

Opening Your Book with a BANG!

by Tara Johnson

Famous First Words...

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” ~*A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

“Call me Ishmael.” ~*Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” ~*Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

“It was a pleasure to burn.” ~*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

“You better not never tell nobody but God.” ~*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

“Where’s Papa going with that ax?” ~*Charlotte’s Web* by E.B. White

“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” ~*1984* by George Orwell

There’s nothing that sets mood, reveals character, raises intrigue, and invites readers into your story like a power-packed opening.

When I was editing my story *All Through the Night*, I studied the first chapter, sensing something was off. Turning to my bookcase, I grabbed the newest story I was dying to read. *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* by Patti Callahan.

I flipped to the first page.

“From the beginning it was the Great Lion who brought us together.”

That’s a great line.

I reached for *Pride and Prejudice*.

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

I yanked volume after volume off my shelves to examine each book’s opening lines and turned to stare at the first page of my story.

That’s what was missing. An intriguing opening.

All Through the Night originally opened up like this:

“Cadence Piper walked down the darkened street, breath ragged.”

It tells the reader nothing about Cadence, nor does it invoke curiosity.

The rewrite:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.’ I will fear no evil. I will fear no evil...Cadence Piper walked down the darkened street, clutching her reticule to her middle.”

Your opening sentence is what draws the reader in, without giving away too much of the story. It’s a curiosity provoker, an open invitation to discover more.

A great opening line should:

1. Raise curiosity (aka Baiting the Hook)
2. Establish genre
3. Display your voice (your distinct fingerprint)
4. Twist expectations (use the element of surprise)
5. Set up what’s ahead
6. Be memorable

The lovely thing about power-packing the opening sentence of your story, and each chapter, is there’s a variety of sentences to choose from.

1. Action sentence.

This should point to something intrinsically important to the character’s situation, or hint at the conflict that is coming.

Ex. “When the phone rang, Parker was in the garage, killing a man.” ~ Richard Stark, *Firebreak*

2. Character Sentence.

This tells us more than our character’s name: it reveals what they value.

Ex. “When the blind man arrived in the city, he claimed that he had traveled across a desert of living sand.” ~Kevin Brockmeier, *A Brief History of the Dead*

3. Dialogue

Dialogue immediately pulls the reader into the thick of the action. Note of warning: be careful to quickly establish who is speaking and give the reader some sense of time and place.

Ex. “He speaks in your voice, American, and there’s a shine in his eyes that’s halfway hopeful.” ~DeLillo, *Underworld*

4. Thought

This is highly effective when done well. The higher the stakes, the more desperate, or quirky, or shocking the thought.

Ex. “Don’t fail. Tonight of all nights, don’t fail.” ~Johnson, *Engraved on the Heart*

5. Statement

This is the broadest yet creatively diverse of all. It can be self-deprecating, philosophical, humorous, or mysterious, as long as it fits the tone and premise of your story.

Ex. “I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homework that Truth is a matter of the imagination.” ~LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Ex. “All children, except one, grow up.” ~Barrie, *Peter Pan*

6. World-Building

This transports the reader into a new place. It can be a galaxy far, far away, or to the peaceful shores of Prince Edward Island.

Ex. “Far out into the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the western spiral arm of the Galaxy, lies a small, unregarded yellow sun.” ~Adams, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*

Let me show you how to play around with your opening sentence. I’ll craft a basic sentence and then re-write it into these different variations:

Charlotte dug her fingers through the soil.

An **action** sentence.

Charlotte scraped her fingers through the dark soil, ignoring the sting of her fingers from her bleeding, broken nails.

A **character** sentence:

Charlotte’s muscles screamed as she scraped her fingers through the dark soil yet again, searching for potatoes. She alone left to appease her father’s demands. But at least alone meant peace.

A **dialogue** sentence:

“How many more potatoes I gotta dig up?” Charlotte called over her shoulder as she wiped away a bead of sweat trickling down her temple. Dirt caked to her fingers and she knelt in the loamy soil. Father glowered from his chair in the shade of their rickety porch.

“Til the job is done.”

A **thought** sentence:

I’ll never eat a potato again as long as I live. Charlotte glared at the dark soil as she sat back on her aching legs, weary of digging through the unyielding soil.

A **statement** sentence:

A garden was an interesting place. Full of mystery and tranquility. A chore for some and an escape for others.

A **world-building** sentence:

Beneath gnarled trees and rolling meadows, beside a log cabin squatting low in thick humidity of Southern air, a lone figure hovered over the dark soil of a small garden.

I'm sure you've noticed these varied openings can include more than one technical sentence. It can be a couple, woven together, that sets the mood and raises curiosity. This isn't just a technique for novel openings, but for chapters as well.

How to Apply It...

Take the current opening line of your WIP (work-in-progress) and rewrite it in all six of these sentence types. You may be surprised how much it changes.

When in doubt, don't be afraid to start with a classic.

"Once upon a time..."