Effective Beginnings and Endings for Narratives

Beginnings

First of all, don't fret or waste time about writing the "perfect" beginning in your first draft. If you are stuck on the introduction, temporarily skip it and write the body of your narrative. Then go back and work on the introduction.

When you do start working on the opening, think about the following from page 52 of The College Writer: A guide to Thinking, Writing, and Researching:

"The opening paragraph is one of the most important elements in any composition. It should accomplish at least three essential things: (1) engage the reader; (2) establish your direction, tone, and level of language; and (3) introduce your line of thought.

Here are some suggestions on how to begin your narrative (adapted from Ralph Fletcher's What a Writer Needs).

- Dramatic Lead - Chose a lead that "grabs a reader by the throat and won't let go."
  - Whenever I got into trouble, my mother always had a straight look at me. I would start to cry then, not out loud but in my heart.
  - In 1974, my family canceled Christmas.

- Starting in the Middle of a Scene - Bring the reader right into the middle of the action.
  - Ba-room, ba-room, ba-room, baripity, baripity, baripity, baripity — Good. His dad had the pickup going. He could get up now. (Bridge to Terabithia)
  - "Where's papa going with that axe? said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast." (Charlotte's Web)

- Leisurly Leads - Beginnings don't have to be short and dramatic. You can start slowly with a description that sets the mood of the piece.
  - The first week of August hangs at the very top of summer, the top of the live-long year, like the highest seat of a Ferris wheel when it pauses in its turning. The weeks that come before are only a climb from balmy spring, and those that follow a drop to the chill of autumn, but the first week of August is motionless, and hot. It is curiously silent, too, with blank white dawns and glaring noons, and sunsets smeared with too much color. Often at night there is lightning, but it quivers all alone. There is no thunder, no relieving rain. These are strange and breathless days, the dog
days, when people are led to do things they are sure to be sorry for after.
(Tuck Everlasting)

- Beginning at the Ending - You can start at the end, and your narrative will explain how the ending came about.
  - One day last spring, Louis, a butcher, turned into a fish. Silvery scales. Big lips. A tail. A salmon.

Now let's look at four different beginnings of the same story:

1. **Typical (In other words, boring. Avoid this kind of beginning.)**
   It was a day at the end of June, 1994. My whole family, including my mom, dad, brother and me, were at our camp at Rangeley Lake. We arrived the night before at 10:00, so it was dark when we got there and unpacked. The next morning when I was eating breakfast, my dad started yelling for me from down at the dock at the top of his lungs about a car in the lake.

2. **Action**
   I ran down to our dock as fast as my legs could carry me, my feet pounding away on the old wood, hurrying me toward the sound of my dad’s panicked voice. “Bill!” he hollered again.
   “Coming, dad!” I gasped and picked up my speed.

3. **Dialogue: A character or characters saying something. (Some writers advocate avoiding this type of beginning, but I think it works fine if done right.)**
   “Bill! Get down here on the double!” my father hollered.
   “Dad?” I hollered back, “Where are you?” I was sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast our first morning at our Rangely Lake camp, and from someplace outside my dad was calling for me.
   “Bill! Move it! You’re not going to believe this,” Dad’s voice urged me. I gulped down my milk, pushed away from the table and bolted out the door, slamming the broken screen door behind me.

4. **Interior Monologue: A character thinking about something.**
   I couldn’t imagine what my father could be hollering about already at 7:00 in the morning. I thought hard and fast about what I might have done to get him so riled up. Had he found out about the cigarettes I’d hidden in my knapsack? Or the way I’d talked to my mother the night before when we got to camp, and she’d asked me to help unpack the car? Before I could consider a third possibility my dad’s voice shattered my thoughts.
   “Bill! Move it! You’re not going to believe this!”
Endings (from "How to Write a Conclusion." CreativeWriting-Prompts.com)

Examples of a successful story ending are:

- A memory of the main event.
- A decision resulting from the main event.
- An action reflecting an important decision.
- Thoughts and feelings about the events that have taken place.
- A hope or wish
- A call to action.
- Restate the thesis in the first or second sentence.
- An amusing, light-hearted or insightful observation if appropriate.
- End the essay with a quote that sums up or comments on the topic.

Use a combination of the above elements to write an effective conclusion.

General tips:

- Keep the conclusion straight and to the point.
- One paragraph (four to five sentences) is sufficient.
- Don’t repeat yourself.