for the Estates of the Realm were assembled a little before in Parliament.)”¹⁰ Still others have begun their histories with well-chosen quotations that, when explained, help introduce the reader to their topics and themes. E. P. Thompson, for example, begins *The Making of the English Working Class* as follows: “‘That the number of our members be unlimited.’ This is the first of the ‘leading rules’ of the London Corresponding Society, as cited by its Secretary when he began to correspond with a similar society in Sheffield in March 1792.”¹¹ And at the other end of the political spectrum, Lewis Namier begins his *Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* in a similar fashion: “‘You will be of the House of Commons as soon as you are of age’, wrote Lord Chesterfield to his son, Philip Stanhope, on 5 December 1749; ‘and you must first make a figure there if you would make a figure in your

country.”¹² In both cases, the significance of these illustrations becomes apparent only a little later.

Argumentative Openings

In somewhat similar fashion, the *argumentative* opening seeks to make a small point before moving on to greater and more important things. T. B. Macaulay, for example, underlines the importance of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the accession of William III by arguing that: “Nothing in the early existence of Britain indicated the greatness which she was destined to attain.”¹³ W. F. P. Napier, by contrast, begins his history of the Peninsular War by pointing out how the French Revolutionary Wars were qualitatively different from the Napoleonic Wars that followed: “The hostility of aristocratic Europe,” he says, “forced the republican enthusiasm of France into a course of military policy, outrageous in appearance, in reality one of necessity; for up to the Treaty of Tilsit, her wars were essentially defensive.”¹⁴ Finally, G. M. Trevelyan begins his history of *England under the Stuarts* by discussing the distinctiveness of English society, compared to its Continental counterparts: “The division in English society most nearly corresponding to that chasm which on the continent divided the nobles from the remainder of mankind, was not nobleman and commoner, but gentle and simple.”¹⁵

Reflective Openings

The final type of introduction—the *reflective* opening—consists, as its name suggests, of general statements about history or historiography. David Hume, for example, begins his *History of England* by remarking that: “The curiosity, entertained by all civilized nations, of enquiring into the exploits and adventures of their ancestors, commonly excites a regret that the history of remote ages should always be so much involved in obscurity, uncertainty, and contradiction.”¹⁶ J. A. Froude begins his own *History of England* by stressing the difficulties involved in such a project: “In periods like the present, when knowledge is every day extending, and the habits and thoughts of mankind are perpetually changing under the influence of new discoveries, it is no easy matter to throw ourselves back into a time in which for centuries the European world grew upon a single type, in which the forms of the father’s thoughts were the forms of the son’s, and the late descendant was occupied in treading into paths the footprints of his distant ancestors.”¹⁷ Finally, Frederick Pollock and William Maitland begin their *History of English Law* by remarking on the artificial nature of historical periodization: “Such is the unity of all

history that any one who endeavours to tell a piece of it must feel that his first sentence tears a seamless web.”¹⁸

Combination Openings

These five categories are, of course, merely generalizations: many historical openings fit into more than one category. For example, Taylor’s opening to *English History 1914-1945* is at once locative, argumentative, and motive: “Until August 1914,” he says, “a sensible, law-abiding Englishman could pass through life and hardly notice the existence of the state, beyond the post office and the policeman.” The first part of this passage informs the reader about the time and place where the story begins (locative). The second part makes a particular point about the nature of the English state prior to 1914 (argumentative). By making this point, Taylor alerts his reader to the principal theme of his history, which has already been described (motive).

Similarly, the beginning of William Robertson’s *History of Scotland* is first argumentative, then reflective. “The first ages of the Scottish history are dark and fabulous,” he says—but then adds, so are the first ages of every country’s history: “Nations, as well as men, arrive at maturity by degrees, and the events, which happened during their infancy or early youth, cannot be recollected, and deserve not to be remembered.”¹⁹ Conversely, the introduction to Henry Thomas Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England* is first reflective, then argumentative. “Of all the great branches of human knowledge,” he writes, “history is that upon which most has been written, and which has always been most popular. And it seems to be the general opinion that the success of historians has, on the whole, been equal to their industry and that if on this subject much has been studied, much is also understood.”²⁰ By now, it should not surprise us to discover that Buckle disagrees with this general opinion he describes.

Finally, consider Lewis Namier’s full introduction to *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*—by turns illustrative, reflective, and motive:

“You will be of the House of Commons as soon as you are of age”, wrote Lord Chesterfield to his son, Philip Stanhope, on 5 December 1749; “and you must first make a figure there if you would make a figure in your country.” Small boys play at kings and soldiers, or at riders, engine-drivers, chauffeurs, and airmen—the material expression of that fancy varies with methods of locomotion. But for several centuries the dream of English youth and manhood of the nation-forming class has remained unchanged; it has been fixed and focused on the House of Commons, a modified, socialized arena for battle, drive, and dominion.²¹

Selecting Historical Openings

Each of these five types of openings has its place, and students should be encouraged to introduce their work in a way that suits their topic and thesis. Professors can help their students understand the strengths and weaknesses of each approach by providing their classes with examples of the types given above. Note, for example, that this article began with an *argumentative* introduction, but we may re-write the original statement to provide illustrations of each of the general types:

Argumentative: “As every history professor soon discovers, undergraduates often have trouble writing effective openings for their book reviews and research papers.”

Locative: “For close to four centuries now, since the publication of Sir Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* in 1614, British historians have been experimenting with different ways of introducing their work to their audiences.”

Motive: “To judge from a selection of classic works published by British historians over the past four centuries, there seem to be five basic ways of introducing a work of history to one’s readers.”

Illustrative: “Sir Francis Bacon’s *History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh*, first published in 1622, begins with a sentence that would make modern historians cringe: ‘After that Richard, the third of that name, King in fact only, but tyrant both in title and regiment, and so commonly termed and reputed in all times since, was, by the divine revenge favouring the design of an exiled man, overthrown and slain at Bosworth-field; there succeeded in the kingdom the earl of Richmond, thenceforth styled Henry the seventh.’”²²

Reflective: “Sooner or later, every historian must confront a blank piece of paper, and answer one of the most difficult questions of their career: ‘Where do I start?’”

And so on.

In my experience, locative openings are both the easiest to teach and the easiest for students to master—in part because they fit so easily into an “inverse-pyramid” introductory paragraph: start with a topic statement, explain the significance of the topic, discuss what historians have written on this topic, ask your own research question, and finally, state your thesis. (It also helps to be able to provide students with a particularly arresting example of this type of opening, e.g., Genesis 1:1) Motive openings are a little more difficult for students to master, but can be useful to practice because they compel students to focus on their paper’s argument rather than their topic.

Similarly, in my experience, students should at first be encouraged to avoid using reflective openings, for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, undergraduates rarely have the time for the sort of deep thinking that reflective openings require; while on the other hand, in a properly written research paper, students rarely have space to waste on these kinds of deep thoughts. Students should also be advised to steer clear of using argumentative openings unless they understand clearly how this particular argument fits in with and supports their general argument. Take this article, once again: it begins by arguing that a problem exists in historical education; without this problem, there would be no reason to write the rest of the paper.

Finally, students should neither be specifically discouraged nor encouraged regarding the use of illustrative openings. These types of openings have become very common of late, and as a result, warning students away from them would be tantamount to saying, “do what we say, not what we do.” However, professors must explain to students *why* historians use this type of introduction—to illustrate their wider argument, and to pique the reader’s interest. An obscure and uninteresting illustrative opening is just as much a waste of space and time as a shallow reflective opening, so stress to your students the importance of getting to the point, unless they have a good reason for engaging in this type of delay. By familiarizing themselves with strategies for writing openings, students will feel better equipped to produce historical works, whatever type of opening they decide upon.

Notes

1. David M. Leeson, “Barthes and the ‘Act of Uttering’ in Historical Discourse,” *Storia della Storiografia* 56 (2009): 105-128.
2. Henry Hallam, *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages*, Vol. I (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1880), 15. Had Henry Hallam written Genesis 1:1, it might have read: “In the beginning the heaven and the earth were created by God.”
3. Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871*, second ed. (London, U.K.: Routledge, 2001), 1.
4. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. I (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 3.
5. A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1965), 1.
6. Lord Acton, *Lectures on Modern History* (London and Glasgow, U.K.: Collins, 1960), 42.
7. R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, U.K.: John Murray,

1936), 3.

8. William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England*, Vol. I, fifth ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1891), 1.

9. George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, new ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 17.

10. William Camden, *The History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth, Late Queen of England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 9.

11. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, U.K.: Penguin, 1980), 19.

12. Lewis Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, second ed. (London, U.K.: Macmillan & Co., 1963), 1.

13. Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, Vol. I (Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston, n.d.), 15. Note that Macaulay's history does not actually begin with these words: instead, the great Whig historian begins his *History of England* with a direct address to the reader. "I purpose," he says, "to write the history of England from the accession of King James the Second down to a time which is within the memory of men still living. I shall recount the errors which, in a few months, alienated a loyal gentry and priesthood from the House of Stuart. I shall trace the course of that revolution which terminated the long struggle between our sovereigns and their parliaments, and bound up together the rights of the people and the title of the reigning dynasty." And then, being a Whig historian, he promises to show how every good thing that has happened to England since 1688 can be traced back to the Glorious Revolution. This is in many ways an excellent locative introduction, but since this form of direct address is unfashionable nowadays, it makes a poor example for teaching purposes.

14. W. F. P. Napier, *History of the War in the Peninsula and in the South of France*, Vol. I (London, U.K.: Frederick Warne, 1900), 1.

15. G. M. Trevelyan, *England Under the Stuarts* (London, U.K.: Routledge, 2002), 1.

16. David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, Vol. I (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1854), 1.

17. James Anthony Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, Vol. I, new ed. (London, U.K.: Longman's, Green & Co., 1893), 1.

18. Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law*, Vol. I, second ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 1.

19. William Robertson, *The Works of Wm Robertson, DD*, Vol. I: *The History of Scotland during the Reigns of Queen Mary and of James VI* (Oxford, U.K.: Talboys and Wheeler, 1825), 3.

20. Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England, Vol. I* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1883), 1.

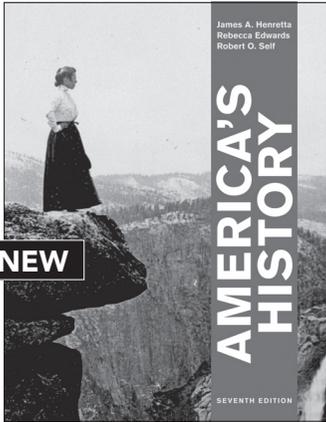
21. Namier, 1.

22. Francis Bacon, *Bacon's History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, ed. J. Rawson Lumby (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 5.

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