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In the Beginning: Creating, Dynamic, Meaningful, & Compelling Openings

Richard Goodman | October/November 2012



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The beginning of your story, essay, or novel carries more weight than any other part of your work. This is simply because it *is* the beginning. The reason for its prominence is similar to seeing anything for the first time. Your senses are attuned. Your expectations are high. You are looking intently at what's there. It's analogous to seeing a person for the first time. When someone walks into a room, a person you've never seen before, you experience that person intensely. What is the person wearing? How tall is he or she? What color are his or her eyes? How does he or she walk? What can you read in his or her face? Are you attracted to him or her? And on and on; a flood of impressions, things noted and stored, judgments made with an alert, impressionable mind.

The next time that person enters the room, though—i.e., your second line or second paragraph

—everything is calmer, the intensity is far less. You may have certain new impressions or observations, and the first ones may be refined, but that second look is nowhere as potent, as intense, as the first. That person may not be old news, but he or she is certainly not new news.

What can, and should, an opening do, besides be irresistible? It can provide information. Not necessarily by providing facts—although it can do that—because information can be emotional or tonal.

Looking at your first sentence or the first paragraph that way is helpful. (When I refer to beginnings here, I'll freely allude to the first sentence as well as to the first paragraph as the situation requires. The principle is the same.) And revelatory. It shows you the impact it can have. And does. It can help you to understand the opportunity you have as a writer.

There are certain things the beginning of your story can do and, because of its position, its first-in-line-ness, is poised to do. (Let's call all the categories—novel, story, essay—simply, “story.”) But there is one thing it must do: compel the reader to continue reading, or, to put it another way, make the reader unable *not* to read on. If the reader stops cold after the first line, it doesn't matter what else that line does, or what follows. Granted, the reader is usually fairly tolerant at the beginning of a story. He or she will usually give you the benefit of the doubt and continue reading, but if the first sentence—or sentences—aren't especially inviting or tempting, the reader is already wary and perhaps even slightly disappointed. You have a strike against you.

Some examples:

“Call me Ishmael.”

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”

“None of them knew the color of the sky.”

“They threw me off the hay truck about noon.”

Each of these openings fulfills, in its own way, the task of being irresistible. Herman Melville, Jane Austen, Stephen Crane, and James M. Cain each do it in his or her own way, of course. Each first line has a compactness and confidence, a sense that there is more here and that the “more” will be worth your while. You don't want to know, in *Moby Dick*, *why* they call him Ishmael. You *are* very attracted to the slightly ambiguous way the narrator introduces himself—is that his real name?—and, more important, by the simple, taut way he presents himself in three words with great energy and economy. With Jane Austen's first sentence, you encounter grace and wit melded perfectly, here a promise of writing that appeals to our highest refinement. Crane's opening line to his story, “The Open Boat,” following that title, tells us a great deal about those in the open boat, but not enough. We read on. James M. Cain's first sentence in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, promises to be the exact opposite of Austen's ride, and, if we are in the mood for hard-boiled fiction, that's just fine by us.

Of course, these lines can, and do, other things as well. The tone is definitely set with “They threw me off the hay truck about noon.” This will not be *The Importance of Being Ernest*.

We each have our own favorite first line or lines, and this essay could continue for quite a while just naming them, beginning with a great favorite, “In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together.” Suffice it to say that there are many more, but, as the radio announcers say, our time is limited.

What can, and should, an opening do, besides be irresistible? It can provide information. Not necessarily by providing facts—although it can do that—because information can be emotional or tonal. It can, speaking of tone, set the tone. It can create a sense of drama, mystery, or tension. It can introduce a character. It can hint at a problem. It can engage the reader through the voice of the narrator. It can foretell the ending. (“In my beginning is my end,” Eliot wrote.) It can do all of these things, or some of them, at the same time. It’s a unique opportunity. You’ll have only one first opened door with your story. Only one, “Ladies and Gentlemen, may I have your attention, please.”

How do writers take advantage of the opening of their story and use it skillfully to accomplish what they need to do? We can begin with the simple act of dispensing information. There’s no better example of how that’s done well than the preface of Laura Hillenbrand’s *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*. Remember that when this book was published in 2001, very few people had ever heard of Seabiscuit, much less known anything about the horse’s remarkable, unlikely drama. That seems incredible now, after the hugely successful book and the equally successful movie. Not only that, but Hillenbrand also knew very well that no book about a horse had ever done remotely well in the history of American literature. (I’m excluding books for children and young adults, because this book is not in that category.) She had her work cut out for her. Here’s what she did to counter that in the first paragraph of the book’s preface:

In 1938, near the end of a decade of monumental turmoil, the year’s number-one newsmaker was not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Hitler, or Mussolini. It wasn’t Pope Pius XI, nor was it Lou Gehrig, Howard Hughes, or Clark Gable. The subject of the most newspaper column inches in 1938 wasn’t even a person. It was an undersized crooked-legged racehorse named Seabiscuit.¹

What she does here, foremost, in this brief paragraph, is get the reader to understand how big, culturally speaking, Seabiscuit was. First, we notice the famous—and infamous—company she puts Seabiscuit in: Roosevelt, Pope Pius XI, Clark Gable, Mussolini, and Hitler. But it’s *how* she puts Seabiscuit in that company that makes this so convincing. The names are intricately balanced. If you were to diagram them, poetically speaking, it would be AAA—all the political figures—; B—the Pope—; and CCC—all the well-known cultural icons. Look closely, and you’ll see this paragraph is even more fully balanced. The year 1938 is at the start of the paragraph, and it’s also near the end. The word “newspaper” is placed before the litany of names, as well as after. Hillenbrand further provides a sense of balance with the litany itself: “was not”; “wasn’t”; “nor was”; “wasn’t even,” setting up the dramatic “It was.” Having been set to expect a person, we are, instead, given the name of a horse. That horse—the one who was more famous than Roosevelt, Clark Gable, or the Pope—was named Seabiscuit.

No good artist ever does anything without a reason. So you can be certain that every single thing in this paragraph was done deliberately. The effect is to get you to look at this horse in a way you’ve never looked at another horse and to believe this is going to be a story worth reading. Of course we know the denouement to this paragraph is going to be Seabiscuit. That’s the name on the cover of the book. So how can we still be surprised? We’re surprised by the facts that we didn’t know, and by how they’re presented to us. This writing is the result of patient crafting, but it’s also the result of research and of marshaling facts. These facts didn’t just fall from the sky, though; Hillenbrand rooted them out—obsessively, as she herself describes it. To find those fact she began “prowling Internet search engines, memorabilia auctions, and obscure bookstores, writing letters and placing ‘information wanted’ ads, and making hundreds of calls to strangers.”² She didn’t stop until she found what she was looking for. This, with her craft, produced a gem of an opening paragraph.

Let's look to drama, to a dramatic beginning. For that, turn to Kathryn Harrison's book, *The Kiss*. To say that it caused a big stir when it was published in 1997 would be the very definition of understatement. It's the true story of an affair Harrison had with her father. You may be shaking your head already, saying, well, how could you *not* make a dramatic opening with that kind of material? Dramatic subject matter does not a dramatic opening necessarily make, however—or a book, for that matter. Here's how Harrison introduces this inflammatory material:

We meet at airports. We meet in cities where we've never been before. We meet where no one will recognize us.

One of us flies, the other brings a car, and in it we set out for some destination. Increasingly, the places we go are unreal places: the Petrified Forest, Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon—places as stark and beautiful and deadly as those revealed in satellite photographs of distant planets. Airless, burning, inhuman.

Against such backdrops, my father takes my face in his hands.³

The lesson here is not that you need something this explosive to write about, but that you should construct the releasing of information in a deft, poetic way, taking your time, looking at how you can inform the reader as well as surprise him or her. Be patient.

What we notice right away is that it's written in the first person plural. "We." That's a little bit unusual. What's more intriguing, though, is how the "we" is used. Right away, the reader knows there's something illicit, wrong, or forbidden. Why meet at an airport? Why meet in cities where you've never been before? Why be afraid someone will recognize you? And, of course, the ultimate question: Who is "we"? Notice that in the second paragraph, Harrison continues with the mystery, still not naming who the other half of "we" is. We do know from the first sentence in the second paragraph that "we" is just two people. Then we have the litany of "airless, burning, inhuman" places where "we" meet: "the Petrified Forest, Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon." These descriptions point to something remote in the human spirit, something hard to survive. What is that?

Then: she tells us. But look at how she tells us. She lets it slip out casually, almost unnoticed—and it would be, if the word "father" weren't so astonishing in this context: "Against such backdrops, my father takes my face in his hands." She doesn't say: "The person I meet in these airless, inhuman places is—my father." She skips that stage and goes right into their erotic activity together, what is truly forbidden, the answer to why they're meeting in those remote places. Because, although we know there is something emotionally dangerous involved, we don't know exactly what that something is yet. If Harrison simply said that person was my father, we *still* wouldn't know. We do now. The revelation is even more shocking, because we're walking in on them in the middle of it. Imagine what this opening would be like if it were written in an obvious way.

The lesson here is not that you need something this explosive to write about, but that you should construct the releasing of information in a deft, poetic way, taking your time, looking at how you can inform the reader as well as surprise him or her. Be patient.

The beginning of poet and memoirist Molly Peacock's essay, "Passion Flowers in Winter," which becomes the beginning of her book, *The Paper Garden*—about the 18th-century English botanical illustrator, Mrs. Mary Delany—demonstrates the salutary effect the personality of the narrator can have on the reader. Here's how it starts:

Imagine starting your life's work at the age of seventy-three, as Mrs. D. (This is what they call her in the Print Study Room at the British Museum.) Mrs. Mary Delany, a student of Handel, a sometime dinner partner of Jonathan Swift, and a devoted subject of mad King George invented the precursor of what we call collage. One afternoon in 1773, she noticed that a piece of colored paper matched the dropped petal of a geranium. She made this visual imaginative connection shortly after the death of her beloved second husband, Dr. Patrick Delany, while she was staying at a friend's house. (Some house! It was Bulstrode, the British estate, ancestral home of the Duchess of Portland, Mrs. Delany's lifelong friend.)⁴

Peacock begins her story with the marvelous fairy-tale like, once-upon-a-time, hopeful word "Imagine." We see that the word is directed to *us*. "Imagine starting your life's work at the age of seventy-three..." You mean *my* work? Yes, *yours*. Peacock also employs a minor but appealing technique. She gives us a series of asides. Not just any kind of asides; they feel like she's whispering to us in the back of a lecture hall while the speaker goes on. She does this with parentheses. Look at the first one: "(This is what they call her in the Print Study Room at the British Museum.)" We get an inside look at the museum, a little private tour. The second is so casual, it's close to gossip: "(Some house! It was Bulstrode, the British estate, ancestral home of the Duchess of Portland, Mrs. Delany's lifelong friend.)" This is a way in which the narrator speaks *directly* to us, the reader. She knows about us. She cares about us. This technique of parenthetical asides is one you can use yourself. It requires discretion, of course, but more than that it requires the desire to open the windows and let some fresh air into your story.

It's worth noting a technique that all three beginnings have in common. It's simple but highly effective. That is: grouping things in threes. You see it in the Preface to *Seabiscuit*: three statesmen, three cultural icons. You see it in *The Kiss*, in the first paragraph. We, we, we; the three places they visit; the three modifiers used to describe those places. You see it in *The Paper Garden*: "...a student of Handel, a sometime dinner partner of Jonathan Swift, and a devoted subject of mad King George..." Notice, too, that Molly Peacock does this for essentially the same reason as Hillenbrand: to make Mrs. Delany important, or significant, in our eyes by placing her next to these figures we all know. Why is it that all three of these writers—and many more—feed us information in threes? Not in twos, not in fours, not in sixes, but in threes?

It's not just a matter of rhythm or melody, but it's also a matter of symmetry. We usually associate that word with a one-on-one relationship. The left side is symmetrical with the right side. There are numerous iconic examples: yin-yang; two-faced Janus; the masks of tragedy and comedy; before and after, and so on. Things in threes, though, are just as symmetrical. The symmetry lies in the imperfection, in the *lack* of one-on-one; it's a more human kind of symmetry instead of a purely mathematical kind of symmetry. Two items enclose a third. There is a completeness to things in threes that groupings in twos or fours cannot achieve. There is a beginning, middle, and an end. It's no coincidence that the mysterious, magical numbers are uneven: 3, 7, 9, 11. These writers all know that, and they take advantage of that. Of course, grouping things in threes is not a technique confined to the first paragraph, but it's a fine, resonant way of pulling your reader into the story.

We can get lessons about our prose writing from all genres, of course. In terms of creating a dramatic opening, you might look to poetry for some instructive examples. Take just two. First, the beginning of Robert Frost's "Home Burial," a poem the contemporary poet Seamus Heaney, among others, admires so much:

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs

Before she saw him.⁵

This is so loaded with tension; it's like a tightly strung bow—in fact, a too-tightly strung bow. The two people, a couple we must assume, are already facing off, and there is the strong whiff of conflict. Otherwise, why would it make a difference who saw whom first? And the poem goes on to describe great fierce emotions over their dead child.

The second is from Yeats's "Leda and the Swan":

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl.⁶

It's hard to think of a better example of *in medias res*, starting in the middle of the drama. Those first two lines are a blunt announcement; everything else is assumed. Poetry is a good place to inspire yourself to be bolder when it comes to openings, especially with fine narrative poets like Yeats and Frost. And when you come to think of it, either of those two beginnings would fit quite well at the start of a work of prose.

I'd like to make a point that is applicable to all kinds of openings with the first sentence of Joan Didion's essay, "In Bed" from *The White Album*:

Three, four, sometimes five times a month, I spend the day in bed with migraine headaches, insensible to the world around me.⁷

The point is: an opening sentence, or even paragraph, cannot, and should not, try to do too much. It can only do so much effectively, and if you burden it with too much responsibility, it will go crazy after a fashion and not communicate anything at all. Didion's line—again with a trio—"three, four, sometimes five"—is a relatively simple statement whose information can be accessed easily. She tells us that three or four or five times a month she has a migraine headache that is so severe, she has to stay in bed. That's it. Sometimes writers have the fear that if they don't get it all in the first sentence—all the exciting, dramatic moments—then the reader will lose interest. Not true. In fact, in my experience, the simpler, the briefer, the more compact the opening sentence, the better. Of course, this is a generalization, but it's not a bad generalization to consider, and even to try. *Remembrance of Things Past*, that enormous, interwoven story by Marcel Proust begins, "For a long time I used to go to bed early." Apparently, the paucity of information hasn't stopped people from reading on. Quite the opposite. Its very incompleteness is one of the reasons you read on.

Sometimes an opening gives you a kind of fair warning, a little bit like those road signs we are so familiar with: "Winding Road Ahead." Here's the beginning of former *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker's delightful memoir, *Growing Up*:

At the age of eighty my mother had her last bad fall, and after that her mind wandered free through time. Some days she went to weddings and funerals that had taken place half a century earlier. On others she presided over family dinners cooked on Sunday afternoon for children who were now gray with age. Through all this she lay in bed but moved across time, traveling among the dead decades with a speed and ease beyond the gift of physical science.⁸

This book centers on Baker's mother—with strong appearances from his aunts and uncles and, in the

end, from his future wife. So the promise he's making here, with the spotlight entirely on his mother, is more than fulfilled later. The book is at its core about women much more than it is about men. It is his mother, his aunts, his future wife, and, to a certain degree, his sister, who are at the artistic core of this book. Baker is also doing something else though. He is addressing the issue of time directly. He is saying to us, through his mother's dementia, that I, the writer, will travel freely through time, too. For one thing, I have to follow my mother. For another, it's the best way for me to tell my story. By facing this issue directly, Baker prepares us for shifts and abrupt changes in time where they're needed.

A beginning can indicate what we should look for, be prepared to think about, and see in a story. How we should focus our attention. Hemingway's famous short story, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," begins this way:

It was late and every one had left the café except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference.⁹

Information is disseminated, to be sure. We learn that there is an old man, that he's deaf, that he likes to sit late in the café. But, to my mind that's not the most significant thing the first two lines convey—though, indeed, we need to know these matters to follow the story. What I believe this beginning does most significantly is that it makes us aware that the story will be about subtle, delicate things, about shadings of experiences and realities. Hemingway does this by, in the very first line, telling us about the "shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light." Now, why do we need to know that? Maybe because Hemingway wants us to be aware of such subtleties, such nuances of experience. And that's true, too, in the second line. Hemingway is telling a story about a man who is capable of experiencing how "the dew settled the dust" and, in fact, has a preference for that delicate change.

Why is it so important that Hemingway place this information at the beginning of his story? In fact, at the core of the short story is the idea of dignity, of how dignity is often based on nuance, on a kind of delicate compassion. One waiter in the café understands this; the other does not. And when the waiter who does understand goes to a bar seeking some comprehension of this idea, he doesn't find it, and all, to his mind, is *nada y pues nada*. We have been alerted to this theme from the very first sentence, perhaps without even realizing it.

A beginning can, in a form of literary shorthand—in a kind of code, perhaps—give you all the elements of the story to come. Here's how Joseph Conrad shows us his Lord Jim for the first time:

He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull. His voice was deep, loud, and his manner displayed a kind of dogged self-assertion which had nothing aggressive in it. It seemed a necessity, and it was directed apparently as much at himself as at anybody else.¹⁰

These three sentences bear scrutiny. The details are fascinating, starting with the height, "an inch, perhaps two," which, in its indefiniteness, makes it absolutely precise and indelible. Moreover, there is, in the physical description, a foreshadowing of what we will come to know. The "deep, loud voice" has "nothing aggressive in it" and "was directed apparently as much at himself as at anybody else." This is the man who left hundreds of pilgrims to die on the open water and must live with that decision inside himself for the rest of his life. The aggression is turned inward. His deep, loud voice is meant for

himself. This is a prophetic description, and all the elements of the essential conflict of the book are coiled within these somewhat innocent-looking lines. What this does is to set you on a psychological or emotional course artfully, subtly. Those words will resonate later in the book.

A beginning can, in a form of literary shorthand—in a kind of code, perhaps—give you all the elements of the story to come.

I'd like to conclude with one of the most charming, engaging, and irresistible beginnings I know. It's from *A River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean: "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing."¹¹

If you can resist that, then you have enormous willpower or a pathological hatred of fishing. Even then, I would venture that your curiosity is piqued enough to make you read on. You probably have to know just why and how there was no distinction between religion and fly fishing. Maclean shows you in this affecting story of two brothers, sons of a Presbyterian minister who taught them how to fish but who couldn't prevent one from his tragic end.

Once you start looking at beginnings carefully—good beginnings—studying them from a writer's point of view, you can see how writers have taken full advantage of the power and the influence uniquely imbued in them. Then you'll be more likely to take full advantage of them yourself. They only come once.

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NOTES

1. Laura Hillenbrand, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*. (New York: Ballantine, 2001), p. xvii.
2. Hillenbrand, p. 342.
3. Kathryn Harrison, *The Kiss* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), p. 3.
4. Molly Peacock, "Passion Flowers in Winter" in *The Best American Essays 2007*, ed. David Foster Wallace (New York: Mariner Books, 2007), p. 174.
5. Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost, Collected Poems* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2002), p. 51.
6. William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 214.
7. Joan Didion, "In Bed," in *The White Album* (London: Flamingo, 1963), p. 168.
8. Russell Baker, *Growing Up* (New York: Signet, 1992), p. 7.
9. Ernest Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Scribner, 1998), p. 288.
10. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 45.
11. Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 1.

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