

OPENER IDEAS

Openings can be particularly difficult to write, in part because they need to hook your reader and set the scene in an engaging way while still remaining consistent with the rest of your essay. If you find yourself sitting before a blank page with no sense of how to begin, try one of these techniques:

1. **Open with a pithy quotation**

Polonius. *This is too long.*

Hamlet. *It shall be to the barber's with your beard.*

With this injection of humor, Shakespeare interrupts the high and epic-versed drama of the death of Priam. And although this cut at Polonius is bound to excite some laughter in the audience, it is also undoubtedly bound to arouse a sense of guilt as well.

“O, from this time forth/ My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth” (IV.iv.66). With this proclamation at the end of his last soliloquy, Hamlet deceives himself, along with his readers, into thinking that he is ready to act upon his revenge.

2. **Open with an illustrative quotation**

Wishing happiness to Hamlet and Ophelia, Gertrude proposes a toast “To both your honors” (III.i.42). Making a promise to the king, Polonius swears, “Upon my honor” (II.ii.390). Honor, as a guiding principle in life, is so ingrained in the minds of the characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that it forms part of their everyday speech, much as today we reveal our values through such casual expressions as “To your health” and “I swear on my life.”

3. **Open with a surprising fact or clever observation**

Shakespeare might today be called a plagiarist.

“Hamlet” is among an actor's most coveted roles. In the nineteenth century, several actresses took a turn as the tormented Prince of Denmark, perhaps most famously a one-legged bald woman, who was (not surprisingly) panned by the critics.

4. **Open with a relevant anecdote**

A king is reported to have died while sleeping in his garden; his brother marries his widow and ascends his throne. So begins the tragedy of *Hamlet*, one of Shakespeare's longest, greatest, and most critically contested plays.

5. **Open by defining a key term**

The term “hero” customarily brings to mind romanticized visions of swashbuckling individuals who act quickly and adeptly in any given crisis.

6. **Open with a question**

Why does Hamlet, who claims to have “cause, and will, and strength, and means” (IV.iv.45), delay taking vengeance on his father's murderer?

7. **Open with an overview that is relevant to the essay's argument**

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* lays out in dramatic detail the tragic consequences of the battle between human desire and human will: Hamlet's desire to avenge the death of his father contrasts with his inability to muster the force of will necessary to perform the act.

8. **Open by setting the scene in a dramatic fashion** (use sparingly!)

A king sits upon a throne, using his power to make all of his desires reality, using his power to govern the land that he has been given, using his power to crush the now hopeless opposition. Rarely is anyone, in any circumstance, given the opportunity to view a king without all the regalia, as a human being with true emotions, motives, and desires.

Credit: Robert Cochran and University Writing Center, 2020.

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