

Writing articles

✓ Things to remember

Don't talk about yourself

You're writing for the public, not for your friends. Your opinions are only interesting if you can explain them, justify them, or make them entertaining.

Be interesting

People don't buy magazines in order to be bored. If your article isn't interesting, they won't read it – and the magazine won't publish your writing again. To be interesting, you should:

- give your article a good title.
- start with a good opening.
- use concrete images and facts, not concepts and generalizations.
- use precise and interesting vocabulary.
- surprise the reader – or at least say something new.
- know when to finish – and finish in style.

Remember who you're writing for

Who reads this magazine? How old are they? What nationality? What do they already know about the

subject of the article, and what will you need to explain?

What are you trying to achieve?

Are you trying to persuade the reader to do something? To inform? To advise? To recommend? To entertain? Or a combination of these?

Layout

Your article should normally have a title and be written in paragraphs. Some magazine articles include lists – lists of instructions, lists of 'tips' or advice – which require a graphic layout such as that used in 'Be interesting' above. Note also the use of subtitles on this page and in certain magazine articles.

Organization and planning

Try to say just one thing in a 250-word article. Make notes, then summarize what you want to say in one sentence. You could write a plan based on that one sentence; the rest of the article would explain and illustrate what you want to say.

Relevance

Make sure that your article is relevant to the title, and that everything within the article is relevant to your main idea.

Length

If a magazine or an English exam asks for 'about 250 words', don't write 500. The magazine wouldn't print the article; the examiner may only read the first half of it, and you will certainly be penalised, perhaps severely.

Accuracy and libel

Don't present opinions, guesses and rumours as if they were facts. Such carelessness, apart from making your article inaccurate, untrustworthy and valueless, can also be illegal when printed in a magazine. Distinguish between fact and rumour by adding a simple word or phrase: the alleged murderer, the suspected mafioso, I've heard it said that . . ., there is a rumour that . . ., the minister is said to have / rumoured to have / supposed to have taken bribes.

In groups work through the following pages on how to write appropriate openings and closings. In the end, your group should hand in all tasks indicated with (*):

- FULL answers to all questions in each task. Give a justification/an explanation in 1-2 sentences for your answers! Please label them (indicate corresponding subheading and number).
- TWO openings (cf. p.3/D Writing practice)
- TWO closings (cf. p.5/C Practice)

2.0 Openings

A Which of these eight openings would you choose to begin an article entitled 'Openings and Closings of Magazine Articles'?

1*

1

The 'opening' is the beginning of a piece of writing (either the first sentence or the first paragraph); the 'closing' is the way the piece of writing ends (the last sentence, or the last paragraph).

3 *Doo-be-doo-be-doo-wa, shawop bam boom!*
Does it matter how a magazine article starts?

4

To light a fire, take a few big logs and a box of matches. Strike a match and the logs will easily catch fire. Later, when the fire is burning well, add some smaller wood, which must be very dry. Finally, for a big blaze that will last all evening, throw a small twist of paper on top of the fire.

Is that how to light a fire? Of course not. Yet how few writers start their articles with the 'twist of paper', the inflammable opening that would bring it to life!

7 Kane and Peters, in their authoritative work *Writing Prose*, include a five-page essay entitled 'Beginnings and Closings'. The essay begins 'The British essayist Hilaire Belloc - who knew, if anyone did, how to begin and how to end an essay - once wrote that "To begin at the beginning is, next to ending at the end, the whole art of writing."' Kane and Peters close their essay with an epigram of their own: 'Anyone can stop writing. Only writers can finish.'

2

Two students of mine used to be great rivals at tennis, but recently Laura has become too good for her rival. 'The only difference is my service', she confided in me. 'Helena's service is so predictable that I can always return it. But mine is now stronger and more varied. She never knows what to expect.' The service in tennis has a similar role to the opening of a piece of writing - and many writers could 'improve their game' by developing a range of different openings.

5

This article is about how to begin and how to end a piece of writing.

6

There are at least 15 different ways of beginning a magazine article, and a good dozen ways of ending. Not all of them are possible in every style of writing, but the ability to choose interesting and appropriate openings and closings is a very useful skill for a writer to have.

8

'Just take the horn out of your mouth.' This was Miles Davis's advice to a fellow jazz musician who didn't seem to know how to end his lengthy solos. But when you want to end a piece of writing, is it enough to 'just put your pen down'?

B Purpose

The opening of a magazine article has one or more purposes, in descending order of importance.

- to catch readers' attention and make them want to read the rest.
- to tell readers what the article is going to be about (the topic).
- to tell readers what the article is going to say (the content).
- to tell readers how the article is going to be organized (the structure).

2*

- 1 Which of the openings in A best achieves the first purpose? (In other words, which one would you most want to read?)
- 2 Do any of the openings leave you in doubt about the topic of the article?
- 3 Which of the openings gives you the clearest idea of what the writer is going to say and how the article is going to be organized?

4.HAK – SJ 16/17

C Nine ways of opening an article

- 1 Match the openings 1–8 in **A** with the following categories a–i. Some of the categories may have more than one example; others may have none.
 - a **A surprising fact**, perhaps including statistics.
 - b **A surprising, shocking or bizarre statement**. The reader keeps reading out of curiosity: how are you going to continue? Do you really believe that? What on earth are you talking about?
 - c **A question**. This helps to define the subject of a piece of writing. It also starts readers thinking about the subject, making them want to read what you have to say.
 - d **A quotation**.
 - e **A story** that illustrates what you are going to say. It may be a story about the subject itself; it may be a story about another topic that has something in common with the subject of your article.
 - f **A statement of the topic**. The statement mentions what the topic is, and often summarizes what you are going to say. This opening is often the key to the organization and paragraphing of the article.
 - g **A definition of the topic** (sometimes a dictionary definition). This opening may be appropriate, but is one of the least interesting.
 - h **A description or image** that evokes a suitable atmosphere or symbolizes the whole question.
 - i **A reference to a well-known phrase** from literature, a song, a proverb, etc.: an allusion or 'rewritten' quotation.

- 3*** 2 Here are five more openings, all of them introducing an article on the same subject. What subject?

9

As Mark Twain might have put it, reports of the death of the family have been greatly exaggerated.

11

Jane Smith is a junkie because both her parents are in the police force. She had problems at school, but when she got home she found no one to talk to. The day she broke up with her boyfriend, both her parents were working late. Jane's parents were never there when she wanted them. If they had been, would she have needed to turn to drugs?

13

In theory women are free, yet everywhere they are still in domestic chains.

10

It's 6.00 in the evening and Jason has just cooked dinner for two. He's sitting in the kitchen, waiting. He's had a long day. He got up at 7.30, ate breakfast alone, did the washing-up and made his bed. He still hadn't seen or spoken to anybody when he left home at 8.30. Jason is 12 years old. He's waiting for his dad to come home from work.

12

Forty years ago, 75% of wives in Britain were 'housewives' whose husbands were working: today only 20% of British families fit this model. What factors have led to this change, and what effect has it had on society, in particular the upbringing of children?

- 3 Match these openings to the categories a–i above.
- 4 Which of the openings 1–13 use quotations or direct speech? Would these openings be just as good without the quotations or direct speech?
- 5 Some of the openings (e.g. 8) only use words and ideas. Would you agree that it is more interesting to use *images* and *pictures*? Which openings do this, and which of them is most successful?

3*

D Writing practice

At a time when many people are taking exams, your college's English-language newsletter invites you to submit a 250-word article on the subject of exams. Are they useful? Are they necessary? Do exams help students to study, or do they obstruct a student's wider education?

Do Not Write the Article. Just write **two openings** for your article, of no more than two sentences each

- a) a very bad one, so that no one will read beyond the opening
- b) a very good one, so that everyone will want to read the rest of your article

4*

4.HAK – SJ 16/17

2.1 Closings

A piece of writing is like a film: a weak or unsatisfying ending spoils all the good things that went before. The ending of a good film gives you a feeling of satisfaction. The film feels whole, complete.

5*

How do we always recognize the end of the film before the words THE END come up on the screen? What signals does the film give out to tell us it is finishing? What makes a film feel complete? Think of the plot, the musical score and the images.

Referring to specific films you have seen, how many different kinds of ending can you think of?

A Six ways of closing an article

- 1 **Return to the beginning:** a conclusion paraphrasing the opening, or a return to the imagery or words of the opening.
- 2 **A Summary or conclusion.**
- 3 **A Question.**
- 4 **A Quotation.**
- 5 **An Image / picture,** symbolizing the end (sunset, death) or a new beginning (dawn, birth).
- 6 **A short sentence** to signal a break with what went before, or to indicate the intention to finish.

The closing of a piece of writing is also often signalled by certain linking words: *All in all; then; to sum up.* There is a list on page 23.

B Examples

Here is the opening of an article attacking education.

I don't believe in education. In most cases it does more harm than good. In the words of Oscar Wilde, 'Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit – touch it, and the bloom is gone.'

Here are some possible closings for the same article. Match them with the six different types of closing referred to on page 126. Some of the closings (a–g) may illustrate more than one of the categories (1–6); some of the categories may be illustrated by more than one closing.

A

They say that education promotes civilized values, tolerance and understanding. They say that education opens the doors to happiness and success. Education, as I have shown, does precious little of this. School education does even less.

D

In short, it is high time we questioned the law requiring all children to be educated. This law is an abuse of a fundamental human right, the right to innocence and individuality.

B

To quote from the song by Pink Floyd, 'Teacher! Leave those kids alone!'

C

And in this brave new world that I envisage, education will be a minority interest, rather like the hobby of growing stunted bonsai trees. A new generation will spring up, a virgin rainforest bearing the exotic fruit of blissful ignorance.

E

In the light of all this evidence, who could still believe in education? Who but an educated fool?

F

No, I do not believe in education.

G

As the poet so rightly says, 'Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise.'

C Practice

This is the opening of an article. Choosing from the six ways of closing an article, write **two** different closings. You will have to imagine the five short paragraphs that haven't been written.

'The best things in life are free,' they used to say, but for most of us having fun usually means spending money. And yet, even in a city, there are at least five ways you can enjoy yourself without putting your hand in your pocket.

6*