

Yesterday

How to Rewrite a Flat Opening

From Lifeless to Irresistible: Turning a First Sentence into a Hook that Connects.

Part 2: How to Rewrite a Flat Opening

By Patricia Hickman



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A first sentence is more than a beginning—it's a promise.

It's the author's way of saying, *"Something worth reading starts right here."* And whether you're writing a novel, a short story, or even a blog post, that first line can either draw your reader in or let them drift away.

But let's be honest: most of us don't write great first lines on the first try.

We write flat ones. Quiet ones. Explainers. Set-up sentences. Sometimes, we don't even realize we've done it until later.

If you've ever looked at your opening line and thought, *"It's fine, but it's not doing anything,"*—you're in the right place.

This post will walk you through **how to identify, diagnose, and rewrite a flat opening** so it actually pulls your reader into the world of your story.



What Makes a First Sentence Fall Flat?

Here are a few signs your opening line may need a rewrite:

- It's vague or generic
- It lacks a clear voice
- It explains instead of engages
- It doesn't hint at stakes, tension, or emotion
- It could open *any* story or novel

Here's an example of a flat opener:

✗ *"Sarah was walking to the store."*

Nothing wrong with it technically. But it's not pulling us in. There's no tension, no voice, no question raised. It's just... there.

What a Strong First Sentence Should Do

Great first sentences don't just start a story. They **hook the reader** by doing at least one of the following:

- Introduce conflict or tension
- Show character through voice
- Raise a question the reader wants answered
- Drop us into an unusual or emotional moment
- Create a sense of tone or urgency

Here's a possible rewrite of that same sentence:

✓ *"Sarah hadn't meant to steal the gun—but it was too late to put it back in the freezer aisle."*

Now we have:

- Conflict (she stole a gun?)
 - Setting (a grocery store)
 - Voice (casual, ironic)
 - A reason to keep reading
-

A Simple 3-Step Rewrite Method

If your first sentence feels limp, try this process:

Step 1: Ask What the Scene Is *Really* About

Go deeper than the action.

- Who is this really about?
- What changed right before this moment?
- What's the tension under the surface?

“Sarah was walking to the store” might really be about her trying to escape something. Or steal something. Or find something she's afraid she won't.

Step 2: Add Specificity and Trouble

Generalities don't hook readers—**specific details and conflict do**. Let the sentence start with a moment of friction or tension, even if it's quiet.

“The store had been quiet until Sarah dropped the pocketknife into her coat pocket.”

Step 3: Sharpen for Voice and Rhythm

Now read it aloud.

- Does it flow?
- Does it match the tone of your story?
- Can you make it punchier or more surprising?

Look for:

- Overused phrases
- Too many adjectives
- Passive constructions

Sometimes the fix is one strong verb or a better noun.



Before-and-After Example

Let's take a flat opening:

✗ *“Daniel woke up and got dressed.”*

Okay. A moment in time—but it's not a story yet.

Let's apply our steps:

- What's happening emotionally?

- What's unusual about this morning?
- What's Daniel not saying?

✅ *"Daniel was still buttoning his shirt when he realized the blood on the cuffs wasn't his."*

Now we have:

- Movement
- Suspense
- A hint of danger
- A reason to turn the page

💡 Final Encouragement

You don't need a perfect first sentence right out of the gate.

You just need a sentence that makes *you* want to keep going. Something that feels alive, immediate, a little dangerous.

You can always fix it later. In fact, you should.

As I often tell my students: **Don't try to get it right—try to get it interesting.** Revision will take care of the rest.

✍️ Try This: A First Line Challenge

Pull up a flat opening from one of your drafts.

Now write *three* new versions of that same line:

- One with added conflict
- One in a new voice or tone
- One that starts mid-action or just after a key moment

Then pick the one that makes you *want to write the next line*.

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