How Great Writing Begins

Analyzing the patterns of first paragraphs from 94 of the most compelling feature articles from The Atlantic, Fast Company, and NYT Opinion Editorials

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Photo by Trent Erwin on Unsplash

How does great writing begin?

Fiction writers labor over their opening scenes and sentences. TV shows must produce a strong pilot to get a chance at landing a syndicated series. None other than Plato himself once declared in The Republic that “the beginning is the most important part of any work”.

Yet nonfiction writers, myself included, don’t have a deliberate and informed approach to starting their articles.

Without a good beginning, we will lose our readers to another tab in the browser, a message from a friend, or an impulse to check their email. We must learn to write beginnings that grab our readers and never let go, drawing them into our article and compelling them to read through to the end.

So how do the masters of feature writing begin their articles?

I decided to answer this question with data. I've always been a fan of using data to inform my work, not to blindly copy others, but to discover patterns that reveal how to improve my work.

I decided to analyze the beginnings of the 94 most compelling articles from three publications: *The Atlantic*, *Fast Company*, and *The New York Times* Opinion Editorials. See the appendix below for the full list of articles, why I chose these publications, and what defined "most compelling". (Evergreen social sharing was one big factor in determining compellingness). In this article, I analyze how those articles start and and demonstrate what you can learn about honing the introduction of your own articles.

The 13 Patterns of Introduction

I found that the introductions of articles in the sample fit into 13 categories. Here's how they look, sorted by number of times each type of introduction was used:

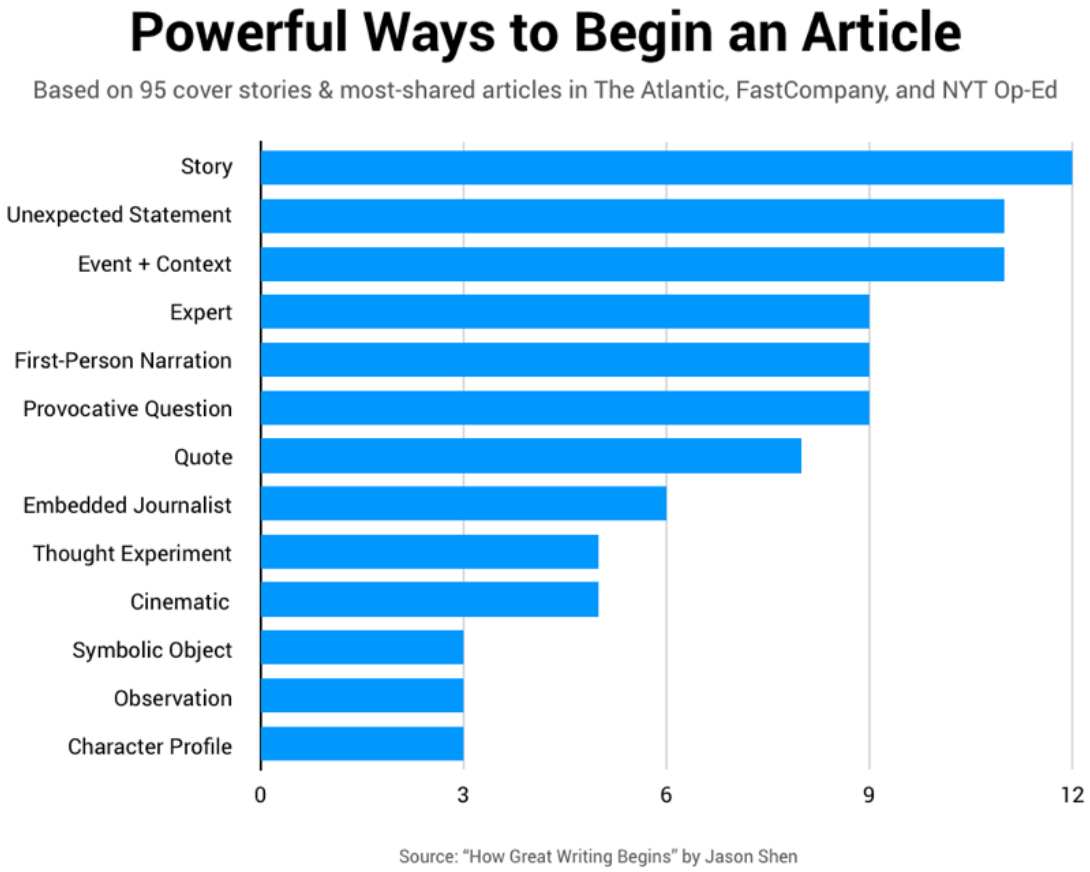


Illustration by the author.

Here's a quick overview of each approach I found:

- **Story**—a full plot arc with at least one character and a beginning, middle, and end.
- **Unexpected Statement**—a bold, sometimes controversial statement that is followed up with context and supporting evidence.
- **Event + Context**—a description of something that happened in the world, followed by what it means and why it matters.
- **Expert**—a series of presumably factual statements of the world without supporting evidence.
- **First-Person Narration**—the writer is telling their own personal story as if speaking out loud.
- **Provocative Question**—similar to Unexpected Statement, but in the form of a question that is followed up with a discussion of the answer.

- **Quote**—an interesting statement or question made by an authoritative or otherwise relevant third-party source.
- **Embedded Journalist**—where the writer references themselves as part of the story, but the piece is mainly about someone or something else.
- **Thought Experiment**—a statement where the reader is asked to imagine or consider a scenario that is not real.
- **Cinematic**—a detail-rich description of a person in a particular place, usually without any action.
- **Symbolic Object**—a focus on a particular object which relates to the main topic in an important way.
- **Observation**—a softer version of Expert and Unexpected Statement, where the writer describes what they've seen or believe and allows that may not reflect everyone's views or experiences.
- **Character Profile**—the description of a particular person, usually the main subject of the article.

Article Subjects: Entities vs. Ideas

One thing I noticed as I was doing my analysis was that most articles fell into one of two camps: an entity or an idea. There were patterns in which type of introduction were used for each.

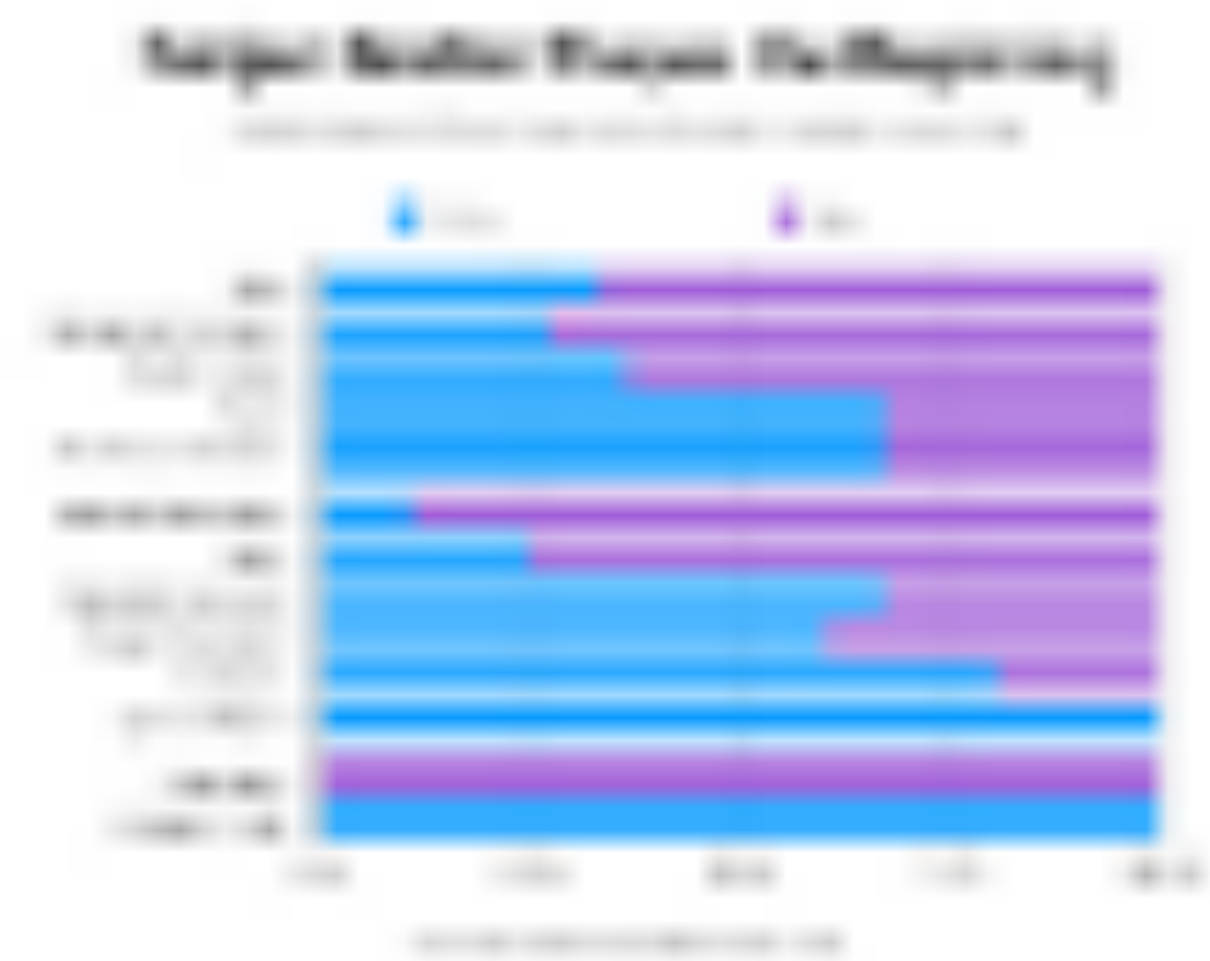
Entity-based articles focus on a specific person, organization, or event. Fast Company might profile a company like Pinterest or GIPHY. A NYTimes Op-Ed piece might share the personal story of someone who kneeled with Colin Kaepernick or encountered Harvey Weinstein.

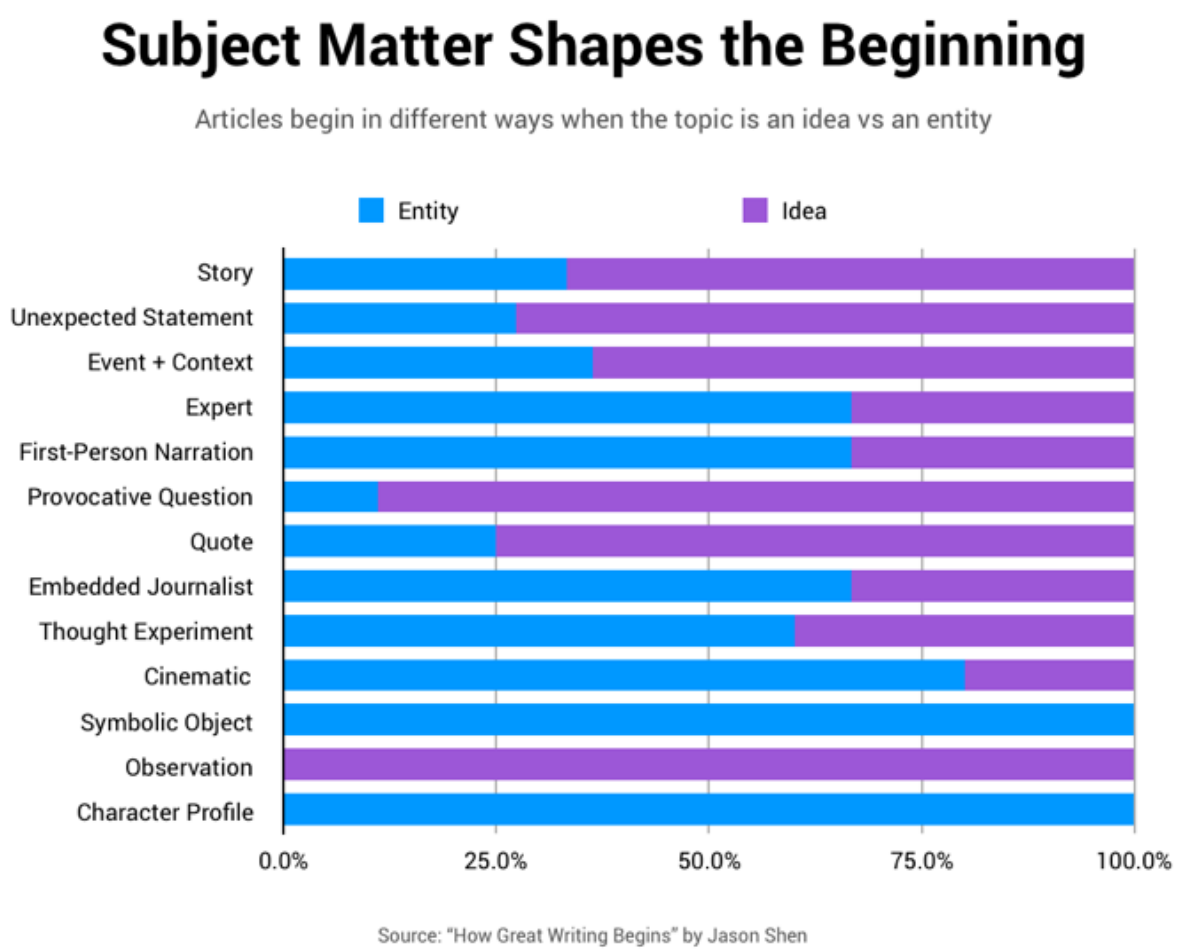
The most popular ways to begin articles about *entities* are Expert and First-Person Narration, Embedded Journalist, and Thought Experiment.

Meanwhile, **idea-based** articles are around less tangible things: trends,

arguments, recommendations. An example from The Atlantic might be an article about women bullying other women at the workplace. That piece might mention a number of companies and share specific experiences people have had, but its subject is bigger than any one of those specific entities.

Articles about *ideas* tend start with these patterns: Story, Unexpected Statements, Event + Context, and Provocative Question.





Styles of Beginnings with Examples

Now that we've looked at the data in aggregate, let's dig into specific examples of each of these beginnings and how they are used to hook readers.

1. Story

The most popular method of beginning overall was Story.

Marketers talk a lot about storytelling, but I've realized it's easier said than done. At a minimum, stories need a main character who takes action to reach a goal or overcome an obstacle. There should be some kind of resolution, either positive or negative.

Story beginnings were popular for both types of articles: those about entities, and those about ideas.

To open your article with a story requires to you find a relevant character and a story worth sharing. People love stories—we have been telling and listening to them for millennia—but we also have a real nose for bad ones. If you're going to use this technique, you need a good story with impact!

Entity Example

This Fast Company article on Bumble begins with the story of how it publicly booted one of its male users when he insulted a woman on the platform. While this story could have gone later in the article, by moving it up, the author is able to introduce the product and succinctly describe how the company's stance sets it apart from other dating apps (and how it is changing again). It takes the simple arc of boy-meets-girl into a much more interesting twist.

> *Like many single millennials, Ashley and Connor met cute the modern way: They matched on Bumble, the dating app where people swipe through potential partners but only women are allowed to initiate a conversation, and started texting. But when Ashley asked an innocent question about work, Connor launched into a misogynistic rant in which he called her a "gold-digging whore." Bumble's response, a fiery blog post now known as the "Dear Connor" letter, quickly went viral. The company called for a future in which Connor would "engage in everyday conversations with women without being afraid of their power" — and then, in an unusual move, banned him from using the service.*

Bumble CEO Takes Aim at LinkedIn (FastCompany)

Idea Example

Here's an article about the mistreatment that women face in tech—an idea. It opens with an in-depth story full of detail and depth that goes on for a full four paragraphs (we've only included the first two here, but you can see where it's going).

This is a powerful way to begin an article and it immediately helps the reader gain empathy for the generalized idea of "women in tech" who are at the center of the story.

> *One weekday morning in 2007, Bethanye Blount came into work early to interview a job applicant. A veteran software engineer then in her 30s, Blount held a senior position at the company that runs Second Life, an online virtual world. Good-natured and self-confident, she typically wore the kind of outfit — jeans, hoodie, sneakers — that signals coding gravitas. That day, she might even have been wearing what's known as the "full-in start-up twin set": a Second Life T-shirt paired with a Second Life hoodie.*
>
> *In short, everything about her indicated that she was a serious technical person. So she was taken aback when the job applicant barely gave her the time of day. He knew her job title. He knew she would play a key role in deciding whether he got hired. Yet every time Blount asked him a question about his skills or tried to steer the conversation to the scope of the job, he blew her off with a flippant comment. Afterward, Blount spoke to another top woman — a vice president — who said he'd treated her the same way.*

Why is Silicon Valley so Awful to Women? (The Atlantic)

2. Unexpected Statement

This type of beginning involves making a bold, controversial, or just plain unexpected statement upfront. In some ways, it can act as the thesis statement for the piece. It might argue that that high-achievers often feel

inadequate, or that the economy isn't as strong as it appears, or that Saudi Arabia is undergoing the most reform of any nation in the Middle East today.

Sometimes this is done by first stating a seemingly uncontroversial fact or opinion, only to cut it down with a "but the truth is XYZ" statement. It works because it surprises the reader, and promises the article will give them an interesting and fresh take on a topic.

Remember, even though we consider fiction to be "entertainment", nonfiction writing can is often used as fodder for social conversations. Providing an entertaining spin on a subject is of value to readers.

Idea-focused articles, unsurprisingly, favor the Unexpected Statement, because it is often used to set up the entire piece, but some entities used it as well. I've bolded the actual statement in the two examples below.

Idea Example

In this NYTimes Op-Ed piece, a professor of psychology argues that cutting-edge AI is still missing some of the fundamental thinking processes that humans possess, and offers some ideas for how we can get there.

> ***Artificial Intelligence is colossally hyped these days, but the dirty little secret is that it still has a long, long way to go.*** *Sure, A.I. systems have mastered an array of games, from chess and Go to "Jeopardy" and poker, but the technology continues to struggle in the real world. Robots fall over while opening doors, prototype driverless cars frequently need human intervention, and nobody has yet designed a machine that can read reliably at the level of a sixth grader, let alone a college student. Computers that can educate themselves — a mark of true intelligence — remain a dream.*

Artificial Intelligence Is Stuck. Here's How to Move It Forward. (NYTimes Op-Ed)

Entity Example

This piece in The Atlantic, which ran during a period in 2017 when confederate statues in the South were under a lot of scrutiny, looks to dispel a myth about Robert E. Lee, the leading general of the Confederate Army during the Civil War. The piece could have started with the description of the man, or of a particular statute, or of an event that had happened recently. But by making this bold statement upfront, we know exactly where this article is going.

> ***The strangest part about the continued personality cult of Robert E. Lee is how few of the qualities his admirers profess to see in him he actually possessed.***
>
> *Memorial Day has the tendency to conjure up old arguments about the Civil War. That's understandable; it was created to mourn the dead of a war in which the Union was nearly destroyed, when half the country rose up in rebellion in defense of slavery. This year, the removal of Lee's statue in New Orleans has inspired a new round of commentary about Lee, not to mention protests on his behalf by white supremacists.*

The Myth of the Kindly General Lee (The Atlantic)

3. Event + Context

The difference between this beginning and the Story beginning is that Events are usually well-known and publicized actions undertaken by major players (politicians, large corporations, celebrities) and covered by mainstream news. What's great about this method is that no matter what you're writing about, there's usually an event that is relevant and can be a hook into the topic.

Usually these events are recent — in the last month or so—but sometimes they can be events that happened in the distant past that have new

relevance in the present. Recent events tend to date the writing over time, but that's the trade-off you make for giving the article timeliness.

The crucial follow-up is to explain why this event matters. Ideally, the article is able to reveal a secret or hidden meaning to the event that was otherwise unknown, unpopular, or unclear until a certain connection is made.

The Event + Context pattern is more popular among articles focused on ideas than entities.

Idea Example

In an example of what good journalism should be—contextualizing the events around us for a better and more full understanding of our state of affairs—this Atlantic article examines the facts behind Trump's travel ban in early 2017. By starting with the key argument made by the administration and its mouthpieces, the article goes on to dismantle that idea.

> *This weekend, Rudy Giuliani went on Fox News to explain why Donald Trump's decision to bar Syrian refugees from U.S. shores and suspend visas for citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries did not amount to a Muslim ban. "What we did was, we focused on, instead of religion, danger," the former New York City mayor said, in reference to the targeted nations: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. "Which is a factual basis, not a religious basis. … It's based on places where there are substantial evidence that people are sending terrorists into our country."*
>
> *But Trump's policy does not have the factual basis that Giuliani claims. The data on terrorism in the United States consistently indicates that the threat largely lies elsewhere.*

Where America's Terrorists Actually Come From (The Atlantic)

Entity Example

In this story about Giphy, everyone's favorite repository of animated clips, the reporter sets up what seems like just an insider's view of some colleagues watching an awards show, which turns out to be a work event and a signal of the company's growing influence in pop culture and future direction.

> *On a mild Sunday evening in September, a handful of staffers from Giphy gathered in its Los Angeles studios to watch the Emmy Awards. The group congregated in the sleek, modernly furnished space that normally serves as a reception area, and they commandeered the minimalist black couch that is usually for waiting guests, the one opposite the wall of flat-screen TVs that during the week showcases rotating clips from its service.*
>
> *The vibe felt a bit like a dorm room, as they sat with laptops perched on knees and La Croix cans stationed within arm's reach, but this is only incidentally a social event. The Giphy folks have been tasked by the Emmys producers to "live GIF" the show, creating those seconds-long video loops used to enliven digital conversations and get shared. The effect is a dizzying bit of pop culture meta-commentary: The show's value is unlocked in a handful of moments that can be used to comment on the show itself — and then punctuate life's little moments long after the Emmys are over.*

In Six Seconds Giphy Could Make Billions (Fast Company)

4. Expert

The Expert pattern lumps together a handful of styles which all center around having the relative absence of a specific hook, while making factual statements and arguments without citation. Other names I considered giving this category included "Professor" or "Textbook," but I thought Expert was the best way to convey that these articles are written with a lot of research and the assumption that the reader should, or already is,

interested in the topic. This approach is favored by articles about entities rather than ideas.

Entity Example

Just because we're only citing facts doesn't mean the writing has to be boring. This account of the North Korea's nuclear capabilities (which appear to have diminished more recently) is riveting because of it's visual imagery, sentence length variety, and colorful language (e.g. "doggedly.")

> *Thirty minutes. That's about how long it would take a nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launched from North Korea to reach Los Angeles. With the powers in Pyongyang working doggedly toward making this possible — building an ICBM and shrinking a nuke to fit on it — analysts now predict that Kim Jong Un will have the capability before Donald Trump completes one four-year term.*
>
> *About which the president has tweeted, simply, "It won't happen!"*
>
> *Though given to reckless oaths, Trump is not in this case saying anything that departs significantly from the past half century of futile American policy toward North Korea. Preventing the Kim dynasty from having a nuclear device was an American priority long before Pyongyang exploded its first nuke, in 2006, during the administration of George W. Bush. The Kim regime detonated four more while Barack Obama was in the White House. In the more than four decades since Richard Nixon held office, the U.S. has tried to control North Korea by issuing threats, conducting military exercises, ratcheting up diplomatic sanctions, leaning on China, and most recently, it seems likely, committing cybersabotage.*

How to Deal With North Korea (The Atlantic)

5. First-Person Narrator

If an article is about something you did or experienced, then an easy way to begin is to write as if you were speaking to a friend. In school, we sometimes learned not to use the word "I" in our writing. I often substitute "we" as a pronoun to avoid saying "I". While some consider that a good rule of thumb, there are situations where first-person narration is stronger.

Using the First-Person Narrator approach takes us closer to author, making us feel what they feel, see what they see. This technique is used more often in articles about entities than ideas.

Entity Example

This op-ed by San Francisco 49er Eric Reid, who kneeled alongside of activist and former teammate Colin Kaepernick, starts out like a narrator at the beginning of a movie or other story, giving the background and context for the action to come.

> *In early 2016, I began paying attention to reports about the incredible number of unarmed black people being killed by the police. The posts on social media deeply disturbed me, but one in particular brought me to tears: the killing of Alton Sterling in my hometown Baton Rouge, La. This could have happened to any of my family members who still live in the area. I felt furious, hurt and hopeless. I wanted to do something, but didn't know what or how to do it. All I knew for sure is that I wanted it to be as respectful as possible. A few weeks later, during preseason, my teammate Colin Kaepernick chose to sit on the bench during the national anthem to protest police brutality. To be honest, I didn't notice at the time, and neither did the news media. It wasn't until after our third preseason game on Aug. 26, 2016, that his protest gained national attention, and the backlash against him began.*

Eric Reid: Why Colin Kaepernick and I Decided to Take a Knee (NYTimes Op-Ed)

6. Provocative Question

This approach uses the first few sentences to ask a stimulating question of the reader. Typically the question is one that is not easily answered or contains a twist that leads the reader to continue onward. Questions that provoke may be rhetorical, challenge our assumptions, or voice a curiosity we've all wondered but have never investigated.

This type of beginning is used far more by idea-centered articles than ones focused on entities, which makes sense: questions allow one to begin discussing fairly abstract things.

Idea Example

In this Fast Company piece about email sign-offs, the article connects the effort we spend on composing our emails to ask how well we are optimizing for how we close it. The answer, "not as well as we could be," immediately makes us want to read on to figure how how we can do better.

> *You undoubtedly spend time drafting the body of your email, but how much thought do you put into your sign-off? "Sincerely," "Thanks," or "Best"– the words you use to close an email can impact your chances of receiving a response, according to a study by email productivity software provider Boomerang.*
>
> *"It's the one or two forgotten words at the bottom of the page that seem to have an impact on whether or not we get a response," says Boomerang data scientist Brendan Greenley.*
>
> *Analyzing more than 350,000 email threads, Greenley and his team found that emails that included a closing saw a higher rate of response when compared to the average response rate of all emails, which was 47.5%.*

Use These Words At The End Of Your Emails To Increase Your Chance Of

Getting a Reply (Fast Company)

7. Quote

Sometimes the best way to begin is to borrow someone else's words, particularly if they are dramatic, funny, weird, or requires some demonstrated expertise that the author does not have. The Quote pattern is the flip side of the Expert pattern. Where the Expert pattern presumes the writer herself has the authority, the Quote pattern leans on the authority of the person she is quoting. I found quotes to be more popular among idea-based articles than entity-based ones.

Idea Example

This article about how difficult it can be for people to change their minds begins with a powerful quote that gets right to the heart of the matter: even when we know someone is lying, it can be hard for us to stop believing. This quote offers a tantalizing promise to the reader—continue onward and you'll discover how to escape the power of a charismatic liar:

> *"I remember looking at her and thinking, 'She's totally lying.' At the same time, I remember something in my mind saying, 'And that doesn't matter.'" For Daniel Shaw, believing the words of the guru he had spent years devoted to wasn't blind faith exactly. It was something he chose. "I remember actually consciously making that choice."*
>
> *There are facts, and there are beliefs, and there are things you want so badly to believe that they become as facts to you.*

This Article Won't Change Your Mind (The Atlantic)

8. Embedded Journalist

Some pieces strike a balance between telling someone else's story and featuring the writer's perspective. The article might feature a few "I's" and

"me's," but the subject of the piece is not the writer himself, which distinguishes this beginning from First-Person Narration. The writer wants the reader to know that they were there. They were at the scene, interacting with important characters, and the reader gets to be a fly on the wall of this broader story, almost like a documentary. As you can imagine, this technique was most often used for entity-focused articles.

Entity example

This article about Shonda Rhimes opens with massively successful TV producer sending the writer a note (with selfie) about how she was thrilled to skip an ABC network event in New York in lieu of some quality time with her team in Los Angeles. This opening demonstrates that the writer has a bond with Rhimes and promises readers they'll get an insider peek into her world.

> *One Monday afternoon, Shonda Rhimes sent me an email. The powerhouse behind ABC's Grey's Anatomy, Scandal, and How To Get Away With Murder launched right in with a story. A few days earlier, at the network's presentation to advertisers in New York, executives announced that Scandal's upcoming seventh season would be its last. Rhimes wasn't at the event. She had skipped the trip to New York, choosing instead to live-stream the proceedings "in our Shondaland theater with all of our writers, editors, and the rest of the team." Being in L.A. made her "glad," she says, recalling her emotions in a single word. "Why was I glad? Because I didn't have to actually face it. The decision I made. The decision to end a thing I love." But there was another reason Rhimes stayed behind, one that was encapsulated by the selfie she included in the email: a black-and-white photo of her in sweats — no makeup, no blowout — staring intently into her MacBook. Rhimes has been busy lately, daydreaming up new projects and businesses fueled by a spirit of unyielding curiosity and experimentalism that she calls, simply, "What If We . . ."*

Shonda Rhimes Sparks a Moment (FastCompany)

9. Thought Experiment

We're now starting to get into the more zany and uncommon ways of beginning an article. The Thought Experiment is about asking the reader to consider something that is not real: an unexpected future, an image in their mind, an hypothetical situation. While uncommon, this type of beginning is used largely by entity-oriented articles to set up the context for the rest of their piece.

Entity Example

In this article about Amazon, the writer asks us to consider the qualities of a great neighborhood, before informing us that Jeff Bezos finds the "gritty and spontaneous" ones best. By having us think about the topic for ourselves first, the writer makes us more invested in what otherwise might be a rather mundane beginning.

> *Picture your ideal neighborhood. What does it look like? Is it manicured, with buildings set in a pattern so that everything flows together, designed for perfection? Or is it gritty and spontaneous, the kind of place where a restaurant might move into the space that used to house a dry cleaner? Boxes bearing the Amazon logo can arrive at doorsteps in either of these environments, of course, but Amazon's founder and CEO, Jeff Bezos, prefers the second type.*
>
> *"I think neighborhoods, cities, and towns that have evolved are more interesting and delightful than ones that have been carefully top-down planned," he tells me when I meet him at Amazon's Seattle headquarters in November. "There's just something very human" about them, he says.*

Why Amazon is the World's Most Innovative Company of 2017 (Fast

Company)

10. Cinematic Intro

This pattern often feels like the first scene in a movie: a specific character in a particular place, usually about to do something interesting. Written in the present tense, it puts the reader in the same environment as the character. These beginnings are powerful because they are visceral, and they demonstrate that the writer was either present at this scene or had extremely good intel from someone who was.

Entity Example

Swap out Elon Musk and Tesla for Tony Stark and Stark Industries, and the beginning of this article could be the start of the next *Iron Man* movie. By giving us visceral details about what's happening and bringing the scene to life, we are drawn into what might otherwise be a dry piece about some corporate M&A activity.

> *Elon Musk stands in the middle of a residential street. It's shortly before sunset at a joint Tesla–SolarCity product launch, held last October at Universal Studios' back lot in Los Angeles, and Musk, wearing a Gray sweater and black jeans, is perched on a platform erected in the center of the manicured suburbia that served as the set for Desperate Housewives. Musk begins his presentation with doom and gloom — rising CO2 levels, the crisis of global warming — but the audience of 200 or so is beaming. They're excited to see what fantastical invention he will unveil as a solution. As he stresses the need to transition the world to sustainable energy, an overzealous attendee yells out, "Save us, Elon!"*

The Real Story Behind Elon Musk's $2.6 Billion Acquisition of Solar City and What it means for Tesla's Future — Not to Mention the Planet's (Fast Company)

11. Symbolic Object

Many intros center around people — either a story with a person, a person saying something, or the writer herself. This makes sense, as humans seem most keenly interested in other humans. But once in a while, the most interesting way to begin an article is by focusing on an object. This object tends to have a special meaning for, you guessed it, a character in the article. Beginning with the object first, we get a different path into the piece.

Entity example

In this story, we are introduced to a box of ashes—quite a striking image—of the true main character, a woman who served the author's family for her entire adult life, against her will.

> *The ashes filled a black plastic box about the size of a toaster. It weighed three and a half pounds. I put it in a canvas tote bag and packed it in my suitcase this past July for the transpacific flight to Manila. From there I would travel by car to a rural village. When I arrived, I would hand over all that was left of the woman who had spent 56 years as a slave in my family's household.*
>
> *Her name was Eudocia Tomas Pulido. We called her Lola. She was 4 foot 11, with mocha-brown skin and almond eyes that I can still see looking into mine — my first memory. She was 18 years old when my grandfather gave her to my mother as a gift, and when my family moved to the United States, we brought her with us. No other word but slave encompassed the life she lived. Her days began before everyone else woke and ended after we went to bed. She prepared three meals a day, cleaned the house, waited on my parents, and took care of my four siblings and me. My parents never paid her, and they scolded her constantly. She wasn't kept in leg irons, but she might as well have been. So many nights, on my way to the bathroom, I'd spot her sleeping in a corner, slumped against a mound of laundry, her fingers clutching*

> *a garment she was in the middle of folding.*

My Family's Slave (The Atlantic)

12. Observation

This category was a tough one to recognize because it seems similar to the Unexpected Statement and the Expert. It does not feature a particular person, object, or event, but instead focuses on a broader trend in the world and current zeitgeist. The difference to me is that Observation is about stating an opinion or describing a state of the world, in a less forceful and more thoughtful manner.

This pattern does not try to shock the reader like an Unexpected Statement or Provocative Question, nor does it force a series of facts, figures, and declarations to the reader like Expert. It's more of a slow build-up to a main point, which is why they were seen exclusively in Idea-based articles.

Idea Example

This article starts with a statement that most people would agree with, and reflects the author's view of young people today, then moves into her main thesis and why we should adopt her way of thinking.

> *Today's college students desperately want to change the world, but too many think that living a meaningful life requires doing something extraordinary and attention-grabbing like becoming an Instagram celebrity, starting a wildly successful company, or ending a humanitarian crisis.*
>
> *Having idealistic aspirations is, of course, part of being young. But thanks to social media, purpose and meaning have become conflated with glamour: Extraordinary lives look like the norm on the internet. Yet the idea that a meaningful life must be or appear remarkable is not only elitist but also misguided. Over the past five years, I've interviewed*

> *dozens of people across the country about what gives their lives meaning, and I've read through thousands of pages of psychology, philosophy and neuroscience research to understand what truly brings people satisfaction.*
>
> *The most meaningful lives, I've learned, are often not the extraordinary ones. They're the ordinary ones lived with dignity.*

You'll Never Be Famous — And That's O.K. *(NYTimes Op-Ed)*

13. Character Profile

Last but not least, a handful of entity focused articles used this method to begin with a look at the main character. Since the articles were always about a specific person, this was really just an introduction to them. Sometimes the focus is on their external selves — what they look like, sound like, act like. Sometimes it's focused more on their internal selves — what they are interested in, what they've done in the past.

Entity Example

In the case of this profile of Alec Baldwin, he seems to be at the end of his rope. This beginning weaves in relevant facts and commentary about the actor's life while describing how he looks.

> *Alec Baldwin collapses onto his dressing-room couch at Saturday Night Live like a man participating too enthusiastically in a trust fall. He is 58 years old. He has three children under 4. He has been dividing what's left of his time between filming a movie with Emilio Estevez in Cincinnati and answering the call from NBC whenever it comes, which, because of his now-signature portrayal of Donald Trump, has been many weeks this season. His appearances gather eyes like car accidents; some clips have been watched on YouTube more than 20 million times. Those legions of viewers have formed a kind of makeshift*

> *resistance, a community of the gaslit, together feeling a little less crazy for knowing that at least Alec Baldwin can see what they are seeing. Turning the president into a running joke might prove the most consequential work of his career. It's at least been the most consuming.*
>
> *Baldwin has bags under his eyes, his normally enviable hair appears as though it's been beaten flat with a tire iron, and he has two blood-red spots on the bridge of his nose. His whole body looks like it aches. He is keeping it going by alternating between a bottle of Diet Coke and some grainy concoction from Starbucks served in a bucket. This week he is hosting SNL for a record 17th time, expectations are soaring, and the pressure, like the workload, is telling on him like a terrible secret. It's only Tuesday.*

Alec Baldwin Gets Under Trump's Skin (The Atlantic)

Final Takeaways

When I set out to write a piece about how articles begin, I didn't know what I would find. I didn't know if beginnings could be neatly categorized into distinct groups or whether my exploration would bear useful fruit.

Fortunately, the research, while difficult, came through with valuable insights. I had never thought that most non-fiction writing boiled down to either being about an entity or an idea, but I'll be taking that distinction forward in my own writing.

I realize that I don't tell enough stories in my own writing. As I prepare new articles about other subjects, I have been digging up the people, events, and details that make for a good opening story.

And while many of the types of beginnings were familiar to me, I discovered

some new ones that I will try employing more in the future: Symbolic Object and Thought Experiment are two that seem full of possibility.

If you enjoyed this article, follow me on Medium as I'll be continuing onward with Part II, which will analyze the way these same articles conclude. You won't want to miss it!

Appendix I: All Beginnings

This is an Airtable spreadsheet where you can see all the articles in the dataset and what type of beginning I gave each of them.

Appendix 2: How I Chose the Articles

I drew from three print publications that consistently put out articles I find compelling: two magazines and a newspaper. I was not interested in studying news reports, which often take a more formulaic and mechanical approach to their beginnings.

Instead, I wanted to look at feature writing that explores people, places, stories, and ideas that have significance: articles that are timely, but read for their perspective, not just their raw information. I wanted my sample to be of pieces that were carefully edited (which meant cover stories) and ones that had demonstrated interest from readers (which meant looking at most shared pieces).

The Publications

The Atlantic is monthly print and magazine with a 150-year history of great writing covering everything from business to politics to to culture. I find it more readable than the New Yorker and less pop culture/entertainment-focused than New York Magazine.

Fast Company has a shorter history, having started in the 1990's and covers technology, business, and increasingly media and entertainment as well. While Fast Company cover stories carry the same weight and journalistic investment as any major magazine, their online stories vary widely in terms of topic, scope, and level of writer (staff, paid freelancer, unpaid contributor) giving our data set more diversity.

Finally, the **NYTimes Op-Ed** section is filled with pieces written by people who are not typically full-time writers or journalists, but have something important to say. These topics range widely, from AI's shortcomings to the dearth of female CEO's to ways to stimulate creativity, and I think it added a good dose of topic and author diversity to the dataset. Op-eds also tend to be shorter, between 700 and 1000 words, which requires them to have a hook that leads straight to the main point quickly.

Overall, I think the pieces analyzed represent a range of topics, styles, lengths, and intended mediums. They represent a range of topics, styles, and lengths. A different set of magazines might have lead me to a different breakdown of story type, but I suspect that the major categories would not change much.

What Defines "Most Shared"

BuzzSumo is tool for discovering popular content and influential people in different topics. For my analysis, I searched for the most-shared articles on fastcompany.com, theatlantic.com, and URL's shared by NYT Opinion (which tweets almost entirely links to op-eds) over January through December 2017. BuzzSumo has an "Evergreen Score" which they define as the number of social shares and backlinks an article gets starting 30 days after it was published. According to BuzzSumo:

> *The Evergreen Score is important because some content is relevant for a short period of time after publication, with interest and traffic declining quickly afterwards. Evergreen content, by contrast, continues to be read, shared and linked to for a long period of time.*

This was important, because just focusing on most-shared articles, I'd over-rank articles that did not have lasting relevance.

For those that are keep track at home, that's just under a hundred articles: 3 x 25 most popular Atlantic/Fast Company/NYTimes Op-Ed pieces + 2 x 10 cover stories from The Atlantic and Fast Company.