

## OPENING LINES

*When in doubt, or wherever possible, tell the whole story of the novel in the first sentence.*

—John Irving

A great opening works like a Baked Alaska: The server lights a match and it bursts into flame. It's mesmerizing, and when the flame dies down, you are ready to eat.

Open with the most important thing you have to say. Spend your capital—fast. Open with a swift, well-placed whack: “I steal.” (Mona Simpson, *Lawns*)

For five years I was on the team of short-fiction readers for *The Seattle Review*. What an enlightening experience. Above all, I learned—again and again—how a weak opening can kill a piece. Nice writing does not do the job. A nice description does not do the job. A windup explanatory sentence, typically begun with a dependent clause, does not do the job.

- Often a good opening consists of a small sentence that concentrates into its short little self the essence (sometimes the central dramatic conflict) of what follows.

“The first time I cheated on my husband, my mother had been dead for exactly one week.”  
—Cheryl Strayed, *The Love of my Life*

- Begin with a...truth that the rest of the piece then proceeds to prove out or defend. Or begin with your conclusion.

“Death is ordinary.” —William Vollmann, *Three Meditations on Death*

- What is the central question of the piece? Ask the question in the first sentence.

“Why do I fast?” —Wole Soyinka, *Why do I Fast?*

- An elegant and simple way to begin is to state directly what a piece is about in the first sentence or at least by the end of the first paragraph.

“This is a story about two writers.” —Kathryn Chetkovich, *Envy*

- Immediately establish your own or the protagonist's connection to the subject matter at hand.

“I stand here ironing and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.”  
—Tillie Olsen, *I Stand Here Ironing*

**(Excerpts from *The Writer's Portable Mentor* by Priscilla Long , pp. 165-174)**

### Examples of Powerful Opening Lines:

“The magician's underwear has just been found in a cardboard suitcase floating in a stagnant pond on the outskirts of Miami.”  
—Tom Robbins, *Another Roadside*

“It was the day my grandmother exploded.”  
—Iain M. Banks, *The Crow Road*

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

“Francis Marion Tarwater's uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get a jug filed, had to finish it and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Savior at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up.”  
—Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away*