Establishing a Line of Inquiry

We are often trained to start our essays in a fairly routine manner. We are taught, by way of the five-paragraph model, to open broadly and then gradually narrow down the focus until we arrive at a thesis (the shape of which is sometimes illustrated as a funnel or inverse triangle). However, not only does the convention of starting generally frequently result in empty statements like, "Throughout history, students have been writing boring essays," but it actually tells the readers very little about how the writer will engage us. The following guide offers more particular strategies for setting up a line of inquiry that engages readers by offering a distinct motive to read on.

In *The Craft of Research* (2008), Booth, Wayne, Gregory, Colomb, and Joseph Williams study the way writers from various disciplines set up their lines of inquiry, and they argue that a pattern emerges. No matter the convention, they claim, a compelling inquiry first establishes common ground and then disrupts that common ground. Put another way, a writer initially sets up "contextualizing background," locating her readers in the subject, and then surprises us by introducing an unknown. We might also think of this as a "bait-and-switch" strategy, where the reader is drawn in by something familiar and attractive, only to have the rug pulled out from under her.

It's important to note that the "bait," in context of academic writing, should be both particular and genuine. It is particular in that it locates us some place specific, whether an historical moment, a genre, a body of research, etc. It is genuine in that it is intellectually rigorous and thoughtful enough to earn our trust. The "switch," in turn, also needs be specific and rigorous, as well as compelling—the surprise should feel both jarring and logical.

These nuances might be better understood by looking at a couple of examples. First, let's turn to Susan Sontag's essay "Looking at War," a comprehensive study of war images throughout history that contemplates the impact these images have on our relationship to large-scale violence. Sontag establishes her line of inquiry in the following way:

> In June 1938, Virginia Woolf published *Three Guineas*, her brave, unwelcomed reflections on the roots of war. Written during the preceding two years, while she and most of her intimates and fellow writers were rapt by the advancng Facist insurrection in Spain, the book was couched as a tardy reply to a letter from an eminent lawyer in London who had asked, "How in your opinion are we to prevent war?" Woolf begins by observing tartly that a truthful dialogue between them may not be possible. For though they belong to the same class, "the educated class," a vast gulf separates them: the lawyer is a man and she is a woman. Men make war. Men (most men) like war, or at least they find "some glory, some necessity, some satisfaction in fighting" that women (most women) do not seek or find. What does an educated—that is, privileged, well-off—woman like her know of war? Can her reactions to its horrors be like his?

> Woolf proposes they test this "difficulty of communication" by looking at some images of war that the beleaguered Spanish government has been sending out twice a week to sympathizers abroad. Let's see "whether when we look at the same photographs we feel the same things," she writes. "This morning's collection contains a photograph of what might be a man's body, or a woman's; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting room." One can't always make out the subject, so thorough is the ruin of flesh and stone that the photographs depict. "However different the education, the traditions behind us," Woolf says to the lawyer, "we"—and here women are the "we"—and he might well have the same response: "War, you say, is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped at whatever cost. And we echo your words. War is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped."
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> Who believes today that war can be abolished? No one, not even pacifists. We hope only (so far in vain) to stop genocide and bring to justice those who commit gross violations of the laws of war (for there are laws of war, to which combatants should be held), and to stop specific wars by imposing negotiated alternatives to armed conflict. But protesting against war may not have seemed so futile or naïve in the 1930s.
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> Sontag, Susan. "Looking at War." *The Best American Essays.* Ed. Anne Faidman. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 243-44. Print.

Sontag references Woolf to establish both a historical context (1938 during the rise of fascism in Spain) as well as an intellectual one: just as Woolf is interested in the public's reaction to images of war, Sontag, or so the readers assume, is equally intrigued by this phenomenon. However, the "switch" comes when Sontag asks, "Who believes today that war can be abolished?" Just when the reader feels comfortable with Woolf's declaration that war is an abomination that must be stopped, just when we are affirmed in our own beliefs, Sontag challenges or disrupts these beliefs by positing that the current generation has become so used to war that we see it as inevitable. The readers, then, are both invested and surprised. We trust, or at least are willing to go with, Sontag's hypothesis because she has established a certain authority via Woolf, but we are also unsettled by the dispiriting accusation that we have become inured to images of suffering. Hence, her readers, having taken the bait and having been surprised by the switch, feel compelled to read on.

As suggested above, the bait-and-switch strategy can be seen across the disciplines. Let's look at an example from a scientific report:

> Many have the intuition that living near trees and greenspace is beneficial to our health. But how much could a tree in the street or a nearby neighborhood park improve our health? Here we set out to examine this very question by studying the relationship between health and neighborhood greenspace as measured with

comprehensive metrics of tree canopy on the street vs. tree canopy in parks and private residences.

It is a known fact that urban trees improve air quality, reduce cooling and heating energy use, and make urban environments aesthetically more preferable. Importantly, several studies have shown that exposure to greenspaces can be psychologically and physiologically restorative by promoting mental health, reducing non-accidental mortality[8], reducing physician assessed-morbidity, reducing income-related health inequality's effect on morbidity, reducing blood pressure and stress levels, reducing sedentary leisure time, as well as promoting physical activity. In addition, greenspace may enhance psychological and cardio-vascular benefits of physical activity, as compared with other settings.

Moreover, experimental research has demonstrated that interacting with natural environments can have beneficial effects – after brief exposures - on memory and attention for healthy individuals and for patient populations. In addition, having access to views of natural settings (e.g., from a home or a hospital bed) have been found to reduce crime and aggression and improve recovery from surgery.

Although many studies have shown that natural environments enhance health or encourage healthy behaviors, to our knowledge, fewer studies have quantified the relationship between individual trees and health. In addition, studies have not separately estimated the treed area beside the streets and other urban greenspaces and related those variables to individuals' health in various domains, including cardio-metabolic conditions, mental disorders and general health perception. Knowing the kind of greenspace that may be associated with health benefits would be critical when deciding the type of greenspace that should be incorporated into built environments to improve health.

Kardan, Omid, et al. "Neighborhood Greenspace and Health in a Large Urban Center." *Scientific Reports.* Web. 23 Jul. 2015.

Although the writing conventions vastly differ from Sontag's essay, the science paper follows a similar pattern: the authors *establish a common ground* by situating their research in context of what is commonly assumed as well as in context of what has already been studied: "It is a known fact that urban trees improve air quality, reduce cooling and heating energy use…." They then *disrupt the common ground* by finding a lack or gap in the research: "…fewer studies have quantified the relationship between individual trees and health…." Finally, they go further to consider the *far-reaching implications* of this new study: "Knowing the kind of greenspace that may be associated with health benefits would be critical when deciding the type of greenspace that should be incorporated into built environments to improve health." As a result, once again, the readers are convinced they will learn something new and important from an authority on the subject.