**Grammar Lesson 10: Sentence Openers and Inversions**

From Virginia Tufte, *Artful Sentences*

How should you begin a sentence? How do you create what Tufte terms “sentence perspective?” Think about what you want you sentence to accomplish and how this sentence should connect to the sentences that precede and follow it.

**Most English sentences begin with the subject. The second most common opening is with an adverbial or prepositional phrase. Examples follow:**

When Uncle Runkin came to visit he brought his coffin and slept in it, laying it across a couple of sawhorses we carried into the upstairs bedroom. Fred Chappell, *I Am One of You Forever*, 119

George looked over at Slim and saw the calm, God-like eyes fastened on him. John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, 40.

All round him the long scar smashed into the jungle was a bath of heat. William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*, 1.

**Verbals as openers: A strong way to open a sentence is with a gerund, participial or infinitive phrase.**

Quickened by his spiritual refreshment, it had a boom. Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt, 178.

Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 64.

Weeping, sobbing, pleading, the woman in the customs line begged forgiveness. Anne Applebaum, *Between East and West*, 295.

But to tell the truth, if it had not been for Nick and his socialism I should never have bothered with politics at all. William Golding, Free Fall, 95.

**Adjectives as openers: these focus on a description of a noun, often the subject of the sentence.**

Garish in her dress, eccentric in her habits, chaste in her conduct, coarse in her speech, she succeeded in her lifetime in drawing upon herself the ridicule of the great and the applause of the learned. Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 70.

**Prepositions and Conjunctions as Openers: these sentences are very useful for transitions between sentences and connecting ideas and descriptions within sentences.**

For its method alone, this vibrant study is bound to be noticed, quoted, and remembered. And it setting a new standard for commentary on an often intractable topic, it may even set off a revived—revitalized—debate. Garrett Steward, book review, 772.

**Inversion: this is a way to play with language and lead toward the subject which often ends the sentence for emphasis.**

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 1.

Around him sat four or five of the younger guides. Jean Speiser, *River in the Dark*, 39.

On a pleasant shore of the French Riviera, about half way between Marseilles and the Italian border, stands a large, proud, rose-colored hotel. F.Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*, 1.

**Putting it together.**

Read the following passages and consider the variety of openings. How does the variety of the sentences create a rhythm in the paragraph?

FOR the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not -- and very surely do I not dream. But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified -- have tortured -- have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me, they have presented little but Horror -- to many they will seem less terrible than barroques. Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the common-place -- some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects. Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat,” 1

I look around for the girls, but they’re gone, of course. There wasn’t anybody but some young married screaming with her children about some candy they didn’t get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon station wagon. Looking back in the big windows, over the bags of peat moss and aluminum lawn furniture stacked on the pavement, I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he’d just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter. John Updike, “A&P,” p. 6.

B. Describe an object that is past its usefulness using four different sentences with prepositional, verbal, adjectival, and inverted.