

Structure from Studying Narrative



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STRUCTURE

OPENINGS

Where to begin?

In *The Sound of Music*, Maria sings 'Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.' But as writers through the ages have discovered, it is not the only place to begin a narrative.

1. Read the two openings included here and share your response. What is the effect of the different approaches taken by Charles Dickens and JD Salinger?

EXTRACT 1 DAVID COPPERFIELD

I am Born

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. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously.

In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse, and by some sage women in the neighbourhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted, first, that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits; both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender, born towards the small hours on a Friday night.

I need say nothing here, on the first head, because nothing can show better than my history whether that prediction was verified or falsified by the result. On the second branch of the question, I will only remark, that unless I ran through that part of my inheritance while I was still a baby, I have not come into it yet. But I do not at all complain of having been kept out of this property; and if anybody else should be in the present enjoyment of it, he is heartily welcome to keep it.

I was born with a caul, which was advertised for sale, in the newspapers, at the low price of fifteen guineas.

Charles Dickens

EXTRACT 2 THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

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. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're *nice* and all – I'm not saying that – but they're also touchy as hell.

JD Salinger

Your own story

Where would you begin your own story? When you were born? Before you were born? At a significant moment in your life?

2. On your own, experiment with writing two or three different openings to your own life story.
3. Share your openings and talk about:
 - the different approaches you have taken
 - the choices this involved you in making
 - the effect of your choices.

Which openings seem to work particularly well? Why do you think this is?

Critics and novelists on openings

4. Read the following comments on openings and pick out the point which seems to you most interesting or helpful when thinking about the narratives you are studying.
5. Present it to the rest of your group or class, explaining the point and adding a comment of your own, perhaps related to the text you are studying, for example:

Ian McEwan draws attention to the fact that beginnings are constructed. The beginning of our own text tries not to look constructed but in fact it is ...

A beginning is an artifice, and what recommends one over another is how much sense it makes of what follows.

Ian McEwan: Enduring Love

Gabriel Garcia Marquez has said that sometimes he spends months on a first paragraph, since it's there that the theme, style and tone of a book are defined – solve that and the rest comes easily.

Blake Morrison: The Independent

As with the title, there is only one first sentence and it serves as a prelude to the rest of the book. The opening sentence has a unique position, and this is partly why there are many famous first sentences to novels, but few second or third ones.

Peter Childs: Reading Fiction Opening the Text

It [is] necessary for a novelist to show a reader, in the beginning, what kind of thing he or she is reading, what he or she has signed up to.

John Mullan: How Novels Work

However one defines it, the beginning of a novel is a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined. It should, therefore, as the phrase goes, 'draw us in'.

David Lodge: The Art of Fiction

When we talk about the famous openings of novels we usually mean resonant first sentences rather than beautifully crafted first scenes or chapters. The memorable first sentence will epitomize in a small way the logic of the novel as a whole.

John Mullan: How Novels Work

FIRST SENTENCES

The following sentences are all openings to novels or non-fiction narratives. They give a flavour of the ways in which different authors try to engage their reader.

1. Read the opening sentences and, in pairs, discuss:
 - the way in which the narrative opens (does it, for example, seem to begin at the beginning or part way through the story?)
 - the type of narrative you think it is taken from
 - the expectations each creates.

1 On an evening in the latter part of May a middle-aged man was walking homeward from Shaston to the village of Marlott, in the adjoining Vale of Blakemore or Blackmoor.
Thomas Hardy: Tess of the D'Urbervilles

2 It's hot as hell in Martino, but the papers on the porch are icy with the news.
DC Pierre: Vernon God Little

3 My father's family name being Pirrip, and my christian name Philip, my infant tongue would make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip.
Charles Dickens: Great Expectations

4 At eight o'clock in the evening, the Baltimore airport was nearly deserted.
Anne Tyler: Digging to America

5 1801 – I have just returned from a visit to my landlord – the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with.
Emily Brontë: Wuthering Heights

6 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

7 It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills.
Raymond Chandler: The Big Sleep

8 The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call 'out there'.
Truman Capote: In Cold Blood

9 Rose Pickles knew something bad was going to happen.
Tim Winton: Cloudstreet

10	I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. <i>Khaled Hosseini: The Kite Runner</i>
11	May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. <i>Arundhati Roy: God of Small Things</i>
12	It was 7 minutes after midnight. <i>Mark Haddon: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i>
13	I am, I discover, a very untidy man. <i>Rose Tremain: Restoration</i>
14	Stuart does not like the manuscript. <i>Alexander Masters: Stuart: a Life Backwards</i>
15	An easterly is the most disagreeable wind in Lyme Bay – Lyme Bay being that largest bite from the underside of England's outstretched south-western leg – and a person of curiosity could at once have deduced several strong probabilities about the pair who began to walk down the quay at Lyme Regis, the small but ancient eponym of the inbite, one incisively sharp and blustery morning in the late March of 1867. <i>John Fowles: The French Lieutenant's Woman</i>
16	There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. <i>Charlotte Brontë: Jane Eyre</i>
17	The beginning is simple to mark. <i>Ian McEwan: Enduring Love</i>
18	There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke. <i>James Joyce: 'The Sisters', Dubliners</i>
19	Why is London like Budapest? <i>Angela Carter: Wise Children</i>
20	In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. <i>F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Great Gatsby</i>