

The Essence of Getting Off to a Flying Start

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Начало: beginning, essence, basics, basis, origin

Thinking about конец (end) awhile back got me thinking about начало (beginning) and начать (to begin). After all, when you are thinking about words, лучше начать с начала (it's best to start from beginning). Besides, we all know that хорошее начало — половина дела (well begun is half done).

Не знаю, с чего начать (I don't know where to start). How about with stress, since the verb начать is very stressful for non-native speakers of Russian — and some native speakers as well. Unless you are doing a Gorbachev imitation, keep in mind that the stress in начать is on the end: начаТЬ. In the past tense, if you're female, keep the stress on the last syllable (началА). If you're male, put the stress on the first syllable (НАчал). Got it? Это отличное начала нашему делу (We're off to a flying start).

Начало can refer to the start of something. Жилые дома в начале улицы строились в конце 40-х и в начале 50-х годов прошлого века (The apartment houses at the beginning of the street were built in the late 1940s and early 1950s). Начало фильма мне понравилось, а к концу мне стало скучно (I liked the beginning of the film, but toward the end I found it boring).

Начало can also refer to the source or origin of something. This might be something bad, like болезнетворное начало (pathogenic source &mdash that is, what makes you sick). Or something good, like организующее начало (organizing principle &mdash that is, what managers are always trying to introduce in the workplace).

In other contexts, начало can mean the essence of something or someone. This is often used in discussions about gender. I find this hard to translate, largely because I don't know what people are talking about. If a woman has сильное женское начало (strong female essence), what does that mean? High pheromone count? Curvy shape? Ability to whip up a tasty dinner in 15 minutes flat? This is yet another mystery of Russian culture.

In the plural, начала refers to the basics of something, the fundamental principles. For example, private tutors advertise their ability to take little mud-pie-making Sasha and, after a few weeks of astronomically expensive schooling, give you back little Sasha with овладение началами художественного творчества (mastery of the basic principles of artistic creativity). In just a few short weeks, they promise to раскрыть художественное начало вашего ребёнка (reveal the artistic nature of your child).

There's yet another meaning of начала (plural) that seems a bit puzzling to English-

speakers. Sometimes these beginnings refer to the way something is done. For example, work might be done на коллективных началах (collectively, jointly, literally "on a collective basis") or на общественных началах (as a volunteer; literally, "on a public basis"). The latter seems to have its origins in the notion of work done for the benefit of society, not the individual, company or state. But the notion of societal benefit can get fuzzy. When a nurse friend doesn't get paid for three months, she sighs: Оказывается, что мы теперь работаем на общественных началах (It turns out that now we're unpaid volunteers).

In this case, you might describe the problem using the old-fashioned phrase под началом (under someone): Мы работаем под началом у жулика (We work under a crook). Or you might complain about your начальник (the boss), who is the ultimate source of good and bad in the workplace.

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