

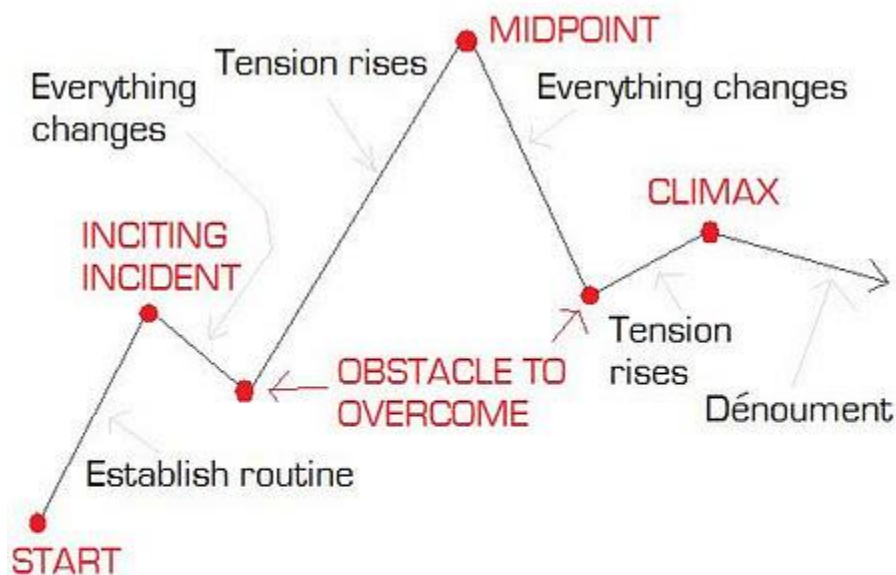
# The Story Arc

By Bryan M. Powell for “Reading, Writing, and Rhythm”

[www.substack.com](http://www.substack.com)

To most, if not all readers of fiction novels, this post may be an eye-opener, because I am about to reveal some trade secrets of the business of writing a novel.

Phrases such as Goal, Motivation, and Conflict, and the Plot Arch are common among authors, and, if we are good at our craft, you will not even notice them. You will be so engrossed in the story and intrigued with the characters that you will hardly notice what we’ve done



## THE STORY ARC

Through a well-crafted story, the hero or heroine, or the villain will have experienced three conflicts as they seek their goal. And each challenge will grow in intensity until they reach a tipping point. It is at this moment we reach the peak of the plot arc and our character has to sink or swim, kill or be killed, live or die. And their decision will leave you either laughing or crying cheering or bemoaning.

But it all begins with a great Hook or Opening Sentence. The Line and Sinker are what follows; a compelling first paragraph and then an intriguing first chapter. And so it goes.

## Opening Sentences Part II

### 7 Keys to Writing the Perfect First Line of a Novel

By Joe Bunting

Perfect first lines must be vivid.

Here's the line from Ulrica Hume's, *Poppies* that caught my attention.

"I was born upside down, the umbilical cord looped twice around my neck."

It's a simple sentence, but I love it. "Born upside down." There's something at once whimsical and perilous and messy about that image. You instantly get a picture of the hospital room, the tiny baby, perhaps with a bit of hair, being held upside down by the doctor, still slightly blue and screaming.

### Great First Lines Instantly Invite Us into An Image.

Here's another *All the Pretty Horses*, by Cormac McCarthy:

"The candle flame and the image of the candle flame caught in the pier glass twisted and righted when he entered the hall and again when he shut the door."

Isn't that a cool image? The light from a candle being reflected and twisted by a door. One of the reasons so many of Cormac McCarthy's novels have been adapted into films is that his writing is so cinematic, focusing on seemingly small details to invite us into the lives of his fascinating characters. Great first lines, like the opening montage of a film, lead us into a scene. They use images, lighting, and tone to set the mood that the rest of the opening pages will take.

## **Perfect First Lines Establish a Unique Voice.**

We like to hear stories from people who sound interesting and unique, and perfect first lines introduce the reader to a character's unique voice.

Voice is the peculiar vocabulary, tone, and phrasings our characters use. Here's an example of the first line from *Catcher In the Rye* by J.D. Salinger:

"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, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth."

Notice how conversational this is. All the rules we were taught in school—don't use adverbs like really, don't use slang like lousy"—Salinger breaks them. And it works because this isn't a school paper; this is one friend talking to another.

The remarkable thing about a unique voice is that it can be just as vivid as a description. You instantly get an image of a sarcastic, teenage kid reading this? Voice can spark your imagination to create whole worlds.

## **Perfect First Lines May Be Surprising.**

This might be the most important point. So many of these examples of great first lines are surprising. For example, in George Orwell's novel, *1984*

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen."

How do you quickly show the world you're describing is slightly off from the real world? Alter the way time is tracked.

Charles Dickens' first line from *A Christmas Carol* begins with ... "Marley was dead: to begin with." Want to create surprise?

One-word sentences can surprise the reader: “Breath.” “Ice ... for as far as the eye can see.”

“Run!” “Water ... everywhere.” “It was pitch black.” From Catherine Coulter’s *Blind Side*.

### **Perfect First Lines Can be Funny.**

Humor is closely linked with surprise, and great first lines are often very funny.

For example, here’s a silly image from *J.R.R. Tolkien’s* very funny novel *The Hobbit*:

“In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat; it was a hobbit hole, and that means comfort.”

“And that means comfort.” I love that part. I can imagine Tolkien’s four children squealing with delight at this opening line.

And here is Jane Austen exhibiting her slyly satirical wit in the first line of *Pride and Prejudice*:

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. *Of course*, he must. How could he not?”

### **Perfect First Lines Are True.**

Some novels begin with a philosophical truth. Take the iconic first line of one of the bestselling books of all time, *A Tale of Two Cities*:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness.”

This is true in any day or in any age, but here, it was a philosophical reflection on the subjectivity of history and human experience. Great first lines can do that. They can take a look at an entire culture as a whole and make a bold statement. Genesis 1:1 does that.

### **Perfect First Lines Are Clear.**

Many great first lines do little more than introduce us to the characters we're going to be following through the book. For example, from Melville's *Moby Dick*:

"Call me Ishmael."

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in its first line:

"Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy."

This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air raids. Great first lines instantly let the reader know who the narrator is, where we are, and what this story will be about.

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