Sample Introductions

I. Starting with a quotation

One way to establish a suitable tone for your essay is to start by quoting a passage from the novel you are analyzing. The quotation serves as a staging area, so to speak, for your introduction. In your own writing that follows the passage, avoid referring to the quotation in a mechanical way. As you read this sample, note the conventions of blocking a quotation and citing the passage.

Sample #1 opening quotation:

The Tom Sawyers Rule the World

I slipped the ramrod down it to make sure it was loaded, and then I laid it across the turnip barrel, pointing toward pap, and set down behind it to wait for him to stir. And how slow and still the time did drag along. (Clemens 29)

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is not from the same mind that wrote The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Tom Sawyer was written by a Mark Twain out to write a child’s book, a book T. S. Eliot describes as “a very good boys’s book” in his “Introduction to Huckleberry Finn” (Clemens 328). Huckleberry Finn, whether Twain wanted to or not, developed into the rich character study that Eliot calls “a masterpiece.” The image of a child aiming a gun with full intention of patricide is a scene some would call dark but one that seamlessly slides into a book described as a comedy. The two books are as opposite as their two protagonists. Tom Sawyer is a solid, by-the-numbers work and has no outstanding themes or beliefs. A sprawling epic, Huckleberry Finn is one of our literature’s first and greatest commentaries on race and American identity. Comparing the two novels and their protagonists sheds light on such themes as Tom’s romantic egotism and Huck’s realistic crisis of conscience. Likewise, their diverse interests and ways of reacting to the world urge us to question their decision-making and influence on others. In essence, Tom and Huck are two vastly different American role models whose relationship makes a philosophical statement on the roles of leaders and followers in a society.
Sample #2 opening quotation

Emancipated by a Slave

We said there wasn’t no home like a raft, after all. Other places seem so cramped up and smothers, but a raft don’t. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft. (Clemens 98)

In a setting of constant pressures and numerous rules, one frequently feels helpless to reveal to others his true nature as an individual. Only under the “free and easy and comfortable” conditions that protagonist Huck Finn describes in Clemens’ Adventures of Huckleberry Finn may an individual openly express his genuine qualities. An escape from the novel’s valley society, therefore, provides an opportunity for Jim, Miss Watson’s dehumanized, stereotypical slave, to separate himself from the enslaving ideas that reduce him to property. In his own humanization during his escape from valley society in the river chapters, Jim emancipates Huckleberry Finn from adherence to the “truths” of this society that restrict the boy’s ideas of a free, guiltless conscience.

II. Building the Introduction Around a Quotation

There are several methods to lead to a thesis statement in your introduction. You can start with a quotation like the samples above, or you can discuss the novel in general and narrow your generalizations to the thesis statement. Or you can build your introduction around a scene and/or quotation. Here is an example of a student paper that started by building around a passage from the novel:

Sample:

In Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, Jem and Scout live in a society that often rewards egotistic and pompous displays of courage and overlooks genuinely heroic actions that demonstrate real strength of character. Early in the novel Jem himself echoes society’s tendency to glorify high-profile actions that make easy editorials in the town’s newspaper, actions such as
Atticus’s shooting a mad dog. It takes Atticus, the moral voice of the novel, to explain that Mrs. Dubose, a sick old woman fighting a disease, is more courageous than a man who shoots a mad dog. After having forced his son to read daily to Mrs. Dubose, Atticus tells Jem, "I wanted you to see something about her– I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand" (Lee 116). Part One of the novel ends on this note, and the rest of the story is a testimony to the many unglorified acts of personal courage by Atticus, Tom Robinson, Boo Radley, and others. Because of Jem’s initiation into the underground world of genuine acts of courage, he grows from a boy, innocent of the harsh realities of the world, to a young man capable of changing his society.