Boo!

Scared you, didn't I? But I also got you to read on to this second sentence. So, even though it was only four characters long, that first line did its job: it served as a hook to bring you into this piece of writing. In that sense, it was a great beginning -- and "great beginnings" are the topic of this, the first installment of the "On Writing" column that I will be contributing to each issue of On Spec. A Canadian horror writer I know said something very intriguing recently: he was looking forward to the day when he was well known, so that he wouldn't have to start off with a grabby first sentence. He wanted to be able to begin subtly, with the reader trusting that the story would be worth his or her time just on the strength of the author's name.

But even the lions of literature still go for the snappy start. Consider this opening line from Robertson Davies's Murther & Walking Spirits: "I was never so amazed in my life as when the Sniffer drew his concealed weapon from its case and struck me to the ground, stone dead."

In a short story, you really do have to hook the audience with the very first sentence. With a novel, you probably have the luxury of using an entire paragraph to snare the reader. But no matter which one you're writing, there are only four major ways to start your tale.

First, there's evocative description. In some ways, this is the hardest, because nothing is happening. And yet, if you do it well, the reader will not be able to resist continuing: "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (William Gibson's Neuromancer); "Halifax Harbor at night is a beautiful sight, and June often finds the MacDonald Bridge lined with lovers and other appreciators. But in Halifax even June can turn on one with icy claws" (Spider Robinson's Mindkiller). Note what these two examples have in common: beautiful use of the language. If you are going to start off with static description, then you must dazzle with your imagery or poetry.

A second approach is to start by introducing an intriguing character: "Mrs. Sloan had only three fingers on her left hand, but when she drummed them against the countertop, the tiny polished bones at the end of the fourth and fifth stumps clattered like fingernails" ("The Sloan Men" by David Nickle, in Northern Frights 2, edited by Don Hutchison); "My name is Robinette Broadhead, in spite of which I am male" (Gateway by Frederik Pohl). The reader immediately wants to know more about Mrs. Sloan and Robinette, and so forges ahead.

The third -- and trickiest -- approach is to start off with a news clipping, or journal entry, or something else that isn't actually the main narrative of the story. It can be done effectively: the horror novels Carrie by Stephen King and The Night Stalker by Jeff Rice begin just this way. Be careful of this technique: you might think that by using such a device to tell the reader that the following story is significant, you'll be forgiven for an otherwise slow start. But Carrie immediately goes into its famous gym-class shower scene, and The Night Stalker launches right into the first of the vampire murders. Really,

this kind of beginning just postpones the inevitable -- you'll have to follow up your news clipping, or whatever, with one of the other four classic narrative-hook techniques.

The fourth, and most versatile way, is to start off in the middle of the action. Sometimes a single sentence is all it takes: "Because he thought that he would have problems taking the child over the border into Canada, he drove south, skirting the cities whenever they came and taking the anonymous freeways which were like a separate country" (Peter Straub's Ghost Story). All the explanation can come later -- for a hook, all you need to know is that someone is on the run. Immediately, you began asking questions: Who is running? What's he running from? Is it his child, or has he kidnapped one? And suddenly you're reading along, wanting to know the answers. Another example: "The Dracon's three-fingered hands flexed. In the thing's yellow eyes I could read the desire to either have those fingers around a weapon or my throat" (Barry B. Longyear's Hugo-winning novella "Enemy Mine"). We want to dig in and find out what a Dracon is and how the narrator ended up in a life-or-death onfrontation with it.

A variation on starting in the middle is leading off with dialog: "Eddie wants to see you." / "What's he want?" Nita asked. "Another blowjob?" (Charles de Lint's "In this Soul of a Woman," from Love in Vein edited by Poppy Z. Brite). People love overhearing other people's fascinating conversations, and you can snare them easily as long as your characters are saying interesting things. But if you're going to start somewhere other than the natural beginning of the tale, you have to choose carefully. I often take an exciting scene from near the end, move it to the beginning, and then tell most of the rest of the tale as a flashback leading up to that scene. An extreme example is my novel The Terminal Experiment, which starts out with a female police detective dying in hospital. The scene in which she is fatally wounded doesn't occur until ninety percent of the way through the book.

Whatever you choose, give it a lot of thought. Most people I know try to write the beginnings of their stories first. Although that seems sensible, I suggest you wait until you've got everything else finished -- then work out the best possible start. It really is the most important element of your story -- because it's the part that determines whether the rest gets read at all.