

## Chapter 3

# Writing the Hard Parts: Introductions and Conclusions

[Insert photo here--studentteacherclassroom]

The guardian angel may follow you along a rust colored river, up telephone poles to those humming canisters, or through hedges and vines where thirsty dogs pant. He may hover over a line of wet laundry, cleaning a fingernail and whistling for his own enchantment. He may even be that blue vapor issuing from a tailpipe of a car idling in the road. Guardian angels are always near, or so I was told by my mother, who also believed in fortunes laid out on a gypsy's wobbly card table.

So begins Gary Soto's essay "The Guardian Angel," an account of the author's seemingly charmed childhood and how it contrasts greatly against his fear-ridden adulthood. Soto's essay, which appears in full later in this chapter, opens with a variety of vivid images to grab readers' interest and pull them into the essay. Readers can see the rust colored river, the tall telephone poles, the blue vapor of the car's exhaust. Readers can hear the electrical canisters humming, the dogs panting and the angel whistling as he cleans his fingernail. With these vivid images, Soto shows us not only his perception of a guardian angel but also a hint of the kinds of explorations he made as a child—the kinds suggesting he needed someone to watch over him. By captivating us in the first sentence, Soto makes us want to read more. That kind of enticement is the goal of a well-written introduction.

Students often struggle with the openings of their essays. If they happen to experience no problems introducing their papers, they often struggle with concluding them. In fact, many students believe the introduction and conclusion are the hardest parts of the essay to write. Studying this chapter will not make writing such paragraphs easy for you, but it will make the job *easier* than it was before you read this information.

Keep in mind that you **don't have to write the paragraphs of your essay in the order they will appear in the final copy**. You might find it easier to write your body paragraphs first and save the introduction and conclusion for last. Many students choose that strategy. However, before you write an introduction or a conclusion, **you must know what your thesis will be**. If you don't know the main idea of your paper is, you don't know what there is to introduce or close.

### Introductions

[Insert photo here--handwriting]

You probably already know that introductions open essays smoothly. They inform your reader what the paper is about. However, an effective introduction *avoids* simply announcing what the paper is about. An introduction that says, "In this paper I will

examine the reasons for Georgia’s drought” will not grab the reader’s attention. Your job is to explain what the paper is about without announcing it.

Many students think that an easy way to open a paper is to start with the thesis statement. Actually, that’s one of the most difficult ways to open. Once you’ve stated your main idea, what else is there to say? Students who go this route often find themselves repeating ideas in the introduction, or they begin writing supporting examples that would more logically fit in the body paragraphs. Instead, **try writing the thesis statement at the end of the introduction.** In fact, following a simple pattern will help you write an engaging opening:

1. Begin your introduction with an **engaging hook**. That hook will grab the reader’s attention and pull the reader into the paper. In the next few pages, we’ll discuss various ways to hook your reader.
2. After the hook, you will likely need to explain it a bit—follow up on the compelling idea, explain who said a quotation, or establish the relevance of the vivid images to the main idea. This is a good place to introduce the general topic of the paper before you make a specific claim about that topic. This sentence (or couple of sentences) serves as the **transitional passage** in the introduction.
3. Finally, you should include your **thesis statement**, which, of course, is the main idea of your paper. The thesis statement should explain what the topic of the paper is as well as establish a point or opinion about that topic.

As you follow this pattern, be sure to avoid a few no-no’s:

1. **Announcing the main idea:** We covered that above. Your paper should not say, “In this paper, I will explain...”
2. **Asking a question instead of making a statement:** Questions are effective sentences in any other part of the essay, but not as the thesis. If you ask a question as your thesis, you neglect to tell your reader what your point is.
3. **Beginning with especially broad sentences:** Many times, when students don’t have an engaging hook for the opening, they begin with an idea that’s so broad that it belabors the obvious, such as “Since the beginning of time, men and women have been different.” If you’ve read Chapter 2, you’ll remember the advice to avoid “duh” statements. Many students write “duh” statements in introductions.

Now that you know the basic pattern of how to write introductions, you can try different ways to write them. Coming up with an engaging hook is the challenge of this pattern, but some tips will make writing hooks easier. All of the following examples examine the topic of college students and drug/alcohol abuse:

1. **The Anecdote:** An anecdote is a brief narrative or a story. If you know a story that’s relevant to your main idea, that anecdote would be an excellent attention-grabbing device.

Dodie had three tests coming up. But with her phone bill and rent due, she had to work extra hours to earn the money to pay them. Of course, all that work cut into her study time, and Dodie found herself reading into the wee hours of the morning several days a week. Her roommate noticed Dodie struggling and gave her two little white pills to help keep her awake. After only a few days, Dodie found herself needing more and more pills to stay on top of her work schedule and homework. And what was the result of depending on those little white pills for a ten-day period? Dodie was exhausted and incoherent during two of her tests, and she fell asleep during the third. Although she had the best of intentions, Dodie demonstrated how **drug use usually snowballs into drug abuse, which ultimately ruins academic performance.**

2. The Element of Surprise: If you can surprise your readers at the beginning, you can grab their attention and make them want to keep reading. The example below combines the element of surprise with the anecdote strategy explained above.

Felicia strolled across Armstrong's campus on a sunny Friday morning. The weather was warm and breezy, and the flowers around the fountain smelled sweet and accented the quad with their purple and pink blooms. She passed students dressed in shorts and flip-flops heading for class on this new fall day. Next to the Compass Pointe dorm building, she noticed a small shrub with tiny white flowers on it. She bent over the shrub as if to take in the flowers' sweet fragrance. And then she threw up on it. Felicia had been out all night at a fraternity party instead of studying for her algebra class. Unfortunately, Felicia is one of many college students who let alcohol abuse interfere with academics. **With more counseling services on campus and a more overt campaign warning against such behaviors, perhaps the university could reduce the number of failures due to alcohol and drug use.**

3. Vivid, Specific Detail: Introductory paragraphs can engage readers with vivid images and specific description. Actually, the example above uses such details at the beginning of its hook. Gary Soto's essay employs this strategy as well. By describing something or someone vividly, a writer can captivate a reader and pull that reader into the essay.

The room thumps with the rhythm of the latest hip hop records. Lights in red, yellow, and green flash on the walls, floor and ceiling. Bodies twist and bounce on the dance floor, heads bobbing from side to side, each dancer waving one hand in the air and the other keeping a plastic cup, full of beer or a mixed drink, close to the chest. And in the corner of the room, on a small, non-descript table, is a plastic bowl full of car keys. The scene above is a common one among college students, except, unfortunately, for the bowl of car keys, and as a result, too many young men and women are killed or seriously injured from alcohol-related accidents. Although October is drug and alcohol awareness month, **every month we should be aware of the dangers of drunk driving and the simple ways we can avoid its resulting**

tragedies.

4. **Quotation:** This type of hook is popular among writing students because it's captivating and easy. You can quote almost anyone, as long as the quotation is engaging. Notable written or spoken words make good hooks as well as amusing quips from friends and relatives. The key to writing a good quotation hook is to also **be sure to explain who said it and how it's relevant to the topic of your paper.**

Winston Churchill once said, "I have taken more out of alcohol than alcohol has taken out of me." If Churchill was accurate in his assessment, he was the exception rather than the rule. Most people see no harm in having just one little drink to help them relax or one beer to help them feel more at ease at a party. But gradually the desire for one or two drinks can grow into a need for a whole bottle. Alcohol dependency sneaks up on people, and many don't realize they're addicted until it's too late. College students are easily sucked into alcohol dependency as they experiment with the drug during their initiation into independence. **For that reason, every college campus should implement drug and alcohol awareness programs as well as provide counseling services for students with alcohol-related problems.**

Occasionally, students reach for the dictionary when trying to find a quotation. Usually, though, **it's best to avoid dictionary definitions when trying to hook the reader.** Unless you're defining a technical term few people know, or unless your intent is to define a concept from a unique perspective, dictionary definitions are not attention-grabbing devices.

Also when using the quotation strategy, **don't confuse quotations with clichés.** As mentioned in Chapter 2, clichés are overused sentences and phrases that most people already know; therefore, we cannot attribute them to one person (so for that reason, they aren't really quotations). Clichés like "The early bird gets the worm" or "Imitation is the best form of flattery" are so common that they're not engaging. Instead, they're boring.

5. **Contrasting Ideas:** Opening with contrasting ideas can encourage readers to examine a topic from a fresh perspective before they read the thesis statement. You can present contrasting ideas in terms of past versus present, popular belief versus fact, or what's said versus what's done.

When my mother was in college, the legal drinking age was eighteen. Most people believed that if young men were old enough at eighteen to die for their country, they were old enough to buy a beer. Of course, that's when most of our young men were being shipped off to Viet Nam. During the 1980's, though, our society gradually became more conservative, and states voted to change their drinking laws to prohibit people under twenty-one from drinking. Unfortunately, they didn't also change the age one can go to war. Now, young men and women, several of whom are my fellow students, serve in the armed services and put their lives

at risk for our country. At the age of eighteen, every young man is required by law to sign up for the draft. But we can't have a beer. There's something wrong about this discrepancy. **I'd like to see high school students and college students writing letters to their congressmen to change the legal drinking age back to eighteen.**

Of course, you can combine the strategies for hooks if you wish. You could include a quotation in an anecdote, or you could use vivid details or an element of surprise along with contrasting ideas. As you try these strategies, you'll likely find that you can open your essay with some thoughtful, attention-grabbing details rather than repeating ideas or offering dull, vague sentences.

### One "Questionable" Hook

You may have learned along the way that writing a **rhetorical question** is a good way to hook your reader in the opening of your paper. That strategy does work, **as long as the question is written effectively**. A rhetorical question is one designed to prompt thought, not to seek information. In order to provoke thought, a rhetorical question should be difficult to answer.

Often, though, students consider the rhetorical question an easy way to write a hook. In such instances, they neglect to write hard-to-answer questions. Instead they often directly address the reader with questions that have simple answers. Typically, these questions begin with "Did you know. . ." or "Have you ever. . ." Such questions have yes or no answers. They provoke little thought and therefore generate little interest. If you want to write a rhetorical question as your lead, **avoid addressing the reader directly, and make sure the question stimulates some critical thinking**.

#### Ineffective Hook

Have you ever drunk alcohol while underage?

Did you know that most people get drunk for the first time before they're twenty-one?

Do you know any members of the armed forces who are under the legal drinking age?

#### Effective Hook

How many more students must see the inside of a rehab unit before the university takes stronger measures to deter drug and alcohol abuse?

Who is more at fault, the person who drives under the influence of alcohol, or the friend who lets him do so?

If Uncle Sam doesn't trust me with a beer, why does he trust me with an assault weapon?

Keep in mind that the strategies discussed in this chapter are not the only ways to write introductions. You may know of some other effective ways to open your papers. As you become more comfortable writing introductions, you might also become more comfortable writing the closings.

## Conclusions

[Insert photo here--leonashands]

Many students assume that the purpose of the conclusion is to summarize the essay. In fact, if you read many writing textbooks, you'll see the summary as one option for closing your paper. However, the summary is not the most effective way to end your work. And if the summary is a dry repeat of the essay's supporting ideas, the closing will end up just plain boring. Instead of relying on summary, try some other, more effective strategies.

First, keep in mind that a conclusion must achieve **two goals**:

- It must **reiterate the thesis statement in a different way** than how it was expressed in the introduction
- It must **end with a satisfying sense of completion**

At the same time, a conclusion must avoid some **two no-no's**:

- It should not **introduce a new idea and attempt to develop it**
- It should not **repeat the ideas already expressed in the essay**

Now, if you can't bring up something new and you can't repeat something already said, what's left to write? There lies the challenge for many writers. However, if you've composed a good introduction, the conclusion becomes easier to write. That's because a good hook can emerge in the conclusion as well as the introduction. An effective strategy for concluding is the **full circle conclusion**, which refers to the introduction's hook somewhere in the final paragraph. Take introduction #5 on page \_\_\_\_, for example. If that paragraph were the introduction of your paper, the following paragraph might make an effective conclusion:

I realize times have changed. We know much more about alcohol's effect on the body than we did when my mom was in college. Still, our expectations of young adults are contradictory. If we can send young men and women to face terrorists and bloodshed, we ought to expect them to be able to handle their liquor. If we don't think they can handle alcohol at such a young age, do we really want them fighting for our liberty? Perhaps our state governments and Congress should take another look at our legal discrepancies.

The underlined sentence above refers to the hook in the introductory paragraph. Then, of course, the sentence in bold type is the reiteration of the essay's thesis. With the full-circle conclusion, a writer can end with a nice sense of completion without being repetitive and without bringing up new ideas for development.

Read Gary Soto's "The Guardian Angel" on page \_\_\_\_\_. You'll see that its closing paragraph employs the full-circle conclusion as well. By questioning where that angel is ("Is he hovering over the clothesline or standing upright among the shovels and hoes?"), Soto reminds readers of his opening images while leading them to a satisfying sense of

closure: “I want nothing more than to be happy by next fall, by the time the orange trees hang heavy with the water of perpetual fruit.”

Of course, you could choose other options for concluding your essay. For instance, a rhetorical question keeps readers thinking about the topic even after finishing the piece. If you’re writing an argumentative paper, or if you’re calling for a change, you could conclude with a prediction of how a situation would be different if your suggested change were implemented.

We discussed in Chapter 2 how an essay’s effect depends largely on its development and style. You can improve the style of your essay by composing an effective opening and closing for your paper. The strategies outlined above should make that part of your writing process easier for you, but, of course, as with writing introductions, you should employ your own writing process when writing closings. You might want to follow these strategies until you find your own closing process that feels comfortable to you. If you need assistance with writing introductions and conclusions, feel free to consult your professor.

**Exercise 1:** Below is an outline—including the thesis statement—for a comparison-contrast essay examining the differences between the two Target stores in Savannah. Using this plan for the essay, write an introduction for it. Be sure to include an effective hook. Then write a full-circle conclusion for the essay.

[box]

Thesis: Two stores in Savannah may both be named Target, but they have striking differences.

1. Location: Savannah Mall store is in a less-congested part of town  
It’s part of a mall, so parking is more convenient  
While Abercorn is a busy street, several entrances into the parking lot relieve congestion  
Victory Drive store is in a more congested part of town  
Truman Parkway off-ramp is adjacent to Target shopping center  
Home Depot is also adjacent  
One entrance from Victory Drive makes frustrating traffic in and out of parking lot
2. Merchandise:  
Savannah Mall store includes more variety, especially in women’s and men’s clothing  
Savannah Mall store offers more selections in designer clothes, such as Isaac Mizrahi  
Victory Drive store has less variety and fewer selections of designer clothes
3. Layout: Savannah Mall store has more square footage

Savannah Mall store has more space in aisle, making shopping more comfortable  
Savannah Mall store keeps its merchandise arranged neatly, less cluttered

Victory Drive store has less square footage and less space in aisles  
Victory Drive store usually has more customers, crowding the aisle space even more  
Merchandise is often misplaced, picked over or disheveled

[end box]

**Exercise 2:** Evaluate the following introductory paragraphs. Be prepared to discuss with your classmates which examples use effective leads and which ones warrant revision. If you believe an introduction warrants revision, suggest a more effective strategy.

1. Webster's New World Dictionary defines a resume as "a summary, especially of employment experience." In other words, a resume explains what you have done on the job and what skills you have. Even though many students work while also attending school, very few students know how to write an effective resume. This essay will explain several important tips for writing an effective resume.
2. Have you ever had to do community service to earn credit for school? These days many high school students must perform a community service requirement in order to graduate. While some students may complain about community service requirements, those experiences helping others do help prepare students for college and for the professional world.
3. Babe Ruth once said, "Every strike brings me closer to the next home run." I ought to tattoo that sentence to my forehead, or at least have it written at the top of every page in my biology textbook. I have wanted to be a nurse since I was a little girl. All through school I made excellent grades in science. But now that I'm in college, my biology class is the most challenging course I have. Even though I study each night, I also have to keep up my grades in my other courses. I feel overwhelmed, and often I make mistakes on tests or during labs. But I keep going. Thanks to the staff members in the counseling center at student affairs, I've learned some time management skills and stress management skills to help me move closer to my goal.

### **Straightening Our Hair** by bell hooks

*A noted poet and feminist critic, bell hooks was born Gloria Jean Watkins in 1952. Her father was a custodian for the U.S. Postal Service, and her mother was a homemaker. She grew up in rural Kentucky. During her young adulthood, to honor her female ancestors, hooks took her great-grandmother's name. hooks's works examine racism, classism and sexism, and while they include reflections on her own life and beliefs, they*

*also recall the voices of numerous other women. hooks's books include Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black (1989), Sisters of the Yarn: Black Women and Self Recovery (1993), Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (1994) and The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love (2004). The following piece—an examination of the African American practice of straightening hair—first appeared in the book Tenderheaded: A Comb-bending Collection of Hair Stories, edited by Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson (2001).*

[insert “Straightening Our Hair” by bell hooks]

### **Questions**

1. What is hooks's main idea in this essay? Where does she state it?
2. Within this essay, hooks defines a beauty parlor as something other than a place where women get their hair done. How does she define the beauty parlor, and how does this definition enable hooks to develop her main idea?
3. According to hooks, how does hair affect one's self esteem?
4. Where in this argumentative essay does hooks employ narrative? How does narrative enable her to achieve her larger purpose?
5. Much of hook's argument is grounded in examining causes and effects. What causes does hooks identify? What effects?
6. hooks uses vivid imagery in her essay. Where does she include images that appeal to our sense of smell? Touch? Sight? Sound?
7. Where does hooks employ comparison and contrast to reveal the difference between straightening hair today and straightening hair before desegregation?
8. How does hooks open her essay? How does she conclude? Is her strategy effective? Explain.

### **Writing Assignments**

1. hooks discusses how many African American women straighten their hair so that they can feel more valuable in a white supremacist society. Think about the way you dress and groom. Are any of your dressing or grooming practices defined by what society expects of you? Do you dress or groom yourself in hopes that your appearance will conform to a social ideal? Or do you dress or groom yourself in order to protest against a societal norm? Explain.

2. In 2009, comedian Chris Rock produced a documentary titled *Good Hair*, which examines women's attitudes and practices of styling and maintaining their hair. Check out a copy of this documentary from your local library, or rent a copy from your local video outlet. After watching this film, write an essay examining the similarities and differences between hooks's essay and Rock's film.

### **I'm Not Leaving 'Til I Eat This Thing**

by John T. Edge

*A graduate of the University of Mississippi with a master's degree in southern studies, John T. Edge writes about food and its role in American, specifically southern, culture. His writing frequently appears in Gourmet, The New York Times, The Oxford American, and Saveur. Edge serves as the Director of Southern Foodways Alliance of the University of Mississippi's Study of Southern Culture. His books include Fried Chicken: An American Story, Apple Pie: An American Story, Hamburgers and Fries: An American Story, and Donuts: An American Passion. In the following piece, Edge examines the southern delicacy of pig lips. He uses personal interview and close observation to paint a picture of a successful pickled pig lips business.*

[insert "I'm Not Leaving 'Til I Eat This Thing" by John T. Edge"]

### **Questions**

1. Is Edge's article about pig lips, or is it about the Dufour family business? What aspects of the essay support your opinion?
2. Edge's main idea is implied. What is it?
3. This article reveals characteristics of the South that readers might not be familiar with. What are they? What details reveal those aspects?
4. Edge uses images to appeal to all five senses. Where are some of those images? How do they enhance his writing style?
5. Identify passages where Edge includes narrative in his article. Where does he examine processes?
4. Edge bookends his profile of the Dufour family business with an image of himself sitting in a bar trying to eat pickled pig lips. What is Edge's purpose for structuring the article this way? Is it an effective opening and closing strategy?

### **Writing Assignments**

1. Think of a food item that represents the area you come from. Write a piece about how that food plays a role in local culture.

2. Interview someone who works for or owns a family business. Observe that person at work. Conduct an interview with that person. Using your field data as supporting evidence, write an essay profiling the person you observed.

**The Guardian Angel**  
by Gary Soto

*Known for his poetry and his prose, Gary Soto is the author and co-author of dozens of books, some of which are written for adult readers, while others are written for younger audiences. Perhaps his diverse writing talents and appeal to diverse audiences make him one of the best known Latino writers in America. Raised by Mexican-American working class parents in Fresno, California, Soto often captures his roots vividly in his writing. The following pieces comes from A Summer Life (1990), a book of short essays about Soto's youth.*

[insert "The Guardian Angel" by Gary Soto]

**Questions**

1. What is Soto's main idea in "The Guardian Angel"? Is it stated or implied?
2. Soto is also well known for his poetry. Point out passages in this essay that seem poetic.
3. From Soto's second and third paragraphs, what can you infer about his brother? From paragraphs four and five, what can you infer about Soto?
4. How has Soto changed from childhood to adulthood? Which Soto does he seem to prefer, the older one or the younger one?
5. Point out some examples from the last paragraph that illustrate Soto's lack of confidence.
6. In paragraph seven, Soto writes, "Now I need my guardian angel more than ever." How do the examples in that paragraph illustrate that he needs a guardian angel?
7. In the eighth paragraph, Soto writes several examples of his fears. What do these examples reveal about his life?
8. How does Soto open his essay? How does he conclude it? Are his introduction and conclusion effective? Explain.

## Writing Assignments

1. Soto's essay examines how he seemed to have a charmed life as a child, and he attributes his good luck to the protection of a guardian angel. Were you a lucky child or an unfortunate one like Soto's brother? Think of several examples from your youth that exemplify your luck (or lack of it) and write an essay about them.
2. Implicit in Soto's essay is the notion that children often have no fears. Do you agree with that notion? Why or why not? Think back on your own youth and write an essay about children's fears (or lack of them), including an examination of the causes of those fears and their effects.

### Livin' Like Larry (Or Not)

By K. W. Oxnard

*K. W. Oxnard is a local writer and businesswoman. She has also taught freshman composition at Armstrong Atlantic State University. In addition to writing freelance for several local magazines, Oxnard also has a regularly published column in Savannah Morning News. The following column was published in the Savannah Morning News on November 3, 2009.*

It's not often one can—or should—take advice from a children's cartoon.

But while watching SpongeBob Square Pants on a recent afternoon with my beau's children, SpongeBob's best friend Patrick (a zaftig starfish) tried "livin' like Larry," a self-help guru/lobster. First he jumped into a car-crusher, with predictably accordion-like results. Then he rode a frightened seahorse, who bucked like a bronco before throwing Patrick into some coral.

Finally, after unsuccessfully trying to convince SpongeBob to join him, Patrick skateboarded off a decrepit rollercoaster track, right into the jaws of sharp-toothed sea monsters.

As usual, the writers delivered SpongeBob's lesson of the day—a potentially clichéd message about resisting peer pressure, avoiding the allure of a charismatic leader and instead cultivating one's own common sense—in a goofy yet compelling package.

So here's the \$64,000 question: Could a cartoon invertebrate have saved the three adults who died in a sweat lodge in Arizona?\*

But before we dive into that tempting analogy, let's back up. A few weeks ago, the *New York Times* reported that, using data from the Framingham Heart Study, researchers have found that your friends can make you fat.

Yes, you read correctly. As the *Times* article said, "good behaviors—like quitting smoking or staying slender or being happy—pass from friend to friend almost as if they

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\* Prior to this article's publication, two people died and three others suffered heart attacks after spending two hours in an Arizona sweat lodge, or indoor sauna. After investigation, local authorities issued a homicide warrant against the owner of the resort operating the sweat lodge.

were contagious viruses.” Same with bad behaviors, apparently, and not just friend to friend, but friend to mother-in-law to hairdresser.

Just as YouTube videos bloom virally through the population, so can bad or good habits—even moods like happiness or pessimism.

If this sounds an awful lot like peer pressure for the over 18 crowd, that’s pretty much the sum of it. The researchers observed that “when a Framingham resident became obese, his or her friends were 57 percent more likely to become obsessed too.” And get this: A study participant was about 20 percent more likely to blimp out if a friend of a friend became obese—even if the connecting friend didn’t gain an ounce.

How does it work? Apparently, we give off subtle cues to those around us about what’s accepted and what’s taboo in a particular social group. Then superconnectors—people who exert more influence on the group than others—transfer our habits to those around us. Even if we’ve never met them.

Ouch! In a country that prides itself on rugged individualism, that stings. As one scientist noted, “We can begin to understand human emotions like happiness the way we might study the stampeding of buffalo. . . You don’t ask the buffalo, ‘Why are you running to the left?’ The answer is that the whole herd is running to the left.”

Good-bye, Lone Ranger. Hello, lemmings!

So is that what happened, in a tragic way, in that teepee in Sedona, Arizona? Here was a group of educated people, many, perhaps, desperate to escape their bourgeois trappings—to prove that they weren’t desk monkeys but instead primal beings connected to a higher power. And along came a superconnector, retreat leader James Arthur Ray, who held such sway over his followers that they ignored their own bodily warning signs.

Unlike SpongeBob and Patrick, though, two people didn’t bounce back cartoon-like. They died—of dehydration, kidney and multiple organ failure. It seems they chose the wrong crowd, which any teenager will tell you can mean the difference not between being popular or not, but being alive or not.

As SpongeBob says, “Wait a minute, Patrick. I think you’re missing the point. ‘Livin’ like Larry’ doesn’t mean throwing caution to the wind and risking everything on a stunt that will cost you your life!”

Yet just as social contagion can work in insidious ways, it can also help push us in healthier directions. Most of us aren’t likely to run off to a retreat in the desert. But we can make small changes that may start a ripple effect in our communities.

One of the social contagion researchers said that as a result of his work, he’s now lost five pounds and improved his mood with “happy music” before he gets home from work “because I know that I’m not just having an impact on my son, I’m potentially having an impact on my son’s best friend’s mother.”

Said like a true—yet self-aware—lemming.

## Questions

1. Oxnard’s column begins with a short narrative. What is the narrative about? And how is it related to the column’s main idea?
2. What examples does Oxnard provide to illustrate her points about our influences on our friends and friends of friends?

3. What is a lemming? How are lemmings relevant to this essay? Is a reference to a lemming an appropriate way to conclude this column? Explain.
4. In her opening, Oxnard invokes a popular televised cartoon character, Sponge Bob Square Pants. Where does she refer to the same character later in her essay? What is her point for doing so?
5. Other than a television cartoon, what sources inform Oxnard's column? What's the effect of referring to those sources?

### **Writing Assignments**

1. Think about your own friends, their eating behaviors, and your own eating behaviors. Do you agree with the findings of the Framingham Heart Study that our friends eating habits influence our own? Write an essay arguing your agreement or disagreement.
2. The unfortunate deaths in the Arizona sweat lodge serve as one example of how people harm themselves or others because of someone else's influence. This tragedy seems to involve a stronger influence than simple peer pressure. Write an essay on how some people can assume authority over others—whether warranted or not—and control their behavior as a result.

### **To Be or Not to Be? Not to Be.** by Kayla Johnson

*Originally from Indiana, Kayla Johnson came to Savannah in 2009 to attend Armstrong Atlantic State University. She is a member of AASU's honors program, and she is a psychology major. She wrote this essay while she was enrolled in ENGL 1101.*

I remember last Christmas Eve when I hit a deer while driving to my grandparents' house. The roads were horribly icy, and it was snowing fairly hard. I tried to slam on my brakes, but I failed. My Jeep had surprisingly little damage, so I continued toward my destination, ready for the enormous dinner occurring there, which featured my uncle's deer sausage. I ate some, and it was delicious. Even though my friends have described me as obtusely compassionate, I didn't feel bad about eating deer meat, even after I'd hit one with my car. I was simply eating some meat. In fact, it is much better to eat food from animals than it is to be a vegan.

I've always loved watermelon. Throw me an orange, and I'll be satisfied. While I almost always get enjoyment out of my fruits and vegetables, I can't see myself living on a diet entirely of them. In eleventh grade, for my humanities group project, I became a vegan for thirty days. I ate nothing that came from animals, not even dairy or eggs. It was awful. I craved steak with mashed potatoes loaded with bacon and cheddar cheese. A chicken sandwich and waffle fries from Chik-fil-a were what my stomach desired. By day seven, salads and fruits repulsed me. I could not bear to eat tofu and soy products;

they tasted like cardboard. Why would anyone want to be on such a distasteful diet of rabbit food?

It wasn't only the taste that parted me from my journey. I was always tired. I wasn't getting the nutrition I normally received. I even began to take vitamins, but exhaustion still overtook me. I recently asked a fellow group member Tony Santos if he recalled the experiment. "Of course I do," he said. "That was a horrible project. I remember I had a big match that Saturday, and I was so tired! I could barely move. My body wasn't used to not getting the carbs I needed before a wrestling match. It was the only time we lost that season, and I kind of felt like it was my fault."

My friend Shelby also participated. "That project sucked," she said. "I didn't realize how much meat I eat until then. I also had a low iron count before we started the experiment, and eating only fruits and veggies wasn't helping much" (Covington).

At the end of my experiment, I was angry; I realized that I had been paying to feel tired. My grocery bill was astronomical during my experiment. I was buying soy products, fruits and vegetables, and I was eating more because these products were less filling. These products also cost more at the grocery store. My mom refused to take me grocery shopping because if I did, I "would spend too much time reading labels. We'd be there forever" (Johnson). No wonder so many people eat animal products. Buying items for a cheeseburger is much cheaper than buying salad ingredients. Cow's milk is cheaper than buying soy milk. Additionally, to ensure proper health, I needed special vitamin supplements, which also dipped into my budget. In this economy, people need to save as much as they can.

Taco Bell, McDonalds, and Zaxby's are everywhere. While I can get salads there, their quality is lacking. They aren't normally made fresh. What's more, they usually include chicken and bacon. Just last week I was craving salad, so I went to McDonalds and was disappointed. It had obviously been sitting in the cooler for a few days. The lettuce was wilting. The carrots were chewy. It could have simply been a bad salad, but this wasn't the first time I was disappointed by a fast food salad. They are also more expensive. Many people, especially college students, cannot afford to spend five dollars every day on a salad when a double cheeseburger is more filling and only costs two dollars.

I know that some people will disagree with me. They believe that vegan is the way to go. Many argue that they don't want to partake in something that encourages cruelty to animals. I can see their point. Animals shouldn't be slaughtered malevolently. Surely there is a kinder way to kill animals, but it doesn't mean we should stop eating all animal products. For example, most vegans don't drink cow's milk because it is an animal product. Many human mothers breast feed their newborn infants, but vegans don't have a problem with that. Vegans kill plants and trees for their offspring to eat. Trees are living organisms; they require nutrients from soil and sunlight to exist, yet vegans do not object to eating them.

An ice cold glass of milk and a cookie almost always sounds good. Eggs and toast make for a nutritious breakfast. I refuse to change my eating habits because a cow was milked or a chicken laid an egg or a chicken was killed. Humans are at the top of the food chain, and we eat almost anything beneath us. I'm sure that if some other animal were to overthrow mankind, it would enjoy me as a tasty snack.

## Works Cited

Covington, Shelby. Personal Interview. 4 Oct. 2009.

Johnson, Shelly. Personal Interview. 4 Oct. 2009.

Santos, Tony. Personal Interview. 10 Oct. 2009.

## Questions

1. What is Johnson's main idea? Where does she state it?
2. A well-written essay provides different kinds of specific examples to support its main idea. What different kinds of specific examples does Johnson include in her essay? Does she offer enough variety? Explain.
3. How does Johnson grab her reader's attention in her opening? Is this hook an appropriate device for the topic she's writing about? Explain.
4. How does Johnson close her essay? Is her closing strategy effective? Explain.
5. Take the stance of a peer reviewer for Johnson. If she had more time to work on her essay, how could she revise it to improve it? Explain.

## Writing Assignment

1. Johnson takes a clear stand in her essay about vegetarianism. However, many vegetarians would disagree with her argument. If you are a vegetarian (or even if you're not), write an essay arguing against Johnson's point.
2. People can be awfully particular about the food they eat and how they eat it. For instance, some people refuse to eat fish because they fear mercury poisoning. Others won't drink milk past the expiration date. Identify a particular eating habit that you find beneficial or detrimental. Write an argument for or against that eating habit.