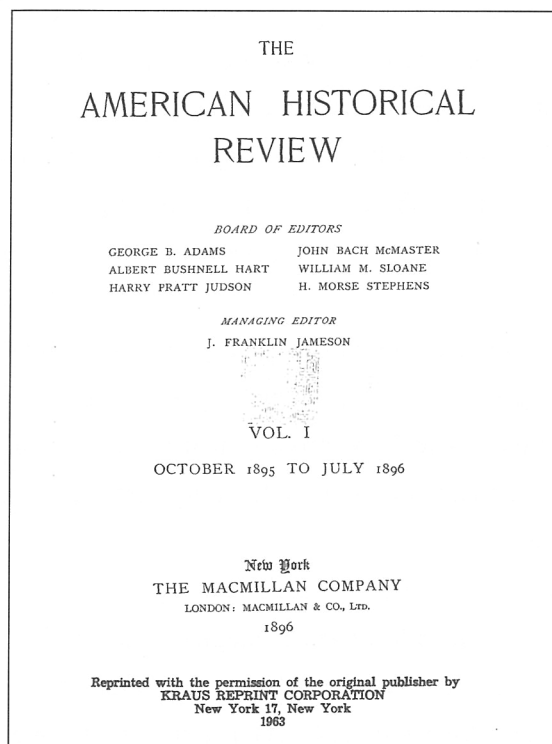


Openings in the *American Historical Review*



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THE CONCEPT OF AN "OPENING"

How should an article in history begin?

All writings have beginnings, but not all beginnings are openings. Those familiar with chess know that the series of moves that make up a match are conceived of as divisible into three basic parts—an opening, a middle game, and an endgame—and that anyone who hopes to advance beyond rudimentary play must first memorize some standard openings. It is by analogy to this usage in chess that I invoke the term.

An opening is a strategic beginning. It may consist of a single sentence, or it may run for pages. It is always marked, however, by a characteristic premise, namely, that an article, like a game of chess, is not simply the exposition of personal intelligence, but the encounter of minds. Openings are calculated not only to match the internal logic of the argument to follow, but also to play with the reader.

For instance: "The history of the physiology of nerve and muscle may be divided somewhat arbitrarily into four phases," is not an opening but a plain beginning. The author merely sets forth information, unconcerned with whether readers will be interested or not.

By contrast, "Few problems in human history are more fundamental and challenging than the origins of agriculture,"^① is an opening. It is a preemptive move against "So what?" indifference. It entices with the promise that if we read on, we may gain insight into one of the most "fundamental and challenging" problems of human history. So, almost irresistibly, we read on.

Theoretically, there are countless possible openings; in practice, however, these possibilities are often variations on a few basic strategies or, to continue with the language of chess, gambits. In the case of the *American Historical Review* (AHR), the official journal of the American Historical Association (AHA), my survey of some two thousand articles (1895-present) suggests the prevalence of two gambits in particular. I call them the gambit of engagement and the gambit of enchantment.

THE GAMBIT OF ENGAGEMENT

This opening seeks to engage (from the French, *en gage*, "at stake") the reader by arguing that there are momentous matters at stake. In perhaps the familiar version, authors plead the importance of their particular topic by appealing to the judgment of other historians:

^① Ping-ti Ho, "The loess and the origin of Chinese agriculture," *AHR* LXXV [1969], 1.

- (1) For over a hundred years no subject of historical research has attracted greater interest or has been more passionately discussed than the ordinary inhabitant of the Western countryside during the early Middle Ages.^②
- (2) Few chapters in the history of the Weimar Republic have aroused as much interest among publicists and historians as the secret relations between the Reichswehr and the Red Army.^③
- (3) Nine hundred years ago the Normans defeated the Anglo-Saxons at Hastings, and, ever since, historians have been pondering the meaning of this stark event and arguing over its consequences.^④

A second common variant simply opens with a grand declaration whose interest is taken for granted:

- (4) Ideas, no matter whether true or false, are often potent factors in social change.^⑤
- (5) Through a species of dialectic, counterrevolutions often reveal the character of the revolutions against which they are directed.^⑥
- (6) Political myths are an integral part of political life in all twentieth century mass societies.^⑦
- (7) Every civilization of which we know anything has met at least one, and usually more than one, major crisis in history.^⑧

Yet a third version confronts the reader directly with a key question, or unresolved mystery:

- (8) When did the medieval idea of the solidarity of Christian Europe as against the Turk break down?^⑨

② Carl Stephenson, "The problem of the common man in early medieval Europe," *AHR* LI [1946], 419. 2 other examples:

(a) "Few episodes in the career of Theodore Roosevelt have caused as much controversy among historians as the part played by the President in settling the difficulties arising out of the Anglo-German naval demonstration against Venezuela in 1902-1909." (Seward W. Livermore, "Theodore Roosevelt, the American Navy, and the Venezuelan crisis of 1902-1903," *AHR* LI [1946], 452.)

(b) "Few episodes in military history have received more one-sided attention than the Yorktown campaign." (William Wilcox, "The British road to Yorktown: a study in divided command," *AHR* LII [1946], 1.

③ Hans W. Gatzke, "Russo-German military collaboration during the Weimar Republic," *AHR* LXIII [1958], 565.

④ C. Warren Hollister, "1066: the 'Feudal revolution'," *AHR* LXXIII [1968], 708.

⑤ Sidney B. Fay, "The idea of progress," *AHR* LII [1947], 231.

⑥ Charles Tilly, "Some problems in the history of the Vendée," *AHR* LXVII [1961], 19.

⑦ Dietrich Orlow, "The conversion of myths into political power: the case of the Nazi party, 1925-1926," *AHR* LXXII [1967], 906.

⑧ Joseph R. Strayer, "The fourth and fourteenth centuries," *AHR* LXXVII [1972], 1.

⑨ Franklin L. Baumer, "England, the Turk, and the common corps of Christendom," *AHR* L [1944], 26.

- (9) The history of the migrations which marked the downfall of both the Roman Empire in the West and the Han Empire in China is still very obscure.

“Nowhere, since the time of Alexander the Great, do we feel so strongly that the meagreness of the sources flouts the magnitude of the events.”¹⁰

The gambit of engagement, in short, declares: Listen, I have something important to say.

THE GAMBIT OF ENCHANTMENT

The gambit of enchantment, by contrast, murmurs softly: Here is an interesting tale. It seeks not so much to impress or convince, as to intrigue and seduce.

In the closing days of a negotiation in London in 1818 a strange offer was made to the British government by representatives of the American government. It was made confidentially, It was rejected by the British government. It was lost from public sight for one hundred and thirty years thereafter until it was exhumed from the private papers of one of the private investigators.¹¹

Here is an article about a fruitless negotiation that had languished in utter obscurity for over a century, an event that presumably had no impact whatsoever on the course of history. Yet the allure of the words “strange”, “confidentially”, “lost” and “exhumed” make us no less curious about what follows than to learn about the most earthshaking revolutions.

The art of the opening in a 1898 article is even subtler.

The particular politician, with whom we are concerned, reached Lawrence, Kansas, on the twenty-second of April, 1855, alone and unannounced. He came in a primitive, rickety buggy, drawn by an old, moccasin-colored horses, which, it is to be hoped, had seen better days. The appearance of the new-comer himself was in keeping with his travelling outfit—a man quite forty years old, lank, almost haggard in figure, and dressed in overalls and a round-about.¹²

Far from insisting on the fame or importance of the individual in question, the author accents, on the contrary, his protagonist’s unprepossessing anonymity. His title,

¹⁰ Robert L. Reynolds and Robert S. Lopez, “Odacer: German or Hun?” *AHR* LII [1946], 36.

¹¹ Frederick Merk, “The Ghost River Caledonia in the Oregon negotiation of 1818,” *AHR* LV [1950], 530. In a similar vein: It is difficult to suggest a reason why so striking and picturesque a case as that of the Miscreant Cardinal in 1382-1383 should have remained in print for four hundred years in a well-known repository of law reports without exciting a single word of comment from the lawyers and controversialists who have sought argument and precedent within the famous pages of Fitzherbert’s *Grand abridgment*. (Theodore F.T. Plucknett, “The case of the miscreant cardinal,” *AHR* XXX [1924], 1.)

¹² Leverett W. Spring, “The career of a Kansas politician,” *AHR* IV [1898], 80.

too, is deliberately vague: "The career of a Kansas politician." Such stratagems shrewdly play off the reader's expectations that a historian, especially in the principal historical journal of America, would not bother to tell the tale of a truly inconsequential man. The more the author underlines the unremarkable blandness of this plainly-dressed figure in 1855 rural America, therefore, the more tension builds. In the context of perusing the *AHR*, a reader cannot but suspect extraordinary worlds latent or disguised under the appearance of the ordinary.¹³

"Once upon a time," begins another article,
dragons lived in the west, and sirens whose sea voices gave men to the sea, and
monsters who preyed on fools, and to the west was darkness and danger and death.
In its wisdom the sun daily searched the western sky in its flight from death.¹⁴

This opening, too, plays upon the context. It not only enchants by echoing the voice of myths, but it also, and more deviously, captures our attention by making us wonder: how could this fairytale possibly relate to the scholarly study of history? In a children's book this opening would be merely pleasing. In the *AHR*, it is arresting.

WHY DO OPENINGS MATTER?

The chief conclusion from my survey of the over one-hundred-year run of the *AHR* is that authors in this journal have devoted much careful thought to the question of how to begin—as if they took for granted that an effective article must first and above all captivate the reader. Openings, as opposed to mere beginnings, figure as a major, recurrent feature of the *AHR* style.

It is worth asking why. Why this insistence on openings? What does it tell us about the practice and conception of history in America?

In raising this question, I am implying that openings play a less prominent and regular role in historical articles written in East Asia. Some may disagree. It would, in any case, certainly be worthwhile eventually to survey the varieties of openings that we do

¹³ Of course, we also find more direct appeals to suspense:

In November, 1861, the country had been on tenter-hooks, so to speak, for twelve entire months, and during the last six of those months one mortification and failure had followed sharp on another. The community in a state of the highest possible tension, was constantly hoping for a successful coup somewhere and by someone executed in its behalf. It longed for a man who would do, taking the responsibility of the doing. While it was in this state of mind, the telegraph one day announced that the United States sloop of war *San Jacinto*, under the command of Captain Wilkes, had arrived at Fortress Monroe, having on board the two Confederate envoys, Mason and Slidell, taken on the high seas from the British mail steamer *Trent*. At last the hour seemed come and with it a man. By one now seeking an explanation of what then occurred, all this must be borne in mind. (Charles Francis Adams, "The Trent affair," *AHR* XVII [1912], 540).

¹⁴ Loren Baritz, "The idea of the West," *AHR* LXVI [1961], 618.

find in Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, and to explore the contexts underlying different attitudes toward openings.

In the American case, the puzzle of openings must, I think, be considered together with a consideration of the problem of titles. “You see,” explains a character in Laurence Lafore’s satirical novel, *Learner’s permit*, “the rules are very strict.” He is analyzing the art of naming papers in history:

I’ve been doing research on it, reading old programs for historical meetings. The title has to consist of two short, racy co-ordinates which don’t co-ordinate. One has to be religious and the other must deal with money or sex. Then the subtitle must be long, expository, and boring.¹⁵

Although published forty years ago, Lafore’s summary is confirmed by many a history conference program even today. The imaginary titles concocted in jest by Lafore’s young academics - “God and gold: the colonial policy of Ferdinand XII,” “The wages of sin and the price of rum: commercial interests of the New Haven ‘Saints’”, and “Bride of Christ and virgin soil: Sister Polycarpa and the conversion of Illinois County, 1690-1691” - still sound, for all their comical exaggeration, remarkably plausible.¹⁶

The social logic of such schizophrenic titles is not hard to interpret. On the one hand, the “long and boring” subtitle announces the specialized research by which the author qualifies as a professional scholar. On the other hand, the racy main title strives to attract non-specialist readers. The structure of the title, in short, reflects the demand that studies in history be at once narrowly expert, and broadly interesting.

Let me refine. A review of titles in the *AHR* reveals that for more than a half a century after its birth in 1895, article titles bearing colons were actually the rare exception. Colons began appearing regularly only in the 1950s. The evolution of the AHA likely has something to with this. When the Association began in 1884, the group of professional historians was tiny; the first professors in the discipline had been appointed at major universities only in the 1870s, and the overwhelming majority of articles in the early *AHR* concentrated on American history. Today, the AHA counts some 15,000 members, and the history addressed by *AHR* articles spans the globe. The rise of titles with colons reflects, in part, this professional growth. In order to qualify as a member of the profession, a historian must claim a personal niche, a special area of expertise. But by the 1950s, history in America was a discipline in which vast swathes of territory had already

¹⁵ Laurence Lafore, *Learner’s permit* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1962), 59.

¹⁶ Lafore himself was a respected historian and author of numerous scholarly studies, most notably, *The long fuse, an interpretation of the origins of World War I* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965). There are of course many effective uses of the colon in titles. One of the best titles I found in the *AHR*, in fact, includes a colon: “Wednesday, August 19, 1812, 6:30 P.M.: the birth of a world power” (*AHR* XVIII [1913]).

been staked out by predecessors and contemporaries. Like land in Tokyo, newcomers could only find ever smaller parcels of open field-such as, to use Lafore's example, the two years of 1690-91 in Illinois County. At the same time, however, in order to have one's voice heard in this increasingly crowded and competitive profession-by the 1970s, the editors of the *AHR* would estimate that they could publish only 10% of submissions-authors had to argue vigorously for the property value of their tiny domain.¹⁷

The gambit of engagement, by far the most popular opening in the *AHR*, may be interpreted as an expression of this same trend. In order to have any readers at all, specialists had to relate their research in to themes of broad interest. Suggestively, the dominance of the gambit of engagement is more marked in the second half of the *AHR*'s existence than in the journal's early years.

But recourse to the gambit of engagement also reflects, no doubt, a more general and stable reality of American society. It is a gesture of self-justification in the face of a society deeply skeptical of intellectuals and esoteric research. More than historians in older societies, where traditional class divisions and reverence for learning insulate scholars from social pressures, and allow-and arguably, even encourage-them to pursue studies incomprehensible to the layman, historians in America have had constantly to make the case for the value and significance of their studies.

This is not the sole motivation behind the insistence on openings, however. As evidenced by the gambit of enchantment, another major factor is the tradition that conceives history as a form of storytelling-a tradition in which narrative style matters no less than narrated content. (Along with colleagues in English departments, historians in American colleges tend to regard the teaching of "good writing" as one of their chief missions.) Relevant, too, is the close tie between the scholarly writing and public speaking; the addresses of the AHA president are featured prominently in the *AHR*, and many of the published articles were originally read as lectures or conference papers.¹⁸

¹⁷ "Articles for the *AHR*," *AHR* LXXV [1970], 1580.

¹⁸ An notable example of how conventions of oratory rhetoric shaping written style is the beginning of Moses Coit Tyler's "President Witherspoon in the American Revolution" (*AHR* IV [1896]) which consists of a single sentence stretching over one hundred and fifty words:

Although John Witherspoon did not come to America until the year 1768-long after he had himself passed the middle line of human life-yet so quickly did he then enter into the spirit of American society, so perfectly did he identify himself with its nobler moods of discontent and aspiration, so powerfully did he contribute by speech and act to the right development of this new nation out of the cluster of dispersed and dependent communities, that it would be altogether futile to attempt to frame a just account of the great intellectual movements of our Revolution without taking some note of the part played in it by this eloquent, wise, and efficient Scotsman-at once teacher, preacher, politician, law-maker and philosopher, upon the whole not undeserving of the praise which has been bestowed upon him as "one of the great men of the age and of the world."

To summarize, the phenomenon of openings spotlights the relationship of authors to readers,¹⁹ of specialists to non-specialists, of the historian to society, of histories to stories, of writing to speech—all critical issues in the comparative study of style.

¹⁹ In an article titled, “Amunclae a serpentibus deletae,” (*AHR* XIII [1907]), the reader is invited to become part of the narrative:

Leaving Tarracina and going toward Fundi, after having walked the via Appia for four miles, between the skirts of Mount Giusto and the banks of the river Canneto, you come to one of the issues of the large lake, Fundanus, formed by the numerous streams which drain the ample valley surrounding it. This lake in ancient times must have occupied a much wider territory than at present and must have had much more active and direct communication with the sea...Here, too, near the lake of Fundi, is said to have flourished the city of Amyclae or Amunclae, whose disappearance gave rise to the strangest and most startling stories.