CHAPTER 7

HOOKS AND SINKERS

> We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like "I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive . . ." And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: "Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?"[1]

If the drug trip described in the opening lines of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* had transported Hunter S. Thompson beyond the California desert to the even more bizarre and alien landscape of academe, his account might instead be titled *Hallucinogen-Induced Anxiety Disorders and Revulsion Responses in a Southwestern Gambling-Oriented Locality: A Qualitative Study,* and the first few sentences would read something like this:

> It has been suggested that frontal brain asymmetry (FBA) is associated with differences in fundamental dimensions of emotion (Davidson, 2002). According to the directional model of negative affect, the left prefrontal cortex is associated with the approach-related emotion, anger, whereas the right prefrontal area is associated with the withdrawal-related emotion, anxiety.

Of course, we all know that scientific researchers are supposed to be concerned with serious, sober matters such as frontal brain asymmetry, not with drug-fueled road trips and hallucinated bats. (The actual title of the article quoted above, by the way, is "Anticipatory Anxiety-Induced Changes in Human Lateral Prefrontal Cortex Activity.") All the same, academics who care about good writing could do worse than to study the opening moves of novelists and journalists, who generally know a thing or two about how to capture an audience's attention.

Not every engaging academic book, article, or chapter begins with an opening hook, but a striking number of them do. Stylish writers understand that if you are still reading three pages later, they have probably got you for the long haul. By contrast, nothing sinks a piece of prose more efficiently than a leaden first paragraph. In the sciences and social sciences, researchers frequently follow a four-step rhetorical sequence identified by John Swales as "Creating a Research Space," or CARS:

- Move 1: Establish that your particular area of research has some significance.
- Move 2: Selectively summarize the relevant previous research.
- Move 3: Show that the reported research is not complete.
- Move 4: Turn the gap into the research space for the present article.[2]

Promoted by Swales as a more subtle alternative to the conventional "problem-solution" model, this approach can help authors marshal a clear and compelling argument. However, the CARS model also has a lot to answer for. Move 1 encourages authors to begin with a sweeping statement of the obvious:

> Ecologists and anthropologists, among others, recognize that humans have significantly affected the biophysical environment. [Anthropology]

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

SHANTHI AMERATUNGA

In 2002, an estimated 1–2 million people were killed and 50 million injured in road-traffic crashes worldwide, costing the global community about US$518 billion. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has described the situation as "a worsening global disaster destroying lives and livelihoods, hampering development and leaving millions in greater vulnerability." Without appropriate action, road-traffic injuries are predicted to escalate from the ninth leading contributor to the global burden of disease in 1990 to the third by 2020. . . . In this Review, we aim to summarise the characteristics of the rise in road-traffic injuries and present an evidence based approach to prevent road-traffic crashes. Our Review uses the substantial work undertaken by international experts contributing to the 2004 world report and data published since that time.

In the opening lines of this review article from *The Lancet*, population health researcher Shanthi Ameratunga and her colleagues Martha Hijar and Robyn Norton demonstrate that the CARS (Creating a Research Space) model can work well when employed gracefully, generously, and without exaggeration. Rather than baldly asserting the importance of the topic, they offer hard evidence about global death rates, injury numbers, and monetary costs. And rather than claiming to overturn or better the research of distinguished colleagues, the authors acknowledge and build on "the substantial work undertaken by international experts." Note also their use of active, concrete verbs *(kill, injure, cost, predict, escalate, prevent, highlight)* and their canny choice of a supporting quotation from Red Cross/Red Crescent that contains language as vivid and precise as their own *(worsening, disaster, destroying, hampering, vulnerability)*.

There is, to be sure, still plenty of scope here for the authors to tighten up their prose. In their penultimate sentence, for example, "an evidence based approach to prevent road-traffic crashes" could be more elegantly rephrased as "an evidence-based approach to preventing road-traffic crashes," and the words "aim to" could be deleted altogether. For stylish academic writers, the work of editing and polishing is never done.

Move 2 often leads to egregious name-dropping rather than meaningful engagement with colleagues' ideas and arguments:

> Identity is central to any sociocultural account of learning. As far as mathematics is concerned, it is essential to students' beliefs about themselves as learners and as potential mathematicians (Kloosterman & Coughan, 1994; Carlson, 1999; Martino & Maher, 1999; Boaler & Greeno, 2000; De Corte et al., 2002; Maher, 2005), and it has vital gender, race and class components (see Becker, 1995; Burton, 1995; Bartholomew, 1999; Cooper, 2001; Dowling, 2001; Kassem, 2001; Boaler, 2002; Cobb & Hodge, 2002; Gilborn & Mirza, 2002; Nasir, 2002; De Abreu & Cline, 2003; Black, 2004). [Higher Education]

Move 3 invites authors to take a crowbar to the existing literature, jimmying open alleged research gaps whether or not they actually exist:

> Although scholars have demonstrated the link between collective efficacy and team performance (Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi & Beaubien, 2002), little is yet known about the factors responsible for the development of collective efficacy. [Psychology]

Finally, with Move 4, the author steps boldly into the breach, making claims, frequently inflated, for the novelty and importance of his or her own research:

> This study expands the existing models for estimating the effect of community college attendance on baccalaureate attainment by mapping out the points of divergence in the educational trajectory of 2-year and 4-year students. [Higher Education]

Developed to encourage rhetorical precision, the CARS method frequently steers authors into rhetorical predictability instead.

In some academic contexts, formulaic openings are required; in most, however, they are merely conventional. Philosopher Jonathan Wolff notes that students in his discipline are trained "to give the game away right from the start. A detective novel written by a good philosophy student would begin: 'In this novel

I shall show that the butler did it.' "[3] A quick trawl through several top philosophy journals confirms that up-front openings are indeed a disciplinary norm:

> In this essay I argue that citizens of a liberal-democratic state, one that I argue has a morally justified claim to political authority, enjoy a moral right to engage in acts of suitably constrained civil disobedience, or what I will call a moral right to public disobedience.

Yet these same journals also reveal that many other options are available to philosophers who resist the "butler did it" trend. An article on the mind-body problem, for example, opens with a carefully chosen literary quotation:

> "Merely—you are my own nose."
>
> The Nose regarded the major and contracted its brows a little.
>
> "My dear sir, you speak in error" was its reply. "I am just myself—myself separately." Gogol (1835)

An essay on feminism and pornography begins with a question drawn from a newspaper story:

> A recent article in *The Boston Globe* asks, "What happened to the anti-porn feminists?"

A study of corporate responsibility catches our attention with a historical anecdote:

> The Herald of Free Enterprise, a ferry operating in the English Channel, sank on March 6, 1987, drowning nearly two hundred people. The official inquiry found that the company running the ferry was extremely sloppy, with poor routines of checking and management.

And a paper about the problem of mental causation starts by painting a vividly personalized picture of physical pain:

> Quincy strikes his thumb with a hammer, feels pain, and dances in circles. Quincy's pain, we think, causes his dancing, but can it? Quincy's pain depends on some activity in his brain—say, his C-fibers firing—

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

RICHARD DAWKINS

I have just listened to a lecture in which the topic for discussion was the fig. Not a botanical lecture, a literary one. We got the fig in literature, the fig as metaphor, changing perceptions of the fig, the fig as emblem of pudenda and the fig leaf as modest concealer of them, "fig" as an insult, the social construction of the fig, D. H. Lawrence on how to eat a fig in society, "reading fig" and, I rather think, "the fig as text." The speaker's final pensée was the following. He recalled to us the Genesis story of Eve tempting Adam to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Genesis doesn't specify, he reminded us, which fruit it was. Traditionally, people take it to be an apple. The lecturer suspected that actually it was a fig, and with this piquant little shaft he ended his talk. . . . But our elegant lecturer was missing so much. There is a genuine paradox and real poetry lurking in the fig, with subtleties to exercise an inquiring mind and wonders to uplift an aesthetic one. In this book I want to move to a position where I can tell the true story of the fig.

With these opening lines from *Climbing Mount Improbable*, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins uses just about every rhetorical trick in the book to hook and hold our attention: humor, metaphor, concrete nouns, active verbs, varied sentence length, literary references, and more. He begins by placing us directly in the moment: "I have just listened to a lecture." With a few well-chosen words, he constructs a breezy précis of what he has just heard: "We got the fig in literature, the fig as metaphor." Dawkins's lightly sarcastic tone—"I rather think," "the speaker's final pensée," "this piquant little shaft"—risks turning some readers off. But his offer to tell us the *true* story of the fig, an emblem of evolutionary improbability at its most intriguing and bizarre, will keep most of us turning the pages.

> and those firings cause the muscles in his legs to move. If his neurons cause his legs to move, what more is there for his pain to do?

The authors of all four articles subsequently go on to state a thesis ("here's my main argument") and carve out a research space ("here's how my work contributes to the existing literature")—but only after having secured their readers' attention with a relevant quotation, question, story, or illustration.

Every discipline has its own typical opening moves, which can provide a rich store of ideas and inspiration to academics in other fields. Historians often begin their articles by recounting a specific event that is exemplary of the period or problem they wish to explore:

> In 1924, a farmer named Kwadjo Agbanyamane and his mother borrowed £20 from a neighbor to buy some land near Peki, in the Gold Coast region of what is now Ghana. In return, Kwadjo "gave" the neighbor his six-year-old brother Kwamin, "to serve for the debt until" he could pay for the land.

Literary scholars like to spin webs of signification from a single starting quotation or anecdote:

> *Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us*
> *To purify the dialect of the tribe*
> *And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight.* (T. S. Eliot)
>
> The concern of this article is language, and specifically the various projects of linguistic "purification" that were part of literary modernism in Britain.

Popular science writers may home in on a fascinating fact: a creature, object, or phenomenon that captures our imagination but then leads the author into a discussion of wider issues.

Any opening gambit can, of course, become stale and predictable if used repetitively or unimaginatively. However, alert stylists will find ways to keep their openings fresh. Literary historian Stephen Greenblatt recommends that writers "plunge the reader into a story that has already begun" and create "the desire to know

SPOTLIGHT ON STYLE

STEPHEN GREENBLATT

Several years ago at Harvard, a friend invited me to dinner and asked if I would pick up two of his other guests, Nadine Gordimer and Carlos Fuentes. Thrilled, I readily agreed to do so. On the appointed evening, all dressed up and tingling with pleasant anticipation, I went first to get Nadine Gordimer, who immediately deflated me somewhat by getting into the backseat of my car. My feeble attempts at small talk went nowhere. When I picked up Carlos Fuentes a few minutes later, he turned out to know Gordimer—there was a flurry of kissing on both cheeks—and so naturally he too got into the backseat. As I headed off toward Newton, half amused and half annoyed, the conversation between my two distinguished passengers encapsulated the globalization of literature.

Literary historian Stephen Greenblatt opens this article on racial memory and literary history with a self-deprecating personal anecdote. Deftly recounting his own amusement and discomfort at being reduced to the role of chauffeur for Gordimer and Fuentes, he pulls his readers right into the car with him as he eavesdrops on two of the most eminent authors in the Western world. Greenblatt's slightly over-the-top vocabulary—*thrilled, all dressed up, tingling, flurry*—cues us to the multiple layers of irony in his narrative. Later in the same paragraph, the self-confessed "feeble" conversationalist gets the last laugh by turning his sharp critical lens on his two passengers.

Greenblatt himself is the first to acknowledge that stylishness can shade into solipsism if writers focus only on themselves. Far from advocating scholarly navel-gazing, he urges academic writers to carry their "passionate energies into an alien world":

I am suggesting only that you should try to write well—and that means bringing to the table all of your alertness, your fears, and your desires. And every once in a while—say, every third paper—tell yourself that you will take a risk.

more." Himself a master of the technique, Greenblatt notes that he used to open all his academic essays with a historical anecdote attached to a date, for example: "In September 1580, as he passed through a small French town on his way to Switzerland and Italy, Montaigne was told an unusual story that he duly recorded in his travel journal." Eventually, however, the formula became "a bit too familiar in my writing, so I decided to stop."[4] Now Greenblatt favors personal anecdotes instead.

An effective first paragraph need not be flashy, gimmicky, or even provocative. It must, however, make the reader want to keep reading. Compare the following openings, both from articles published in the same biology journal. The first begins with an attention-getting question and then segues to a specific case study framed in clear, concrete language. The second, by contrast, freights a potentially intriguing topic with ponderous abstractions:

> Many ecological studies are inspired by Hutchinson's simple question, "Why are there so many kinds of animals?" . . . Communities of ants, well known for being structured by competition, provide an excellent testing ground for the mechanisms that can promote coexistence.
>
> The conspicuous interspecific variability of the mammalian penis has long been of value as a taxonomic tool (e.g., Hooper and Musser 1964a, 1964b), though as in other animal groups the selective pressures underlying such genitalic diversity have not been well understood.

Amazingly, the authors of the first article make the study of ant communities sound fascinating, while the author of the second succeeds in rendering penis size one of the most boring topics on earth.

In my data sample of academic articles from across the disciplines, I found that roughly 25 percent of the articles open in a deliberately engaging way, offering stories, anecdotes, scene-setting descriptions of historical events or artistic representations, literary or historical quotations, or provocative questions aimed

directly at the reader (see Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2). The other 75 percent begin with an informational statement of some kind; that is, a sentence that announces the topic of the article, presents relevant background information, summarizes previous research, posits a fact, makes a claim for the importance of the topic, or sets up the author's main thesis, either by identifying a gap in existing knowledge or by presenting the opening moves of a "straw man" argument ("Most people think that. . . . but this paper will show otherwise"). As one might expect, humanities scholars proved far more likely than scientists or social scientists to start with a deliberately engaging opening. Notably, however, with the exception of medicine, every single discipline in my data sample includes at least one or two articles that begin with an opening hook—an indication that, in most academic journals, attention-grabbing openings are not illegal, merely uncommon. Social scientists, in particular, can draw courage from this statistic, which confirms that CARS in the first paragraph is not their only option. Like a catchy title, an opening hook communicates a powerful subtext: "I care about my readers, and I am willing to work hard to catch and hold their attention."

THINGS TO TRY

- Ask yourself the same questions that you asked when considering your title: What kind of first impression do you want to make on your audience? Does your opening move match your intention?
- Find an article or book chapter that particularly engages you and analyze its opening structure. What *specific* opening strategies does the author use? Can you adapt those strategies for your own work?
- Experiment with one or more of the following opening ploys:
    - a literary quotation
    - a scholarly or historical quotation

- a personal anecdote
- a historical anecdote
- an anecdote drawn from your research
- a description of a scene or artwork
- a dialog or conversation
- a surprising fact
- a direct admonition to the audience ("Consider this"; "Imagine that")
- a challenging question

If you do decide to start with an attention-grabbing hook, however, make sure it speaks to the content and purpose of your article or chapter.

- Instead of a hook, construct a funnel: an opening paragraph that draws in your reader with a compelling statement of the topic's importance and then narrows down to your main argument. Better yet, start with a hook that pulls your reader into the mouth of the funnel.