

MONSTERS! INK!

LESSON SEVEN

HOOK, LINE, & SINKER!



An opening line can do a lot. The very first sentence of a story can be extremely powerful. It can stick with you for days, weeks, even years.

What author doesn't dream of crafting an opening line that will achieve the iconic recognition of "Fourscore and seven years ago..." or "Call me Ishmael," When you are a writer, you hear over and over again the important job of the first line: to draw your reader into your story. The first line is a "hook" to

grab the reader. But another important aspect of the first line is when it grabs you as a writer.

Think of opening lines and paragraphs as being like meeting someone for the first time. You probably wouldn't be interested in getting to know a person who immediately began telling you absolutely everything about themselves or tried to drag you into personal drama right away. Instead, you learn just enough about the person that you want to ask a question, and then another.

Think of the opening of your story as a similar opportunity to lead your reader into the rest of the paragraph and the next page. They don't have to fall in love with your story on the first sentence, but they need to be curious enough to keep going.

The first page, the first paragraph and the first sentence of your story may be more heavily revised than any other part of your monster tale. Keep these points in mind as you work on the beginning of your story:

- Be specific and vivid.
- Ask yourself what you're using to get the reader's attention (plot, character, humour, etc.)



- Ask yourself what questions you are raising in your opening sentence and paragraph. Will they draw readers on?

While revision is important, and will be important, for the entire short story — you should rip it apart and massage it and mold it until you have it right —paying special attention to the first paragraph or three is definitely recommended.

"Out of the air, the ax." How can a reader not love a first line like that? That's the opening of Joyce Carol Oates's thriller, "Jack of Spades," and it does exactly the work first lines should: It makes us want to know what happens next.

That's the key. **The only purpose of the first sentence is to get us to read the second sentence.** If the opening line works, we're likely to give the author a chance to impress us.

A great first line invites the reader immediately into a small, private and very realistic world, hinting that something amazing has just happened or is about to. After reading, "The truth is, if old Major Dover hadn't dropped dead at Taunton races Jim never would have come to Thursgood's at all."

Already we are worried about what will become of Jim at whatever the mysterious Thursgood's might turn out to be.

If you're browsing, first lines still matter. Picking up these books in a store or library, teased by the author's prose, it would take an effort not to keep reading, just to discover what brought about the challenges already inherent in the cleverly crafted first line.

Some of the greatest first lines in modern fiction are short.

Here's Renata Adler, "Speedboat": "Nobody died that year."

And some are very long, as this memorable beginning from John Irving: "I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice -- not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany."

And for a short story it's even more critical. A short story is like a chess game: The opening is a huge part of whether you win or lose. The first sentence of a short story doesn't just "hook" readers, it also sets the tone and launches the plot.

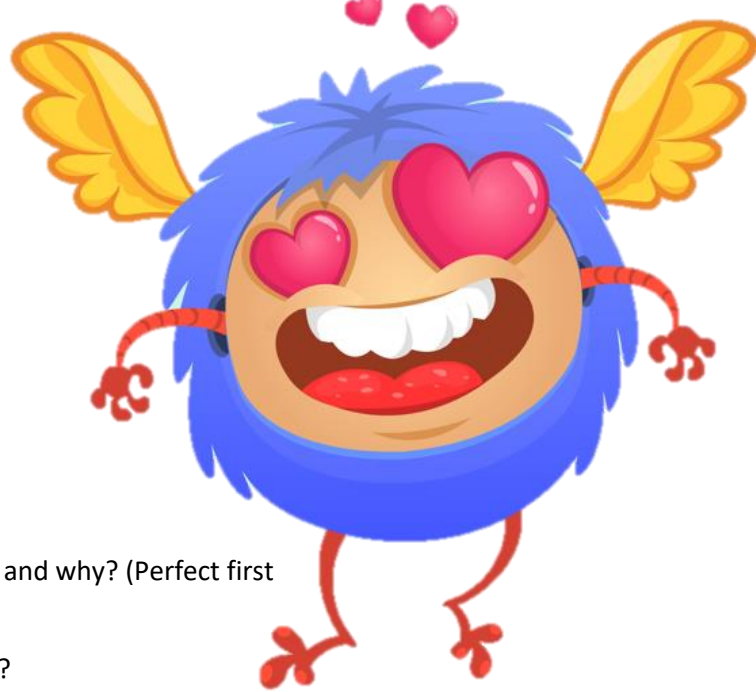
Long or short, whether a book is found on a shelf or on a screen, a great first line can still draw us swiftly into the author's world.

Read sample opening lines from the following list or some of your own personal favorites and use the questions at the end, and others, to get students thinking and analyzing the lines.

QUESTIONS:

Ask students to make predictions for the reading based on the first sentence.

Engage the class in discussion about the predictions. **Be an example yourself and model for students your thoughts as you read them (ones that you like, what you like about it, ex.).**



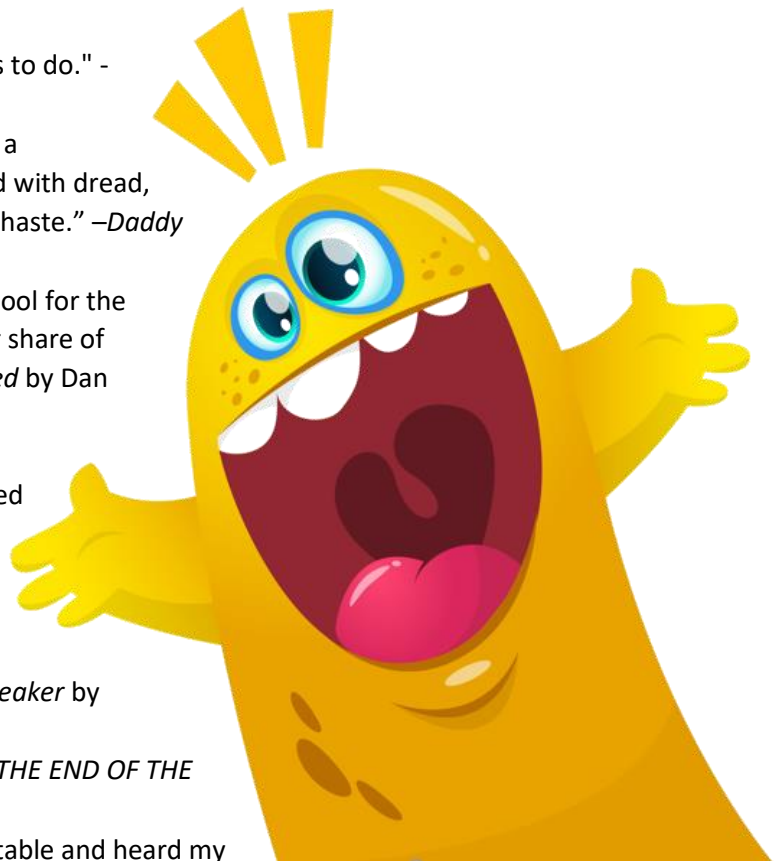
- What sort of questions do these opening lines raise?
- What kind of promises do they make to the reader?
- What do they tell you about the story that's to come?
- Which one do you like best? Why?
- What do you think?
- We haven't heard from you yet. Do you agree?
- Did any of them surprise you in any way? Which ones and why? (Perfect first lines are often surprising in some way.)
- Did you find any of them funny? Which ones and why?
- I think/believe that... It seems to me that... In my opinion...
- After we read through the list, are there any that still especially stick out in your mind?

Note: It's a silly way to judge a book, of course; plenty of books with quiet first lines are absolute treasures. But book lovers are drawn to first and last lines.

SAMPLES OF MEMORABLE FIRST LINES!

- "I've confessed to everything and I'd like to be hanged. Now, if you please." Franny Billingsley's *Chime*
- 'I disappeared the night before my twelfth birthday.' Kensuke's Kingdom, Michael Morpurgo
- "The man in black fled across the desert and the gunslinger followed." *The Gunslinger* by Stephen King.
- 'Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond.' , Chinua Achebe
- "It is impossible to know who you really are until you spend time alone in a cemetery." -- *BLOOD MAGIC* by Tessa Gratton
- "It has been sixty-four years since the president and the Consortium identified love as a disease, and forty-three since the scientists perfected a cure." -- *DELIRIUM* by Lauren Oliver
- 'The island of Gont, a single mountain that lifts its peak a mile above the stormracked Northeast Sea, is a land famous for wizards.' *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ursula Le Guin
- "On Thursday, when Imogene woke up, she found she had grown antlers." -*Imogene's Antlers*, David Small
- 'The girl with the gun crouched, waiting.' *The Honours*, Tim Clare
- "In an old house in Paris that was covered in vines lived 12 little girls in two straight lines." Madeline, Ludwig Bemelmans
- "On the morning I was scheduled to die a large barefoot man with a bushy red beard waddled past my house." -*Seven Wonders Book 1: The Colossus Rises*, Peter Lerangis
- "It was a dark and stormy night." – *A Wrinkle in Time*, Madeline L'Engle
- Karen Cushman's *Catherine, Called Birdy* begins, "I am bit by fleas and plagued by family."

- ❑ *A Drowned Maiden's Hair* by Laura Amy Schlitz starts thusly: "On the morning of the best day of her life, Maud Flynn was locked in the outhouse singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."
- ❑ "The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world." -*The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson
- ❑ "Not every thirteen-year-old girl is accused of murder, brought to trial and found guilty." -*The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* by Avi
- ❑ "Well the Sasquatch girls are hip, I love their fur all splotted with crud..." - *Falcon Quinn and The Crimson Vapor* by Jennifer Finney Boylan
- ❑ "If you are interested in stories with happy endings you would be better off reading some other book." -*A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket
- ❑ How about M.T. Anderson's beginning to *The Game of Sunken Places*? "The woods were silent, other than the screaming."
- ❑ And another—he is a formidable formulator of first lines—comes from *Whales on Stilts*: "On Career Day Lily visited her dad's work with him and discovered he worked for a mad scientist who wanted to rule the earth through destruction and desolation."
- ❑ "Ma, a mouse has to do what a mouse has to do." - *Ragweed* by Avi
- ❑ "The first Wednesday in every month was a Perfectly Awful Day — a day to be awaited with dread, endured with courage and forgotten with haste." -*Daddy Long Legs* by Jean Webster
- ❑ "Like most of the students at the Blatt School for the Insanely Gifted, Daphna Whispers had her share of quirks." -- *The School for The Insanely Gifted* by Dan Elish
- ❑ 'Aubrey Fitzwilliam hated being dead; it made things much harder than they needed to be.' *Blaze of Glory* – Michael Pryor
- ❑ "I sold my cell phone to the devil." -- Rachel Vail's *GORGEOUS*.
- ❑ "When the doorbell rings at three in the morning, it's never good news." - *Stormbreaker* by Anthony Horowitz
- ❑ "The twelve Lords of Death were bored." *THE END OF THE WORLD CLUB* by J&P Voelkl
- ❑ "When I was nine years old, I hid under a table and heard my sister kill a king." Frances Marie Hendry's opening line to *Quest for a Maid*
- ❑ "There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it." - *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C. S. Lewis
- ❑ "Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu." — Ha Jin, *Waiting*



- “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.”
— J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*
- “Once upon a time, there was a woman who discovered she had turned into the wrong person.” —
Anne Tyler, *Back When We Were Grownups*
- “It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.” — George Orwell, *1984*



APPLYING IT BACK TO THEIR OWN STORY!

Have students brainstorm and write down at least 5 ideas for their own first lines for their monster story. Encourage them to be silly, daring, wild, odd, and imaginative! Practice, Practice, Practice!

There is really no such thing as the perfect first line. There is only a perfect first line for your story. Be patient as you look for it. It might take longer than you think to find it. You may discover it, and then find another, then discard that one for something better still.

Remember, a great first line can hook your reader through the rest of your story. Keep searching for it. It’s worth it.

It often takes several tries and attempts to clear out the stale ideas, over-used ideas, or ideas from other people and get the creative juices flowing on your own unique ideas!

You may wish to adjust the number required according to grade level and skill, but it’s always best to require multiple options instead of settling on a single idea.

IT’S NICE TO MEET YOU!

TIPS FOR CREATING A GREAT OPENER

Here are some suggestions for creating a great beginning to your story:

What effect are you going for? In a short story, you have a limited time to create an effect in the reader’s mind. Think of our example, A Tell-tale Heart ... and think of what effect it creates in your mind by the end. You can be sure that Poe was going for that effect, and that he worked hard to craft it ... and you can see that he began that effect in the first paragraph. Think about your desired effect, and then

see how you can begin the process of creating it in your first couple of paragraphs. Every sentence, every word, should somehow contribute to that effect.

Grab their attention. This is one of the main jobs of the short story opener — get the reader’s attention. Imagine that your story is being published in a magazine — you’re competing for the reader’s attention with feature articles about how to win a man or how to please her in bed. You’ve got to get that attention immediately.

Get them curious. Beyond just getting their attention, you have to arouse their curiosity, so that you can hold their attention, and get them to want to read more. Be different. Raise a question in the reader’s mind. Draw them into your world.

Be true to the story. While the last two points above are important, it’s also not good to try to have a flashy opener when your story is more subdued. If you get the reader’s attention and draw them in, and the story turns out to be completely different from the opening, you’ve broken an implied promise to the reader. The opening is a promise about what the story will be like. Be true to the spirit of the story, or you’ll break that promise.

Have something happen immediately.

You don’t need to do this in every story opening, of course, but it’s good to start in the middle of the action rather than in the beginning, when nothing is happening. For example, “I woke up that morning with no idea that today would be different from any other” is not as interesting as if you started in the middle of the action: “So things started going downhill after I accidentally tripped the bank’s alarms and the guards began shooting at me.” Actually, that’s past tense — if you were to rewrite that opening, it would be fun to begin in the present tense, describing the tripping of the alarm and the bullets flying by.

Poe’s A Tell-tale Heart ... a classic. Here’s the opening paragraph:

“True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story.”

Within a few words — just the first three or five words really — Poe sets the tone of the story, and brings the insanity of the narrator to the opening sentence. He catches our attention and makes us curious to read more. It’s hard to beat an opening like that.

Don’t add too many adjectives. The novice writer adds a whole bunch of adjectives to achieve the desired effect. They’re a shortcut, but they’re telling instead of showing. Don’t tell the reader that the character is wacky or tough. Show him, through action and dialogue.

Consider dialogue. Sometimes the best openings are dialogue. Not always, but sometimes. It’s an option to think about, at least.

Describe an interesting character. While description can be a boring way to start a story, if the character is incredibly interesting, such a description can definitely help create the story’s desired effect, and catch the reader’s attention and curiosity.

Be concise. Cut out all unnecessary words. You don’t have a lot of time to create your desired effect, to catch the reader’s attention, to draw him into the story. (Don’t worry about this as much on the first rough draft, we’ll work on this during editing!)

Don't be trite. You probably have to read a bunch of short stories to know what's trite, but if you've seen it in bad stories before, avoid it. Describing the weather ("It was a dark and stormy night") is but one example.

Feel free to break the rules. The rules spelled out above were meant to be broken, as are all writing rules. They're guidelines, really, so if you have something that breaks the rules and works, go for it.

And always ALWAYS always rewrite. No matter what your first attempt, chances are it can be improved. Look over the points above and see if there's some way you can make it better. Can you put the reader even more in the middle of the action? Can you cut out unnecessary words? Would present tense be better? Can the dialogue be improved? Do several rewrites if you can.

TEACHER HELPS: ACCOUNTABLE TALK

Students often struggle finding just the right words to explain, describe, and clarify what they are thinking. One way to help students, and further engage English language learners in class discussions, is to provide sentence frames on the board for students to help organize their thoughts. Some sample ones are listed below according to category. Select some based on your students grade and skill levels, display them, and model using those sentences in your own responses and during discussion.



AGREEMENT

- "I agree with _____ because _____."
- "I like what _____ said because _____."
- "I agree with _____; but on the other hand, _____."

EXPRESSING DISAGREEMENT

- "I disagree with _____ because _____."
- "I'm not sure I agree with what _____ said because _____."
- "I can see that _____; however, I disagree with (or can't see) _____."

CLARIFICATIONS

- "Could you please repeat that for me?"
- Paraphrase what you heard and ask, "Could you explain a bit more, please?"
- "I'm not sure I understood you when you said _____. Could you say more about that?"
- "What's your evidence?"

CONFIRMATION

- "I think _____."
- "I believe _____."

CONFUSION

- "I don't understand _____."
- "I am confused about _____."

EXTENSION

- "I was thinking about what _____ said, and I was wondering what if _____."
- "This makes me think _____."
- "I want to know more about _____."
- "Now I am wondering _____."
- "Can you tell me more about _____?"

REVIEW

- "I want to go back to what _____ said."

EXPRESSING OPINIONS

- I liked _____ about that opening line. It made me want to _____ (ex. keep reading/find out what happened next/to _____) because _____.
- I disliked _____ about that opening line. It didn't make me want to _____ (ex. keep reading/find out what happened next/to _____) because _____.
- I preferred the _____ because _____.
- My favorite _____ (line, word, etc) was _____ because _____.
- I believe that _____.
- In my opinion _____.

MAKING PREDICTIONS:

- Because the character _____, I predict s/he will _____.
- Because it says _____, I predict _____.
- At first I thought _____, but now I believe _____.
- I think _____ will _____ because _____ usually _____.
- Since _____, I can assume that _____ will _____.
- My idea is _____.
- My theory is _____.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST:

-_____ and _____ are _____.
- ... Both _____ and _____ have _____.
-__ and __ are both similar because they both _____.
-There are several major differences between ___ and __. The most notable is _____.

MONITOR AND CLARIFY

- The part about _____ did not make sense so I reread and now I know _____.
- I didn't know the word _____ but I used context clues to figure out that it means _____.
- The part about _____ confused me so I _____ to figure it out. *reread / read ahead / used context clues / used the dictionary / used pictures*

EX LIBRIS WITH A NOVEL TWIST!

AKA THE PAPERBACK GAME!

As described by Dwight Garner for the NY Times

Use this fun game as a great way to have students (and teachers!) practice writing interesting first lines as you attempt to compose fake, but plausible, first lines for real books.

The best group games often need no special equipment to play: no dice, cards, tiles or machines that bleat at wrong answers. Classics like charades and the dictionary game — sometimes called Fictionary, — call at most for paper and pencils.

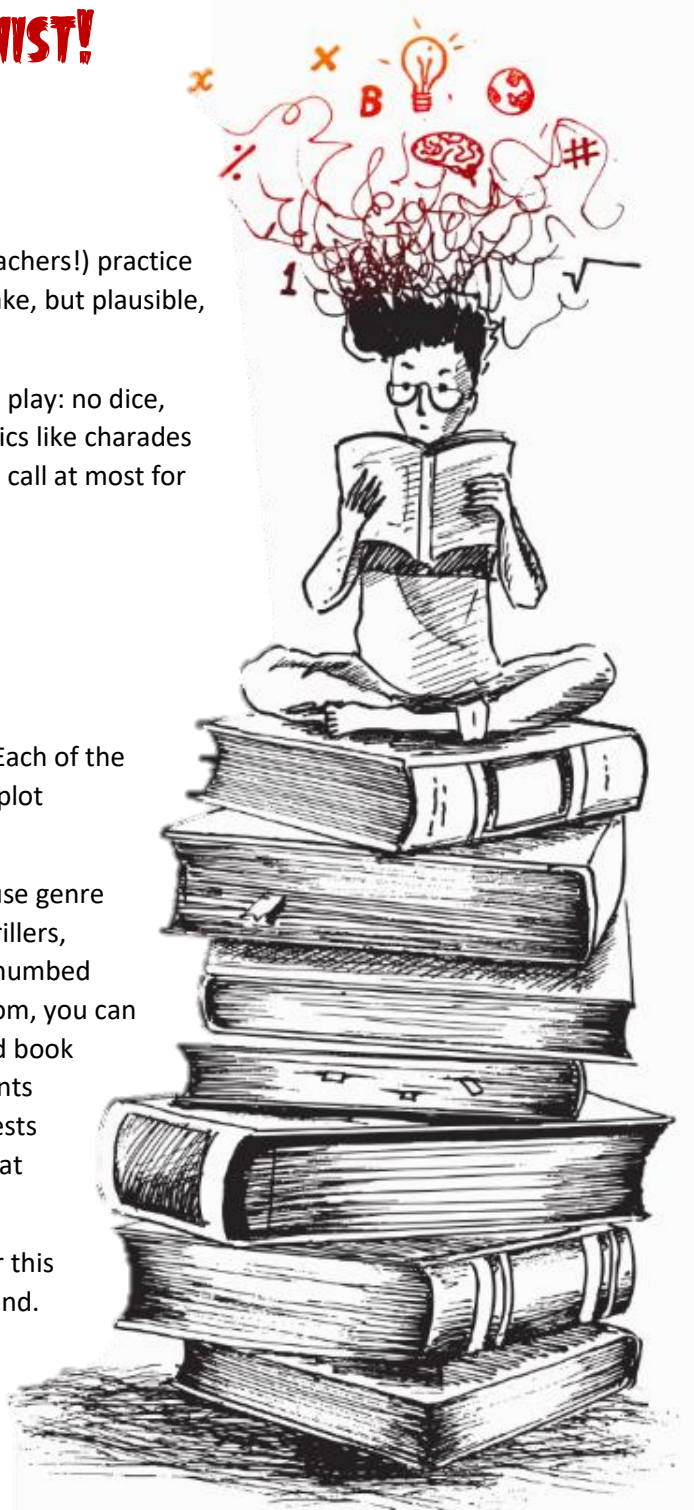
Here's what you'll need to play:

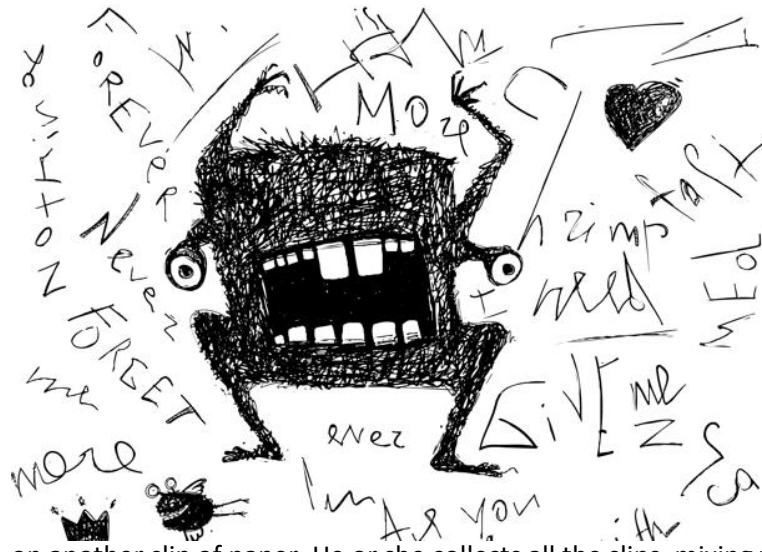
- slips of paper (index cards work well),
- a handful of pencils or pens
- a pile of paperback books*
- Or get a deck of *Ex Libris* cards by Oxford Games- Each of the one hundred cards gives you the title, author and plot summary of a different novel or short story.

*Any sort of book will do, but it's especially rewarding to use genre books: mysteries, romance novels, science fiction, pulp thrillers, westerns, the cheesier the better. If you don't have well-thumbed mass-market paperbacks in your house, library, or classroom, you can usually buy a pile from your library, or from a thrift or used book store, for roughly 50 cents a pop or less. Sometimes students (and adults) flee from games they fear will be public I.Q. tests or will expose gaps in their literary knowledge, this isn't that kind of game.

Here is how the game unfolds. One player, the "picker" for this turn, selects a book from the pile and shows its cover around. Then he or she flips it over and reads aloud the often-overwrought and sometimes outright silly publisher supplied description on the back cover. Hearing these descriptions read aloud is among the game's distinct joys.

Try to imagine the following recited in the voice of the fellow who does the husky voiceovers for coming attractions in theaters, "A wellborn Boston beauty, Corinne Barrows has traveled halfway around the world in search of Jared Burkett — a dashing rogue and a devil; a honey tongued charmer...She has found him on the lush and lovely island of Hawaii."





The other players absorb these words, and then write on their slips of paper what they imagine to be a credible first sentence for Ms. Lindsey's novel. Essentially, they need to come up with something good — or bad — enough to fool the other players into thinking that this might be the book's actual first sentence. Players initial their slips of paper and place them upside down in a pile at the center of the table. Meanwhile the picker — the person who read the back cover aloud — writes the book's actual first sentence

on another slip of paper. He or she collects all the slips, mixing the real first sentence with the fakes, and commences to read each one aloud. Each person votes on what he or she thinks is the real first sentence.

Here's how score is kept: If someone votes for your bogus sentence, you get a point. If you pick the real first sentence, you get two points. (The picker doesn't vote in this round.) Now go around the table clockwise. Someone else picks a book, and you repeat the process until a round ends — that is, until each person has had a turn at being the picker.



What, by the way, is the actual first sentence of Johanna Lindsey's "Paradise Wild"? Here goes: "The tall, slender, golden-haired young woman fidgeting by the hall table fastened her startling green eyes on the closed door at the left of the hall." It's the kind of stuff you can't make up. Or can you?

Another excellent variant of the paperback game involves obtaining a poetry anthology and reading, say, the first three lines of a rhyming quatrain aloud. Players then compete to write a fake fourth line.

APPLYING IT BACK TO THEIR OWN STORY AGAIN!

Have students brainstorm and write down at least 2 more ideas for their own first lines for their monster story and add them to their previous list.

Then, have them circle two to three of their favorites for future reference. They may change it later during the editing and revising process, or even simply while writing, but it's important to get the ideas flowing and physically written!

You may wish to adjust the number required according to grade level and skill, but it's always best to require multiple options instead of settling



SAMPLE SUPPLY LIST LESSON SEVEN

MATERIALS

- Sample story first lines from the list or other selected favorites
- Accountable talk sentence frames
- Completed Vivid Verbiage Word Banks for each pair from Lesson Six
- Pencils
- Writing Paper
- Completed settings for each co-authorship
- Completed characters for each co-authorship
- Story ideas from the dice sessions
- Story Dice, just in case!
- slips of paper (index cards work well)
- a pile of paperback books*
- Or get a deck of *Ex Libris* cards by Oxford Games- Each of the one hundred cards gives you the title, author and plot summary of a different novel or short story.

PACING GUIDE:

THIS LESSON HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO TAKE ONE TO TWO 75-MINUTE SESSIONS TO COMPLETE. IT MAY TAKE MORE OR LESS DEPENDING ON THE NEEDS OF YOUR CLASSROOM AND THE ABILITIES OF YOUR STUDENTS.