

20 Great Opening Lines to Inspire the Start of Your Story

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As Glinda the Good Witch says in *The Wizard of Oz*, “It’s always best to start at the beginning.” That’s where editors and literary agents generally get going, so perhaps you should, too. Here are some strategies, accompanied by exemplars from literature, for making the first line of your novel or short story stand out so that the reader can’t help but go on to the second and the third and so on to see what else you have to say:

1. Absurd

“‘Take my camel, dear,’ said my Aunt Dot, as she climbed down from this animal on her return from High Mass.” — Rose Macaulay, *The Towers of Trebizond*
Are you in the mood for amusement? This opening line makes it clear that farce is in force.

2. Acerbic

“The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children’s games from the beginning, and will probably do it till the end, which is a nuisance for the few people who grow up.” — G. K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*
Astute observations accompanied by a implied sigh of disgust are tricky to master, but Chesterton, one of the most multifaceted men of letters, lights the way for you with this sample of the form.

3. Bleak

“The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel.” — William Gibson, *Neuromancer*
Oh, by the way, just in case you missed the forecast? Don’t expect any fluffy bunnies or fragrant blossoms or dulcet giggles to show up in this seminal cyberpunk story. A spot-on metaphor expresses the story’s nihilism, letting you know what you’re in for and lugubriously inviting you in.

4. Confiding

“There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.” — C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*
The author of the Chronicles of Narnia no sooner introduces by name a new character in the latest installment than, in just five more words, he succeeds in telling you everything you need to know about him. Well, got that out of the way.

5. Cynical

“Justice? — You get justice in the next world, in this world you have the law.” — William Gaddis, *A Frolic of His Own*

Somebody got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning — and maybe the bed’s shoved up against the wall, and that attitude is a permanent condition. The stage is set for an unhappy beginning, middle, and ending.

6. Disorienting

“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” — George Orwell, *1984*
Ho-hum — huh? Orwell’s opening line creates a slight but immediate discordance that sets you up for an unsettling experience.

7. Enigmatic

“Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.” — Anne Tyler, *Back When We Were Grownups*

It will not surprise you to learn that the protagonist sets about retracing her steps and striving to correct the error, but after reading this subtle but striking first line, can you resist finding out how she does it?

8. Epigrammatic

“The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” — L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*
This offbeat observation from Hartley’s novel of painful reminiscence is a blindsidingly original statement that one will feel compelled to read about just how the writer acquired this wisdom.

9. Expository

“In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen, and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.” — Norman McLean, *A River Runs Through It*

By the end of this paragraph, you already know a great deal about the narrator’s family (especially the father) — but thanks to the introduction, as clear as a snow-fed mountain river, you want to know more.

10. Foreboding

“I have never begun a novel with more misgiving.” — W. Somerset Maugham, *The Razor’s Edge*
The author is a bit intrusive here, true enough, but it is kind of him to let us know that we’re in for a bit of unpleasantness. But if he can express such profound reluctance, it must be quite a story.

11. Gritty

“There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands’ necks. Anything can happen. You can even get a full glass of beer at a cocktail lounge.” — Raymond Chandler, *Red Wind*

Chandler, the master of hard-bitten crime noir, makes it obvious that this story is not going to end well. You can almost hear the smoky, whiskey-soured, world-weary narration in your head. And this quote comes from one of Chandler’s half-forgotten short stories.

12. Inviting

“Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.” — Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

Dickens extends his arm toward the passageway within, welcoming you to enter what promises to be an entertaining story.

13. Picaresque

“In the last years of the Seventeenth Century there was to be found among the fops and fools of the London coffee-houses one rangy, gangling fritch called Ebenezer Cooke, more ambitious than talented, and yet more talented than prudent, who, like his friends-in-folly, all of whom were supposed to be educating at Oxford or Cambridge, had found the sound of Mother English more fun to game with than her sense to labor over, and so rather than applying himself to the pains of scholarship, had learned the knack of versifying, and ground out quires of couplets after the fashion of the day, afroth with Joves and Jupiters, aclang with jarring rhymes, and string-taut with similes stretched to the snapping-point.” — John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*

Oh, but you know this novel is going to be juicy. This snide introduction to the main character conveys a promise of a continuous feed of schadenfreude.

14. Pithy

“Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board.” — Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Every once in a while there comes an opening line that seems to have an entire story folded up inside it. But it’s just the label on the envelope. And I challenge you to withstand the urge to open it up and read the message.

15. Poetic

“We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall.” — Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*

A somber, stately metaphor draws us in despite the pervasively gloomy imagery.

16. Prefatory

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” — Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

Many people associate Dickens with whimsy and eccentricity, but *A Tale of Two Cities* is a stern study of the insanity of mob rule, and this floridly eloquent prologue sets the stage like the presenter of a Shakespearean prologue: “Epic Ahead.”

17. Romantic

“He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad.” — Raphael Sabatini, *Scaramouche*

Romantic, that is, in the sense of lust for life, not love for another. This author of swashbucklers like *The Sea Hawk and Captain Blood* (and, of course, *Scaramouche*) lets you know right away that you are about to meet someone larger than life.

18. Sarcastic

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

Austen didn’t invent the word *snark* — but she certainly refined the application of the quality. Notice, though, how subtle this line is. It’s a bon mot — understated, yet with teeth behind that prim smile.

19. Sour

“If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.” — J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

Can you find it in your heart to forgive this young man his grievously bad attitude? More likely, you’ll be impressed by — and want to immerse yourself in more of — his insolence.

20. Unexpected

“Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu.” — Ha Jin, *Waiting*

This seemingly pedestrian introduction upends itself with an intriguing premise that raises a question in the reader’s mind that must be answered.