

## EXPERIMENT WITH ESSAY LEADS

“I *never* proceed without an opening that I think will produce a good piece of writing. That’s the only never in my personal toolbox.”

—Donald Murray

### Some Leads to Try

- **Anecdote:** a brief story that captures the essence of the issue or situation
- **Quotation:** a voice not your own that speaks to or exemplifies the problem or issue
- **News:** the writer gives the reader the who-what-where-when-why of a situation or issue
- **Background:** the writer gives a brief history of the issue or situation
- **Announcement:** the writer tells the reader what he or she is going to say about the issue or situation and takes an attitude

### Some Leads to Avoid, Please

A dictionary definition (“*Webster’s* defines *conformity* as . . .”): it’s a cliché.

A question to the reader (“How did that hamburger you had for dinner last night get to the shelves of your supermarket?”): it presumes the reader cares about the answer, plus it’s condescending.

A bromide or cliché (“We’ve all heard the expression, ‘Better safe than sorry.’ But is that true of today’s airline security procedures?”): your reader is already snoring.

A lead that isn’t focused (“Adoption programs in this country have some flaws. They aren’t completely bad, but they need to be dealt with. There are a couple of things I’m concerned about, even though, overall, adoption is a good thing.”): the reader is confused and bored before the writer has even started the essay.

## EXAMPLES OF ESSAY LEADS

### ANECDOTE

#### How Are You Being Controlled? by Colby Smith

You go out to buy a pair of shoes, but the Super Duper Store is the only one in town: all the smaller, family owned shops and specialty stores went out of business when the Super Duper Store moved in. Each small store couldn't get enough varieties of shoes, and customers won't pay more if they can buy something cheaper somewhere else, even though before, with all the small shops combined, consumers had a wider selection and, at certain times and places, cheaper prices.

But that's all long gone now. You go into the Super Duper Store and check out the shoe selection. You need running shoes, and you have two choices: the fifty dollar pair, or the \$120 pair. Neither seems that well made, or even what you're looking for, but you don't have a choice. There's no other place to look, and you need shoes. So you buy the better pair, but not long after you've bought them, a sole falls off. Then you have to go back to the Super Duper Store and give them more money for more bad shoes you don't want. This might seem to be a worse case scenario, but it's a situation that's worsening with the growth of huge, conglomerate corporations.

#### The Movie Theatre Monopoly by Emily Robinson

When I went to the movies at Hoyts Cinema in Brunswick a few weeks ago, I was shocked by the ticket prices. For an adult—which Hoyts defines as someone twelve or over—to attend an evening movie, the cost is \$7.75. In other words, a motorist could buy six gallons of gasoline for as much as it costs for one person to see an hour and a half movie. Is there a way to see a movie locally, at a large movie theatre, without paying Hoyts prices? No. Hoyts is the only multiplex theater in midcoast Maine. Hoyts is a monopoly.

Beef as a Health Food? You Bet  
by Jed Chambers

You're in the supermarket, shopping for your dinner. You wander to the meat counter and notice that sirloin is on sale. You love beef, and you want to sink your teeth into a nice juicy steak tonight, but you've been told by nutritionists that it will raise your cholesterol levels through the roof and probably means heart disease. Well, put that steak in your shopping cart. I'm here to tell you about a side of beef that isn't talked about enough—the healthy side.

**QUOTATION**

The Feminist Question  
by Anne Atwell-McLeod

Feminism?

“It makes me think of women who don't shave their legs,” popular TV actress Sarah Michelle Gellar was recently quoted as saying in JUMP magazine. A figure in the media who influences a lot of adolescents, Gellar perpetuates a stereotype of feminism that makes a joke of the bold steps taken over the past century, stereotypes that in today's society are much more widely recognized than feminism's reality. As a third-wave feminist, I'd like to challenge people my age to look beyond these mistaken ideas and understand how feminist ideals make life richer and fairer, for both women and men.

**NEWS**

Stop the Tobacco Companies from Targeting Kids  
by Jack Sherman

Ninety percent of American smokers started as teenagers. There are lots of reasons for this scary statistic: peer pressure, parents who smoke, and, most significantly, because of the billions of dollars spent by the tobacco industry on ads that target kids.

## BACKGROUND

### Lethal Possibilities by Erin K. Witham

It was only this spring that I learned about the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945, near the end of World War Two. I was amazed that my country had done this. And I was shocked to discover the number of people killed by the bombs. On August 6th, 1945, the USA dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Three days later another, more powerful, bomb of plutonium was dropped on the city of Nagasaki. I could not believe this happened just fifty-five years ago. I do not believe it was a necessary step to ending the war.

### The Right to Read by Marcia Conley Carter

No kid who's ever read *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* could conceive of an adult banning the tale because "it's too violent for children." Nor can we imagine that Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* would be taken away from kids because "it gives a poor philosophy of life." But all across America books like these are being removed from schools and libraries because parents, church groups, school boards, and community groups think that these titles and others—books about kids with "two moms," or titles like *The Little House on the Prairie* that are "offensive to Native Americans"—should be taken off the shelves of our classrooms and libraries. Other books that have been banned include *The BFG*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Where's Waldo*, *James and the Giant Peach*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*.

## ANNOUNCEMENT

### What Is the Prize? by Peter Wilde

An elementary school principal dyes his hair green when students read 10,000 pages. Another school hosts a pizza party for students to celebrate a similar "achievement." Give me a break. Readers don't need prizes. Reading itself is the prize.

## CHECK YOUR ESSAY LEAD\*

- \_\_\_ *Is it inviting?* Is there a voice? Is it lively? Will it engage a reader's interest?
- \_\_\_ *Is it clear?* Does the reader immediately understand what specific issue or problem you're going to explore in the essay?
- \_\_\_ *Is it true?* Are all your statements factual, accurate, and generally the case, so the rest of your essay can be believable to a reader?
- \_\_\_ *Is it focused?* Does it point the direction in which the rest of the essay is headed?
- \_\_\_ *Is there an attitude?* Does it sound like you, speaking with conviction about your opinion on the issue?
- \_\_\_ *Is there a clearly implied audience?* Do you have a target audience in mind? *Who* are you talking to and trying to convince?
- \_\_\_ *Is it long and developed enough?* Is there enough meat here to establish what the problem is and where the essay is going?
- \_\_\_ *Is it packed with information?* Have you provided sufficient context, background, evidence, concrete examples, quotes, statistics, *information of some kind*, to make a reader want to continue reading?
- \_\_\_ *Is it honest and unexaggerated?* Can the rest of your essay deliver on what the lead is promising?
- \_\_\_ *Is the language clear and strong?* Are the words you've chosen and the sentences you've structured straightforward, easy, and inviting? Are the verbs strong?

\* Adapted from *Write to Learn* by Donald M. Murray (1999) Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston