

the poem through several revisions, you will have seen the text so many times that it becomes a bit of a blur. We tend to memorize our texts.

In sum, then, an aspect of word processing that seems entirely mechanical, graphic, even trivial can be used to achieve a poem that's more linguistically and intellectually challenging.

(H.O.)

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Revising Openers in Prose Genres: Eight Options

Use to Write:	Short Fiction; Longer Fiction; Creative Nonfiction; Autobiography; Essay
Ideas and Concepts to Explore:	formulaic; personification; riff; voyeurism; writer/reader "contract".
Authors/Works Mentioned:	[each of the eight numbered tactics includes a quotation from a story and identifies the author].

It's obvious how crucial the first sentence, first few sentences, and/or first paragraph of short stories are. "Openers" begin that precarious contract (always subject to immediate cancellation) between the narrative and the reader. Sometimes as we revise, therefore, it's good to focus even more than usual on the story's opener. Here are some "templates," if you will, for opening up narratives. They are substantially revised versions of ones that appeared in *Writer's Digest* (June 1991), pp. 37–39. A list of eight "model" openers may seem a little too cut-and-dried or formulaic, but that's not the purpose; over the years, looking at such models has helped students first to remember they have available to them more than one way to open for the narrative they're working on, and second to analyze "openers" they have already crafted. So these eight narrative tactics are *not* offered as "sure-fire bets" or "quick (and slick) fixes" but as one picture of the *range* of options open to you. You might choose a story you're working on and begin by seeing if only *one* of the options below might work, by improvising upon it, and by seeing what effect it has on the narrative and how the narrative might have to change to accommodate the new opening tactic. Or you might situate the opening sentences of an existing draft among the options. Experiment. (And with some adaptation, some of these tactics may work well with nonfiction writing, too.)

1. Conflict; or "Tell, Don't Show"

You might call this the "keep it simple" opener: state a conflict or a problem flatly in the first sentence, and as you revise from there, see where the paragraph seems to want to go. This also allows you to ignore, *for the moment*, that "Show, don't tell" advice that seems ubiquitous in writing classes. For example, the first sentence of James Purdy's story, "Cutting Edge," is:

Mrs. Zeller opposed her son's beard.

Nothing fancy here! Purdy's narrator doesn't "work up" to anything. Sometimes such unadorned bluntness is refreshing—both to you, the writer, and your readers.

2. Character

In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Flannery O'Connor places her reader inside the mind of the main character, Julian, and also quickly suggests the complex relationship he has with his mother:

Her doctor had told Julian's mother that she must lose 20 pounds on account of her blood pressure, so on Wednesday nights Julian had to take her downtown on the bus for a reducing class at the Y. . . . Julian did not like to consider all she did for him, but every Wednesday night he braced himself and took her.

The "problems" suggested here aren't as out-in-the-open as the "problem" stated in Purdy's first sentence, but there is a sense in which a variety of pressures are beginning to build. If you've read this story, you know how crucial buses and blood pressure become in the plot (I won't ruin it for those who haven't read the story), so O'Connor's opener is also efficient, economical, in the sense of getting to what is, what will be, crucial as the narrative plays out. Maybe you can revise an opener so that it locates itself "inside" a character or represents one character's view of another.

3. The Daily Double: Conflict and Character

Here's how John Updike's well-known story, "A & P," begins:

In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits.

Hmmm. The "stated problem" isn't as blunt here as it is in Purdy's first sentence, but we know something's up. And we don't get the psychological quicksand suggested by O'Connor. But we get an appealing blend of character and conflict, for there's a strong hint of personality, of a voice rattling off a story, and the action described gives us the sense that we're at least rolling toward a problem, a conflict, a collision of some kind—doesn't it? What do you think? If you have a first-person story going, you might try something breezy and quick like Updike's opener and see how it works.

4. Talk Is Good, Not Just Cheap

E.B. White starts "The Second Tree From the Corner" this way:

"Ever have any bizarre thoughts?" asked the doctor.

Mr. Trexler failed to catch the word. "What kind?" he said.

Almost regardless of what they're saying, *two-characters-talking* has a way of jumpstarting a narrative. Often the effect is one of "beginning in midstream" (*in medias res*). Maybe it's that we feel we're listening in, eavesdropping. I don't know for sure. Maybe it's because in virtually every dialogue, every exchange of words, there's the potential of conflict—misunderstanding, disagreement, overreaction. It could be that "buried"

several paragraphs into your story there's a dialogue; you could try starting your story *there*. Give yourself and your reader two voices to listen to.

5. Nobody Home, Just Yet

Often when I read stories or novels that begin by deliberately establishing the setting, I get a little bored—because I want to get to the representations of people, characters, the actors in the drama. There are times, though, when description of setting brings its own drama, as the following opener from Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" does (in my opinion):

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun . . .

For me, the extremity, the severe sparseness of the setting, begins to build a tension of its own here. (For similar reasons, I also liked the opening scenes of the so-called "Spaghetti Westerns" of the late 1960s and early 1970s—many featuring Clint Eastwood, many directed by the Italian, Sergio Leone, and most shot, ironically, on the turf of Hemingway's story, Spain.) And the imagery is striking while not succumbing to the temptation of *personifying* nature; personification often comes off as forcing the drama, as does a gothic description: You know—thunder, wind in big trees, lightning flashing to reveal the outlines of a big ol' house. Try opening with setting description, but be a tad sly about it.

6. Characters On a Landscape

This tactic is another daily double, if you will: It starts fairly conventionally, with characters in the drama, but it views them from a distance, as part of the landscape or setting and creates some subtle suspense. The example I've chosen is from Alice Adams' story, "At The Beach":

The very old couple, of whom everyone at the beach is so highly aware, seem themselves to notice no one else at all.

The tension here is refreshingly simple, the implicit message being "We watch them but they don't watch us"—a hint of mystery, a hint of voyeurism, drawing us into the narrative. We like to watch people, don't we—to spy a little bit? You might capture that feeling in an opener that shares some elements with Adams'.

7. Desire

Desire is ubiquitous in fiction. Sometimes I think, "What else is fiction but narrative expression of what people want but can't have, what they get but don't want (while they want for something else), and so forth?" So why not "begin with desire?"—as Walter Howerton does in "The Persistence of Memory":

Sometimes I wish I had gone to Viet Nam . . .

The first person narrator here wants something, yes, but also he wants something complicated, even counter-to-common-sense: to have fought in a

war, and not just any war but the Viet Nam war. It's hard *not* to be interested in this expressed desire and the narrative flowing from it.

8. Theme

Especially after decades of literary criticism that has deflated the importance of, even the very concept of, "theme," this opener may seem old-fashioned, belonging to the age of Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice* begins, "It is a truth universally known that . . ."). For that very reason, however, it can be a refreshing opener because it gives the reader what the reader may least expect—a kind of thesis statement, which is supposed to belong to the domain of essays, not stories. Surprises are good. The example I've chosen is from the story, "Widow Water," by Frederick Busch:

What to know about pain is how little we do to deserve it, how simple it is to give, how hard to lose.

As you revise, try some of these. Experiment with them. Just as importantly, start your own list of openers you like (or don't like). Take them apart, see how they function, see what narrative moves follow them, improvise, "play riffs." How to *open* a narrative is endlessly fascinating, terribly difficult, charmingly challenging, almost always important as you revise and edit.

(H.O.)