Mastering
The Magic of Opening Lines
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How To Fix Your Opening Lines
What Opening Lines Must Do

- Set up the main question the reader is going to be asking all the way through
- Establish the voice of the protagonist/narrator
- Set the tone
- Ground the reader in a time or place

That’s why I advocate writing the first lines last—or at least tweaking them after you’ve finished the story, when you know what it’s about.

So, how do you make your first line reflect all these things?

Let’s look at some examples.

Unless otherwise noted, they are taken from *The Best American Short Stories 2017* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2017)
Maidencane - Chad B. Anderson

Nowadays the memory starts like this: there’s a rush in the red dirt, and you and your brother snatch up the tackle box and run from the girl. She flings her fishing pole at you and yells that her daddy will just buy her another tackle box. And another, and another. The girl’s echoes follow you along the riverbank.

This opening paragraph sets the story firmly in the narrator’s voice: which, in this case, is second person. It’s still a relatively unusual point-of-view but I’m seeing it more and more, especially in short stories. I think it gives the story an immediacy it might otherwise lack, and draws the reader in. It also introduces the prospect of the narrator being unreliable. They’re holding us at arm’s length, not saying “I did this” but “say, you did this”.

(I always feel like there’s an unspoken “hypothetically…” in a second-person story. I kind of like it.)

“Nowadays” - implies that something has changed over time. This pulls the reader in, asking a question that they expect to find the answer to, before the end of the story.

This kind of question will hook the reader and keep them reading until you answer it. (At which point, I hope, you’ve asked another question to keep them reading.)

“The memory starts” - this invites the reader to ask more questions: why are we hearing about a memory? Why not just talk about the memory with the other participants in the scene? Where are they now? What is going to be significant about this memory.

(Remember: short story readers are puzzle-solvers. They know every detail in a short story is there for a reason and they enjoy tallying them up, trying to unpick the story puzzle as they read. Don’t frustrate them by throwing in things that waste their time and mental energy!)

“A rush in the red dirt” - This language is non-obvious. What does it mean? It slows the reader down as they try to make sense of it. It sets the tone for the story: it’s going to be literary. It also raises questions in the reader’s head. This time the question is answered quickly: the rush is a girl. In telling us that, the writer immediately raises more questions: they are running from the girl. Why? Who is she? What will the consequences of this interaction be, for the characters and the story?

“She flings the fishing pole at you” - this is wonderful example of showing, not telling: she doesn’t “throw the pole, angrily”. She flings it. It’s the perfect word. It is active. It invites
the reader to see the scene and to wonder what came before, and what will come after. You want to keep reading, don’t you?

“Her daddy will just buy her another” - we can hear the defiance in the girl’s voice, but the writer doesn’t tell us too much, too soon. We don’t know if it’s true, or why he mentions this. Is her daddy rich? Is she spoiled? Is she proud and faking it? What is going on, here?!

Following directly on from this paragraph, the writer slows things down a bit, describing the scene and shifting the mysteries from the question he’s raised about the girl, to new questions about the brother (“you wish you could remember the songs he liked” — why can’t you just ask him?)

This paragraph sets up much that the story will be about: it turns out to be about memory and consequences, and relationships.

While the girl in the opening does turn up again throughout the story (in a way), the story pivots to one about the narrator’s family, her relationship with her brother. But it is also a story about memory and consequences.

All these things are in the opening, along with questions the reader wants answered, a strong sense of voice and place, and action that pulls us into the story.

It’s a strong opening.
ARE WE NOT MEN? By T. C. Boyle

The dog was the color of a maraschino cherry, and what it had in its jaws, I couldn’t quite make out at first, not until it parked itself under the hydrangeas and began throttling the thing. This little episode would have played itself out without my ever noticing except that I’d gone to the stove to put the kettle on for a cup of tea and happened to glance out the window at the front lawn. The lawn, a lush blue-green that managed to hint at both the turquoise of the sea and the viridian of a Kentucky meadow, was something I took special pride in and any wandering dog, no matter its chromatics, was an irritation to me.

See how the author buys himself time to meander through the backstory tea-making, the glance, the specific colors of the glass, his general feelings about dogs, all because we want to know what the dog has and why it is the color of a maraschino cherry?

This tantalizing promise gives him the opportunity to step back, to woo us with the character’s voice. This man is fussy and odd and leaps off the page (who knows “the viridian of a Kentucky meadow?).

At this point, the reader has no idea what the story is really going to be about, but the voice was one I wanted to hang out with. The seemingly-throwaway details (the cherry-colored dog; the fancy lawn) turn out to be extremely relevant to the themes of the story. It’s the kind of opening that, when you get to the end, seems even more satisfying than it did when you first read it.

That’s what we should be aiming for.
Sander loves his mother. He walks a few steps after her, wearing a new black suit that has room for him to grow into, carrying a big black valise of pamphlets. When his mother goes to the front door to ring the bell, waits for an answer, Sander stands behind her, looking over her shoulder, with an expression on his face that he means to be pleasant.

You are already wondering how screwed up this boy is going to turn out to be, aren’t you? Don’t you want to read on to find out?

I found this opening deeply uncomfortable. There was something subservient, repressed, underdeveloped, in Sander, even before I knew he was 17. The story deals with these repressed feelings and the way his upbringing stunts Sander’s relationships with other people.

It’s all here in the opening.
From his balcony, Nikhil waited and watched the street as hyacinth braiders tied floral knots, rum sellers hauled bags of ice and the row of elderly typists, who had seemed elderly to him since he'd been a boy, struck the last notice of tea daily work. Beside him on the balcony, his servant, Kanu, plucked at the hair that grew from his ears.

The fifth word of this story introduces some suspense: what is Nikhil waiting for? The writer doesn’t tell us straight away. Instead we’re treated to a view of the street, with its sense of festival/echoes of a wedding (which turn out to be not accidental).

By telling us that the elderly typists had ‘seemed elderly to him since he was a boy’, the writer tells us that Nikhil is older, himself. We’re never told what age Nikhil is, but it’s not necessary. If we’re in any doubt that he is past the first flush of youth, we have a servant plucking hairs from his ears (not a service a younger man would need). We soon see that Kanu is, himself, elderly and hard of hearing, which places Nikhil, the protagonist whose viewpoint we are in, somewhere before that stage, himself.

At the end of this passage, we don’t know what or who Nikhil is waiting for, but we have a sense of a festival, an occasion. There is a hint of matrimony, or that this story is going to contain a romance…and it does—several.

It has also settled us into a world that is clearly not present-day Western: the balcony, the servant, the floral-knot braiders, the rum-sellers with their ice, the typists.

Don’t you want to know what Nikhil was waiting for, in his fragrant, sensuous world?
ARCADIA by Emma Cline

“There’s room for expansion,” Otto said over breakfast, reading the thin-paged free newspaper the organic people sent out to all the farms. He tapped an article with his thick finger, and Peter noticed that Otto’s nail was colored black with nail polish, or a marker. Or maybe it was only a blood blister.

“We draw a leaf of some shit on our label,” Otto said, squinting at the page. “Even if it just kind of looks like this. People wouldn’t know the difference.”

Consider what we know in just these few lines:
- This story is set on a farm, probably one that’s struggling a bit economically
- There are two men in the scene and we don’t know how they’re related to each other
- Something’s odd about Otto. What’s up with that black nail?
- Otto is potentially morally compromised.
- Peter seems uncomfortable with Otto.

There’s not much suspense in this story yet, and the attention to detail (Otto’s nail) is a strong clue that this story is going to be all about the setting. That turns out to be true.

This opening also seems to promise that this story will be more about the characters than any intrigue or big events. There is a hint of intrigue with Otto’s comments about the need to expand and his willingness to be less than scrupulously honest to do so.

Things happen, of course. People come and go, days pass. However, this story is mainly about the claustrophobic nature of life on this particular family farm. It is a literary, inward-focused story, as promised by the opening lines.
HOG FOR SORROW by Leopoldine Core

Lucy and Kit sat waiting side by side on a black leather couch, before a long glass window that looked out over Tribeca, the winter sun in their laps. Kit stole sideward glances at Lucy, who hummed, twisting her hair around her fingers in a compulsive fashion. Her hair was long and lionlike with a slight wave to it, gold with yellowy shades around her face. Kit couldn’t look at her for very long. She cringed and recoiled, as if faced with a bright light. Lucy was too radiant.

In these lines we are immediately grounded in the setting: contemporary, New York City, winter.

It’s clear from the focus on the two women, that this is going to be a character-based story. Kit is secretly looking at the other woman, clearly feeling inadequate to her. This indicates that Kit is the character who starts the story with something to lose, some journey to go on. Her sense of self-loathing isn’t quite clear yet, but is hinted at in these lines. Kit’s character will become the focus of the story.

The tone established here is that of a traditional, narrative story. This is not going to be the kind of short story that does anything whacky with the short form. This writer is going to tell us a short story. You could imagine this as part of a novel. This stays consistent throughout the story.

We’re in close third-person, so we know we’re going to be following Kit through this story, only seeing inside her head. Anything we learn about the other characters will always be from Kit’s perspective.

The story turns out to be a character-based story, centered on Kit. There is also a strong sense of place and setting. The events of, and intrigue in this story, always serve to illuminate something about the main character’s journey and sense of self, as promised by this opening.
RICHARD OF YORK GAVE BATTLE IN VAIN

by Danielle Evans

Two by two the animals boarded, and then all the rest of them in the world died, but no one ever tells the story that way. Forty days and forty nights of being locked up helpless, knowing everything you’d ever known was drowning all around you and at the end God shows up with a whimsical promise that he will not destroy the world again with water, which seems like a hell of a caveat.

Dori must find something reassuring in the story. Dori is a preschool teacher and a pastor’s daughter and she has found a way to carry the theme of the ark and the rainbow sign across the entire three days of her wedding, which began tonight with a welcome dinner and ends Sunday afternoon with brunch and a church service where, according to the program, her father will give a sermon called “God’s Rainbow Sign For You.”

This story surprised me. It was one of my favorites in the collection, but the opening was a little deceptive.

Doesn’t it seem, from this opening, that Dori is going to be the point-of-view character that we follow through the story?

Before the end of the first page, however, it becomes clear that it is one of her guests, Rena, who we are following through the story. After we meet Rena, that slightly-out-of-step approach analysis of the Noah story makes much more sense. Of course it wasn’t the pastor’s daughter questioning the Almighty’s almighty caveat!

The tone of this story, and the narrator’s voice, are strongly on display in this opening. The story promises to be full of personality and intrigue—how is someone so clearly alien to the setting going to fit in? It also promises to have a sardonic approach to big questions. I knew, no matter what happened in this story, that I was going to keep reading because I enjoyed the style.

And the story delivers. We follow Rena through her failure to fit in with the small-town celebration, but more than that, it comes back to Dori. In the end, this is as much a story about Dori’s journey as it is Rena’s. By the time we reach the end, the opening makes much more sense.
This is the original timeline. You know, the one all of us came from. So we can’t do anything to it, or we won’t be born to invent time travel. We can only meddle with other timelines.

This is a great example of the efficiency of language in short fiction. The first five words do a lot of heavy lifting.

The single word “original” tells us a lot: this is going to be a time-travel story, it’s going to be twisty and confusing, it’s being told from within the events.

The next two sentences tell us more about the story. They indicate what the central story question is going be (the nature of and limits of paradoxes in time travel). They quickly set up the tone: it’s chatty, informal, ‘direct to camera’.

It promises to be fun, and it is, for people like me who love time travel stories and understand all the tropes. The language in the intro assumes the reader knows these and understands what the narrator is talking about. This is the author’s way of signaling what the story will be, to the reader. “If you don’t like this kind of stuff,” she is saying, “Don’t bother with this story.”

Since that is what all readers are searching for in an opening line anyway, it’s a great way to start.

Opening lines are always an invitation, or a warning to the reader. The opening line should advertise what kind of story you are writing, what it’s going to feel like to come on the journey, and what kind of journey it’s going to be.

This story’s opening line promises a certain type of story, and the author delivers on it.

THE WORSHIPFUL SOCIETY OF GLOVERS
by Mary Robinette Kowal

Outside the cracked window of the garret, the cockle-seller hollered, “Cockles an’ mussels! Cockles an’ mussels!” Her voice blended with the other London morning street sounds to mean that Vaughn was going to be late.

“Botheration.” He tied off the thread in the fine blue leather of the gloves he was stitching and snipped it with the little pair of silver shears he’d snuck out of the master’s shop. Be his hide if he were caught taking them home, but worse if he bit the thread off instead of snipping it neat. No telling what his saliva would do when the guild brownie added the beauty spell to it.

This story opens with a strong sense of place, which is important, because the writer needs to establish that this is not a contemporary setting.

Words like “garret”, “cockles an’ mussels”, and “Botheration”, along with details like ‘the master’s shop’ and the street seller, immediately communicate where and roughly when the story is taking place.

We might be in a historical setting, but that’s not all the author manages to convey in these two paragraphs. Look at the last line: not only does Vaughn have a master, indicating that he is an apprentice in a guild, but there are supernatural creatures who add magic to everyday objects…and Vaughn is not at all freaked out by this, which tell us that this is a fantasy story.

In just over 100 words, we have learned where and when this story takes place, who our main character is, something about his challenges (“late again”, the fact that he works in a meticulous field that brooks no shortcuts or mistakes), the tone of the story and the genre.

Within the next 100 words, we’ll know what the central problem of this story is.

This is an effective and efficient opening.

THE PROVINCIALS by Daniel Alarcón

“I’d been out of the conservatory for about a year when my great-uncle Raúl died.”

Think about everything we know, from that first line:

- This is a story featuring a young adult protagonist.
- They have graduated from a ‘conservatory’, not a technical college, not a university. This is an artistic person.
- This is probably a middle or upper-class person (who else can go to a conservatory?).
- They graduated a year ago, but still define themselves by the conservatory. This is not a person who has gone on to a great and immediately successful career in their art.
- The relative who has died is a great-uncle, not a close relative, so this is not likely to be a story about grief, or about the great-uncle. Instead, it indicates the story is going to involve family and perhaps tenuous connections to one’s roots. Maybe it’s going to be about obligation, or the ties that bind.
- The great-uncle is called Raúl, so this story is not going to be set in WASP-y America.

That’s a fair amount that we can dig out of 16 words, only one of which is more than five letters long.

( The King Is Always Above The People, Daniel Alarcón, Riverhead Books, 2017)
I’D RATHER GO BLIND, Jabari Asim

The summer of ’67 was hot and foreboding.

It’s a bit of a cliché to begin a story with the weather, but Asim pulls it off here because there is more in this line than a weather report.

It tells us that we’re in 1967, a year that anyone with a basic knowledge of contemporary American history, knows was a big one for the culture. And it’s not just ‘hot’ it’s ‘foreboding’.

This one word promises us that something big is going to happen in this story. It’s not just going to be about the domestic trials of a youngest brother; it’s going to be the moment he intersects with the cultural changes going on round about him. We’re immediately curious.

The narrator reinforces this promise a couple of sentences later,

There was no question though, that the temperature was steadily rising. Young men no longer hailed each other with an innocuous wave; instead they thrust black fists skyward.

And when he then mentions his radicalizing older brother, Ed, we know something big is coming, and Ed is going to be right in the middle of it.

I’m nervous for Ed from the start of the story, how about you?
How To Fix Your Own Opening Lines

Now that you’ve seen what a great opening can do, are you looking at your own stories with a twisted expression on your face? Don’t panic! You can make your openings stronger with a few quick tweaks.

1. Read over your story and think about the major theme that emerged. Find a way to raise a question about that theme in the opening few lines. For inspiration, look read “Maidencane” by Chad B. Anderson in The Best American Short Stories 2017.

2. Use language that strongly illustrates your character’s voice and personality. For inspiration read “Are We Not Men?” by T. C. Boyle.

3. Set the tone for the story by concentrating on how your opening line might make the reader feel. For (uncomfortable) inspiration, read “God’s Work” by Kevin Canty.

4. Ground your story in a time and place, without resorting to telling us where it takes place. For inspiration read “A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness” by Jai Chakrabarti.

5. Don’t be afraid to use your opening lines to demonstrate your voice, as Leopoldine Core does in the literary opening to “Hog For Sorrow”. Yes, you must introduce character, setting, and story question, but make sure your voice rings through, too.

6. If you start with dialogue, as Emma Cline does in “Arcadia”, make sure you include information about the people who are talking and hint at the potential conflict between them. Try to make the words do double duty: set the scene and describe the character, for example.

7. It’s OK to misdirect your readers a little, as in the opening to Danielle Evans’s “Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain”. Because the voice is strong and consistent throughout, it doesn’t matter so much that the ‘wrong’ character is introduced first.

8. Choose a single word to alter/clarify the meaning as Naomi Krtizer does with that “original timeline” in “Paradox”.

9. In a longer short story, like Mary Robinette Kowal’s 10,000 word novella, The Worshipful Society Of Glovers, you get to take more time over your opening. You can take 200-300 words to establish everything. Don’t stretch it much more than that, though.

10. Remember, as in Daniel Alarcón’s “The Provincials”, you don’t need to use big words to get your point across.

11. If you’re going to use a cliché, like when Jabari Asim opens “I’d Rather Go Blind” with a comment about the weather, make sure you deepen the meaning.

What’s your biggest takeaway from this report. Tell me: https://stada.me/openings

Keep writing,

Julie

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