

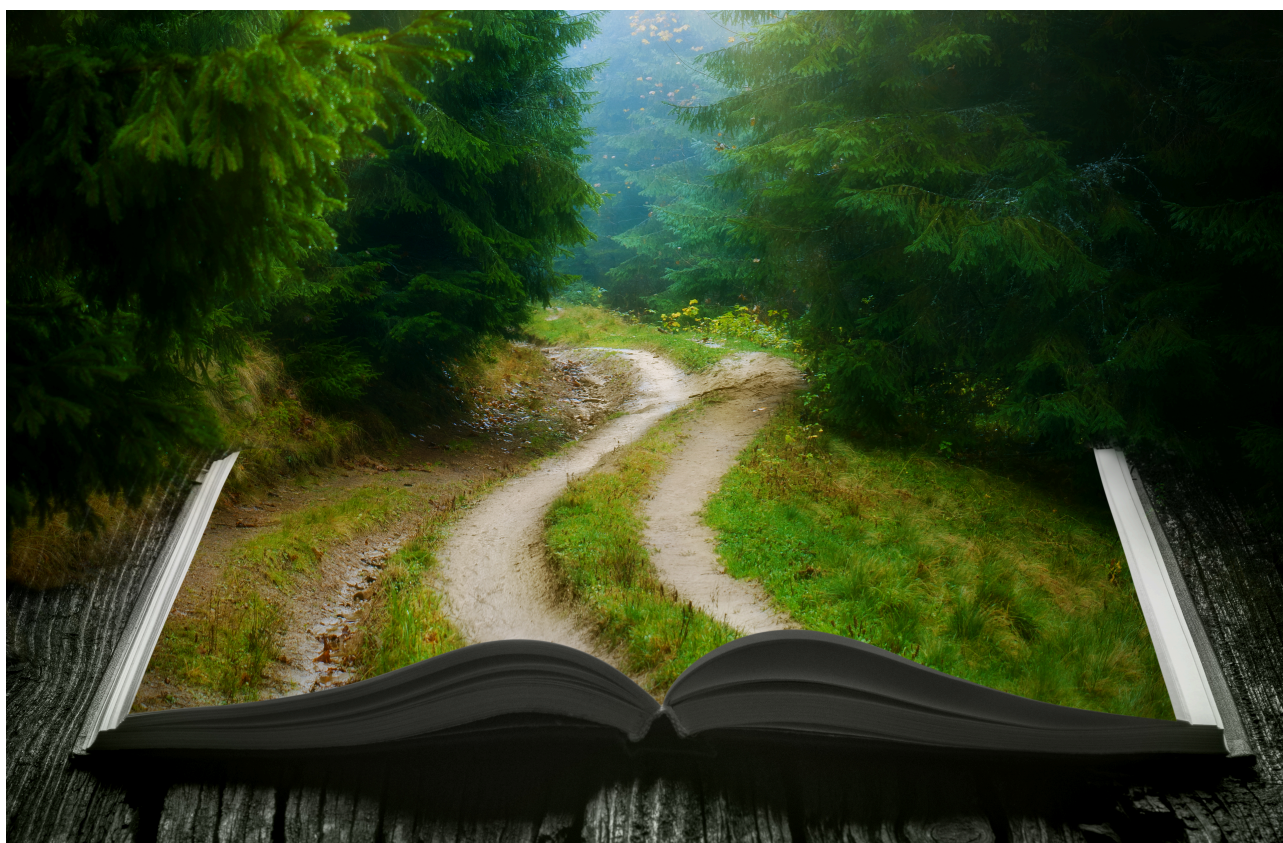
# First Sentences Are Doors to Worlds

## Why Opening Lines Matter

by Gina Collia

You're in a bookshop. Let's make it a secondhand bookshop; they're quieter, smaller and more friendly. And they smell good. You have time on your hands - enough that you don't need to rush - and you're looking for a novel to read. How will you choose it? I'm going to assume that you won't read the entire first chapter of every book you pick up; you have time but probably not an entire week. Will you read the publisher's blurb? Probably. Let's assume that you've done that. What now?

Assuming that you're a sane, respectable reader - not one of those people who actually reads the final page before the rest of the novel - you'll read the first lines of the first chapter. As Ursula K. Le Guin wrote in her essay *The Fishermans' Daughter*, 'first sentences are doors to worlds.' That's where you begin to lose yourself, where the magic begins... or not. If it's the latter, there are plenty more books on those wonderfully sagging wooden shelves to capture your imagination.



So, consider this: those opening lines are your chance, possibly the only one you'll ever have, to hook your own reader. Why would you use them to describe the weather, map out a route to your main character's local shops or comment on the state of her underwear drawer (unless these things play a vital - and I really mean *vital* - part in the

storyline)? And, though I'm talking primarily about writing fiction here, the same goes for non-fiction, business writing, and so on. You have a limited amount of time to capture your audience's attention, so why waste it and risk losing your reader forever? Readers can be unforgiving; they have only so much time, and life's too short to spend it reading uninspiring, uninteresting or bad writing.

Your opening paragraph should tell your audience everything they need to know in order to make one important decision: to read or not to read. It should set the scene, draw the reader in, make tantalising promises (that you keep) about what's to come, and leave them wanting - nay, needing - to know what happens next. Consider the opening paragraph of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*:

'No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.'

We all have different tastes in fiction, but that, to my mind, is the finest opening paragraph ever written (it is also a masterclass in how to use a semicolon, but that's a topic for another day). That paragraph leaves you in no doubt about the kind of book you're reading or the kind of main protagonist you're dealing with. It tells you everything you need to know about Hill House and what you'll encounter within its upright walls, and by the time you've finished reading it - just three (wonderfully punctuated, beautifully constructed) sentences in - you've already been tipped off-balance. Three sentences and Jackson's got you; 'not sane' Hill House, and whatever walks alone there, has got you. There's no escape, so you'll just have to buy the book and read on.

It's up to those first lines to persuade a reader that it's worth reading past them. So, how do you write an opening paragraph that's persuasive enough to do that? Here are a few suggestions:

## **Create Intrigue**

It is important to make your reader curious. You can present them with vital information in a way that sets their brain cogs grinding and gets them asking meaningful questions. Consider the first sentence of *A Christmas Carol*:

'Marley was dead: to begin with.'

Charles Dickens doesn't even need first *lines*; he manages to grab your attention with just six words and an intriguing colon. One short sentence sets the tone for the entire book and presents us with information that's vital to our understanding of everything that comes afterwards. At the same time, it raises more questions than it answers. And death

is usually the end of things, so to place it at the beginning of everything is intriguing in itself. How could anyone not be intrigued? How could anyone not have questions? Now imagine if these had been the opening lines:

‘It was a cold, wet Tuesday, and more rain was predicted for the coming week. The sky was grey, and there had been no sunshine for several days. There was ice on the ground, and the pathways were slippery underfoot. And Marley was dead.’

Marley’s still dead. I’m still telling the reader that he’s dead. But I’m also making it clear that the weather forecast and state of the roads are of more significance. The opening paragraph is the place to showcase everything that’s unique, engaging, intriguing and wonderful about your book. There should be nothing tedious, trivial or mundane - nothing commonplace - about it. It’s highly unlikely that your reader is looking for commonplace.

### **Create a Sense of Unease**

So, your reader is curious. How about making them feel uneasy too? That’s what John Wyndam does at the beginning of *The Day of the Triffids*:

‘When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere.’

What’s wrong? Why is it wrong? If, as I do, you remember the almost silent Sundays of yesteryear, you’ll remember the eeriness of empty streets, shuttered shopfronts and car-free roads. What on earth could ever make a Wednesday feel like that? Whatever it is, it can’t be good. There’s tension there straight away; there’s mystery through uncertainty. It’s the lure of bewilderment. I’m unsettled; aren’t you?

Take a look at the opening line of George Orwell’s *1984*:

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

That’s an opening sentence that you can’t just set aside and forget. It’s too disorientating to be ignored. In what sort of world does a clock strike the unluckiest of numbers? You know right off the mark that Orwell’s world isn’t quite the world you’re used to... the one you’re familiar with and comfortable in. You’re unsettled; you’re uneasy. And so you should be.

### **Be Bold or Shocking**

You can knock your reader off-kilter a little (or a lot) by making a bold or shocking statement, as Michael Cox does in *The Meaning of night*:

‘After killing the red-haired man, I took myself off to Quinn’s for an oyster supper.’

Who in his right mind introduces himself as the sort of person who can kill a man and then go off for a plate of seafood? Is he not in his right mind? Can he possibly be telling the truth? What did the red-haired man do to deserve being killed? Should we dislike the narrator? Were there mitigating circumstances? You're shocked and confused, you have questions - for example, is the narrator reliable? - and you're hooked.

## **Be Concise**

You're not going to get ten pages to set the scene and hook your reader. You'll get a paragraph; you may get two if your reader is feeling generous. So, be brief but comprehensive (remembering that comprehensive and *wordy* are not the same thing). Tell them what they need to know in as few well-chosen words as possible. As Voltaire once said, 'The secret of being boring is to say everything.'

## **Read Other Writers**

To improve your writing, you need to read a lot. To improve your first lines, you need to read a lot of first lines. Go to your own bookshelves, pick up your favourite writers' books and read their opening lines. A lot of publishers and writers offer sample pages of their work online; usually you get to read the first few pages at least. You don't have to read the whole book; focus on the first paragraph. What works? What doesn't work? Why does it work? Why doesn't it work? Keep notes.

## **Be Your Reader**

It's difficult to be objective when reading your own work. You'll never be able to approach it in exactly the same way as your reader. But you can take a break from what you've written, do your best to distance yourself from your work and make an attempt at seeing it with fresh eyes. Close the file and leave it be for a fortnight, or tuck the manuscript away in a drawer if you're a lover of pen and paper, and give yourself time to forget. Then return to it as a *reader*. Read nothing but your opening lines. And I mean *read*; I don't mean edit or proofread. Then ask yourself this: if you'd picked your book up in a bookshop, and all you had to go on was that first paragraph, would you want to read what happens next? If the answer is no, or even a don't know, then it's unlikely that a complete stranger, who isn't as attached to your work as you are, would want to bother either.

As I said before, the opening paragraph is the place to showcase everything that's wonderful and unique about your story and hook your readers. It's the place where readers begin to lose themselves, where the magic begins, but it's also the place where readers are lost, sometimes forever. So, make every word of those opening lines count and give your readers reason to keep on reading!

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