

Question 3

How should my essay start?

Important note: Nearly all of the advice in this book applies to Personal Statements, University of California Personal Insight Questions and supplemental essays. However, for guidance on how to start a PIQ, please see the end of this section.

Like any first encounter, how you start an essay matters. For better or worse, we humans make snap judgments and meeting someone through their writing is no exception. The good news is that unlike the clumsy way you introduced yourself to that cutie at the pool party, with writing you can try and try and try again until you get it just right.

The first paragraph of an essay has three jobs:

- Lay the groundwork for the theme.
- Get the reader curious enough to keep reading.
- Establish your voice.

Here is a sample essay. Read the whole essay and then reread the opening paragraph.

Penelope P.

Boston University

Prompt 7: Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design. (650 words)

It's 7 PM on a Tuesday, and the Berkeley High Jacket's newsroom is buzzing with editors wrestling with page layouts and final edits. I'm taking a last look at the article we're about to publish—an investigative piece on extreme classroom temperatures violating OSHA

regulations—when I notice a key source, a website tracking temperature in real-time, has suddenly gone offline. My page is due to the editors-in-chief in two hours, and I know that isn't enough time to find a replacement source. As the investigative editor, will I cut the source and lose vital data, or continue to quote from a website that no longer exists? I take a deep breath, attempting to shake off the creeping panic, and choose to leave the source in the article—with a note explaining the website's disappearance.

When this dilemma came across my desk, I barely considered myself an editor. It was the beginning of my junior year, and I doubted my ability to lead the Investigative section as one of its two editors. But despite my fears, I was determined to do the best job I possibly could.

This was the first article I'd come up with and assigned all on my own. It had started with a tip from one of my favorite teachers, who said that her classroom, in the oldest building on campus, was regularly 10+ degrees over outside temperatures. In October, the hottest month of the year, that meant having to grapple with 80-90 degree heat almost every day. The school wasn't able to install AC, and despite numerous requests from both the teachers and their union, the district was dragging its feet on coming up with a solution. I was shocked—although I knew how hot many of the classrooms could get, I hadn't realized how much of an issue it was for teachers.

So the Jacket took on the article, hoping to spotlight the issue and push for a change. As the work progressed, I lent a hand with sourcing and interviews, and made the final call on difficult decisions such as to whom we offered anonymity.

After the article was published, the writer messaged me to say that a local newspaper called Berkeleyside wanted to republish it on their website. For that to be possible, we had to do extensive edits to get the article up to Berkeleyside's standards. They wanted an interview with a school administrator, as we hadn't been able to reach one for comment before the original article was published. This became my main task, and over the next four months—when my emails got no response, and follow-up requests also failed—I began showing up at the administration's office building to ask in person.

TIP: Penelope doesn't dwell on the negative response from the administration, which would have been a distraction from her theme. See page 72 for more about managing negativity.

All that work paid off, and when I finally spoke with a school official, they were able to tell me that they were making progress on a solution. We included the new information in the updated article, which was published on Berkeleyside's website at the end of the year. When we returned to campus nearly a year later, in August of 2025, every single classroom at BHS was equipped with one or more ceiling fans.

As teenagers, we aren't often given a voice, much less told that we have the ability to create change. But as a journalist, I've learned that I can actually make a difference—that I can identify things that are wrong in my community and bring attention to them. Student journalists in particular are so important right now. We are the ones who will inherit the world, with all its imperfections, so we are the ones who must change it for the better. My belief in the power of student voices and my passion for journalism have shaped who I am today, and I will carry these values forward into college and beyond.

Penelope's opening paragraph achieves all three goals: it lays the groundwork for the theme; it gets the reader curious; and it establishes her voice. Since Penelope was gracious enough to share her first draft (thank you,

Penelope!), we can see that she ended up with such a successful essay by taking the time to do some thoughtful edits.

Take a look at the original draft of Penelope’s opening paragraph.

It’s 7 PM on a Tuesday, and the Berkeley High Jacket’s newsroom is full of editors wrestling with page layouts and final edits. I’m taking a last look at the article we’re about to publish when I notice the website we’ve been relying on as a source—the one that tracks the temperatures in all the classrooms of my high school—has been taken down. I’m going to have to come up with either a new source, or some way to preserve our credibility while using a website that is now non-existent, in the few hours before my page needs to be finished.

Do you think this first version accomplishes the three main jobs of an opening paragraph? What’s missing? What needs to be changed? Here’s my analysis of the changes Penelope made that resulted in a much more successful first paragraph.

- *Changes to help lay the groundwork for the theme:* When reviewing her first draft, Penelope found a problem: even though her essay is about her passion for journalism, her first paragraph didn’t immerse the reader in her newspaper experience. The impact of her original essay is muted because the reader can’t grasp the significance of the news article about classroom temperature or understand the professionalism of the Jacket. By incorporating a reference to OSHA (part of the federal government) and illustrating the importance of the news story (classroom temperatures are now “extreme”), Penelope convinces the reader to take her work on the Jacket—and by extension her future as a journalist—more seriously.
- *Changes to help get the reader curious enough to keep reading:* Penelope’s final draft creates tension and excitement that keeps the reader engaged. You can see that her first draft didn’t have the same oomph. She revved up interest by putting in a ticking clock (deadline in two hours!), showing us how much pressure she’s experiencing (her deep breaths to ward off panic) and asking a question that (for now) goes unanswered.

- *Changes to help establish her voice:* Penelope did a great job clarifying her voice in her final version. Just adding in some more vivid verbs (the newsroom is “buzzing,” the editors are “wrestling,” she is considering “cutting” a source) shares her investment in the Jacket’s work. Additionally, the same edits that helped make us curious (the description of how she feels such pressure, the internal questioning) helped us see the situation from her point of view, adding a lot of personality to her essay.

If your current first paragraph is not achieving the three goals, you can choose between two editing pathways. The first is to stick with your existing essay and just make changes in tone, detail and word choice as discussed above.

But it’s also possible that your first paragraph isn’t working because your essay would flow better if you started from a different place. It may be that a detail you describe later in your essay would actually make a strong beginning. To see if this is the case for you, reread your whole essay and pick out 1-3 sentences that might work as the beginning. Take some time to “audition” these different openers; you will be amazed at how rearranging existing text can help switch the emphasis and improve the flow of your narrative. Even if the wording needs to be adjusted, keep your eyes open for the right idea to start with.¹

To show you what I mean, I’m going to do the same with Penelope’s essay. Spoiler alert: the changes we are going to “audition” won’t make her essay better, but they will illustrate the process I’m suggesting.

Option 1

It had started with a tip from one of my favorite teachers, who said that her classroom, in the oldest building on campus, was regularly 10+ degrees over outside temperatures.

If Penelope had started with the news story itself, she risked making that the subject of her essay—not her role in getting the article published, revising

¹ I really believe in this strategy of auditioning different ways to begin a piece of writing. As I’m writing this book, I currently have a tab called “Introduction” and a second tab called “Alternative Introduction.” I wonder which one I’ll end up using! (Note: “Alternative Introduction” for the win!)

it for Berkeleyside and then seeing the satisfactory conclusion. Instead of grounding her essay in her theme (what you want to do), that change would have taken her away from it. By starting with a close-up view of herself at work, the essay immediately connects to her anchor story and what it tells us about Penelope's character. Ask yourself: *Does my opening paragraph start with a detail that connects to me and my role in the story or is it overly focused on the background or context?*

Option 2

All that work paid off, and when I finally spoke with a school official, they were able to tell me that they were making progress on a solution.

Sometimes using a flashback—when you talk about how something got resolved and then backtrack to tell the details of you got there—can engage readers, while relieving the tension of not knowing where the story is going. But that tension is exactly what Penelope wants in her essay, so she tells her story in chronological order. As a result, the reader is curious and wants to stick with the essay to find out what happens. Ask yourself: *Does my opening paragraph launch my anchor story in a way that makes the reader want to keep reading or does it give too much away?*

Option 3

As teenagers, we aren't often given a voice, much less told that we have the ability to create change.

Penelope included this sentence in her concluding paragraph, which is where it belongs. Imagine if she had started with this statement. Do you see how distant it feels? We wouldn't have been hearing Penelope's voice as she was "in the trenches" with her article. Keep conclusions at the end; start with introductions, details and personality. Ask yourself: *Does my opening paragraph sound personal or does it seem abstract or theoretical?*

Starting a UC Essay

UC Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) differ from Common Application Personal Statements in two significant ways. First, they are much shorter (350 words vs. 650 words). Second, the general rule is that they should begin by

directly answering the prompt. With Common App Personal Statements, students can often begin more creatively. I'm not sure if it's because UC application reviewers have to read so many essays or if it's because they want to focus on substance rather than style, but essay writers are universally advised to make sure your first sentence answers a UC PIQ prompt without much distraction.

Take a look at these first sentences from other essays featured in this book.

Gabriel T.

UCLA

UC Prompt 3: What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?

After all the quick spins, rolls and somersaults with a red wine glass balanced on my head, I'd finished dancing Binasuan without spilling a single drop.

Genevieve S.

UC Irvine

UC Prompt 2: Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

When I stood on the stage for the Berkeley Mayor's State of the City Address, unfamiliar faces stared at me but I only saw the poem in my hands, the one I spent hours crafting.

In both cases, the writers start by answering the prompt: Gabriel immediately describes a complex dance and Genevieve begins a story about being a poet. But notice that the sentences aren't, to be blunt, boring. They didn't begin, "My greatest talent is Filipino dancing" or "I express my creativity through poetry." Instead, they brought us into the story right away, providing clear details and context.

It's a bit of a Goldilocks situation: you don't want to be boring, but you don't want to be as creative as you might be with a Common Application

Personal Statement. To drive this point home, I've written some over-the-top examples.

Gabriel didn't start his essay like this:

Spin! Roll! Somersault! Don't let the wine spill! Spin Roll!
Somersault! Can I keep the glass full?

And Genevieve didn't start:

I'm staring at them. They are staring at me. I blink first.
Then I take a deep breath and begin to speak.

Do you see how these starters would require the reader to go along for the ride? That it's hard to tell what the essays are going to be about, much less if they are going to answer the prompt?

If you are having trouble figuring out if your opening is too creative, take the Grandmother Test. You want her to be able to read the first sentence of your UC PIQ and know exactly where you are headed. You don't want to hear her voice saying, "What is going on? I don't understand! In my day, an essay meant saying things plainly." Yes, Grandma, the UCs agree.