

# FIRST SENTENCES: BEGINNING IN THE MIDDLE

In a Paris Review interview, Angus Wilson says, "Plays and short stories are similar in that both start when all but the action is finished." This goes along with Horace's injunction to begin the story *in medias res* — in the middle of things.

Yet, beginners' stories often meander for three or four pages before the story begins to rear its head. One day, out of curiosity, we decided to examine the first lines of stories in big and little magazines, story collections, and anthologies. We discovered that many first sentences put the reader in the middle of things. That exploration became the basis for this first exercise.

## THE EXERCISE

Consider how many of the opening lines below pull you into the center of the story. What do you know about the story — situation, characters, geography, setting, class, education, potential conflict, etc.— from reading the titles and the following opening lines? What decisions has the author already made about point of view, distance, setting, tone, etc.? Notice how many of the titles are directly related to the first line of the text.

"Gesturing" JOHN UPDIKE  
She told him with a little gesture he had never seen her use before.

"Exchange Value" CHARLES JOHNSON  
Me and my brother Loftis came in by the old lady's window.

"Buried Lives" Bharati Mukherjee  
One March midafternoon in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, Mr. N.K.S.Venkatesan, a forty-nine-year-old school-teacher who should have been inside a St. Joseph's Collegiate classroom explicating Arnold's "The Buried Life" found himself instead at a barricaded intersection, axe in hand and shouting rude slogans at a truckload of soldiers.

"The Remission" MAVIS GALLANT  
When it became clear that Alec Webb was far more ill than anyone had cared to tell him, he tore up his English life and came down to die on the Riviera.

"Medley" Tom CADE BAMBERA  
I could tell the minute I got in the door and dropped my bag, I wasn't staying.

"On Faith Alone" MELISSA PRITCHARD  
For days, Ted Padilla had me bicycling past the dead Indian, bicycling past a blanket stubbed like a wet cheroot in dirty ditchweed — how did I know what was or wasn't vital, being new to town?

"A Girl Like Elsie" KIRAN KAUR SAM  
I tell Mama I waitress in the Village so she don't have to cut me out of her heart.

"Covering Home" JOSEPH MAIOLO  
Coach discovered Danny's arm when Danny's parents were splitting up at the beginning of the season.

"Getting an Education" GLADYS SWAN  
Most of the neighbors took in the oddities of Findlay Brightwood the same way they took in everything else: the domestic quarrels of the Ryans; the untidy family life of Dr. Kiely— Ear, Eye, Nose & Throat—whose wife let the kids run wild with neglect; the heavy drinking of the Pattersons, who partied lavishly on weekends, going through her money like water, leaving out a full case of whiskey bottles for the garbage man to cart off the following Monday after their friends had departed in drunken riot.

"Nickel a Throw" W. D. WETHERELL  
These are the things Gooden sees from his perch eight feet above the dunking tub at the Dixford Congregational Church's Charity bazaar.

"The Water-Faucet Vision" GISHJEN  
To protect my sister Mona and me from the pains— or, as they pronounced it, the "pins"—of life, my parents did their fighting in Shanghai dialect, which we didn't understand; and when my father one day pitched a brass vase through the kitchen window, my mother told us he had done it by accident.

"Inventing the Abbots" SUE MILLER  
Lloyd Abbot wasn't the richest man in our town, but he had, in his daughters, a vehicle for displaying his wealth that some of the richer men didn't have.

"aw, babee, you so pretty" NTOZAKE SHANGE  
not only was she without a tan, but she held her purse close to her hip like a new yorker or someone who rode the paris metro.

"Bigfoot Stole My Wife"  
The problem is credibility.

RON CARLSON

"Saturnino el Magnifico"  
The entire circus train fell in the manner of a child's toy into the ravine just outside of town, its cars folding up in the fall so that from a distance they looked like the rough-angled line of teeth on a saw.

ALBERTO ALVARO RIOS

"Woman Hollering Creek"  
The day Don Serafin gave Juan Pedro Martinez Sanchez permission to take Cleofilas Enriqueta DeLeon Hernandez as his bride, across her father's threshold, over several miles of dirt road and several miles of paved, over one border and beyond to a town *en el otro lado*—on the other side—already did he divine the morning his daughter would raise her hand over her eyes, look south, and dream of returning to the chores that never ended, six good-for-nothing brothers, and one old man's complaints.

SANDRA CISNEROS

"Another Kind of Nostalgia"  
Theo's husband, Frank, was a drop-in center counselor; Theo was a drop-in center bride.

KATHERINE HAAKE

"Murderers"  
When my Uncle Moe dropped dead of a heart attack I become expert in the subway system.

LEONARD MICHAELS

"Jump-up Day"  
Jericha believed herself already an orphan—her mother was in the ground by the time she could walk on it—so the loss of her father when it came was not an exceptional thing.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER

"The Undesirable"  
I got over to the side of the road as far as I could, into the grass and the weeds, but my father steered the car over that way, too.

DAVID HUDDLE

"Forgiveness in Families"  
I've often thought, suppose I had to go to a psychiatrist, and he would want to know about my family background, naturally, so I would have to start telling him about my brother, and he wouldn't even wait till I was finished, would he, the psychiatrist, he'd commit me.

ALICE MUNRO

"The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World"  
The first children who saw the dark and slinky bulge approaching through the sea let themselves think it was an enemy ship.

GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ

*Now, write ten of your own opening lines for ten different stories. When you read, look for opening lines that immediately pull the reader into the story. And if you keep a journal or notebook, consider starting a new section and adding one first sentence each day—for the rest of your life.*

## THE OBJECTIVE

To get into the habit of beginning your stories in the middle of things. Because you are not obligated to finish these stories, this exercise lowers the emotional stakes and helps to shake up and surprise the imagination.

## STUDENT EXAMPLES

Aunt Iris wasn't too steady on her feet, having just shot Uncle Willis through the heart right after breakfast and then having driven 300 miles through mist and drizzle, so when the desk clerk at the Best Western shoved the registration card at her, she was sure she'd give the whole thing away right then and there because dammit, Willis had always filled these things out before. ALICE MANZO

When the fog rolls into Portsmouth a peculiar, anonymous intimacy descends, taming difficult women and angry men. JIM MARSH

Jason Dyvik's heart, like all bartenders' hearts, was a needy and gluttonous muscle. ERIC MECKLENBURG

Nothing more to say—in the storm, son walking further along the cliff than dad, normal as you please, and the sea reached up and snicked him. PERRY ONION

By the time I was ten I had concluded that death was just a matter of moving furniture. AMANDA CLAIBORNE.

"In my last life," she said, "I was a telephone pole that stole kid's kites, shorted out whole neighborhoods on Christmas Eve and electrocuted telephone linesmen on their last day before pension." ROBERT SOLOMON

*From What If? by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter*