

## A Questionable Beginning

by

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Beginning an article with a question can be weak at best and a lazy habit at worst. Every time I sit down to write nonfiction, a nice stream of catchy questions pop up as clever potential openings. But can a question really accomplish what a first sentence should achieve?

A question seems innocent enough but when you've got a 500 word limit there is no time for wasted words. A statement expressing the theme of your piece is much more effective. "Pack your swimsuit, find someone to feed the cat, and get your parents in the car, you're going to Florida for a vacation you'll never forget." says so much more than "Have you ever dreamed of a Florida vacation?" and it takes more creativity and skill also.

A writing teacher once pointed this out to me and I held the advice close to my heart (and the delete button on my keyboard) because I knew he was a good teacher and not necessarily because I understood how right he was about questions.

Recently I had the opportunity to study improvisation (acting) at The Player's Workshop in Chicago. One of the first things we learned was that questions are taboo in improvisation.\* When you ask a question in improvisation you immediately put pressure on your fellow actor to come up with what you should've *offered* them in the first place. But more importantly, a question never moves a scene forward, and like writing, moving forward is your job.

For example, two actors are starting a typical improv scene (or game) where nothing has been established. Actor A is sitting on the ground and Actor B enters and says, “What are you doing?”

Now what? The scene has come to a complete halt while Actor A tries to come up with something quickly. Like your 500 word article, these actors have only minutes to pull it all together.

Try this scenario instead. Actor B walks in and says, “Cool sandcastle!” (resisting the urge to add, “Can I help?”). They immediately have a jumping off point. With a statement offered not only has an activity been established, but so has the environment around them. This is what a statement can do for your piece.

The whole statement instead of a question theory (and I use “theory” because writers start pieces off with questions all the time. I recently read a piece in Highlights that started with a question.) can also be used effectively in fiction writing. Numerous times I have found myself starting a chapter or scene with a question which leaves me nothing to do but have the other character answer. Eliminating unnecessary questions will tighten up your writing making it sharper and more focused.

If you’re like me and love questions and can’t stand to get rid of them all, how about ending your piece with one?

\* Rumor has it that when actors audition for the prestigious Second City Training Program in Chicago they are automatically disqualified if they ask even one question during their scene.