

Take Notes

## It's a Frame Up

### Helping Students Devise Beginnings and Endings

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*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.*

Offentimes, 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I encourage my students to find instead a single word, a literary/historical reference, or a personal narrative that can provide a fresh way into and out of their writing, surrounding it much like a window frame surrounds a glass pane or a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