

---

# FIXING THE BLANK PAGE FEAR: ESSAY AND STORY STARTER PRACTICE

---

**Deborah Eades McNeme**  
Andover Central High School

## **Abstract**

When her students frequently experienced fear of the blank page, this high school teacher created low-stakes practice tasks to facilitate the writing of first-draft introductions. This article details the process of the Essay and Story Starter Practice that allows students to experiment with various introduction strategies in order to move past writer's block. Additionally, the author discusses how to transition this activity to a virtual classroom setting.

## **Keywords:**

essay introductions, low stakes writing, writing practice, creative writing in the classroom, virtual classroom, writing activities

You can't edit a blank page. I think Hemingway said it. I have seen the quote attributed to so many writers; I am not sure who said it first, but I always give credit to Hemingway when nagging my students with it. I used to repeat the sentiment *ad nauseum* and expect my class of twenty-some fifteen-year-olds to spontaneously erupt in writerly creativity due solely to recitation of those inspirational words I had so cleverly borrowed from Hemingway. The problem with the mantra is that, in isolation, it lacks fruition. I have discovered, however, that combined with a solid writing exercise, it does become useful. The key is to remove the risk students associate with writing. Once you accomplish that, the blank page disappears.

In her 2020 *Kansas English* article, "Stepping Into the Margins: The Art of Teacherless Composing," Sarah J. Donavon explains the importance of including both low- and high-stakes writing opportunities for our students. Basically, she purports that it's good to encourage students to write for writing's sake before requiring graded, high-stakes assignments. Low-stakes writing includes practice that will never be assessed for mastery, that might not make it into the final product, and that includes fun experimentation. There is no obligation to the reader, only to the experimentation of craft. High stakes come with responsibility to the reader as well as the assignment requirements. That responsibility comes with risk. When low-stakes writing doesn't exist, students understandably struggle with getting words on paper. Their brains are paralyzed. They stare at blank screens, and fear sets in that they won't do it right, that they can't. Their grade depends on hooking the reader. If they cannot hook the reader, how can they possibly write the rest of the essay? If they cannot write the essay, how will they pass the class? High stakes, indeed.

My Essay and Story Starter Practice activity allows students to jump into low-stakes writing as a way to prepare for the high-stakes writing. Creating a low-stakes atmosphere is key to the

success of this activity and, consequently, the success of the student. Practice opportunities build rapport and confidence, two elements conducive to learning. The authors of *Leaders of Their Own Learning: Transforming Schools Through Student-Engaged Assessment* address this idea, concluding that “having the opportunity to practice will help [students] see how the techniques affect their teacher’s instruction and ultimately their understanding of the material” (Berger, 2014, p. 63). They go on to say that “a deeper level of student understanding, including the ability to apply knowledge to a new problem ... will only be evident by engaging students in a task” (p. 64). Rather than simply explaining that students need to hook the reader with their introductions, why not engage them in the task in a low-stakes, cooperative way?

The beauty of the Essay and Story Starter practice is that it can be a stand-alone activity or it can be part of the process that eventually results in a final draft. Students can simply practice expositions periodically so that by the time they need to compose a story or essay as an assignment, they are comfortable enough to take off on their own. Another option is to have students practice various introduction techniques in order to choose one that will best fit a specific assignment. Also, as the name suggests, with a few tweaks, this banishing of the blank page can be used as effectively for creative writing as it can for analytical writing.

To create a team-based atmosphere for learning which in turn builds classroom trust, I approach the practice as a request for assistance. I explain that many students struggle at the beginning of the writing process. Then I share that even professional writers experience those same fears. Some of them have developed tricks to get their writer brains going again. I wonder if they, the students, would help me discern which one of these tricks is most effective. It will require all students to try each approach and then simply tell me what they think. Students don’t feel the pressure of performance. Instead, they want to experiment as a way of helping me find the answer. We are figuring it out together.

The Essay and Story Starter Practice exercise is a pretty simple process spread over three days. (If using it as stand-alone practice, spread it out over weeks, if you want.) Each day, students are introduced to an explanation of a writer’s trick, a sample, and an opportunity to emulate it. Students share their practice and discuss metacognitive elements. What were they thinking while they were writing? How did they go about deciding on word choice, sentence structure, or content? As we wrap up the activity, I ask them what they liked and did not like about this method. The discussion creates enthusiasm for the next day’s experiment.

Following is the basic script I use when we are ready to begin composing the rough draft of an essay. At this point, research and thesis statements are already complete.

### **The Process Script**

#### **Step 1: Introduce the Writer Trick**

In his bestselling book, *The Boys in the Boat* (2013), author Daniel James Brown begins each chapter with a powerful quote. The quotes prepare the reader for either an exciting element of the story or for an underlying message. For example, chapter ten starts with this quote from George Yeoman Pocock, the man who crafted the best rowing shells in the world, including the one used by America’s 1936 gold-medal Olympic rowing team: “A boat is a sensitive thing, an eight-oared shell, and if it isn’t let go free, it doesn’t work for you” (p. 173). The chapter goes on to explore the physical and emotional harmony necessary for a rowing team to achieve success.

(Here, we read excerpts from the chapter connected to the quote.)

#### **Step 2: Invite Students to Practice**

Let’s try this one. Choose a quote from your dialectical journal that supports your thesis statement and write it at the top of your paper. Next, explain the meaning of that quote and how it

relates to the position you take in your essay. Here’s the cool thing about this kind of introduction. When you reach the conclusion of your essay, you can revisit that quote again, maybe with a new perspective. You can also try a conclusion that includes a different quote and explain/analyze it in relation to your position. Wouldn’t that be cool to have your conclusion planned before you even start?

(If your students do not have dialectical journals, help them find a meaningful quote in another way.)

**Step 3: Encourage Peer Sharing**

With a shoulder partner, share your practice. Be sure to do the following:

- Thank each other for sharing.
- Recognize at least one element in your partner’s writing that works well.
- Discuss how you chose which quote to use.
- Talk through your thoughts during the writing process.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of this technique.
- One partner will share out to the class at least one take-away from your discussion.

**Comments on the Process**

That is it. That is the process. When we finish, I ask students to hold on to their practice because we will try a new one the next day. At the end of the three days, each student reflects on which one he/she likes best and why. At this point, most students have a rough draft of an introductory paragraph they plan to use in their essays, and they are usually surprised by the lack of tumult involved in the process.

Practicing in a low-stakes situation emboldens students to continue taking risks and helps them understand the value in practice, even if some of it never makes it into the final essay. Additionally, the prompts prod students to consider the conclusion of their essays. My experience has been that when students practice the introduction with the ending in mind, they become excited about writing the entire essay, if for no other reason than that they will get to try out the conclusion they came up with during the low-stakes practice.

This same approach can easily be used for creative writing. In fact, I have found that once we practice the short story version of this activity, students begin paying much closer attention to exposition techniques in all the stories we study. The following tables present the samples and explanations for low-stakes introduction practice for both essays and creative fiction assignments.

**Table 1. Essay Introduction Strategies**

<p><b>Anecdote:</b> Use a brief story that illustrates your position. Consider relating only enough of the story to intrigue the reader.</p> <p>Reveal the rest in the conclusion. Another possibility is to relate the story with one ending in the intro but change the story to have a better ending in the conclusion. The story can be hypothetical or real. Consider which one will help introduce and sum up your main points.</p>	<p>From “The Singer solution to world poverty” by Peter Singer</p> <p><i>In the Brazilian film, <u>Central Station</u>, Dora is a retired schoolteacher who makes ends meet by sitting at the station writing letters for illiterate people. Suddenly, she has an opportunity to pocket \$1,000. All she has to do is persuade a homeless 9-year-old boy to follow her to an address she has been given. (She is told he will be adopted by wealthy foreigners.) She delivers the boy, gets the money, spends some of it on a television set and settles down to enjoy her new acquisition. Her neighbor spoils the fun, however, by telling her that the boy was too old to be adopted--he will be killed</i></p>
---	--

	<i>and his organs sold for transplantation.</i>
<p><b>Bold Quote:</b> Use a bold quote from the text or any other relevant source. Explain the meaning of that quote and how it relates to the position you take in your essay. In your conclusion, revisit that quote again, maybe with a new perspective. You can also try including a different quote and explaining/analyzing it in relation to your position.</p>	<p>From chapter ten of <i>The Boys in the Boat</i>:</p> <p><i>“A boat is a sensitive thing, an eight-oared shell, and if it isn’t let go free, it doesn’t work for you.” --George Yeoman Pockock</i></p>
<p><b>Rhetorical Question:</b> Yes, you can use this method. Make sure you don’t use first or second person in the question. In the conclusion, revisit the question, and provide the answer.</p>	<p>From “Why Women Have to Work” by Amelia Warren Tyagi</p> <p><i>Why are today’s mothers working so hard, putting in long hours at home and at the office? For the money.</i></p>
<p><b>Definition:</b> Try this strategy if there is a controversial word or one with multi-layered meanings central to your position. Yes, you can use Webster’s dictionary, but it would be more impressive to provide your own definition or understanding of the word. Then explain how this word relates to your position. In the conclusion, revisit the definition. You can summarize how the word relates to your position. Another option is to finetune your working definition in light of any evidence you’ve presented.</p>	<p>From “The Loser Edit” by Colson Whitehead</p> <p><i>If you have ever watched a reality TV show and said, ‘He’s going home tonight,’ you know what the ‘loser edit’ is. I imagine it started as a matter of practicality. If you have 20 contestants, they can’t all receive equal airtime. When an obscure character gets the heave-ho, the producers have to cobble together a coherent story line. Intersperse the snippets across the hour, and we can identify sins and recognizable human frailty that need to be punished... The loser edit is not just the narrative arch of a contestant about to be chopped, or voted off the island, whatever the catchphrase is. It is the plausible argument of failure.</i></p>

**Table 2. Story Starter Strategies for creative writing assignments**

<p><b>Begin with the twist.</b> One of the best first lines in literature is from Franz Kafka’s <i>The Metamorphosis</i>. His character has awakened and found that he has somehow been turned into a bug. Try starting your story by introducing the twist or the conflict. After the initial sentence, write 2 - 3 more to explain what happened to lead up to the twist/conflict or what happens after the twist/conflict.</p>	<p>From <i>The Metamorphosis</i> by Franz Kafka</p> <p><i>As Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous, verminous bug.</i></p>
<p><b>Describe an item.</b> Ray Bradbury used this strategy to ward off writer’s block. He would choose an item and describe it in no more than 100 words, then have someone or something interact with that item to begin the action.</p>	<p>From “Ylla” by Ray Bradbury</p> <p><i>They had a house of crystal pillars on the planet Mars by the edge of an empty sea, and every morning you could see Mrs. K eating the golden fruits that grew from the crystal walls, or cleaning the house with a handful of magnetic dust which, taking all dirt with it, blew away on the hot wind.</i></p>

<p><b>Drop into dialogue.</b>                  Many authors use this one, but Hemingway has perfected it.</p> <p>Pretend you are overhearing a conversation. One of the speakers just said something so intriguing that you simply can't stop listening. You must find out what in the world they are talking about. Try starting your story in the middle of a salacious conversation. Go back and forth a total of 4 times before explaining the setting, characters, or situation.</p>	<p>From "Snows of Kilimanjaro" by Ernest Hemingway</p> <p><i>The marvelous thing is that it's painless," he said. "That's how you know when it starts."</i></p> <p><i>"Is it really?"</i></p> <p><i>"Absolutely. I'm awfully sorry about the odor though. That must bother you."</i></p> <p><i>"Don't! Please don't."</i></p> <p><i>"Look at them," he said. "Now is it sight or is it scent that brings them like that?"</i></p>
---	---

### Virtual Learning Transition

Switching successful in-person lessons to a virtual classroom model can be tricky. Not every activity transitions well. Luckily, the transition of The Essay and Story Starter Practice comes with inherent benefits. Here's how I made the switch.

Using Google Slides, I create the same activity. The slide show consists of 3 instruction slides and enough blank slides for each student to claim one. Slide One introduces an explanation of the strategy. Slide Two provides an example. Slide Three instructs students to grab an empty slide, write his/her name at the top, and practice the technique.

**Figure 1. Illustration of essay and Story Starter Slide One**

## Explanation of Story Starter: Begin with the twist.

Franz Kafka begins his classic story, *The Metamorphosis*, like this:

"As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin."

Notice how Kafka starts with the twist. His character has awakened and found that he has somehow been turned into a bug. Key words like *uneasy dreams* and *monstrous vermin* help set the tone. Important details like "one morning" and "transformed in his bed" add to the reader's understanding of time and place. Kafk includes just enough information to communicate to the reader that the setting is normal, but the twist is anything but.

Try starting your story by introducing the twist or the conflict. You can use one of the following sentence stems of something similar. After the initial sentence, write 2 - 3 more that explain what happened to lead up to the twist/conflict or what happens after the twist/conflict. Use the template below to emulate Kafka's story starter.

Figure 2. Illustration of Essay and Story Starter Slide Two

## Sample of Story Starter: Begin with the twist.

Creating a template from Kafka's opening line helps with the emulation.

Template: As (your main character) (action verb) (prepositional phrase) he/she found (explanation of the twist).

Example from template: As Joe stepped into the elevator and pushed the 10 button, he found he hadn't selected a floor, but rather a time, ten years in the future.

If Kafka's template doesn't inspire you, try experimenting with one of the following sentence stems, or you can make up your own.

For three nights (explain a situation), but without warning, (Insert twist).

It was when Belinda discovered \_\_\_\_\_ that the trouble started.

Normally, I would never consider \_\_\_\_\_; however when \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3. Illustration of Essay and Story Starter Slide Three

## Instruction for Practice: Begin with the twist.

- Choose an empty slide
- Write your name on the slide.
- Practice this story starter technique.
- When you are done, read the other slides.
- Feel free to comment in the chat regarding practice slides that seem particularly effective.
- Also in the chat, tell me on a scale from 1 - 3 how likely you are to use this strategy and why. What did you like about it? What did you struggle with?
- Thank you for your engagement and feedback.

Figure 4. Illustration of Essay and Story Starter Student Sample

## Student Name

**Normally, I would never consider being friends with a ghost; however when I met this one I knew we would be friends. I woke up on a early Tuesday morning like normal. When my alarm clock rang at 6:15 am. I got up and grabbed my coffee and put my laptop away in my bag. I looked at the clock and saw it was 7:10. I had to hurry to work so I ran up the stairs because I forgot my keys. When I got upstairs I saw this friendly looking woman with my keys. I thought I was imagining it so I rubbed my eyes and looked again. The lady did not move and was holding my keys now. She handed me the keys and said did you forget anything else. What I didn't know was she was going to be my friend for the next 3 days. She helped me with anything I needed. When she disappeared I couldn't figure out if it was just my mind playing tricks.**

While students practice on the slides, I watch their progress in Google Classroom. Seeing their writing process in real time benefits me in that I can assess where students become stuck. I comment as they write, helping them remember they cannot edit a blank page. This is just practice. We are all in this task together. I can also compliment and encourage their efforts.

Immediate feedback is only one of the virtual transition benefits. Additionally, the slide show method allows students to quickly read several peers' practice rather than sharing with only one other student. Even though the activity is for practice only, many students will go back and edit their own introductions after seeing particularly effective peer samples. The chat feature of the virtual classroom allows for public praise and sharing of metacognitive observations. Posting the Google Slides assignment on Google Classroom also means that students who are absent on the day we practice can still participate almost fully. The flexibility of this activity for paper/pencil, Google Slides, or Zoom classroom makes it a great one to use for nearly every learning environment. Each type of classroom offers its own set of benefits.

### Conclusion

You can't edit a blank page is one of my favorite teacher mantras. There are others. I've been known to repeat from Stephen King's *On Writing*, "Description is what makes the reader a sensory participant in the story" (2000, p. 173). I also like the one stating that writing is easy. All you have to do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed. That is another quote attributed to Hemingway with no real proof that he ever said it. A less macabre idea is Anne Lamott's "Almost all good writing begins with a terrible first effort" (1995, p. 25). None of these matter, however, without the original idea that you can't edit a blank page. This Essay and Story Starter Practice has helped my students time and again face the fear, banish the blank page, and prepare for the next step: the dreaded edit.

I'm sure Hemingway had something to say about that, too.

### References

- Bradbury, R. (1990). Ylla. In *The vintage Bradbury* (pp. 62-75). Random House.
- Brown, D. J. (2013). *The boys in the boat: Nine Americans and their epic quest for gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*. Penguin Books.

- Cohen, S. (2017). The loser edit. In S. Cohen (Ed.), *50 essays* (5<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 412-416). Bedford, Freeman & Worth.
- Donovan, Sara J. (2020). Stepping into the margins: The art of teacher(less) composing. *Kansas English*, 101(1), 4-11. <https://journals.wichita.edu/index.php/ke/article/view/299/306>
- Hemingway, E. (1995). The snows of Kilimanjaro. In *Ernest Hemingway: The short stories*. (pp. 52-77). Scribner.
- Kafka, F. (2010) *The metamorphosis*. (I. Johnston, Trans.). Tribeca Books. (Original work published 1925)
- King, S. (2000). *On Writing: A memoir of the craft*. Pocket Books.
- Lamott, A. (1995). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. Anchor Books.
- Tyagi, A. W. (2008). Why women have to work. In R.H. Shea, L. Scanlon, & R.D. Aufses (Eds.), *The language of composition: Reading, writing, rhetoric* (pp. 238-240). Bedford/St. Martins.

### **Author Biography**

Deborah Eades McNemee graduated from Friends University with a degree in Secondary English Education and from Wichita State University with a Master's in English. She currently teaches both on-level and Advanced Placement language arts courses at Andover Central High School. She writes about keeping classic literature relevant for teen readers at her blog Keeping Classics, and has contributed to the Twain for Teachers page of the Center for Mark Twain Studies website. Her favorite part of teaching is seeing students who profess to hate English class learn to love reading and writing. She can be reached at [mcnemeed@usd385.org](mailto:mcnemeed@usd385.org) or at [KeepingClassics.com](http://KeepingClassics.com).