Comparing and contrasting different texts by a single novelist can be a useful method of finding a way into that writer’s narrative methods. This might involve a rather intimidating reading load, so a possible short cut is to look at the opening pages of different novels.

Below is a selection of openings from the novels of Evelyn Waugh and some suggestions about how these openings might be explored. With some modifications you should be able to apply these approaches to any novelist of your choice.

1. *Decline and Fall* (1928)

   Mr Sniggs, the Junior Dean, and Mr Postlethwaite, the Domestic Bursar, sat alone in Mr Sniggs’ room overlooking the garden quad at Scone College. From the rooms of Sir Alastair Digby-Vane-Trumpington, two staircases away, came a confused roaring and breaking of glass. They alone of the senior members of Scone were at home that evening, for it was the night of the annual dinner of the Bollinger Club.

2. *A Handful of Dust* (1934)

   ‘Was anyone hurt?’
   ‘No one, I am thankful to say,’ said Mr Beaver, ‘except two housemaids who lost their heads and jumped through a glass roof into the paved court. They were in no danger. The fire never reached the bedrooms, I am afraid. Still, they are bound to need doing up, everything black with smoke and drenched in water and luckily they had that old-fashioned sort of extinguisher that ruins everything. One really cannot complain.’

3. *Scoop* (1938)

   While still a young man, John Courteney Boot had, as his publisher proclaimed, ‘achieved an assured and enviable position in contemporary letters’. His novels sold 15,000 copies in their first year and were read by the people whose opinion John Boot respected. Between novels he kept his name sweet in intellectual circles with unprofitable but modish works on history and travel. His signed first editions sometimes changed hands at a shilling or two above their original price.’

4. *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)

   (extract taken from the beginning of Book One, after the Prologue)
   ‘I have been here before,’ I said; I had been there before; first with Sebastian more than twenty years ago on a cloudless day in June, when the ditches were creamy with meadowsweet and the air heavy with all the scents of summer; it was a day of peculiar splendour, and though I had been there so often, in so many moods, it was to that first visit that my heart returned on this, my latest.’

Try comparing and contrasting the openings to these novels in terms of:

A. Narrative voice(s)

B. Use and portrayal of setting and character

C. Other contexts

D. Other aspects of language
## Openings to novels

### Some possible points of comparison
(Texts identified by number)

| **Narrative voices** | 1. Distanced, cool, knowing, gleeful sense of distaste.  
2. Dialogue: main (unreliable?) narrator here offers judgements we might well dissent from.  
3. Dry, ironic, rather disillusioned.  
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Setting and character** | 1. Oxbridge college. Names suggest the upper-classes. College employees identified by rank and office.  
4. Pastoral setting. Narrator and Sebastian identified as central figures in the story. Firmly in the past. |
| **Other contexts** | 1. Possible contemporary parallels (background of present members of shadow cabinet?) Image of university life then and now.  
2. Legal, predatory world: c.f. our compensation culture?  
3. A world of books and reading. Different to ours? The novel develops into a satire on the media world.  
4. As with the above, strong autobiographical elements here. Both precisely ‘placed’ historically. |
| **Other aspects of language** | 1. Use of names: Dickensian delight in their eccentricity. Suggestion of the bestial in humanity.  