

10 Opening Lines That Work and Why

Why First Lines Matter

In a world where readers have endless choices and short attention spans, your novel's opening line must do some serious heavy lifting. It's your first handshake, your first impression, and your first promise to the reader. Get it right, and you've earned their trust—and maybe even their heart. This resource is designed to show you what works, why it works, and how to apply it to your own writing. With annotated examples, quick tips, and a revision checklist, you'll be equipped to craft a first line that truly shines.

1. “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” — *1984* by George Orwell

Why it works: It's eerie and offbeat. The world is familiar—until that last word.

Takeaway: A small twist can instantly signal something isn't quite right.

2. “Call me Ishmael.” — *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville

Why it works: Short, confident, and mysterious. Why this name? Who's he talking to?

Takeaway: A bold voice can pull readers in immediately.

3. “The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.” — *The Gunslinger* by Stephen King

Why it works: It launches us into action. Pursuit. Mystery. High stakes.

Takeaway: A dynamic moment can ground the reader fast.

4. “Phoebe Somerville outraged everyone by bringing a French poodle and a Hungarian lover to her father's funeral.” — *It Had to Be You* by Susan Elizabeth Phillips

Why it works: It's character-rich, outrageous, and instantly sets tone and conflict.

Takeaway: Introduce your protagonist with bold personality and complications.

5. “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” — *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf

Why it works: It’s simple, but layered with context and emotion we’ll soon uncover.

Takeaway: Everyday moments can feel profound if you build the right voice.

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

Why it works: It’s funny, casual, and disarming. A meta wink.

Takeaway: Playful or self-aware narration can create an instant connection.

7. “When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow.”
— *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

Why it works: Immediate intrigue—what happened and why?

Takeaway: Start with a compelling event and let your narrator guide us through.

8. “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born...” — *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger

Why it works: Conversational, voicey, and slightly rebellious—just like the story.

Takeaway: Let your narrator’s voice lead.

9. “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.” — *Murphy* by Samuel Beckett

Why it works: Stark, ironic, and deeply philosophical.

Takeaway: If your novel is high-concept or literary, start with a thought that sets the mood.

10. “I write this sitting in the kitchen sink.” — *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith

Why it works: Quirky, specific, and unforgettable.

Takeaway: Detail and voice can make a scene instantly vivid.

Quick Tips

- Start with motion or tension, not exposition.
 - Avoid weather and waking-up clichés.
 - Let the tone reflect the rest of your book.
 - Don't overthink—clarity beats cleverness.
 - Specificity creates instant imagery.
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Revision Checklist

- Does my opening line hint at a larger story?
 - Does it introduce voice, mood, or character?
 - Is it intriguing without being confusing?
 - Does it feel fresh—not like a scene I've read 100 times?
 - Will it appeal to the kind of reader I want to attract?
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You only get one chance to make a first impression. Make it count.

Crafting the perfect opening line isn't about gimmicks or grand gestures—it's about connection. Whether you lead with voice, emotion, conflict, or curiosity, your goal is to invite the reader into your story and make them *need* to turn the page. Use this guide as a reference, a brainstorming tool, and a compass to help you revise with clarity and confidence. You only get one chance to make a first impression—so make it irresistible.

Happy writing,

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