



## How to come up with a ripper first line

'It was a dark and stormy night' – so said Edward Bulwer-Lytton in the first line of his novel *Paul Clifford*. I'm sure he never thought at the time his work would become the most famous example of how *not* to start a book. Coming up with a really good first line will not only attract a reader's attention, it'll get your narrative off to a cracking good start.

Writing the perfect first line can be easy, and it can also be jolly hard. It's the reader's introduction to your story or book and that line has to be many things, so make it engaging, captivating, motivating, and interesting.

How do we make a sentence into all of those things? Sometimes it's a stroke of sheer genius or it can take a lot of thought and hard work.

Here are some tips and ideas to get you thinking about the ripper first line of your story.

**1. Sometimes a sentence you read or hear can inspire a story**, and that sentence stays in first place in the final version. For example, I was walking down a street in Seattle, Washington one day and two women were talking behind me. They were discussing a friend of theirs whose behaviour was odd: one gave her opinion and the other laughed in disbelief, saying, 'That's just a fig on your imagination.' I guess she meant to say 'a figment of your imagination' – but the words stayed with me and I used that as the opening line in a short story.

**2. A first line can set the tone of a scene and establish character and voice.** For example, my Mom used to tell the tale of her old deaf grandpa, 'Pop' and his friend, also deaf, sitting on a wooden seat down at the wharf. It's more than one sentence, but you can get the idea: here's the dialogue as Mom told it, and as I used it at the start of a short story:

'Hey Pop, goin' fishin'?'

'Nah, goin' fishin'!'

'Aw I thought you was goin' fishin'!'

**3. Create a surprise in your first sentence**, and please don't let us down if you start a story in this way. Follow through and tell the reader more. 'It was the day my grandmother exploded' (Iain M. Banks, *The Crow Road*). Such 'surprise' beginnings make us go, 'What the ...?' and we want to read on.

**4. Humour is a great way to start off a narrative** – make us laugh right from the start. 'I write this sitting in the kitchen sink' by Dodie Smith in *I Capture the Castle* sets us up for some kind of zany and interesting character to follow.

**Similarly, start with a frightening line, or something that makes us uneasy:** 'My name was Salmon, like the fish; first name Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973.' (Alice Seabold *The Lovely Bones*) or the first line of Stephen King's book *It*: 'The terror, which would not end for another twenty-eight years – if it ever did end – began, as far as I know or can tell, with a boat made from a sheet of newspaper floating down a gutter swollen with rain.'

**5. Describe a place.** A great first line can lead us into a scene, just like movies do: use light, sound, smell, location to orient the reader into your story right away. Think cinematic when you're writing: 'The candle flame and the image of the candle flame caught in the pierglass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door.' (Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*).

**6. A first line may provide the essence of the whole story.** 'As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a monstrous vermin.' (Franz Kafka *Metamorphosis*). OK, we get the picture: this story is going to be about 'my life as a rat.'

So that's a few ideas to get you thinking about how to construct a great first line. First lines can come in all shapes and sizes and may take some time to construct, but the investment of time is worth it. Always remember that the first line is your greatest opportunity to hook your reader and keep them on the line for your entire story.