Image Grammar

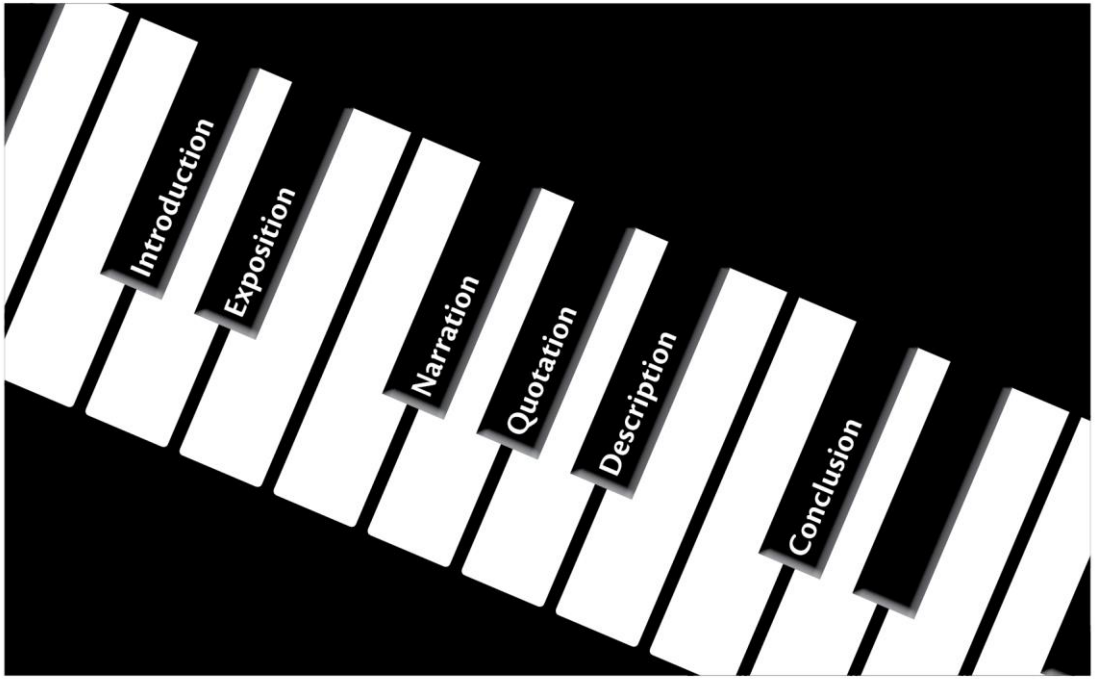
Teaching Grammar as Part of the Writing Process

The Nonfiction Model

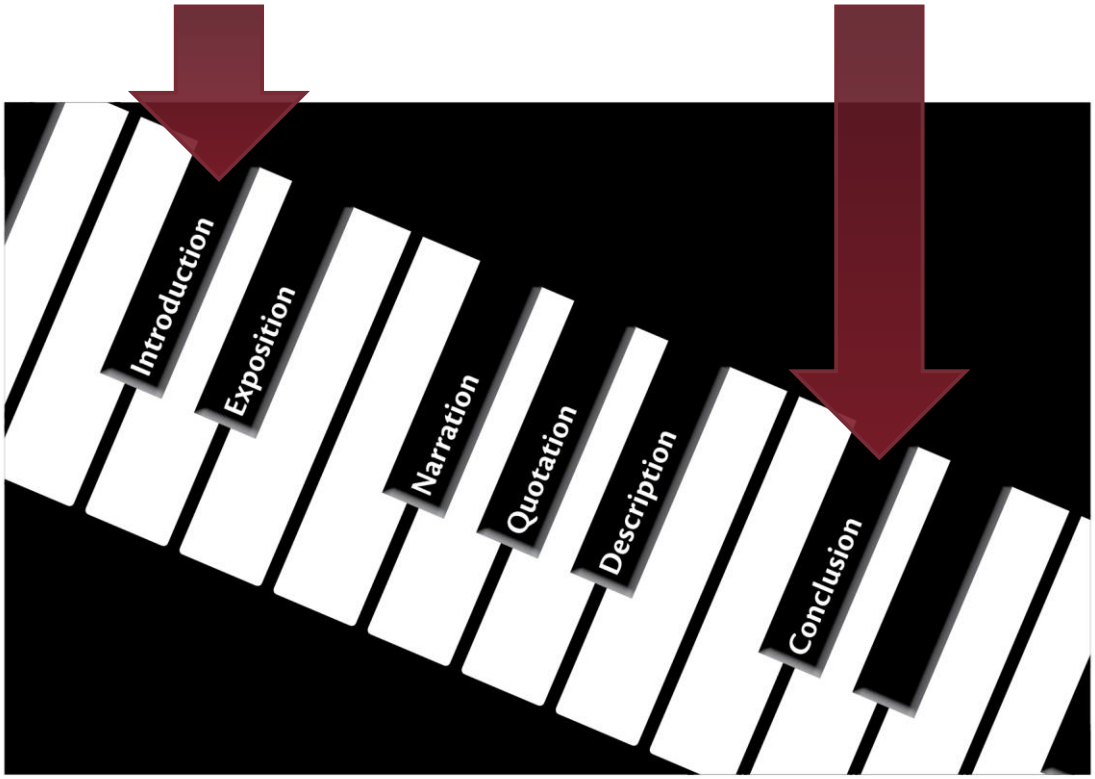
Form is the face of many legends—bardic, epic, sculptural, musical, pictorial, architectural; it is the infinite images of religion; it is the expression and the remnant of self. Form is the very shape of content.

—Ben Shahn

Imagine when you write a nonfiction piece that you are playing a piano. On your piano each key represents different types of information. Your task as a writer is to mix these types, going from one to another. If you do this, you will create a melody in the reader's mind.



Our piano has only six keys, and two of these keys—the introduction and the conclusion—are used only once. Let's examine these two first before looking at the other four keys.



Introduction/ Opening Hook

To begin with, there are eight types of introductions (sometimes called *hooks* since they are designed to hook your interest and pull your mind onto a piece of writing):

Narrative

Quotation

Question

Statistical

Mystery

Description

Imagine

Direct

The Narrative Lead

A narrative lead lures the reader with a compelling story in one to three paragraphs. Here is a narrative lead, taken from a chapter in Edward De Bono's *New Think*.

Example of a Narrative Lead

Many years ago when a person who owed money could be thrown into jail, a merchant in London had the misfortune to owe a huge sum to a money-lender. The money-lender, who was old and ugly, fancied the merchant's beautiful teenage daughter. He proposed a bargain. He said he would cancel the merchant's debt if he could have the girl instead.

Both the merchant and his daughter were horrified at the proposal. So the cunning money-lender proposed that they let Providence decide the matter. He told them that he would put a black pebble and a white pebble into an empty money bag, and then the girl would have to pick out one of the pebbles.

If she chose the black pebble, she would become his wife and her father's debt would be cancelled. If she chose the white pebble, she would stay with her father, and the debt would still be cancelled. But if she refused to pick out a pebble, her father would be thrown into jail, and she would starve.

Reluctantly the merchant agreed. They were standing on a pebble-strewn path in the merchant's garden as they talked, and the money-lender stooped down to pick up the two pebbles. As he picked up the pebbles, the girl, sharp-eyed with fright, noticed that he picked up two black pebbles and put them into the money bag. He then asked the girl to pick out the pebble that was to decide her fate and that of her father. . . . The girl . . . put her hand into the money bag and drew out a pebble. Without looking at it she fumbled and let it fall to the path where it was immediately lost among the others.

"Oh how clumsy of me," she said, "but never mind—if you look into the bag you will be able to tell which pebble I took by the color of the one that is left."

The Quotation Lead

The quotation lead brings a conversational tone to an article with a comment that lures the reader. Notice how this quote from blues performer W. C. Handy generates an image in the reader's mind, adding power to the lyrics of the "St. Louis Blues."

Example of a Quotation Lead

"Music did bring me to the gutter. It brought me to sleep on the levee of the Mississippi River, on the cobblestones, broke and hungry. And if you've ever slept on cobblestones or had nowhere to sleep, you can understand why I began 'The St. Louis Blues' with 'I hate to see the evening sun go down,'" said W. C. Handy.

The Question Lead

The question introduction is the easiest hook to create, but it is the hardest to create effectively. Any question or series of questions can qualify as an introduction, but a good introduction is one that rivets readers to the text. It is best to test a question introduction with a friend before using it. A sentence can sound good to you but might have a different effect on others. Here are a few examples of powerful question leads.

Examples of the Question Lead

John Grisham had always hated English. In college, he even earned Ds in freshman English. So, how did he become a writer with three suspense novels at the top of the charts?

—Laura Faulkner

What do you tell a boy whose heart's dream is to be a pilot, who eats, sleeps, and lives airplanes, who collects every airplane picture he can get his hands on (even draws them superbly with the most fantastic detail), what do you tell him . . . when he is retarded?

—Patricia Kubis

The Statistical Lead

Statistics impress readers. Numbers seem to generate some mystical spell, giving authority to the simplest information. Writers use this lure with lead paragraphs that present fascinating numbers. Some authors refer to this as a *factual introduction*.

Example of the Statistical Lead

Instantaneous pressures of up to six tons per square foot have been measured in breaking waves. Breaking waves have lifted a 2,700-ton breakwater, en masse, and deposited it inside the harbor at Wick, Scotland. They have blasted open a steel door 195 feet above sea level at Unst Light in the Shetland Islands. They have heaved a half-ton boulder 91 feet into the air at Tillmook Rock, Oregon.

—From *The Perfect Storm*, by Sebastian Junger

Another Example of the Statistical Lead

Child abuse is becoming one of the fastest growing acts of violence in the United States. According to the American Humane Association, 1.4 million cases of child abuse were reported in the U.S. in 1982. Nearly 1/5 of these victims were teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17. Last year, nearly 1,300 abused children died.

—Molly Fitzpatrick (student)

The Mystery Lead

The mystery lead, similar to a fiction concept called *story question*, keeps the reader in suspense by posing unanswered questions. A mystery lead resembles a narrative but doesn't end. It leaves you wondering, "What will happen next?"

The following examples illustrate this approach. The first was created by Thomasine E. Lewis Tilden, in an introduction to his book *Mind Readers*; the second was created by Margaret Bourke White, in "A Famous Lady's Indomitable Fight" from *Great Reading from Life*.

Example of the Mystery Lead

Natalia Lulova came to Manhattan in June of 2010 with a simple goal: to win one million dollars. All she had to do was convince magician James Randi that she was psychic. If she passed the test, Natalia would become a millionaire.

—Thomasine E. Lewis Tilden

Another Example of the Mystery Lead

The mysterious malady began so quietly I could hardly believe there was anything wrong. There was nothing strong enough to dignify with the word pain, nothing except a slight dull ache in my left leg when I walked upstairs. I did not dream it was the stealthy beginning of a seven-year siege during which I would face a word totally new to my vocabulary—incurable.

—Margaret Bourke White

The Description Lead

Description is often used to provide imagery in narratives and direct quotes, but it can also create central images in a paragraph. For example, notice the dominating descriptive imagery taken from an essay by Erma Bombeck entitled "Who Are Harder to Raise—Boys or Girls," from her book *Motherhood, The Second Oldest Profession.*

Example of the Description Lead

With boys you always know where you stand. Right in the path of a hurricane. It's all there. The fruit flies hovering over their waste can; the hamster trying to escape to cleaner air; the bedrooms decorated in Early Bus Station Restroom.

With girls, everything looks great on the surface. But beware of drawers that won't open. They contain a three-month supply of dirty underwear, unwashed hose, and rubber bands with blobs of hair in them.

—Erma Bombeck

The Imagine Lead

Closely related to the descriptive lead is the imagine lead, where the writer asks the reader to imagine something. Here is an example from a student research paper on quarks.

Example of the Imagine Lead

Imagine dropping ten alarm clocks off the top of the Sears tower. Then, imagine if you had to rely on picture-taking sensors, like bubble chambers, to tell where the pieces fell. You would have tons of pictures of little trails of bubbles that represented part of the paths of the tiny fragments of the clocks.

After collecting the data, you would have to do the impossible. Using only these pictures, you would have to figure out how one alarm clock works and what materials made it up. Even with the most powerful computers, it would take you a long time, working constantly, repeating the experiment, and guessing about what the trails represent, to come up with an educated guess.

Brian Anderson, a pioneer detective of a world that would fit inside the tiniest speck of dust, works with such a problem.

—Kati Moseley

The Direct Lead

Finally, the weakest lead to use in this nonfiction model—but the best lead for a technical journal article, an essay test, or a business memo—is the direct lead. The direct lead defines the thesis of a long piece of writing in the same way a topic sentence generalizes the main idea in paragraphs.

Although the direct lead lacks the imaginative appeal of other openings, its purpose differs. Other leads try to hook readers who lack a compelling interest in the topic. The direct technique assumes that the reader wants the information and doesn't need to be coaxed.

An Example of a Weak Direct Lead

This nonfiction article is about pollution. It describes some of the many problems we have with our environment.

> (The sentence above is weak because nonfiction articles should begin with a hook that pulls the reader into the text like a large magnet pulling a paperclip.)

An Example of an Effective Direct Lead

There are six things you need to know before climbing the Chilkoot Trail after a snowstorm.

(This direct lead works as an answer to an essay question like "Describe the six things you need to know before climbing the Chilkoot Trail after a snowstorm." It also works as a topic sentence in the body of a nonfiction work.)

A direct lead should not be used as a hook for articles but works fine for essay tests, procedures, opinions, etc.

The Combination Lead

Often professional and student writers combine two techniques. For example, student Linsay Davis combines a statistical and question lead in this introduction to a piece on the McCaughey sextuplets:

> What would cause you to go through 49 diapers each day? To go through 11 gallons of formula a week? To spend $1.25 million on medical expenses? To spend $1.45 million on 4 years of college education? The answer: sextuplets.

Reexamine our piano analogy and notice that we have examined eight types of introductory leads, seven of which are effective. These are the most common techniques used by professional authors.

There are also several options for the conclusion, the final note played in a nonfiction piece.

Conclusions

Author Leo Fletcher recommends three types of conclusions as the most effective. "A good conclusion will (1) emphasize the point of your article, (2) provide a climax, and (3) help readers remember your piece."

If students keep these guiding principles in mind, they can easily create a variety of conclusions. For example, notice how the following three conclusions incorporate Fletcher's principles in different ways. The first meets Fletcher's guidelines by discussing the future; the next ends with a summary; and the last finishes with a quote.

End with a Look to the Future

Concluding an article on the destructive power of tsunamis—tidal waves created by earthquakes—feature writer Kathy Svitil suggests what might happen in the future in the United States:

> The fate of Arop, Warapu, Malol, and Sissano should be disquieting to residents of the West Coast of the United States. A Pacific earthquake could easily send a tsunami their way as well. If they were lucky and the quake was distant, they'd have a couple of hours' warning. But if the quake were closer to shore, they might not know what was happening until they saw the wave looming overhead.

End with a Summary

Just as Svitil's look-to-the-future ending on tsunamis emphasized the main idea, created a climax, and left something to reflect on, artist Lynn Newman accomplishes the same thing with a summary. In his first-person article on why and how he uses photographs as preliminary sketches for painting, Newman concludes with the following summary.

> While I realize using snapshots as a sketchbook is no substitute for drawing or painting on location, it is a way to unravel at least one artistic quandary. Perhaps the wise use of snapshots can free some valuable time and rejuvenate your artistic sensibilities.
>
> —Lynn Newman

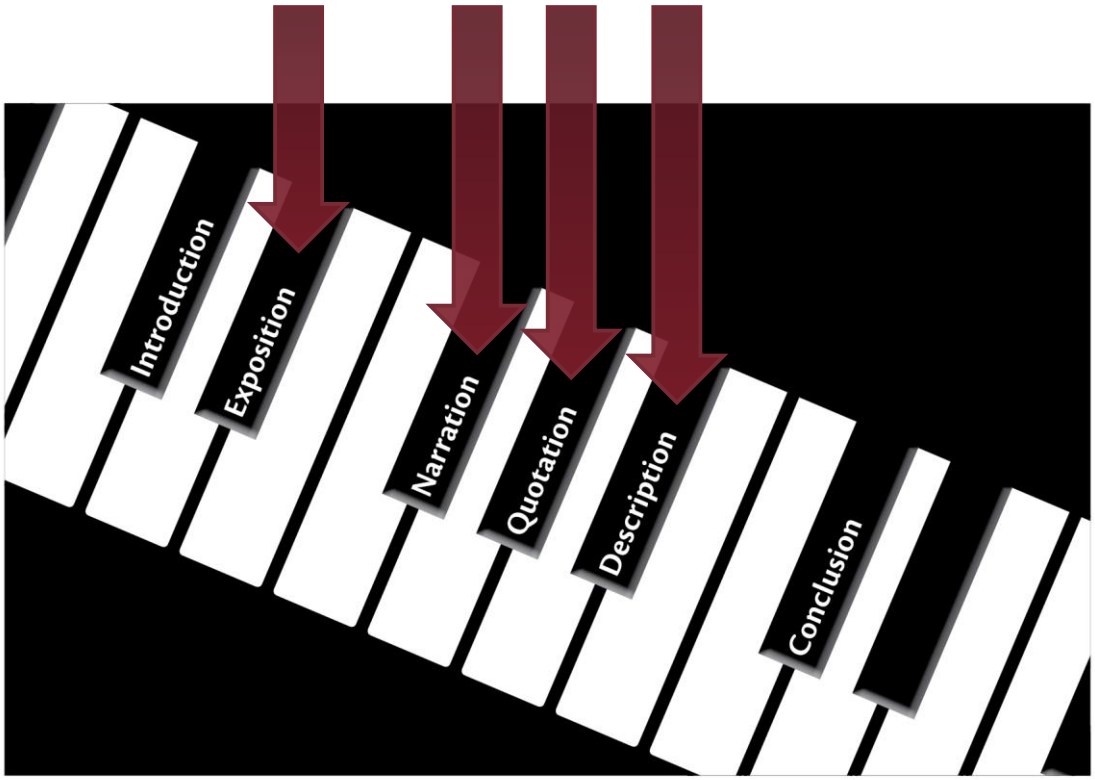
End with a Quote

A quote can bring resolution to an article, as in this example from an article on preserving wetlands.

> "As it's difficult to guarantee that we can re-create all that will be lost," Zedler says, "our primary responsibility must be to protect what's left."
>
> —Steve Nadis, "When It Comes to Building New Wetlands, Scientists Still Can't Fool Mother Nature." *National Wildlife.* December 1998/January 1999.

Returning to the piano comparison, you will see that the four types of melody notes (exposition, narration, quotation, and description) are the heart of the nonfiction model. They give authority, variety, imagery, and pacing.

Let's examine how these four elements work.



Psychological Pace

In this next section, we will examine the four essential techniques used in the body of an article: narration, exposition, quotation, and description. All of these except exposition were examined earlier as methods of introduction. Here we will show how all four work together in other ways, starting with pace, the psychological speed that your mind travels while reading.

Each type of writing in the body of an article has a slightly different pace or psychological speed. One might compare this psychological movement to the pace of a hiker traveling along a forest trail.

The Pace of Quotations

Quotations create the fastest movement along the trail—not unlike a hiker running frantically to escape a grizzly.

The Pace of Narration

Narration might be viewed as a relaxing jog with a steady rhythm.

The Pace of Description

Although description is often used in phrases or sentences rather than complete paragraphs, in a long description our jogger would be taking a brisk walk, admiring the forest images.

The Pace of Exposition

Exposition, which is filled with information—facts, statistics, explanations, comparisons, etc.—is a slow walk. The jogger is taking time to observe essential details.

Additional Details About the Melody Keys

Understanding pace helps to control psychological speed in order to create variety. However, each of these melody keys has additional characteristics that appeal to the reader in other ways.

Description

Description adds important sensory images such as color, details, aromas, and sound. Using descriptive paragraphs, authors use a camera eye to capture the visual images that enhance narratives. Using touches of description in phrases and single words, authors can bring quotes alive with sensory details and transform exposition into a three-dimensional experience.

An Example of Nonfiction Description

Gene Robinson is behind the wheel. He doesn't have any weapons, just tattoos—machine guns, daggers, flowers, snakes . . . and only his needle man knows what else. On each hand is a black glove with the fingers cut out. A Camel dangles from his lips and his black, skull-and-crossbones T-shirt is sweat-soaked.

It is midnight and he is wearing shades.

—From "Prospects," in *The View from Pluto,* by Terry Pluto

Narration

Narration not only varies the melodic flow of nonfiction, but also creates a story grammar appeal. Moffett observed that "children use and depend upon narrative as their principal mode of thinking."

Furthermore, McNeil discovered that children acquire information more effectively when reading narratives. So the narrative plays a unique role in the development of reading and writing.

An Example of Nonfiction Narration

HILLSBORO, Ore.—Police say a bank robbery attempt in Hillsboro failed after a teller told the woman who handed her a threatening note that she couldn't read the handwriting.

According to police, a 30-year-old woman walked into a Wells Fargo bank branch Wednesday and handed a teller a note that said, "Need $300 or I'll kill you. I'm serious."

The teller told the woman she couldn't read the writing. While the woman stepped away to rewrite her note on a bank slip, the teller hit a silent alarm and the bank manager intervened, asking the woman how he could help her. Police and FBI agents soon arrived and arrested the woman.

—Associated Press

Exposition

Exposition is best defined as information. The author gives you key examples, reasons, facts, illustrations, etc. Centuries ago, Aristotle classified exposition as information presented in one of the following types of paragraphs:

- Details and examples
- Proofs and reasons
- Division (partition)
- Classification
- Process
- Comparison/contrast
- Enumeration
- Illustration

An Example of Nonfiction Exposition

When those drivers came out to check on the situation, they found almost 50 vehicles submerged in water. The entire parking lot was under water. In some areas, the water was more than 4 feet deep, almost completely covering some vehicles.

—Channel3000.com, Madison, WI

Quotation

Quotations bring information alive. A quote is comparable to poking a microphone in front of someone, and saying, "What do you think is the answer to life, the universe, and everything?" Regardless of the response, the quote changes the pace and brings a new voice to the work. In addition, quotes often spotlight an authority, creating the illusion that the interviewer has researched the topic.

An Example of Nonfiction Quotation

"Tell me, what is the most important skill a job hunter can have today?"

"Well," said Dilbert, "In the future, the most important career skill will be a lack of ethics."

—Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Future*

Let's see how all of this comes together as an article. Using tabloid topics with imaginary data and working as a team, you are going to construct a complete article with a few short paragraphs. Follow these steps.

First, form groups of six or more and select a tabloid topic from the list on the next slide.

BEER CANS FOUND ON MARS

TITANIC SUNK BY UFOs

JAPANESE FIND NEW POWER
IN PANDA SWEAT!

FARMERS GROW MONSTER CROPS
WITH SPACE ALIEN POOP!

CALIFORNIA TEENS SMOKING CIGARETTES
MADE FROM HUMAN FLESH!

SCIENTIST ATTACKED BY KILLER SQUIRRELS

NEWBORN BABY BENDS SPOONS
WITH HIS MIND!

GIGANTIC CLAM ATTACKS WOMAN!

CROP CIRCLES APPEARING
ON PEOPLE'S HEADS

SATURN IS AN ALIEN SPACE STATION!

VITAMIN CIGARETTES ADD YEARS
TO YOUR LIFE!

EXPLODING PIGS CREATED BY TERRORISTS

HIEROGLYPHICS DESCRIBE ROBOTS
IN ANCIENT VILLAGE

FOOTBALL HELMET PICKS UP
VOICES FROM THE DEAD

DERANGED SPACE ALIENS INJECTING
THEIR DNA INTO POLITICIANS

Next, each member of your group should select one of the following paragraphs to write about. If there are more than six people in your group, double up and work together on one of these six categories:

1. Introduction
2. Narrative with quote at end
3. Exposition
4. Narrative with quote in middle
5. Exposition
6. Conclusion (quote)

Now write a short paragraph on the type of item you selected. Use the suggestion for content listed under each category or use an idea of your own. Just be sure to maintain a variety of techniques.

1. **Introduction**

   Something mysterious is happening.

2. **Narrative with quote at end**

   Someone is investigating the mystery and he/she/they comment on it.

3. **Exposition**

   There is some interesting historical background and/or research that has been done in connection with this, revealing some strange details.

4. **Narrative with quote in middle**

   A related incident occurred shedding more light on the phenomenon.

5. **Exposition**

   There is evidence that an unnamed corporate CEO is trying to cover up the scandal or secret.

6. **Conclusion (quote)**

   One unidentified government authority suggests that the worst is yet to come.

To make this easier, follow along step-by-step as one group of students create their article after selecting the topic GIGANTIC CLAM ATTACKS WOMAN!

Step 1 Introduction: something mysterious is happening

Begin with any of the opening techniques except direct and show that something mysterious is happening.

Gigantic Clam Attacks Woman

by

Christine Prebul, Stephanie Schmitt,

Ericka Thomas, Lindsey Moore, and Scott Murrary

Introduction (Story Question Lead)

There was nothing different about the salt air in Northern Maine that day. Or so everyone thought. As the sky darkened in the late afternoon, the breeze carried the scent of fresh fish from the dock, where anglers had deposited their day's catch of Atlantic herring. Above the ocean's surface everything appeared normal, but something very strange was happening in the deep dark water below. Charlotte Swanson was fighting for her life, struggling to free her leg from the jaws of a creature she had never seen in her ten years of scuba diving.

Step 2 Narrative with quote at end

Someone is investigating the mystery, and he/she/they comment on it.

Narrative

Fisherman Buster "Clam Man" Nielson was sitting in his boat at the dock when he spotted Swanson breaking the water, screaming and waving her arms in the air. In a matter of minutes he untied his anchor ropes, started his twin engines and roared out into the bay, leaving a three-foot wake slapping against the docks and moored boats. When Clam Man reached Swanson, she was hanging on to the edge of her boat. A strange creature was tugging on her ankle. Using a survivor tactic designed for sharks, the Clam Man blasted his boat horn. Frightened by the jarring noise, the creature released Swanson and disappeared below the surface.

Quote (Added to Last Narrative)

"I know all the creatures in these waters," Swanson said. "This beast was unlike anything I've ever seen. It was the size of a Volkswagen Beetle and looked a lot like a gigantic clam. I would be dead today except for one thing—the creature had no teeth."

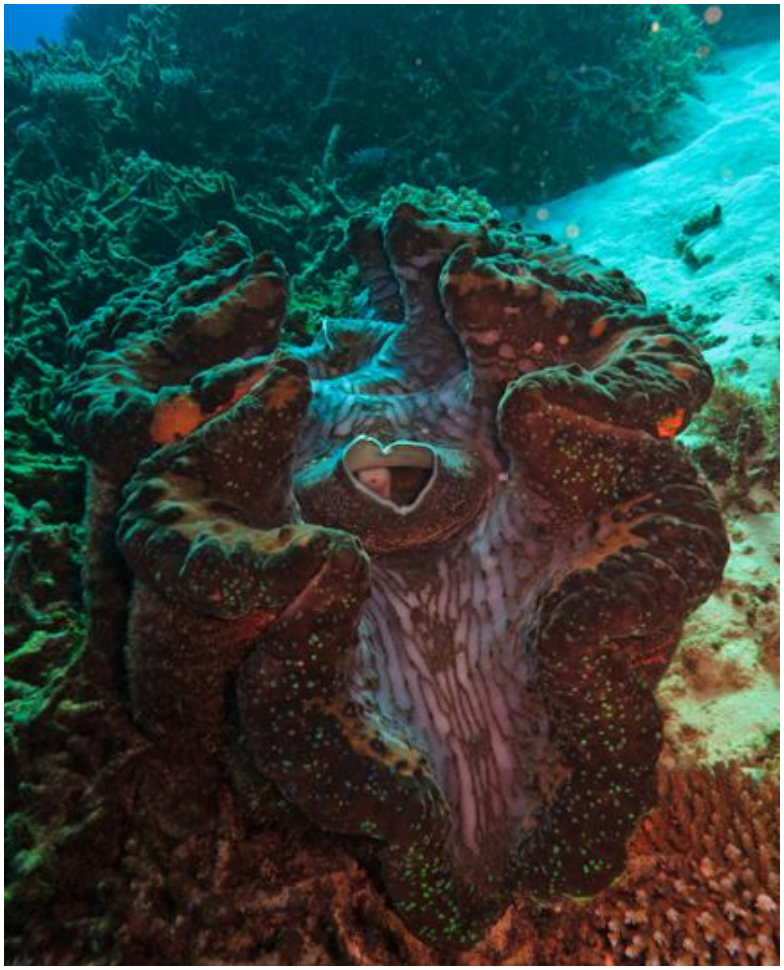
Step 3

Exposition

There is some interesting historical background and/or research that has been done in connection with this, revealing some strange details.

Exposition

Four years ago, a high-ranking government official, who asked not to be identified, claimed that in a highly secret Clamotology Lab, the CIA was altering the genetic structure of clams with a growth hormone. At first, said the source, the clams were altered to accommodate explosives attached to their shells and conditioned to be drawn toward sonar signals from enemy submarines.



Step 4 Narrative with quote at end

A related incident occurred shedding more light on the phenomenon.

Narrative with Quote at End

Just a year ago, the *Enquirer* published an article about Dr. Ben Dover, a tenured professor at the University of Maine, who teaches in the Advanced School of Marine Clamotology. The article ridiculed Dr. Dover's research studies, trying to make him appear bordering on insanity. Out of over 1000 pages of research, the *Enquirer* quoted professor Dover as saying, "Someday, we will be able to discuss philosophy with clams."

Exposition

Although Dr. May refused to comment when questioned yesterday, Ella McDonald, who cleans the University of Maine Clamotology Research Lab where May teaches, said she was nearly bitten by some ocean critter. She said it came a creepin' out of a 500 gallon water tank. But she noticed that it was toothless and when she hit the creature with a coke bottle, it retreated into the tank.

Step 5 Exposition

There is evidence that an unnamed corporate CEO is trying to cover up the scandal or secret.

Exposition

Sightings of giant clams are happening around the globe. In the April 29, 2008, issue of the *National Geographic News*, Kimberly Johnson reported that a new giant clam species was found in the Red Sea. This mollusk may hold clues to how and why humans migrated out of Africa more than a hundred thousand years ago. The apparent near collapse of the clam species around that time suggests they were killed by early hunter-gatherers.

Step 6 Conclusion (quote about the future)

One unidentified government authority suggests that the worst is yet to come.

Conclusion (Quote)

Dr. Valasurbian said, "Local natives of the Mintuba tribe have lived along the East African shoreline for decades. In their oral history is the story of a sea creature they call 'The Kabooka Whappo,' which translated means man-killer. Researchers at the CIA Clamotology Lab have been doing research with natives of the Mintuba tribe for the last five years. I believe their research notes, if made public, might reveal a deadly cover-up."

Okay, now develop your own article as a team. Keep in mind that you only need one paragraph for each of the six template items. Also keep in mind that you don't have to follow the suggested topic given for each paragraph. Just be sure to vary the types of paragraphs.