

# Writing Fiction: Ways to Begin a Story

There are many different means a writer might use to begin a story, and the problem is to choose one that most appropriately raises the curtain on the narrative to follow. Ask yourself such questions as these: Do I want my story to open with the sound of voices as people discuss something about their lives? Or do I want to bring one important character forward into the descriptive spotlight and let the reader have a good, long look at her before action begins? Or do I want to begin with an activity - one person, or more than one, engaged in doing something that will be significant for the story to follow? To judge these three possible openings, the writer might then ask questions of the unwritten story: Story, are you going to be about some involvement of people and their attitudes and opinions; are the ways they voice their thoughts going to be important? Or, Story, are you going to concern yourself with the traits, ideas, experiences, and emotions of one person who must seize the reader's imagination at once? Or are you going to be involved with an event - or events - in which the characters take part, and thus you want an opening that shows actions? Here are some of the possible ways of leading off.

## **With a generalisation**

My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America.

AMY TAN, 'Two Kinds'

When people become characters, they cease to be regarded as human, they are something to be pointed out, like the orange tree that President Krugar planted, the statue in the park, or the filling station that once was the First Church hall.

NADINE GORDIMER, 'The Last Kiss'

## **With a description of a person**

He was lifting his knees high and putting his hand up, when I first saw him, as if crossing the road through that stringing rain, he were breaking through the bead curtain of a Pernambuco bar. I knew he was going to stop me.

V. S. PRITCHETT, 'The Sailor'

### **With narrative summary**

An unfortunate circumstance in my life has just recalled to mind a certain Dr. Crombie and the conversations I used to hold with him when I was young. He was the school doctor until the eccentricity of his ideas became generally known.

GRAHAM GREENE, 'Doctor Crombie'

### **With dialogue**

"Don't think about a cow," Matt Brinkley said.

ANN BEATTIE, 'In the White Night'

I'm afraid Walter Cronkite has had it, says Mom.

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS, 'Home'

### **With several characters but no dialogue**

During the lunch hour, the male clerks usually went out, leaving myself and three girls behind. While they ate their sandwiches and drank their tea, they chattered away thirteen to the dozen. Half their conversation I didn't understand at all, and the other half bored me to tears.

FRANK O'CONNOR, 'Music When Soft Voices Die'

### **With a setting and only one character**

After dinner, with its eight courses and endless conversation, Olga Mikhailovna, whose husband's birthday was being celebrated, went out into the garden. The obligation to smile and talk continuously, the stupidity of the servants, the clatter of dishes, the long intervals between courses, and the corset she had put on to conceal her pregnancy from her guests, had wearied her to the point of exhaustion.

ANTON CHEKHOV, 'The Birthday Party'

## With a reminiscent narrator

I was already formally engaged, as we used to say, to the girl I was going to marry.

PETER TAYLOR, 'The Old Forest'

## By establishing point of view

### *First Person*

Since Dr. Wayland was late and there were no recent news-magazines in the waiting room, I turned to the other patient and said: "As a concerned person, and as your brother, I ask you, without meaning to offend, how did you get that scar on the side of your face?"

JAMES ALAN MCPHERSON, 'The Story of a Scar'

### *Third Person*

The August two-a-day practice sessions were sixty-seven days away, Coach calculated.

MARY ROBISON, 'Coach'

## THE EXERCISE

This one is in two parts. First experiment with different types of openings for different stories until you feel comfortable with the technique of each. Then see how many ways there are to open one particular story you have in mind. How does the story change when the opening changes from a generalisation to a line of dialogue?

## THE OBJECTIVE

To see how experimenting with several ways of opening your story can lead you to a better understanding of whose story it is, and what the focus of the story will be.

Source: *What If?* by Anne Bernays & Pamela Painter