

# It's a Frame Up

## Helping Students Devise Beginnings and Endings

ROMANA HILLEBRAND

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Oftentimes, getting an essay started and getting it concluded can trouble my college sophomores and juniors more than finding something to say in between. They can always rely, of course, on the old standbys: the traditional introduction and the traditional conclusion to the traditional essay, telling the audience what will be said and concluding with what has been said. Granted, this approach works well in speeches or with lengthy writings, but in shorter essays, these crusty techniques come off as predictable and boring.

### What Is a Framing Device?

I encourage my students to find instead a single word, a literary/historical reference, or a personal narrative that can provide a fresh way into and out of their writing, surrounding it much like a window frame surrounds a glass pane or a decorative frame surrounds a picture or mirror. Just as the right picture frame becomes one with the painting, the right rhetorical frame becomes one with the composition, enhancing as well as complementing. This

frame not only starts and concludes the writing, but can also reinforce the main idea, offer a broader perspective, or even interject a bit of humor. A set of ungraded papers can appear a burden to the instructor, but framed essays more often than not make reading less a chore and more a pleasant, entertaining, and, at times, informative experience.

Last year, a student in my research class wrote a lengthy paper on the relationship between humans and plants, beginning her rather serious topic with a reference to a well-known nursery rhyme: "Ring around the roses, a pocket full of posies . . ." She explains that the pocket full of flowers masked the stench of death during the time of the black plague, only one of the many useful purposes of plants that have benefited us throughout the ages. The paper ends with a reinforcement of the warning that we depend on plant life to add quality to our own lives: "Without plants, life on Earth would cease to exist as we know it: 'ashes, ashes, we all fall down.'"

On a much different note, a student in my rhetorical conventions class wrote a short paper that manipulates his memories of a particular odor into a framing device. Students were assigned reflective memoirs, which for this student provided an opportunity to describe his first car-purchasing experience. He opens the piece by detailing the musty smell of the used car and the "Blue Bouquet" air freshener that made it his. He ends with a description of his strongest memory: "Regardless of where I am or what I am doing, whenever I smell the scent of a Blue Bouquet air freshener, I can hear the rumble of the exhaust behind me, feel the air rustling my hair, and sense the urge to slam the pedal to the floor so I can feel the sheer bone-crunching power of acceleration."

A good place to find rhetorical frames commonly used by professional writers is in newspapers that run feature articles and columnists. In 1985, flying home after a trip to Mexico, I sat next to *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jack Smith. He explained that in

most of his articles, he connected the first and last sentences after taking readers on a journey of other ideas, a pattern that made writing a daily column less onerous.

### The Single-Word, Single-Image Frame

Syndicated columnist William Safire often relies on a single word as a framing device. In a 1994 article, he calls on *tsunami*, the Japanese word for a “great wave caused by underwater seismic shock,” to frame an article on the shock that caused the conservative wave of that year. His introduction connects the definition of tsunami with the main idea of his article: the majority of voters “shook up” legislators to express their lack of faith in an ever-growing government. The column ends with a second mention of the tsunami, identifying it as a shock that does indeed change everything and that leads to exciting days politically, an analogy that reinforces his (but not everyone’s) opinion.

A writer can seduce a reader into considering relatively abstract ideas by creating a framing device that links these ideas to everyday images and experiences. In another column, Safire decries the “new disloyalty” that seemingly affects our culture at every level of business and politics. He has his teeth into a large concept, but he introduces his thoughts about a fickle public, fickle corporate world, and fickle government by making a down-to-earth confession: Over the years, Safire says, he has been a toothpaste hopper. He writes that the avuncular tones of Harry Von Zell got him to switch to long-forgotten Ipana from even more forgotten Kolyinos. Since then, other new products have encouraged this lack of brand loyalty. Safire moves on to take

on “Disloyalty” with a capital *D*; he worries that we have become a disposable culture all too ready to relegate even people to the discard pile. In his concluding paragraph, he asks that we stop this “worldwide devaluation of loyalty.” He ends, however, with a mundane image echoing his opening. “Pick a brand of toothpaste and stick with it.” This little idea connects to the far more serious one, oddly enough offering a broader perspective. The smallness of his framing device may seem incongruous, but this very element awakens us to the exigency of our everyday actions.

### Allusions as Framing Devices

Literary references also make effective framing devices. In our local newspaper, a

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letter to the editor from an angry professor responds to an editorial in which the editorial writer is accusing the university teachers of “salary whining.” The professor puts to work Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” as a literary framing device, quoting Poe’s opening sentence as his opening sentence: “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge.” The writer uses the words of Poe’s narrator to convey his own indignation at being flagrantly wronged. The body of the letter details the professor’s resentment at what he considers to be the editorial writer’s insults, but the final sentence refers again to Poe’s story: “Ah, for a fresh batch of cement, a stack of bricks, and a good trowel,” the very tools, readers of Poe will recognize, that the story’s narrator uses to work his revenge

on Fortunato. By humorously framing hostile feelings, the professor gently emphasizes his point: Overworked and underpaid, he and his colleagues do not appreciate editorials claiming otherwise.

Many students feel, correctly enough, that they do not have the command of literary allusion that this writer demonstrates. However, almost all have an intimate knowledge of some folk and fairy tales that may serve them as they create framing devices. One student, writing about her struggle with obesity, puts to use the question that opens *Snow White*: “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” The student quickly explains that, in her world, “fairest” is changed to “fattest.”

She further connects the device by describing her despair each time she stands before that cruel mirror. After revealing her struggle and her growing awareness of others who, for various reasons, do not “fit in,” the paper ends with a new version of the mirror question: “Who is the healthiest of them all?” While the framing device gives an added dimension of poignancy to the narrative, the newly recast, final question concludes it on an uplifting note.

### Personal Experience as a Framing Device

Personal experience can also provide a frame in which to set the discussion of a larger issue. *Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman provides a personal experience to frame an opinion piece calling for labels in clothing to guarantee consumers that child labor has not produced newly purchased garments. Standing at a checkout counter, she looks at the various tags and labels affixed to a pair of shorts she has decided to

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purchase. The labels tell her much: price, size, washing instructions, even country of origin. Left unasked is the question “Who has produced this pair of tennis shorts?” As she ponders the origin of these shorts, she creates a transition from the frame to the article’s purpose—asking consumers to make a connection “between what we wear and the people who make it.” Goodman concludes her argument by referring once again to her own purchase, calling herself an “uneasy consumer of one pair of tennis shorts who would like to initiate change by asking one simple question: How about labels for labor?”

Students often use personal experience narratives similar to Goodman’s as a way into and out of papers on such topics as racism, the environment, or political and school concerns. By calling on an incident or event from his or her life, the writer adds an extra dimension to the topic as well as an authenticity. When the concluding sentence refers to this opening experience, the reader is left with a satisfying sense of closure. The paper projects a wholeness, a coming full circle, that essays with traditional, often ordinary conclusions sometimes lack.

In a particularly effective paper on the negative impact television violence can have on children, one of my students begins with a description of his family’s extended Thanksgiving dinner. The student explains that the peacefulness he felt as the family members gathered to give thanks for all their blessings vanished once he entered the family room where his younger cousins were mobilized in front of the television for the *Power Rangers* program. After watching intensely physical confrontations, the normally docile three- to twelve-year-olds turned into “miniature fighting machines.” They eagerly kicked and punched any interloper, forcing the narrator to leave and

causing him to seriously question the laissez faire child-rearing attitudes of the children’s parents. This incident acts as a segue that connects the family experience with his topic: the growing problem of children’s viewing of television violence and possible solutions to this problem. The writer concludes by offering a plan for handling the situation at the next Thanksgiving dinner: “I may not be the most popular cousin for turning off the *Power Rangers*, but what is popular is not always right, and what is right is not always popular. I can live with not being popular.”

For many students, the personal experience that becomes the framing device for an essay triggers the piece’s central idea, rather than the other way around. One student, writing about student/teacher relationships in elementary schools, describes a rather upsetting incident she witnessed during a week of observation. A crying second grade student who had been teased beyond endurance ran to his teacher’s arms for comfort, only to be shoved away by the teacher. This observation begins the student’s essay and inspires the central idea of the piece: when teachers touch students, they have reason to fear the consequences. The paper ends with the writer once again referring to the incident of the spurned second-grader. She mentions how troubled she was at the time, but after doing research on the subject, she explains, “I clearly understand her reasons for not offering comfort and for not hugging him back.”

### Some Framing Traps

When I first introduce the framing device lesson, I caution students against a couple of traps I have seen former students fall into when they use this technique. Sometimes a framing device can take on a life of its own, becoming more developed than the content.

This I call the “runaway frame.” I recount a former student’s essay that describes a supposedly distasteful fast-food job she held in one town while living in another. For her introduction and conclusion, she gives a hair-raising account of her forty-minute commute to work over black ice. Although the purpose of her paper was to dissuade readers from taking a position at the particular restaurant where she worked, the overly long framing device was far more compelling. No reader would want to live down that hill after reading about the slippery road, the traffic, the delays, and the danger.

There’s another trap that students fall into. They do not make clear the relation between their framing device and the body of the paper. One student began and ended a paper on the Cuban missile crisis with quotes from Hamlet. “To be or not to be,” the paper begins, ending with the lines, “whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them . . .” One may imagine many connections between these words from Shakespeare and the events of the Cuban missile crisis, but the writer did not articulate any of them. As we help students revise, we need to be on the lookout for these connections that have not yet made it from the student’s mind to his paper.

Keeping these caveats in mind, however, a carefully crafted frame can make satisfying metaphorical connections for both reader and writer, giving the paper a deeper sense of meaning and a way into and out of the assignment that escapes the traditional pattern and quandary of old hat.

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