

21W.755, Writing and Reading Short Stories (Fall 2006)
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Sessions 17 and 18: Where to Start

Exercise: Go around campus like you haven't seen it. Choose one place, *look* at it. How is it unique. Give a few details.

(Have students write 1 paragraph [3 sentences] about the place. Read them and see how quickly people recognize it.)

Beginnings – Where to begin?

New writers often find beginnings difficult – because it *is* difficult.

- Beginning
- Middle (most difficult for experienced writers)
- End (easiest)

Make choices about your beginning when you're done (or almost).

The beginning is often the most heavily rewritten.

This does not mean that you can be sloppy in writing the beginning, but it means that you should be aware that the choices you make at first **CAN BE CHANGED**, and very possibly will be. Unless the beginning just comes, don't feel like every word is set in stone.

This is one of the reasons people have trouble writing—blank paper/screen is daunting and you feel like you have got to get down a great first sentence, or a great first paragraph.

The hook – and the tyranny of the hook

(e.g. instructor's best hook: "I hated my second funeral, which was the only one I managed to attend." Lewitt, Shariann. *Rebel Sutra*. New York, NY: Tor. ISBN: 978-0812571189.)

A hook is a device that startles the reader in the first sentence, that is so compelling that the reader needs to continue the story. This can be useful, but is not always a good idea.

The purpose of the first sentence is to get the reader to read the next sentence.

This might appear silly, or self-evident, but writers often think that the first sentence has got to be special, memorable, and make the reader read the entire story. This is not true. The first sentence needs to get the reader to read the next sentence and the one after that. No story can depend entirely on the first sentence.

So—do NOT let that first sentence, or first paragraph, or first page, freeze you.

Think of the hook or the stunning first sentence as being akin to hitting the reader over the head. Yes, this gets the reader's attention. But you can ALSO think of a first sentence (or paragraph) as taking the reader gently by the hand and guiding him/her into the story. It may not be as exciting as being hit over the head, but it is just as effective!

Available choices are:

- Begin in the middle of the action.
- Begin *before* the action begins. (Beware backstory! Writers love backstory but reader do *not*.)
- Begin well after action has happened or begun (flashbacks, reminiscent voice).

Ways to Begin¹

1. With a **generalization** (e.g. "Boston girls shouldn't date Southern men.")
2. With **dialog**
3. With a **description of a person**
4. A **setting** and **one character**
5. **Narrative summary** (e.g. "My current unfortunate circumstance called to mind a Mr. Applerow who owned a dairy farm down the road from my father's garage.")
6. With a **group** but no dialog (generalized description of the group)
7. A **reminiscent narrator** (e.g. "When I first got off the train in Montreal, I didn't know a soul and I had no place to stay.")
8. Establish **point of view** (1st person – establish character and voice, 3rd person – establish voice and character, place)

If you are having trouble and can't quite get the story going, try a different place in time to begin. Begin the story much later and make what is now the beginning flashback. Or begin much earlier in time, in the roots of the now event.

Childhood narrator

- a specific narrative voice
- event 3rd person – words, vocabulary, types of things a child notices

We all assume we can write from the child's point of view because we once *were* children. But we *forget* a lot of what a child's focus is like.

We have to develop the child internally as any other character, but be constantly aware of what is *child*.

Examples:

The Lovely Bones

The Little Friend

A Member of the Wedding

To Kill a Mockingbird

Childhood narrator is different from a book *for* children or young adult.

Universal vs. Generic

Universal is good—we can all relate to something universal. But universal does not mean devoid of individuality. We can see through/enjoy the individuality to the essential.

¹ Adapted from: Bernays, Anne, and Pamela Painter. *What If Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Longman, 2003. ISBN: 0321107179.

Generic=boring. And we don't believe generic because nothing and no one really IS generic. Generic is a kind of two-dimensional place holder.

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21W.755 / 21W.757 Writing and Reading Short Stories
Spring 2012

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