

The Short Short Story - Session 2

The first line

You have read the first line of a story, what makes you read on?

- **curiosity** - to learn something, factual or fictitious
- **entertainment** - humour (tickles you), shock (grabs you by the throat), mindless escapism
- **it strikes an emotional cord** - grabs you by the heart, something you relate to, an emotion you want to follow
- **committed to reading the story** - e.g. classic books, friend recommendation, need to for exams, loved the title etc.

Activity:

First lines; what hooks you in: (You may come up with different answers)

Entertainment: humour

"In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing."

A River Runs Through It, Norman Maclean

Curiosity

"On a very hot evening at the beginning of July a young man left his little room at the top of the house in Carpenter Lane, went out into the street, and, as though unable to make up his mind, walked slowly in the direction of Kokushkin Bridge."

Crime and Punishment, Dostoyevsky

Entertainment: shock

"It was a pleasure to burn."

Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury

Strikes an emotional cord

"Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins."

Lolita, Vladimir Nabokov

Entertainment: shock

"Since it's Sunday and it's stopped raining, I think I'll take a bouquet of roses to my grave."

Someone Has Been Disarranging These Roses, Gabriel Garcia Marquez

1)

Curiosity

"Something very peculiar happened today."

Diary of a Madman, Nikolay Gogol

Entertainment: escapism

"Once upon a time..."

Many Authors

2)

Commitment to the story

*"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

Entertainment: humour

"It can hardly be a coincidence that no language on earth has ever produced the expression 'As pretty as an airport.'"

The Long Dark Tea-Time Of The Soul, Douglas Adams

Strikes an emotional cord

"When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears, his eyes were reduced to chinks, and diverging wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of the rising sun."

Far from the Madding Crowd, Thomas Hardy

Commitment to the story, possibly strikes an emotional cord for nostalgia

"'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."

Brideshead Revisited, Evelyn Waugh

3)

Entertainment: shock

"They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time."

Paradise, Toni Morrison

4)

Entertainment: humour

"There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it."

C.S.Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

Strikes an emotional cord - we all know these people

"Mr and Mrs Dursley of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were very normal, thank you very much."

J.K.Rowling, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone:

5)

Curiosity - want to meet the world where all these extremes exist

"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)

Strikes an emotional cord - We're with him. We all know that feeling

"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)

Curiosity - a new way of looking at the world, that most of us haven't considered before.

Strikes an emotional cord - anyone from an unhappy family will prick their ears up.

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina

- Which lines worked for you?
- Why?
- Which didn't?
- Why?
- Would you be tempted to read further with any of the books?
- Any other thoughts?

What is the purpose of the opening line?

- to entice you to read on - creating drama, leaving you with questions that you want answering.
- sets the mood (sad, happy, thoughtful) and tone (humorous, sassy, suspenseful)
- adds something new - character, thought or feeling, action, setting/context

Lines that didn't work:

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)

Why didn't it work?

- Too heavy-handed and melodramatic - prose that are too ornate or elaborate are known as 'purple prose'.
- Not enough subtlety; 'dark and stormy night' is a metaphor for it being a 'dark and stormy story'. It is made worse by the fact it is now a cliché due to so many stories adopting the line.
- It is trying to hook you with with the idea that something big, suspenseful and significant is happening, but it actually has nothing to do with the story itself, so it is a cheat, but because everyone knows it is a cheat, it doesn't work.

On the plus side it led to the annual Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest that was formed in 1982, where the entrants try to compose "the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels." It has multiple categories; romance, crime, horror, adventure, purple prose, children's lit, sci fi, westerns etc. And of course, there is the grand winner:

2019 Grand Prize

"Space Fleet Commander Brad Brad sat in silence, surrounded by a slowly dissipating cloud of smoke, maintaining the same forlorn frown that had been fixed upon his face since he'd accidentally destroyed the phenomenon known as time, thirteen inches ago."

Maxwell Archer, Mt Pleasant, Ontario, Canada

A few of my personal favourites...

2009 Detective category

"She walked into my office on legs as long as one of those long-legged birds that you see in Florida the pink ones, not the white ones except that she was standing on both of them, not just one of them, like those birds, the pink ones, and she wasn't wearing pink, but I knew right away that she was trouble, which those birds usually aren't,"

Eric Rice of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, USA

2000 Romance

"Their's was a love that transcended time, ran roughshod over moral dogmas, guffawed in the face of adversity, rent asunder the shackles of social convention and took a sledgehammer to the crumbling walls of religious doctrine: a passionate love, a tender love, a selfless love, an undying love: not bad for two gerbils born on opposite sides of the glass partition."

Kevin Ruston, Barnet, Hertfordshire, England

2013 Adventure

"I told you to wear sensible shoes, but no, your vanity would not allow it!" he yelled at me as if that had something to do with the airplane crashing into the jungle and all the bodies draped in the trees, but it was just the sort of nonsense I was used to from him, making me wish one or the other of us was hanging dead above us, instead of Rodney."

Thor F. Carden, Madison, TN, USA

2019 Historical Fiction

"Contrary to popular opinion, Jehoshaphat—the 9th-century (BCE) king of Judah who reigned for twenty-five mostly peaceful years yet is best known for his defeat of the Moabites at Elin Gedi in 849 BCE—rarely jumped."

Dave Beck, El Cerrito, CA

- What makes these work, or not work, as the case may be?
- What tips can we get from them, and things we should avoid?

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:

What do they all have in common (apart from being short)?

- punchy
- No floury words
- They all leave you with the word 'what?' - they give more questions than answers.
- They all give us new information.

Opening line to a couple of short short stories:

"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."

Taylor Swift, Hugh Behm-Steinberg

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

- Does it work as an opening line?
- Why?
 - Its funny, grabs your attention, is not what you would expect.
 - Matter-of-fact, straight to the point - almost bullet points
 - Like four short sentences in one.

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

Likable, Deb Olin Unferth

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

- Does it work as an opening line?
- Why?
 - 'She' - a name defines you, this pronoun just defines the sex.
 - self-analytical, a level of truth and honesty that grips
 - Evokes a question of self-doubt... is she talking about me?

Longer short short story opening lines:

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

All one sentence - why?

- keeps it moving, gives a naggy feel, a permanent sense of pressure, each job blends into the next, a never-ending list
- all dialogue - no wasted time in describing things
- reflects the relationship - orders, instructions, guidance/control by one, obedience by another
- reflects the functionality of the life the 'girl' is preparing to live, and the expectations put upon her.
- You can feel the domination of one character over another, as the others personality is being squiggled out of the picture.

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>)

All one sentence - why?

- it is a list, highlighting the key points in an argument
- We don't know the characters, but we know the situation. We have all been there before - the good day that for no real reason goes wrong.
- It has a 'chugging motion' with each section of the sentence starting in 'a' or 'an' followed by the noun - preventing any attachment or nostalgia to the day that is being described, just one painful moment after another.
- The most bear description of the places - shows a sense of movement of the people and time. There is enough to help conger up images in our brains, but nothing extra, as the details really aren't important.

You would think with a short short story that the opening line would be, well short, but as we have seen, not necessarily. What is short, however, is the language... it's not long, flowing prose. Most of it sounds almost bullet pointy. In a short, short story, whatever you are saying, you have to get straight to the point.

It takes time to find your own voice as a writer, but here are a few tips...

From a Stephen King (horror writer) interview with Joe Fassler, 2013):

"An opening line should invite the reader to begin the story," he said. "It should say: Listen. Come in here. You want to know about this." The first sentence sets the stage—however long or short the text—and hints at the "narrative vehicle" by which the writer will propel the book forward. King continued:

[C]ontext is important, and so is style. But for me, a good opening sentence really begins with voice. You hear people talk about "voice" a lot, when I think they really just mean "style." Voice is more than that. People come to books looking for something. But they don't come for the story, or even for the characters. They certainly don't come for the genre. I think readers come for the voice... An appealing voice achieves an intimate connection — a bond much stronger than the kind forged, intellectually, through crafted writing."

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07/why-stephen-king-spends-months-and-even-years-writing-opening-sentences/278043/>

Voice is that of you as a writer - whether you are writing as a narrator, a character or as yourself, your writer's voice will be present through all of it.

Don't worry about fitting it in now as it takes quite some time to find your own writer's voice, but just bear it in mind as you write.

Sometimes writers write the rest of the story and then come back to do the first line as they have a greater understanding of how the rest of the story will go and the mood they want to evoke, sometimes they start with it first.

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

- introduces us to characters, their characteristics and their voice
- intro to relationship dynamics

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

"Call me Ishmael."

Moby Dick, Herman Melville.

- we enter a dialogue with the characters
- we give our attention because conversation is put directly to us
- we engage with a voice
- it introduces us to a character or the narrator

Raymond Chandler (detective fiction write in the mid-20th century) reported advice to writers was, "When in doubt, have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand."

That can apply to an opening line as much as in the middle of a story

- **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

- the excitement is there from the beginning - no long build up
- it opens up questions; who, why, what, where, how, and most importantly, how are we going to get out of this?

- **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

- It gives us information, introducing a new thought, situation, character etc.
- It gives context to the world we are about to enter, setting out the premises we need to accept before we go any further with the story.

- **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

- It gives us information, introducing a new thought, situation, character etc.
- It gives context to the world we are about to enter, setting out the premises we need to accept before we go any further with the story.
- It gives us a voice to one of the characters.

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."

• **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 your 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.