



# Writing Great Beginnings

Harvey Stanbrough

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To provide the reader with more of a sample from the actual story,  
most of the traditional front matter appears at the end.

## Writing Great Beginnings

A great beginning is a story starter for the reader, just as it's a story starter for the writer. It's a great first sentence, first paragraph, and first few paragraphs that grab the reader's interest. Ideally, it's so well written that the reader cannot escape and doesn't want to escape. The opening sentence itself should convey a sense of immediacy, a sense of urgency, that gives the reader no choice but to read the next sentence and the next and the next.

In a short story or vignette, the beginning is just the beginning, but in a novel, each chapter should have its own great beginning. This is more easily done—and perhaps more necessary—in some genres. In a well-written horror, suspense or mystery novel, for example, each chapter will have a “cliffhanger” ending, something that makes the reader want to find out what happens next, and each succeeding chapter will begin with another excellent sentence that forces the reader to continue reading.

Please note that truly great beginnings also are universal. That is, a great beginning in one genre can be plugged into another genre, often with no changes at all, and it will work fine.

### The Components of a Great Beginning

Although one might define the “beginning” as the opening paragraph or even the opening page, a great beginning, from the very first sentence, will have one or more of the following effects on the reader:

Convey a sense that the reader is crossing or has crossed a threshold.

Convey a sense of intimacy, that you're letting the reader in on a secret.

Convey a sense of immediacy through emotion: intrigue, curiosity, fear, etc.

Pull the reader immediately into the mood of the story (ominous, dark, light, humorous, frightening, etc.)

Hint at the main conflict in the story.

**Remember the old saying** that you never get a second chance to make a first impression? That's how important your opening sentence is. Still, you don't have to cram all of the above effects into the first sentence. The second, third, and successive sentences also should be interesting and should convey a sense of immediacy and continuity, a current that carries the reader along. It's almost impossible to write something that's never been written before, but you should always strive to write things in a new way.

**Begin with Action**—In *Ars Poetica*, the poet Horace wrote that stories should be told *in media res*, meaning the storyteller should “snatch the reader into the middle of the action.” Beginning in the middle of the action is the best way to hook a reader up front and keep him turning pages. You can do that in any of three ways:

**1. Open with a strong narrative** that appeals to the reader's physical and emotional senses. The physical senses are sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. The negative emotional senses are fear, trepidation, anger, caution, etc. (Notice that the negative emotional senses are those that the reader

experiences when he feels tension.) The positive emotional senses are joy, elation, etc.

**2. Open with dialogue.** In the written work, dialogue equals action. Because it links the reader directly to the characters in the story, dialogue immediately engages the reader and involves him in the story. It forces the reader to become a character in the story: the Eavesdropper.

**3. Write something that appeals strictly to the emotional senses,** something so intriguing, so profound, or so well written that the reader must continue to read.

It's also a good idea to name your characters the first time they appear in the story. Few things are more annoying to a reader than having to think of a character as "he" or "she" or "a dark figure in the shadows." If you have a *legitimate reason* to withhold a character's identity, it's all right—in that case, give the reader the character's name as soon as you can—but despite what you might have heard from people who should not be teaching fiction-writing courses, hiding a character's identity just to build tension is *not* a valid technique.

Here are a few of my own beginnings for novels or short stories that were designed specifically to appeal to the reader's physical and/or emotional senses. They enable the reader to experience what's going on in the scene and/or they capture the reader's imagination. In the parentheses following the entries are some possible ways you could continue with the story, or a tip to put you in the right frame of mind. All of these are mine, so if any of them pique your curiosity and make you want to write—that is, if any of them serves as a story starter for you—feel free to use it.

### Harvey's Story Beginnings

The ambulance screamed into the yard, its siren winding down. The beams from its revolving lights chased each other across Raphael's worn, weathered face, up the brick wall and across the windows. In the next instant, three paramedics rushed out of the ambulance, already pulling on plastic gloves, their boots kicking up a dust cloud that hovered over the barren yard, then settled on the old man's clothing. (Can you see and hear the scene? Why is the ambulance there? What happens next? Who is the old man? The perp? The victim? An observer?)

In a stodgy apartment on the west side of Tucson, Adam Stanton sat bolt upright in bed, every muscle in his body straining, cramping, the odor of cold sweat permeating the air, his legs twisted in the tangled sheets. (War nightmare? Cops after him? Is anyone there with him?)

On the eighth day of my trek across Death Valley, I saw God. (Serious story about religion? Comedy? Satire? Suspense?)

Eyeing the woman snuggled in her chair, the cat thought, *Move, please.*

On a cloudy, dreary day in a very small town in Italy, in a room much larger than it had ever been before, Serafin hunched over his timeworn mahogany desk, laboring over a promised eulogy. His desk chair complained against the stained oak floor as he leaned back, rubbing the stubble on his cheeks. (Most of the time it isn't what you say so much as how you say it. Does this set a mood?)

The knock on the door was quiet, almost timid. (Child at her parents' bedroom door? Something fearful outside the door of an apartment dweller? Truly fearful or imagined fearful?)

It's been twenty-six years since the world imploded and those scratching sounds crept back into my head. (Unwelcome memory of war? Impending alien invasion? Doomed man on death row remembering what led to his actions?)

Leaning over Granny's bed, Mary sighed. Her eyes misted. Her joints creaked. Mechanically, she moved her hands to her face and emitted a low, moaning sound. (In my story, Mary ended up being a robot. Who is she in yours?)

Shortly before 11 p.m. in a drizzly rain, Robert got out of his car and walked to the back, carefully counting his steps. The air was thick and warm despite the drizzle, and the odor of rotting trees and rocks covered with sour moss permeated the air. The muddy roadside sucked at his boots as if trying to slow his passage. *Seven steps*, he thought, then unlocked the trunk. *The first seven steps of any journey are the hardest.* (What is the significance of the “steps?” Why at night? Does this give you a sense of the location? How many physical senses are invoked?)

Cross-legged, cross-eyed, his mind at cross-purposes and seldom in sync with his tools, Harlan discovered a lump in the center of his face. (Okay, what was the lump? Why did he just discover it?)

Sometime in the past, Mr. Wilson had misplaced his mind. Now he was sitting in a comfy, overstuffed chair in Dr. Swenson’s office in what he hoped would not be a vain attempt at locating it. (A little more “formal” voice? Humor? Horror? SF?)

Our ship landed softly, unlike that of my unlucky friend. He lost power and crashed near the place called Corona. I shapeshifted, became a young woman, less frightening than a golden orb sprinkled with stars. (SF? Horror? Both?)

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” (This one can go in any direction. Is the speaker guilty of something? Is the priest guilty of something? What will be their interaction?)

Katie Wells lay under a heavy quilt and tried to ignore the hushed voices that filtered through her half-open door. (Is she ill? Just hasn’t risen yet? Is she an adult, a child, a boarder? She “tried to ignore” the voices, so what are they saying? You could change “half-open door” to “apartment wall” and change the whole dynamic of story possibilities.)

The sign over the mirror read *One Way Out*. (Fantasy? SF? Magic realism? Guy in an asylum?)

Stripped to his underwear, Bill trembled, sweat pouring from his scalp as he struggled against his bonds. (You can go pretty much anywhere with this.)

Eufemia, still trembling involuntarily with the aftershadow of having given birth to yet another child, grimaced and then sighed as the midwife laid the child on her stomach. “Thirteen,” Eufemia said. “That’s thirteen children. Even the Bible says no woman will have to tend to more than twelve children. I will not continue with this child.” (Does this evoke both physical and emotional senses? Do you want to correct her understanding of the Bible?)

The world had been sad for three days. The sky wept steadily, softly, the water drip, drip, dripping from limbs and leaves of trees and eaves of houses, trickling into rivulets and streams that whispered their way east, to the ocean. (Often it isn’t only what you write, but how you write it. Is there an air of sadness, darkness, even a soft kind of dread?)

**Here are several more beginnings.** Some are from published short stories and novels, and some are from unpublished manuscripts. I consider these truly great because once I read them, I wasn’t able to just put down the book or story and find something else to do. I strongly encourage you to find these authors’ works. If you aren’t familiar with the author, enter the name into a search engine:

### **Gabriel García Márquez, “The Third Resignation”**

There was that noise again—that cold, cutting, vertical noise that he knew so well—but it was coming to him now sharp and painful, as if he had become unaccustomed to it overnight.

It was spinning around inside his empty head, dull and biting. A beehive had risen up inside the four walls of his skull. It grew larger and larger with successive spirals, and it beat on him inside, making the stem of his spinal cord quiver with an irregular vibration, out of pitch with the sure rhythm of his body.

### **Gabriel García Márquez, “Montiel’s Widow”**

When Jose Montiel died, everyone felt avenged except his widow, but it took several hours for everyone to believe that he had indeed died. Many continued to doubt it after seeing the corpse in the sweltering room, crammed along with pillows and linen sheets into a yellow coffin, with sides as rounded as a melon.

**Steven Wedel, horror writer, “A Change of Clothes”**

It was just after 10:30 p.m. and the clothes were coming to life.

**Steven Wedel, “Digging Up the Past”**

Levi pitched the shovel aside and stood up. He reached behind him with his right arm, his only arm, and held his back as he stretched to relieve the cramping.

**Steven Wedel, “New Blood”**

The basement door opened slowly, silently, on well-oiled hinges. A long-fingered pale hand reached through into the darkness. There came the sharp click of a switch and electric light exploded into the cellar. The seven naked people below lay unmoving on their cold steel tables.

**Steven Wedel, “Like Dying”**

Sam Davidson awoke with a start, thrown out of a sweaty sleep into the oily blackness of the night that had filled his bedroom. His heart was pounding and the blood rushed in his ears. His sweat-soaked pajamas clung to his body. The need was back—insistent, demanding. He had to obey.

**Steven Wedel, “Latent Lycanthropy”**

The girl stood out like a ballerina in a morgue.

**George Orwell, *1984***

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

**Don Cooper, *C Trick: Sort of a Memoir***

A sudden jolt almost threw me out of the top berth of the sleeping car, jarring me from the sound sleep I had been in since the train had pulled out of the station.

**Ray Bradbury, “One Timeless Spring”**

That week, so many years ago, I thought my mother and father were poisoning me. And now, twenty years later, I’m not so sure they didn’t.

**Ray Bradbury, “Getting Through Sunday Somehow”**

*Sunday in Dublin.*

The words are Doom itself.

*Sunday in Dublin.*

Drop such words from a cliff and they never strike bottom. They just fall through emptiness toward five in the grey afternoon.

**Dorothy Parker, “Lolita”**

Mrs. Ewing was a short woman who accepted the obligation borne by so many short women to make up in vivacity what they lacked in number of inches from the ground. She was a creature of little pats and prods, little crinklings of the eyes and wrinklins of the nose, little runs and ripples of speech and

movement, little spirals of laughter. Whenever Mrs. Ewing entered a place, all stillness left it.

**Dorothy Parker, “The Custard Heart”**

No living eye, of human being or caged wild beast or dear, domestic animal, had beheld Mrs. Lanier when she was not being wistful. She was dedicated to wistfulness, as lesser artists to words and paint and marble. It is safe to assume that Mrs. Lanier was wistful in her bathroom, and slumbered in soft wistfulness through the dark and secret night.

**Dorothy Parker, “Song of the Shirt, 1941”**

It was one of those extraordinarily bright days that make things somehow seem much bigger. The Avenue seemed to stretch wider and longer, and the buildings to leap higher into the skies. The window-box blooms were not just a mass and a blur; it was as if they had been enlarged, so that you could see the design of the blossoms and even their separate petals.

**Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*:**

A squat grey building of only thirty-four stories. Over the main entrance the words *Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre*, and in a shield, the World State’s motto: *Community, Identity, Stability*.

**Don Johnson, *A Texas Elegy***

Sometimes a man’s expectations come down to very little at the end. A few minutes’ relief from the pain. A few words of comfort from someone he trusts. The thought that, for a little while at least, he’ll be fondly remembered by someone.

**Jack Williamson, *The Humanoids***

Underhill was walking home from the office, because his wife had the car, the afternoon he first met the new mechanicals. His feet were following his usual diagonal path across a weedy vacant block—his wife usually had the car—and his preoccupied mind was rejecting various impossible ways to meet his notes at the Two Rivers bank, when a new wall stopped him.

The wall wasn’t any common brick or stone, but something sleek and bright and strange. Underhill stared up at a long new building. He felt vaguely annoyed and surprised at this glittering obstruction—it certainly hadn’t been here last week.

Then he saw the thing in the window.

**Alison Holt, *The Door at the Top of the Stairs***

The horse bunched against the back wall as the rope slashed across his flank. Joe stepped forward to whip him again, but before he had a chance, Morgan lifted him off his feet and threw him from the stall onto the cement floor of the barn. She followed him, jerked him to his feet, rammed him against the wall and wrapped her hand tight around his throat.

**Alison Holt, *Credo’s Hope***

Blood smeared the mattress where Bibi O'Dell had fallen after she'd been shot. Given her occupation, hooker, and her drug of choice, meth, I wasn't surprised when she told me to go stuff myself after I asked who'd pulled the trigger.

**Alison Holt, *Credo’s Legacy***

I sat across from a man who had a white smile painted on his face. White and red circles surrounded charcoal grey eyes that misted over as he vehemently denied kidnapping his ex-wife's latest boyfriend. As he spoke, he fiddled with the curly orange clown wig he held in his lap.

**Michael Coe, from *Flight to Paradise***

The hot shower poured over Keri's naked body, engulfing her in a therapeutic cocoon, numbing her thoughts to everything but the pain deep within her heart, in her bones, in her head. For months, she had begged God to do something—anything—to stop it, but He'd done nothing.

**Shirley Jackson, "The Smoking Room"**

He was taller than I had imagined him. And noisier. Here I was, all by myself, downstairs in the dormitory smoking room with my typewriter, and all of a sudden there was this terrific crash and sort of sizzle, and I turned around and there he was.

**Dan Brown, from *The DaVinci Code***

Renowned curator Jacques Saunière staggered through the vaulted archway of the museum's Grand Gallery. He lunged for the nearest painting he could see, a Caravaggio. Grabbing the gilded frame, the seventy-six year old man heaved the masterpiece toward himself until it tore from the wall and Saunière collapsed backward in a heap beneath the canvas.

**Larry D. Sweazy, "The Promotion"**

There was the usual stir at night as Darly carefully slid out of bed. Her steps were light, intentional, and Samuel "Red" Wolfe knew the path his wife of twenty-two years would take. She would ease along the bed and down the hall under the control of a nightmare that would not, could not, go away to their son's empty room. He would find her at first light, balled up on the floor next to the bed, a shirt or a blanket wrapped tight in her fist.

**Ernest Hemingway, "After the Storm"**

It wasn't about anything, something about making punch, and then we started fighting and I slipped and he had me down kneeling on my chest and choking me with both hands like he was trying to kill me and all the time I was trying to get the knife out of my pocket to cut him loose. (Notice the lack of punctuation and how the emotion of the sentence runs.)

**Ernest Hemingway, "On the Quai at Smyrna"**

The strange thing was, he said, how they screamed every night at midnight.

**Ernest Hemingway, "Now I Lay Me"**

That night we lay on the floor in the room and I listened to the silk worms eating.

**Ernest Hemingway, "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber"**

It was now lunch time and they were all sitting under the double green fly of the dining tent pretending that nothing had happened.

**Jessi Babcock, untitled novel manuscript**

The little girl's scream jolted her awake. Rochelle sat bolt upright in bed, a bead of sweat trickling down her temple, the salt burning the corner of her eye. She looked frantically around the room, the darkness enveloping her, pressing against her as she breathed in uneven gasps.

**Ronny DeJong, *Beyond the Shadow of the Sun***

Sticking his bayonet through the *gedèk* (bamboo fence), the Japanese soldier aimed to kill me. He missed. A little girl with blond braids, I was only five years old in March of 1944. The bayonet sliced through the air over my head. "Mamma!" I cried.

**John Collier, "Wet Saturday"**

It was July. In the large, dull house they were imprisoned by the swish and the gurgle and all the hundred sounds of rain. They were in the drawing room, behind four tall and weeping windows, in a lake of damp and faded chintz.

**Ross Macdonald, “The Far Side of the Dollar”**

It was August, and it shouldn't have been raining. Perhaps rain was too heavy a word for the drizzle that blurred the landscape and kept my windshield wipers going.

**Flannery O'Connor, “The Comforts of Home”**

Thomas withdrew to the side of the window and with his head between the wall and the curtain he looked down on the driveway where the car had stopped. His mother and the little slut were getting out.

**Dashiell Hammett, “Fly Paper”**

It was a wandering daughter job.

**Dan Baldwin, *Caldera***

“Call me Bitter. I am 117 years old.” These were the first words of any significance the old man had spoken since I crawled into the adobe cavern that was his home.

**Gaeron McClure (writing as Malcolm Mackenzie), *The Poison Egg***

Every hair on the back of Hariri's neck lifted, and he bared his fangs in an involuntary snarl. It was not the darkness below ground that oppressed him—he had been born and had spent most of his life in an underground tunnel—rather, it was the brooding, living presence of this cavern of black basalt.

**Larry Long, *Flight to Avoid***

Puny, bespectacled Billy Gillsdorf heard the lunch whistle, gave the electric cable he was stringing a final tug and got to his feet. As usual, the other members of the construction crew on that floor rushed past him in search of a respite from the arctic February weather.

**Nancy Kress, “Beggars in Spain”**

They sat stiffly on his antique Eames chairs, two people who didn't want to be here, or one person who didn't want to and one who resented the other's reluctance.

**Gregory Benford, “Matter's End”**

India came to him first as a breeze like soured buttermilk, rich yet tainted. A door banged somewhere, sending gusts sweeping through the Bangalore airport, slicing through the 4 a.m. silences.

**Lois Tilton, “A Just and Lasting Peace”**

I remember how my bare feet used to drag in the dust whenever I came up the road to the Ross place, walking slower and slower as I got near to the turn in the road. *Let him not be there, I'd be thinking. Just this once.*

**Greg Egan, “Blood Sisters”**

When we were nine years old, Paula decided we should prick our thumbs and let our blood flow into each other's veins.

**Jack Dann, “Voices”**

I was carefully papering the balsawood wing struts of my scale-model Gotha GV bomber when Crocker asked me whether I ever spoke to dead people.

**Elmore Leonard, “Apache Medicine”**



Kleegan was three hours out if Cibicu, almost halfway to the Mescalero camp at Chevelon Creek, when he met the Apache.

### **Elmore Leonard, “The Rustlers”**

Most of the time there was dead silence. When someone did say something it was never more than a word or two at a time: *More coffee?* Words that were not words because there was no thought behind them and they didn’t mean anything. Words like *getting late*, when no one cared. Hardly even noises, because no one heard.

### **Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis***

When Gregor Samsa woke up one morning from unsettling dreams, he found himself changed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.

### **Robert Frost, “Acquainted with the Night” (poem)**

I have been one acquainted with the night. I have walked out in rain and back in rain. I have outwalked the farthest city light.

**Now it’s your turn.** What’s the best beginning you’ve seen, whether you wrote it yourself or saw it elsewhere? When you read someone else’s work, consider the beginning. Does it make you want to find out what happens next? If so, how does it accomplish that? I hope this gives you some good ideas for your own writing.

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### **About the Author**

Harvey Stanbrough was born in New Mexico, seasoned in Texas, and baked in Arizona. He spent most of his early life in the home of his heart, the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona. After living through a 21-year civilian-appreciation course in the U.S. Marine Corps, he attended Eastern New Mexico University where he managed to sneak up on a bachelors degree. There was then a 23-year stint as a copy editor (incredibly slow learner that he is), but he finally wised up, resigned from his position as Vice President in Charge of Giving a Damn About People Who Revel in Ignorance and retired.

Harvey’s own works of poetry, fiction and nonfiction have been nominated for the Book Expo America Book of the Year Award (Education Category), the Pushcart Prize, the *Foreword Magazine* Book of the Year Award, the Pulitzer Prize in Letters, the Frankfurt (Germany) Book Fair Book of the Year Award, the National Book Award and dozens of others. Like Ray Bradbury, he loves to write. It’s practiclaly all he does, though twice a year he comes out of hiding and discloses to a small group of folks who want to be professional writers everything he knows about writing. Visit his website at [HarveyStanbrough.com](#).