

The Short Short Story Session 2

The first line

- 1) *"Something very peculiar happened today."*
Diary of a Madman, Nikolay Gogol
- 2) *"He who saw the Deep, the country's foundation,
[who] knew ..., was wise in all matters!"*
The Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet 1. The coming of Enkidu
- 3) *"They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time."*
Paradise, Toni Morrison
- 4) *"There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it."*
C.S.Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader
- 5) *"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."*
Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities
- 6) *"When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house, I had only two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home."*
S.E.Hinton, The Outsiders
- 7) *"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."*
Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina

Worst opening in history... arguably...

"It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents—except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness."
Paul Clifford, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1830)

Short first lines

1. *"Marley was dead, to begin with."* A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens
2. *"All this happened, more or less."* Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five
3. *"You better not never tell nobody but God."* Alice Walker, The Color Purple
4. *"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."* J.R.R.Tolkien, The Hobbit
5. *"I write this sitting in the kitchen sink."* Dodie Smith, I capture the Castle
6. *"Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again."* Daphne du Maurier, Rebecca

Opening line to a couple of short short stories:

Taylor Swift

"You're in love; it's great, you swipe on your phone and order: the next day a Taylor Swift clone shows up at your house."

Hugh Behm-Steinberg
(<http://gulfcoastmag.org/journal/28.2/2015-barthelme-prize-winner-taylor-swift/>)

Likeable

"She could see she was becoming a thoroughly unlikable person."

Deb Olin Unferth
(<http://muumuuhouse.com/dou.fiction2.html>)

The Outing

An outburst of anger near the road, a refusal to speak on the path, a silence in the pine woods, a silence across the old railroad bridge, an attempt to be friendly in the water, a refusal to end the argument on the flat stones, a cry of anger on the steep bank of dirt, a weeping among the bushes.

Lydia Davis
(<http://www.conjunctions.com/print/article/lydia-davis-c24>)

Girl

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk bare-head in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum in it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?

Jamaica Kincaid

(<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1978/06/26/girl>)

But what do you open with?

- **Dialogue** - between characters

"Where's Papa going with that axe?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast."

Charlotte's Web, E.B. White

- **Dialogue** - By the narrator direct to the audience (first person)

"Call me Ishmael."

Moby Dick, Herman Melville.

- **Action**

"As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect."

The Metamorphosis and Other Stories, Franz Kafka

- **Statement** - (third-person)

"All children, except one, grow up."

J.M.Barrie, Peter Pan

(Written in third-person, up until near the end, when the narrator addresses the audience, and only then is it apparent as a first-person narrative)

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a fortune, must be in want of a wife."

Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice

- **Statement** - (first-person)

"1801 – I have just returned from a visit to my landlord – the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with."

Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë

First Line Tricks of the trade

- **Start with a conjunction word** - And, but, etc. sounds like a conversation has already started.

"But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction."

A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf

- **Reverse psychology**

"If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book."

A Series of Unfortunate Events, Lemony Snicket, Daniel Handler

"If you're going to read this, don't bother."

Choke, Chuck Palahniuk

- **Out of the ordinary**

"It was the day my grandmother exploded."

Iain Banks, The Crow Road

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."

George Orwell, 1984

- **Directly addressing the audience**

"If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two haemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them."

The Catcher in the Rye, J.D Salinger

- **Sitting the reader down to start listening to the story, like a parent with their child**

"In the sea, once upon a time, O my Best Beloved, there was a Whale, and he ate fishes."

Just So Stories, Rudyard Kipling

- **Simple words make it easier to process and fall into the mood of the book**

"There were no curtains up."

A Kestrel for a Knave, Barry Hines

- **Question**

"That Spot! He hasn't eaten his supper. Where can he be?"

Where's Spot?, Eric Hill

"'Yes,' said Tom bluntly, on opening the front door. 'What d'you want?'"

Goodnight, Mister Tom, Michelle Magorian

"'Oh, Lizzie, do you believe how absolutely horrendous I look today!'"

Sweet Valley High: Double Love, Francine Pascal (Rhetorical question.)

Activity:

Look back at your story - it may not look like a story yet, but it is. We have already described our:

Scene
Characters
Characters voice
What the characters are saying
What is going on outside the frame

We are aiming to write a 200 word (or so) short short story, but don't worry about going over at this stage... within reason.

Work out...

- **What mood do you want to create?** - funny, scary, touching, poignant...
- **Whose voice do you want to come through?** - characters 'voices' can still be heard even if the story is written in the third-person and there is no dialogue (e.g. Likeable, Deb Olin Unferth), but you might just want that of the omniscient-narrator, first-person and/or dialogue.
- **Which part of your story are you going to focus on?** - dialogue, feelings, what is going on outside the picture, an event, interaction or a single character, etc. It should be the bit that you find most interesting.
- **How does time move in your story?** - Are you going just show a snapshot of a character's life as it is in the painting (present tense), a past event that in a character's life (past tense), future hope, fears and aspirations of a character's life (future tense). a mixture of all? Are events going to follow on chronologically or bounce about?

Look at the tips below and try to use one or two of them. Don't worry about them all, just pick the ones that work best for you.

Tips:

- Keep words simple, but precise.
- Keep characters to a minimum
- Look to evoke an emotion in someone - so the reader can relate quickly.
- Leave questions unanswered - so the story stays with you long after you stop reading it.
- Start in the middle of the story (no time to set scenes or formally introduce characters etc.) or even start at the end of the story, and use the rest of your words to give 'processing time' to understand what has happened.
- Some people find it easiest to write the whole story and then come back for the first line. Others like to go in with the first line. Do what you feel is most natural to you. You can always change that first line later, if you do decide to start with it first.
- Don't forget the title. It can tell you loads about the story without you having to use up any of your precious word count.
- Imply, don't spell everything out - let your reader do the hard work.
- None of your notes are fixed. Change them as necessary to fit the narrative you want to tell.
- Try and build up you characters through description, what they say or don't say, how others react to them and what others say about them.

E.g.

“What part of London are you headed for’ I asked him.

‘I’m goin’ right through London and out the other side.’ he said. ‘I’m goin’ to Epsom, for the races. It’s Derby Day today.’

‘So it is,’ I said. ‘I wish I were going with you. I love betting on the horses.’

‘I never bet on the horses,’ he said. ‘I don’t even watch ‘em run. That’s a silly business.’

‘Then why do you go?’ I asked.

He didn’t seem to like that question. His little ratty face went absolutely blank and he sat there staring straight ahead at the road, saying nothing.”

(Para 5, The Hitch-hiker, Roald Dahl)

- Think back to the basic narrative Arc if it helps (<https://thewritepractice.com/story-arcs/>)

Exposition: The initial scenes that introduce the audience to the characters, world, and tone of the story. It is relatively short, and no major changes occur.

inciting incident: The inciting incident is an event in a story that upsets the status quo and begins the story’s movement, either in a positive way or negative, that culminates in the climax and denouement.

rising action: The rising action in a story moves the plot toward the climax through a series of progressively more complicated events and decisions by the main character or characters, leading up to a final decision of great significance.

Crisis: the essential moment where the character has to make a choice.

Climax: The climax in a story is the point, usually near the end, where we get the greatest amount of drama, action, and movement.

Denouement: Denouement (pronounced day-new-mah) is a literary term referring to the final part of a narrative, usually in which the outcome of the story is revealed.