

Effective opening techniques

The difference between an effective start to a film and one that isn't is simple: create excitement and intrigue. To do so, it's important that you as a writer know how and where to start the story in terms of how it will lead to the end of the story.

Creating the opening to a film is not a simple exercise and takes many revisions and a confidence in what they are trying to communicate, but here are 5 key things that may help in creating an effective opening that you could do, rather than you shouldn't do.

When you've read the examples below, study the attached extracts from some excellent film scripts. For each, annotate along the sides which of the techniques below has been used. As an extension, use the table on page two to explore what you think each example does for the script.

1. Introduce your protagonist as soon as possible.

This need not be by revealing everything about the protagonist-the audience does not necessarily need to see every part of the character or learn everything about them, but provide some semblance of who they are quickly. This is most effective through action, reaction or failing this, through dialogue. What is key however is that the protagonist be introduced to the audience in some manner, quickly.

2. Make sure to establish the genre.

Whilst generic elements can be introduced during different parts of the script to establish, maintain or even subvert genre, it can be worthwhile to include some references to genre early on. Even brief mentions of props or visual signifiers of genre that are fleeting can help establish setting and expectation for an audience.

3. Create conflict immediately.

Conflict is a key element needed throughout the entirety of any interesting script. Utilising conflict near the beginning of your script can be an effective way of establishing pace, tone and narrative and is widely used in modern filmmaking. Conflict need not be 'large' and could be used in something as simple as a character having to make a decision under duress or other pressures.

4. Send your protagonist on a journey.

Much like conflict, having a protagonist set off on some form of journey can and should be done throughout a script. However, establishing some form of journey for the protagonist early on allows an audience to engage with a quest and therefore a desire, making things interesting and creating a 'stake' for people to be invested in. As with conflict, a journey need not be a 'large' or especially important near the start of a script and could be something as straightforward as a small emotional journey or a quick physical one. So long as the journey allows an audience to appreciate *how* the protagonist approaches the journey it will be effective.

5. Make it visual.

This one is vital for all aspects of a script. The opening, as with all parts of a script needs to be visual. Establish the strong visual nature of the script and do so at the beginning of the script to help create a style and tone for the rest of the script.

Extract number	Techniques used	Overall effect on audience

Extract 1: Beasts of the Southern Wild

HUSHPUPPY (V.O.)

All the time, everywhere,
everything's organs be beatin' and
squirtin' and talkin' to each other
in ways I can't understand. Mosta
the time they probably just sayin'
"I'm hungry," or "I gotta poop,"
but sometimes they talkin' in
codes.

Hushpuppy's eyes dart up as a MAN'S VOICE yells-

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Get up, get out of here!

We hear a YOWL as a cat is flung across the room.

A window made from a gas station sign opens in a Robinson
Crusoe style tree house patched together from storm debris
and discarded appliances.

A wild man with severe features, a frazz of unkempt hair, and
brawler's scars opens a window made from a metal sign. This
is WINDELL EMMETT DOUCET, known to all as WINK (39).

WINK

Get your pants on, man!

Wink kills a beer and sends it out the hole in the wall into
a basketball hoop attached to a fishing net that stretched 15
feet down to the ground. The net is overflowing with beer
cans.

EXT. HUSHPUPPY'S HOUSE - DAY

Hushpuppy obediently climbs a series of increasingly bigger
and bigger oil drums that function like a ladder, up to the
door of her house.

EXT. SHACKO IN THE BACKO - DAY

We now see Wink in his morning ritual. He opens a cooler
with a butchered chicken inside it and tosses the bird on the
grill.

He goes to the front porch and pours down a bag of dog food.

He pulls a clothesline that leads to Hushpuppy's trailer. A
BELL RINGS.

Extract 2: Blade Runner

INT. TYRELL CORPORATION LOCKER ROOM - DAY

THE EYE

It's magnified and deeply revealed. Flecks of green and yellow in a field of milky blue. Icy filaments surround the undulating center.

The eye is brown in a tiny screen. On the metallic surface below, the words VOIGHT-KAMPFF are finely etched. There's a touch-light panel across the top and on the side of the screen, a dial that registers fluctuations of the iris.

The instrument is no bigger than a music box and sits on a table between two men. The man talking is big, looks like an over-stuffed kid. "LEON" it says on his breast pocket. He's dressed in a warehouseman's uniform and his pudgy hands are folded expectantly in his lap. Despite the obvious heat, he looks very cool.

The man facing him is lean, hollow cheeked and dressed in gray. Detached and efficient, he looks like a cop or an accountant. His name is HOLDEN and he's all business, except for the sweat on his face.

The room is large and humid. Rows of salvaged junk are stacked neatly against the walls. Two large fans whirl above their heads.

LEON

Okay if I talk?

Holden doesn't answer. He's centering Leon's eye on the machine.

LEON

I kinda get nervous when I take tests.

HOLDEN

Don't move.

LEON

Sorry.

He tries not to move but finally his lips can't help a sheepish smile.

LEON

Already had I.Q. test this year -- but I don't think I never had a...

HOLDEN

(cutting in)

Reaction time is a factor in this, so please pay attention. Answer quickly as you can.

Extract 3: Whiplash

BLACK...

We hear a HIT. A drumstick against a drum head. Crisp, sharp.

Then a second hit. Then a third and a fourth. The hits growing so fast they start to blur together. Like gunfire...

INT. NASSAU BAND REHEARSAL STUDIO - GEHRING HALL - NIGHT 1

A cavernous space. Sound-proofed walls. And in the center, a DRUM SET. Seated at it, in a sweat-marked white T, eyes zeroed on his single-stroke roll, is ANDREW NEIMAN.

He's 19, slight, honors-student-skinny -- except for his arms, which have been built from years and years of drumming.

Suddenly -- a MAN enters the practice room. Stopping, rising--

ANDREW

Sorry... I'm -- I'm sorry--

MAN

It's ok. Stay there.

The MAN steps forward, removes his coat. He's tall. Late fifties. Black T-shirt, black slacks, black shoes. We'll know him as FLETCHER.

The room is silent now. And then, softly, as he's one of those people whose whisper can scare the crap out of you--

FLETCHER

What's your name?

ANDREW

Andrew Neiman, sir.

(It's pronounced "Nayman".)

FLETCHER

What year are you?

ANDREW

I'm a first-year, sir.

FLETCHER

You know who I am?

ANDREW

Yes...

FLETCHER

You know what I do?

Extract 4: Rear Window

FADE IN:

INT. JEFFERIES' APARTMENT - (DAY) - LONG SHOT

Although we do not see the foreground window frame, we see the whole background of a Greenwich Village street. We can see the rear of a number of assorted houses and small apartment buildings whose fronts face on the next crosstown street, sharply etched by the morning sun. Some are two stories high; others three; some have peaked roofs, others are flat. There is a mixture of brick and wood and wrought iron in the construction. The apartment buildings have fire escapes, the others do not.

The neighborhood is not a prosperous one, but neither is it poor. It is a practical, conventional dwelling place for people living on marginal incomes, luck - or hope and careful planning.

The summer air is motionless and heavy with humid heat. It has opened windows wide, pushed back curtains, lifted blinds and generally brought the neighborhood life into a sweltering intimacy. Yet, people born and bred to life within earshot and eyegance of a score of neighbors have learned to preserve their own private worlds by uniformly ignoring each other, except on direct invitation.

THE CAMERA PULLS BACK until a large sleeping profile of a man fills the screen. It is so large that we do not see any features, but merely the temple and side of the cheek down which a stream of sweat is running.

THE CAMERA PANS OFF this to the right hand side of the window, and MOVES TO a thermometer which is hanging on the wall just outside the window. It registers 84.

THE CAMERA MOVES ON into the open, and brings nearer to us a room with a large studio window. We are able to see inside this room. A short, balding man is standing near the window, shaving, using a small bowl of water and a portable mirror which he has set up on a shelf. To the right of him is a battered upright piano. On top of the piano is a radio. The music selection coming from the radio stops, and the announcer is heard.

ANNOUNCER

The time - 7:15 A.M., WOR, New York.
The temperature, outside, 84 ---
Friends - is your life worth one
dollar?

Extract 5: Raiders of the Lost Ark

EXT. PERU - HIGH JUNGLE - DAY

1

The dense, lush rain forests of the eastern slopes of the Andes, the place known as "The Eyebrow of the Jungle". Ragged, jutting canyon walls are half-hidden by the thick mists.

The MAIN TITLE is followed by this:

PERU

1936

A narrow trail across the green face of the canyon. A group of men make their way along it. At the head of the party is an American, INDIANA JONES. He wears a short leather jacket, a flapped holster, and a brimmed felt hat with a weird feather stuck in the band. Behind him come two Spanish Peruvians, SATIPO and BARRANCA. Bringing up the rear are five Yagua INDIANS. They act as porters and are wrangling the two heavily-packed llamas. The Indians become increasingly nervous. They speak to each other in bursts of Quechua. The American, who is known to his friends as Indy, glances back at them.

BARRANCA

(irritated)

They're talking about the Curse again!

He turns and yells at the Indians in Quechua, his anger giving an indication of his own fears. The party reaches a break in the canyon wall and takes the trail through it.

When they emerge, their destination is revealed to them in the distance. Beyond a thick stand of trees is the vegetation-enshrouded TEMPLE OF THE CHACHAPOYAN WARRIORS, 2000 years old.

The entire party is struck by the sight. The Indians, terrified now, chatter away. Suddenly the three at the back turn and run, dropping their packs as they go. Barranca yells at the fleeing Indians and pulls his pistol out. He starts to raise his arm to aim but Indy restrains it in a muscular grip.

INDY

No.

Barranca looks evilly at Indy's hand upon him. Indy releases him and smiles in a friendly way.

Extract 6: Apocalypse Now

FADE IN:

EXT. A SIMPLE IMAGE OF TREES - DAY

Coconut trees being VIEWED through the veil of time or a dream. Occasionally colored smoke wafts through the FRAME, yellow and then violet. MUSIC begins quietly, suggestive of 1968-69. Perhaps "The End" by the Doors.

Now MOVING through the FRAME are skids of helicopters, not that we could make them out as that though; rather, hard shapes that glide by at random. Then a phantom helicopter in FULL VIEW floats by the trees—suddenly without warning, the jungle BURSTS into a bright red-orange glob of napalm flame.

The VIEW MOVES ACROSS the burning trees as the smoke ghostly helicopters come and go.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SAIGON HOTEL - DAY

A CLOSE SHOT, upside down of the stubble-covered face of a young man. His EYES OPEN...this is B.L. WILLARD. Intense and dissipated. The CAMERA MOVES around to a side view as he continues to look up at a ROTATING FAN on the ceiling.

EXT. IMAGES OF HELICOPTERS - DAY

They continue to fly slowly, peacefully across the burning jungle. The colored smoke comes and goes. Morrison continues with "The End".

INT. SAIGON HOTEL - DAY

The CAMERA MOVES slowly across the room...and we SEE WILLARD, a young army captain. He looks out the window to the busy Saigon street.

WILLARD (V.O.)

Saigon...shit. I'm only in Saigon.
Every time, I think I'm gonna wake
up back in the jungle.

He moves back to the bed, lies down. He's unshaven, exhausted, probably drunk. We SEE alcohol bottles, photos, documents scattered on the table.