

The Writer's Workshop (Part 4 Of 6): THE OPENING LINE



By [John Adam Wasowicz](#)

The opening line

There's nothing more important than a strong opening. It sets the tone for everything that follows and is the thread from which the entire fabric of your story is composed. A great opening line, like a catchy rhyme in a song, is something the reader carries around with them for a lifetime.

The opening line gives a clue to two things we've discussed in past columns, namely whether the story is told in the first or third person and whether the story is set in the historical past or in the fictitious here-and-now.

I am going to use some opening lines from well known books to illustrate my point.

As I reference opening lines, think about the first words that come to mind when you read them. The images created by a single sentence reminds us of the power of the written word.

Pride and Prejudice: Setting the Table with One Sentence

One of my favorite first lines is Jane Austen's opening salvo in [Pride & Prejudice](#), as popular a story today as when first published in 1813. Here it is:

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

OK. Let's play our game. What are the first words that popped into your head when you read that sentence? Mine were as follows: wit, financial status, the nature of love, naiveté, and scheming.

You have to turn that line over in your head. A host of questions abound. Why is it a universally acknowledged truth? Is the writer being humorous or serious, or both? When does the story occur? What's the law pertaining to inheritance and the role of men and women in acquiring and passing down estates? How do laws affect human dealings? What are the ulterior motives of various players when it comes to love and money? And who wins out in the end: love or opportunity?

In one sentence, the entire book is set like a table prepared for a feast. We learn in the subsequent pages that the head of Longbourn estate has five daughters and that, under the laws in effect during England's Regency Era, his property can only pass to a male heir. Unless he makes prudent decisions in matters of the heart, his family will become destitute when he dies. And so begins a classic story of true love.

The opening paragraph does not focus on any character in the book. Rather, it is about all the characters and the crux of the story. Austen sets the tone, and lets us know she writes the rest of the book about some very serious stuff without losing her sense of humor. All of that in 23 words!

A Tale of Two Cities: A Classic Line for a Classic Story

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

That line, written by Charles Dickens in 1859, constitutes the opening of [A Tale of Two Cities](#).

Back to our game. What thoughts enter your mind when you read it? I think of the collision of polar opposites. In fact, Dickens completes that opening sentence with references to several opposites: wisdom and foolishness; belief and incredulity; Light and Darkness; and the spring of hope and the winter of despair.

Borrowing a phrase from Austen, it's a truth universally acknowledged that good and bad things happen all the time and often at the same time. Just look at today. Here we are coming out of a pandemic in the U.S. while COVID-19 rages in India and other parts of the world.

The two cities in the Dickens classic are London and Paris during the French Revolution. Chapter One, titled "The Period", reads like a history book without a single character making an appearance. In contrast, "Pride and Prejudice," launches into dialogue as soon as the stage is set.

The narrative is in the third person, unlike Dickens' most famous story, "A Christmas Carol," which is a first-person narrative that effortlessly moves between a first and third person account. It's worth noting that 'A Christmas Carol' has a similarly striking opening — "Marley was dead" — which fills the reader with apprehension about a fable that occurs during the Christmas holiday.

The Invisible Man: A Universal Message of Identity

Ralph Ellison begins the 1952 classic, [Invisible Man](#),

"I am an invisible man"

Did this opening line conjure up any thoughts for you? To the uninformed reader, it might sound like science fiction, magic or perhaps a precursor to the Marvel Super Heroes. Of course, we know otherwise. "The Invisible Man," for which Ellison was the first black man to receive the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction, is a story about individuality, personal identity, and how society viewed blacks during the first half of the 20th Century.

When I read "The Invisible Man" in college in the 1970's, I realized the importance of recognizing the talents and abilities of everyone in society. Today, even with social media and a 24/7 news cycle, it is easy to avoid

“seeing” people due to race, religion, sexual orientation, or for being other abled. (In fact, the phrase ‘other abled’ is a great example of “seeing” someone confined to a wheelchair, rather than referring to that person as ‘disabled.’)

The book is a first-person narrative with such lines as:

“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”

These words are especially powerful because the narrator is nameless. In a literary sense, the invisible man is each of us.



The Adventures of Augie March: The Power of Words

“I am an American, Chicago born.”

That sentence is one of my all time favorites, written by Saul Bellow as the opening line in his third book, [The Adventures of Augie March](#). Bellow received the National Book Award one year after Ellison.

What does it convey to you? To me, it speaks of urban America, immigrants, patriotism, and of finding one's way. In a way it is about the invisible man fighting to be seen. As Angie March explained,

“I have taught myself, free style, first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent.”

The power of this first person narrative is similar to Mark Twain in [The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#), Twain writes this book in the first person too and has a similarly classic opening:

“You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter.”

What does that line conjure up in you? Pugnacity, poverty, and, yes, illiteracy.

‘Augie March’ is autobiographical and derives power from the first person recitation of events that mold an individual into a full person. The first person account makes the book personal and endearing, while a third-person narrative makes it distant and impersonal.

“It Was A Dark And Stormy Night”

If you can believe it, that's the opening line in British writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1830 novel titled, [Paul Clifford](#), Snoopy, the Peanuts comic strip character, in his imaginary person as The World Famous Author, began his stories with that phrase. A book by cartoonist Charles Schulz titled ["It Was a Dark and Stormy Night"](#) credited Snoopy as the author. Schulz said the line was a cliché and “had been one for a very long time”.

What words pop into your mind when you hear that line? I think of storms, dark clouds, shadows, chaos, mystery, and gale-force winds. I repeat it whenever I venture out in inclement weather. It has universal application and is easy to remember. I guess that's the meaning of the word cliché.

What's Your Opening Line?

The opening line can express the fabric of an entire book. To be effective, everyone must be able to relate to it. You might not be Austen, Dickens, or Snoopy, but who knows? You might have within you that one line that defines the year, decade, or century in which we live.

It can be first person or third person, present tense or past tense. Just make sure it comes from your heart. Pour it out!

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About the author:



John Adam Wasowicz is an author and practicing attorney. His new book, “Roaches Run,” Book 4 of the Mo Katz mystery series, will be published on Memorial Day weekend. His other Katz stories include [Daingerfield Island](#), which introduced readers to Mo Katz, a defense attorney who had previously worked as a city prosecutor; [Jones Point](#), with Katz in the role as U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia; and [Slaters Lane](#), about a fictitious criminal investigation that takes in 2020 during the pandemic. All of the books are available in paperback, ebook, and audiobook from major online retailers or through indie bookstores.