

Leads

The lead is also known as the first sentence, topic sentence, or hook of a whole paper. Depending on the type of writing either each section of a paper also has one, or even each paragraph to let the reader know what that part of the paper is about. This sentence *leads* the reader into the piece, section, or paragraph. Typically this sentence is not enough to set up what you are talking about, so then you need to elaborate on this idea to define your terms the way you mean them in your paper and then continue to *lead* readers into the discussion (in the case of response, of the text to which you are responding). Here are some examples of how leads can be used as entrées into response writing – NOTE these are not complete introductions, but they are close.)

1. **Famous quotation:** Tolstoy wrote, “All happy families are like one another, all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way”. I find this to be true of suffering in general – it is relative and by extension very unique, whereas happiness is almost universal. We all know what joy feels like. But, for example, we each experience grief differently. Think about it, most great literature is not about joy or happiness, but about the particular sufferings of particular people. In the novel *Wuthering Heights* by Charlotte Bronte, the Victorian conceit of creating one’s own suffering is in full force as Catherine and Heathcliff long and pine for one-another for years.
2. **Anecdote:** My mom gave me some great advice once. She had been trying to decide whether or not to pursue a Master’s degree. Finally she told herself, “these two years are going to go by anyway, do you want to have a degree at the end or not?” She decided on yes. This piece of advice has followed me throughout my own decision-making process, and it’s why I never really understood inertia as a response to stress. In the short story “Hills Like White Elephants” Ernest Hemingway focuses in on a couple, a man and a girl, as they try to come to grips with a life-changing decision.
3. **Analogy:** The imagination is to a writer like tools to a carpenter, water to a turtle, and chocolate to me. That is to say totally indispensable. If the writer begins to have boundaries put on his imagination, then what good is it? A caged imagination will surely shrink, wither and die, as its limits will soon run out, and there will be nothing left to mine. This is one of Salman Rushdie’s points in his essay “Notes on Writing and the Nation”.
4. **Metaphor:** Racism is a deck of cards. It is left up to chance which colour you are, which country you are born into, and which hand you will be dealt. As the deck shuffles, and time passes, our edges may get rough-hewn, but our true colours remain. Prejudice, no matter your rank, is something of a social pass-time and rite of passage even within certain communities and cultures, such as the Deep South in the USA. In the short story “Roselily”, Alice Walker plays out several of these issues with regards to being Black and White, and shows that the issues themselves are anything but.
5. **Definition:** Nationalism is defined as (1) a sentiment based on common cultural characteristics that binds a population and often produces a policy of national independence or separatism; (2) loyalty or devotion to one’s country or patriotism; (3) exaggerated, passionate or fanatical devotion to a national community. A writer is defined as a person who commits his or her thoughts, ideas, experiences, etc to paper. So if a writer is a person who commits their thoughts and ideas to paper and their thoughts and ideas are nationalistic, would this make that writer biased or narrow-minded? Otherwise put: can a nationalist be a ‘great’ writer? This is the central question in Salman Rushdie’s essay “Notes on Writing and the Nation”.
6. **Setting of a problem:** There are two kinds of people in the world: the kind that face their problems head-on and the kind that live in denial and avoid pain at all costs. I am sure an argument could be made for people who refuse to face the hard times in life, lord knows I have been known to ‘cocoon’ and spend a weekend here or there in bed or escaping through movie marathons. But in the end, the only way forward is actually to go through the hard times, feel the tough feelings, and grow. In the short story “Hills like White Elephants”, Ernest Hemingway illustrates this battle of wills with the two main characters, Jig and Nor, acting as complete foils of each other in terms of how they approach a major turning point in their lives.
7. **Description – setting the scene, dropping you in the action:** Imagine if you will a writer. Sitting at a solitary desk. By a window. Faced with a blank page. He types on an old-fashioned typewriter bought at auction. He thinks it makes him a real writer. As opposed to people who write entire novels longhand. They’re just crazy. He stares. He types again. He rips the page out, crumples it up and free-throws it into the trash bin. This scene usually connotes the frustration of the creative experience. Lots of stops and starts. But where do the ideas come from? What is the role of the writer in society? Why is this image so iconic? What is so frustrating about trying to write

the Great American, Canadian etc novel? What is great literature and is it always associated with the nation from which it came? In Salman Rushdie's essay "Notes on Writing and the nation" he attempts to elucidate some of these issues.

8. **Background information:** North America at the end of WWII is characterized by a general ennui or malaise, fear, and disillusionment in terms of both trust in power and the meaning of life. Serious changes were taking place in terms of women in the workplace, civil rights, and technological advancements, to say the least of the beginnings of the Cold War and the space race. Society seemed to be progressing at an alarming rate and people either kept up, were left behind, or opted out entirely. Literature reflected this both in theme and in continuing to progress, break rules, and buck convention. With the story "The Secret Lives of Walter Mitty" James Thurber uses flashbacks of a sort to create dream sequences for Mitty which alternate with scenes in the present moment. This non-linear plotting actively involves the reader in trying to figure out which worlds are real and which are fictional as well as forcing us to examine the role that our daydreams or imagination play in helping us to escape the monotony of our daily lives.

9. **Dialogue:**

"Dear, it's four o'clock, do you mean to tell me you've been in bed all day?" my mom asked accusingly.

"I'm tired", I answered.

"What do you have to be tired about?"

"I don't know, I just am, please leave me alone"

This happened almost daily in my house when I was about 20 and had dropped out of university. I was going through a depression even though we didn't know what that was at the time. Today, while I wouldn't want to relive that period in my life, I am grateful for it because it allowed me to find the person I was meant to be. In "Ode on Melancholy" John Keats shows us that we don't have to be ashamed to be sad, that it is a natural emotion to feel and that without sadness we wouldn't know joy.

10. **General statement:** Dreams and the subconscious have often fascinated people. Most of us can at least agree that they are significant in some way, especially if they recur, such as dreams of falling, losing your teeth, and being chased. Often, analyzing one's recurring dreams can lead to healing in one's conscious life. This is if we are willing to face what they may have to say. Daydreaming, however, is usually about conscious escape – we fantasize about a distant-but-near future in which maybe we're thinner, better looking, more courageous, or more successful. And all this so that we may pass the time in our real lives and not actually have to deal with the fact that maybe we are unhappy. In the case of Walter Mitty in the short story by James Thurber called "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" his daydreams (or secret lives) are escapes from his daily monotony and routine, and from the seemingly perpetual nagging of his wife.

11. **Establish your credibility, expertise, and/or authority on the topic:** I have been skydiving for fifteen years now, and I can attest to the rush and thrill that such a sport provides. My friends think I am crazy, but I enjoy testing my limits and feeling the absolute freedom that flying through the air provides. This is how I can relate to the main character in

12. **Challenge readers' assumptions:** The most popular advice for any writer is always to write what you know and most people agree with this, after all you've got to start somewhere. However isn't this limiting? If you are only writing about what you know, isn't there a temptation to navel-gaze and reinforce our own long-held beliefs instead of challenging them? And what of the argument about cultural appropriation – that Blacks can only write about the Black experience, women – women, Jews – Jews etc? Isn't the point of literature and writing and the imagination to stretch ourselves, our compassion, our world view both as readers and as writers? This is one of the main arguments that Salman Rushdie addresses in his essay "Notes on Writing and the Nation".

13. **Question:** Have you ever felt like you couldn't get out of bed? You were so crushed by the weight of sadness or sorrow or grief that you didn't even recognize yourself anymore? Many people think that it is through suffering, albeit relative to one's experience, and learning from hard times, that we create wisdom. In the Romantic poem "Ode on Melancholy", John Keats explores the following paradox: that we need to experience sadness in order to experience joy. In fact, it is through the tension created between these two polarities that human compassion is borne. He even uses the form of the ode itself to exalt and glorify Melancholy, and challenges us to welcome it with open arms, to "Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,/ And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes".