

Narrative Openings

Good openings need character, conflict and forward momentum.

Interesting characters *are* complex and conflicted, something has happened to the character before the story begins and your opening should hint at where that character is going next.

Your opening should be at a moment when conflict drives the character to respond in some way. The possible resolutions must not be simple or obvious, your reader needs to have questions and be invested in how your character will attempt to address the conflicts facing them. A well-written, interesting, conflicted character will naturally push forward your narrative, as they seek to resolve the problems they are experiencing.

There should also be a distinct style and purpose to the writing, which suggests the ideas it might explore.

Consider the following openings:

“You must not tell anyone, my mother said, what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself, she jumped into the family well.” – *Beginning of the memoir of Maxine Hong Kingston*

- **Character:** someone with a dark family secret
- **Moment of conflict:** the revelation of a secret
- **Forward projection of tension and conflict:** why did she kill herself? Why was it hushed up? Who was she?
- **Ideas/purpose:** family, saving face, culture/identity, mental health.

“There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.” -*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* – C.S. Lewis

- **Character:** a boy with a comical, awful name who has done something bad but clearly also has redeemable qualities (almost).
- **Moment of conflict:** After the character has been punished for something.
- **Forward projection of tension and conflict:** if he was all bad or all good, there would be no tension. As he *almost* deserves it, conflict within himself about doing the right thing is suggested. What did he do and will he change for better or worse?
- **Ideas/purpose:** Justice, redemption, growing up.

"It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York." - *Sylvia Plath: The Bell Jar (1963)*

- **Character:** Internally conflicted, lost character, morbid fascination with death and crime
- **Moment of conflict:** Realisation of the pointlessness of her life
- **Forward projection of tension and conflict:** How is she associated with the execution of the spies? Why did she go to New York originally? What was she hoping for? Why has she lost that hope? Why is the summer strange and suffocating?
- **Ideas/purpose:** the purpose of life, identity, mental health, death.

Use one of the openings below to start your own story.

"It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen." George Orwell
Nineteen Eighty-Four.

"In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together." *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* – Carson McCullers.

"All this happened, more or less." —*Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut

"The war in Zagreb began over a pack of cigarettes."

—*Girl at War* by Sara Nović

"Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice."

—*100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez

"Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure."

—*The Stranger* by Albert Camus

"'You've no choice. Look back.'"

—*The True Story of Hansel and Gretel* by Louise Murphy

"The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new."

—*Murphy* by Samuel Beckett

Opening example: Tim Winton's 'Big World'

After five years of high school the final November arrives and leaves as suddenly as a spring storm. Exams. Graduation. Huge beach parties. Biggie and me, we're feverish with anticipation; we steel ourselves for a season of pandemonium. But after the initial celebrations, nothing really happens, not even summer itself. Week after week an endless misting drizzle wafts in from the sea. It beads in our hair and hangs from the tips of our noses while we trudge around town in the vain hope of scaring up some action. The southern sky presses down and the beaches and bays turn the colour of dirty tin. Somehow our crappy Saturday job at the meatworks becomes full-time and then Christmas comes and so do the dread exam results. The news is not good. A few of our classmates pack their bags from university and shoot through. Cheryl Button gets into Medicine. Vic Lang, the copper's kid, is dux of the school and doesn't even stay for graduation. And suddenly there we are, Biggie and me, heading to work every morning in a frigid wind in the January of our new lives, still in jeans and boots and flannel shirts, with beanies on our heads and the horizon around our ears.