

# **Hooks** for Writing a Personal Narrative / the Desideratum Essay

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The opening is one of the toughest, but most important parts of an essay, as it will help you set the stage and scope for the rest of your story, but only if you can take a unique perspective on the topic. And remember that **telling a story** is your goal for a personal narrative like this, so you'll want to begin in a way that hints at your themes, origins, and deeper meanings behind your desideratum.

Thus, here are five ideas and examples for beginning your story about your *desideratum*.

Remember that you can use a combination of these methods, which aren't exhaustive (that is, other hooks exist).

**Hook #1: Broad, Narrow Statement**—*You can begin where you'd like; just remember that you'll need to narrow your focus to your "thesis," or the statement that sets the stage for your narrative.*

The destination isn't as important as the journey. Or at least that's the cliché many people share whenever they discuss vocation, or calling, in life. As soon as I mention that I'm a writer...or trying to be one...I can see the phrase forming on people's lips, and I dread it—almost as much as I dread telling people that my journey hasn't yielded any published work. Yet, while longwinded *hegira* has been beset with obstacles and writer's blocks, I've also enjoyed some lovely oases where I've had the pleasure of finding that words will always quench my thirst for meaning, whether or not I am to become a "serious" writer—an identity that is roughly fifteen years old and still searching for a publisher.

**Hook #2: Question / Series of Thought-Provoking Questions**—*Questions can set the tone for your narrative, but you should also keep in mind that you'll need to provide some answer(s) to them.*

What makes great art? Do I write so that others can understand me, or so that I can find fulfillment? Both? When the hell am I supposed to write, to publish? Why do I have to edit?

These nagging questions have plagued me throughout my composition journey, fifteen years of attempting to reach some sense of being a "serious" writer, a concept that begs another question: What does being a "serious" writer even look like? To even begin to answer that question, I have to look back at the fifteen years since I developed that idea so I can look forward to begin to discover how to live that life.

**Hook #3: Quotations**—*The best quotes are ones drawn from your topic or from sources to which your audience can relate. Thus, use quotes that connect with your topic and audience.*

*The Great Gatsby* author F. Scott Fitzgerald once said of writing, "All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath" ("The Writer's Almanac"). If this is the case, Fitzgerald suffered from loss of oxygen, as is one of America's most beloved storytellers and one of my personal writing heroes. Though his work may have led him to alcoholism and an early death when he was writing films in Hollywood, his example demonstrates the dedication and trust, the removal from one's everyday experience, the absolute immersion in words and ideas required to make someone a great, storied (no pun intended!) writer.

These are all qualities that I have not been able to perfect in nearly fifteen years of trying to be a "serious" writer, which began in high school.

**Hook #4: Stating the Importance of the Topic / Statistics:** *When using statistics, consider that the data should be pertinent to the topic, validated by a credible source, and typically stated in an objective fashion, free of editorializing.*

*Forbes* recently released a list of the ten worst undergraduate majors; after nine other courses of study (including, notably, anthropology and fine arts) came English Language and Literature at number ten. The site provided statistics for English major grads: "Unemployment rate for recent grads: 9.2%; Median earnings for recent grads: \$32,000;

Unemployment rate for experienced grads: 6.2%; Median earnings for experienced grads: \$52,000” (“The Ten Worst College Majors”). While I graduated from college years ago, the fact remains: I face these numbers every day, particularly in the financial woes of a generation heavily burdened with college loans.

Yet, despite these troublesome numbers—what are numbers to word people, anyways?—I trudge on, teaching the subject I love and doing my best to grow as a “serious” writer, an identity that is nearly fifteen years old and still searching for a publisher.

**Hook #5: Begin “In Medias Res” (“In the Middle of Things”)**—*Again, you’re telling a story, which doesn’t need to be told in chronological order. Thus, one of the best ways to begin is “in the middle of things”—chronologically or thematically in the middle of some action or event that is a part of or that typifies your journey. You should step back from this moment and give your reader clarity about why you’re mentioning it, as you’ll see at the end of this example.*

It can strike at any time. One moment, I’m talking to a student about Thoreau during a normal school day, or driving past a rusty old political billboard, or listening to a radio report about prisons in Louisiana. In the next, my always-hurried mind finally focuses on one topic, one item, and I find myself casting a story, dream-weaving a poem, envisioning a protagonist. But the madness of everyday life doesn’t slow down enough for me to etch this story into a concrete reality. I’m trapped in a no man’s land—I want the idea to remain perfect in my head, but I need to express it somehow in a typically imperfect way. What do I do with this sudden spark of inspiration?

Such is the beginning of a creative process that has helped—and plagued—me for fifteen years of trying to become a “serious” writer.

#### Considerations to keep in mind as you write:

- 1.) Careful about using clichés: The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest awards prizes to people who write the worst first lines of an essay (<http://www.bulwer-lytton.com>). Most of them rely upon clichés and trite, overused phrases. Thus, be careful of these; if you begin with one, revise in order to freshen the language a bit.
- 2.) No **one** hook works best for every situation: Writing is situational, contextual; thus, keep in mind that a hook that works well for one person or one prompt may not work for another.
- 3.) Remember that an opening both **informs** and **motivates** your reader. Thus, you’re giving background for your story, but also convincing your reader to continue reading it.
- 4.) Since you are telling a larger story, consider beginning generally with an **anecdote**—a story that illustrates the beginning of or the main course of your experience.
- 5.) Lastly, consider how you might **end** your essay; some writing concludes just as it begins. Even if that is not the case, you want a story to have a complete ending, and an effective opening often will help you achieve that end.