

MIT Online Writing and Communication Center



Introduction Strategies

Most topics lend themselves to a variety of introductory gambits. Suppose the assignment is to write a literary analysis of Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*. Below are several different ways to start that essay. Please note that not all introductions would be appropriate for one particular thesis or approach. Knowing some of the possible openings, however, often helps lead us to insights we didn't know we had.

Begin with a quotation

Although this approach can be overused, it can be very effective when you have an appropriate quotation. That quotation may relate directly to the subject or it may be only indirectly related (and thus require further explanation). Do not force a quotation into this spot; if an appropriate quotation is not available, select another method.

"The novel *Lolita*," the critic Charles Blight said in 1959, "is proof that American civilization is on the verge of total moral collapse" (45). The judgment of critics and readers in subsequent years, however, has proclaimed *Lolita* to be one of the great love stories of all time and one of the best proofs that American civilization is still vibrant and alive.

"Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul" (11). These opening lines of *Lolita* reveal the essence of Humbert Humbert's complexity and compulsion, his saving grace and his damning passion.

Begin with a concession

Start with a statement recognizing an opinion or approach different from the one you plan to take in your essay.

Many critics have pointed to the unrelenting word games and puns throughout *Lolita* as proof that Vladimir Nabokov's major concern has always been language and art. Although these subjects certainly loom in all his works, a close examination of *Lolita* reveals that morality -- the way people treat each other -- is just as major a concern for him as language and art.

Begin with a paradox

In 1959 Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* had been banned in several cities as pornographic. Today it is required reading not only in literature courses but also in philosophy courses that explore the nature of love. Since its publication, the novel's subject has been recognized to be love, not lust; art, not perversion.

Begin with a short anecdote or narrative

When the original movie version of *Lolita* was released in the early 1960s, Sue Lyon, the young actress who starred as the provocative "nymphet" of the title, was judged too young to be allowed to see the movie in the theater.

Begin with an interesting fact or statistic

Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov -- two acknowledged masters of English prose -- were not even native speakers of English. Conrad's native tongue was Polish; Nabokov's, Russian.

Begin with a question or several questions that will be answered in the paper

How could a book now acknowledged as a masterpiece not only of fiction but also of English prose have been banned when it was published? How could a novel that dealt with love and art be thought of as pornographic? Why would a society so mindful of free speech as America ban any book in the first place?

Begin with relevant background material

Background material should be presented concisely and should be clearly related to your thesis. A rambling discussion of material only remotely related to your main point will confuse and bore your readers.

Although he was born in Russia and lived for many years in England, Germany, and France before coming to America in 1941, Vladimir Nabokov is now considered one of the great American novelists of the 20th century. This opinion, however, is not based solely on his mastery of English prose. His novel *Lolita* has been said to have captured the essence of American life in the 1950s better than any novel written by a writer born in this country.

Begin by stating a long-term effect or effects without immediately stating the cause

It caused howls of protest from the guardians of public morality in the 1950s. Indirectly it helped bring about both artistic and personal freedom in the 1960s. Today it is a recognized classic of art and thought -- Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*.

Begin with an analogy

Like a hurricane that brings fear and panic along with its powerful winds, uprooting trees and disrupting belief in an all-merciful God, so the novel *Lolita* swept across America in the 1950s, bringing fear and panic that pedophilia would be loosed on the land. Instead, the novel, like a hurricane, blew over trees of thought that were not deeply rooted in American experience, exposing their gnarled premises while helping to clear the way for the artistic freedom of the 1960s.

Begin with a definition of a term that is important to your essay

Avoid simple dictionary definitions. Create an expanded definition that explains how the term applies to your topic and essay.

Every few years the ugly charge of "pornography" is aimed at some novel or movie. Never was the term more inappropriately used than in the case of *Lolita*, yet the taint of that word still lingers in the minds of many when they hear the book's title. What exactly is "pornography" that it should stir such feelings and be so hated? The problem, of course, is that no one can agree on what pornography actually is. That it has something to do with sex seems clear; beyond that, there is a chaos of opinion. When the small-minded or special-interest definitions are pushed aside, however, we are left with D.H. Lawrence's provocative definition: pornography is anything that "does dirt on sex." By that definition, *Lolita* is the opposite of pornography -- it is a celebration of sex and love.

"Written by Steven Strang for MIT's Writing and Communication Center."

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