

The Magical Writer

The Craft: Creating Engaging Incipits

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

That may be the most famous incipit in English literature. Although “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” might rival it. And let’s not forget “It was a dark and stormy night.”

Incipits are the opening sentence, paragraph, or scene of a work. Poems have incipits: “Listen, my children, and you shall hear...” So do nonfiction works, whether it’s a crisp thesis sentence or a bitingly relevant anecdote.

Incipits are the first thing most readers encounter. A good incipit sentence can lead people to read a bit more of your book, giving you valuable time to engage them in other ways. A lackluster incipit encourages us to pick up a different book as we’re browsing our friend’s bookshelf.

But although they are the beginning of the readers’ experience, incipits are not necessarily the first thing the writer produces.

Any writing, from action narratives to academic essays, benefits from returning after completing the first draft and reworking the incipit.

Adding an illustrative anecdote at the top of an essay gives the reader a different way of engaging than a thesis sentence does.

Opening with a question instead of a statement encourages readers to participate rather than simply absorb.

Starting with a mysterious, unexplained statement leads some readers onward.

Mystery and Incipits

In some ways, almost any writing is a mystery. Even in a straightforward news story we are first told simply what happened, then filled in on details, causation, consequences, etc. Skillful writers hold back key pieces to draw us forward.

Some mysteries revolve around “whodunit and why.” But in many cases — for example, history books — the reader already knows the outcome of the narrative. The key question is: How did the matter unwind?

Nonfiction writing can benefit from “mystery.” Opening with an anecdote that engages the reader but is not fully explained can raise questions — “promises,” as they are called in another handout.

Studying the techniques of mysteries can sharpen any type of writing.

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The Magical Writer

A Writing Intensive
in the Reclaiming Tradition

With George Franklin and Guest Teachers

Want to write a novel, memoir, or other narrative? Want to jump-start your writing, regardless of the style? Let Reclaiming magic help!

We’ll look at the craft of writing and the emotional blocks that keep us from reaching our full artistic potential.

We’ll meet in sacred space, share writing and support over the web, and gain understanding and skill from working with others. Writing can be an isolating practice - we’ll use magic to weave a web of support and encouragement.

With magical tools such as circle-casting, ancestor invocations, trances, and spell-work, we’ll free our expressive gifts and strengthen our belief in ourselves as artists.

We will also work on writing that expresses our unique voice, creating plot-structures, developing characters, and

other aspects of the writers’ craft. Each class includes directed writing time.

Class is suitable for those working on writing projects who want a supportive circle and new inspiration, and those looking to begin the process. Although you’ll determine your own work-pace, be prepared to dedicate time to your writing, and to write for at least ten minutes each day.

For more information, contact George, <george@directaction.org>

George Franklin is a Reclaiming teacher and co-editor of Reclaiming Quarterly. He has written several novels and published one (visit directaction.org), and helped edit work by writers such as Cynthia Lamb, T. Thorn Coyle, and Starhawk. Magic is a key part of his creative process.

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Magical Writing Ancestor — Dante Alighieri, c. 1300.

The Magical Writer

The Craft — Incipits

Incipit Research

Bookstore Research

Visit a bookstore and browse different types of books and magazines, studying their opening sentences and paragraphs. Which ones engage you? Did any lead you to read the first page, or make you want to flip through the book?

Browse the literature shelves and read the opening sentences of “great novels.” Compare older works with contemporary fiction. Contrast art novels with best sellers.

Look at catalogues, encyclopedia entries, cookbooks, and other “non-narrative” types of writing. What tricks do they use to enliven dry material?

Movie Incipits

In “ye olden dayes,” film makers counted on their audience staying in their seats. Once we’d traveled to the theater and paid for our ticket, a movie had to be pretty bad for people to walk out. Incipits could be leisurely. Acting credits could scroll while people settled into their seats. Milieu and context could be established by slow camera pans.

In the Netflix era, the pressure is on movies to grab our attention, or we’ll move on to the next offering. Only established auteurs like Merchant Ivory can start slowly and trust they will hold their audience.

Television has always faced this dilemma — if the show does not yet have a steady audience (such as soap operas do), its credo must be “dazzle or die.”

This leads, even in well-written dramas such as *The Sopranos*, to highly

artificial plot twists and incessant interpersonal conflict to keep viewers from changing channels. (Note how cliff-hangers are used to keep us from channel surfing at commercial breaks.)

Contrast the incipits of older films — *The Wizard of Oz*, for instance — with the opening scene of a television series like *Desperate Housewives*.

Research — think of a film that unexpectedly engaged you from the start. Watch the beginning again, considering things like the narrative energy map, what information is shown and what is held back, what promises and mysteries are planted, and generally how the filmmakers engaged you so well.

If you have Netflix, HBO, or other inexpensive access to films (like your friends’ video shelves), watch the incipits of genres you don’t usually watch. What can we learn from horror films, or documentaries? What about a foreign film where we turn off the subtitles and study the cinematic energy?

Writing Exercises

Incipit Rewrites

Write five significantly different versions of the opening sentence/paragraph of an essay, poem, or a chapter of a fictional work. Try these variations:

- Change the actual content of your opening — show something different, use different imagery, etc.
- Change the vocabulary — try florid writing, staid prose, etc.
- Open with a character speaking — try opening with dialog without identify-

ing the speaker. Can you engage readers simply by the dialog?

- Open with instant drama or conflict (a motorcycle careens down a narrow road, or two characters argue vehemently).
- Open with an anecdote, even if you invent one for this purpose. Consider using a fable, a news item, a personal anecdote, a historical incident, a joke...
- Start a poem or fictional work with a thesis sentence (consider how “It was the best of times...” is a thesis sentence for the entire book.)

Honing the Incipit

Once you have some possible incipits, let them sit for a day or a week. Come back and see which one jumps out. Set others aside for later chapters, essays, poems...

Take your favorite and start to hone it. Can you eliminate words or clauses without losing the essential image?

Look at the vocabulary and word order. Can you sharpen the imagery without adding to the word count?

Consider the rhythm of your opening paragraph. Does the rhythm reinforce or contradict the mood you want to create?

Short sentences feel breathless. Suspense mounts. Periods propel us forward.

Longer sentences, with commas, subordinate clauses, and multiple ways of making the same point, often including asides such as this clause, create a more laconic feel.

Eliminate adverbs. If the dialog is vivid, the adverb is usually superfluous. If a character says, “You blithering idiot!” the adverb “angrily” can be omitted. Hone opening dialog to eliminate the need for adverbs.