

California Writers Club, Sacramento  
July 1, 2022  
Writing workshop by Susy Flory

# powerful beginnings & satisfying endings

## POWERFUL BEGINNINGS

**Q:** Why worry so much about the beginning? You'll have time to tell your story, right? Surely your reader will stick with you for a while....

**A:** How many times have you started a book and never finished it? Or maybe not even made it past the first page? Or picked it up in a bookstore and then put it down after looking at the first paragraph? I've done this more times than I can count, because I was already bored and couldn't engage.

Beginnings are crucial for any book, and especially for newer writers as most of us don't have an established audience with a first (and maybe only) book.

Beginnings and endings are where I rewrite the MOST. They are hard to get right, and most of the time it's a process of trial and error. You have to keep trying until it works.

### What to accomplish in an opening scene or pages:

- **A promise** of what is to come (but don't give it all away)
- **Setting the scene** and orienting us to this new world or the new idea or solution
- **Creating empathy and a sense of connection.** If this is fiction or memoir, you're introducing characters, introducing people with hopes and dreams and making us love them. If this is nonfiction (Christian living or self-help), you're connecting to the reader themselves.
- **Creating a tone** and a mood
- **Grabbing our attention** when there's a lot of competition for it!

## 7 Different Ways to Start a Book

## & Hook Your Reader

### 1. Orientation Opener

- **FICTION/MEMOIR:** Start with principal person, villain, the set up the brewing conflict, and then the moment where something significant happens to kick off the story (aka, inciting incident).
- **NONFICTION:** Start with a clear and comprehensive overview of the problem, and what the stakes are if the problem is not solved...and soon.
  - **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF OPENING:** It's a quick and intense start—almost like an overview or preview.

### 2. A Day in the Life

- **FICTION/MEMOIR: A Day in the Life:** Introduce us to the main character or narrator and their world, right before everything changes when the story kicks off. What are their/your hopes and dreams? What is their/your life like? Make us fall in love with you or your main character.
- **NONFICTION:** What is a day like for a person with this current problem, situation, or outlook? What are their hopes and dreams? This is your reader, and they need your book. Show them you understand what their life is like, and they stick with you and your book as you lead them by the hand.
  - **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF OPENING:** Hooks the reader with a strong emotional connection to the main character, narrator, problem solver, or mentor.

### 3. Collage/Montage

- **For FICTION/MEMOIR:** Sometimes a character's (or your) life and struggles are so complicated you need to do a few scenes in the beginning to get a lot of information across. This is sometimes called a "shotgun" opening, with scattered scenes that create a strong impression. THEN the story can begin.
- **NONFICTION:** Sometimes real life examples are the way to go. A collection of vivid examples or powerful anecdotes about real people can show why a solution is needed for a particular life problem, or why this new approach is important to pay attention to.
  - **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF OPENING:** It takes strong writing, but this can be a WOW opening with a quick, sharp pace.

## 4. Older and Wiser Perspective

- **For FICTION/MEMOIR:** You or your main character are older and wiser now (after the events of the book, still to come) and you use that wise voice to start the book with some perspective, and a hint of what is to come. Who doesn't want a wise guide to tell us an unforgettable story?
- **NONFICTION:** You are the wise guide here. Share some of your own struggles to show your reader that you understand what they are going through, and that there is help and hope on the other side.
  - **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF OPENING:** Gives the reader hope that there is wisdom to be had after persevering through difficult circumstances or a thorny problem.

## 5. Welcome to my World

- **For FICTION/MEMOIR:** Create an immersive world and drop the reader right into the middle, using vivid imagery that appeals to the senses. Work hard to create a smooth flow of words and sentences, and the musical quality of language. A good editor can help.
- **NONFICTION:** Same! Use the first few pages to describe a new reality that will draw the reader in and help them to visualize a new reality that can be theirs, too.
  - **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF OPENING:** Everyone loves the magic and wonder of visiting a new world, or a new reality, in a book.

## 6. Set Up a Mystery

- **For FICTION/MEMOIR:** All readers are curious. Set up a question that needs an answer, and requires us to read the book to find out what happens and why.
- **NONFICTION:** you set up the problem or current reality for the nonfiction reader, give strong hints to the solution but don't give it all away. They will need to read the book for that!
  - **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF OPENING:** I repeat—all readers are curious 😊

## 7. Start in the Middle of the Action

- **For FICTION/MEMOIR:** Writing great action scenes takes skill and practice, but if you can pull this off, you can grab us quickly by starting in the middle of the action.

— **NONFICTION:** Make the effort to infuse your opening sentences and paragraphs with a strong sense of urgency and intensity. For this kind of opening, you'll want to avoid long introductory passages. Jump right in.

- **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF OPENING:** There's no room for boredom here!

## ONE LAST KEY TO A BEGINNING THAT GRABS THE READER:

A killer first line (or lines)! Write, write, write, and rewrite, rewrite, rewrite that first line until you get something that grabs the reader and won't let them go!

AND...JUST FOR FUN...

### HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF GREAT MEMOIR FIRST LINES

*since memoir is my specialty 😊*

My childhood came to a virtual halt when I was around five years old.

*Little Heathens, by Mildred Armstrong Kalish*

Having just died, I shouldn't be starting my afterlife with a chicken sandwich, no matter what, especially one served up by nuns.

*Learning to Die in Miami, by Carlos Eire*

Any way I tell this story is a lie, so I ask you to disconnect the device in your head that repeats at intervals how ancient and addled I am.

*Lit, by Mary Karr (preface, in an open letter to her son)*

"The blood is still rolling off my flak jacket from the hole in my shoulder and there are bullets cracking into the sand all around me.

*Born on the Fourth of July, by Ron Kovic*

At the age of three my grand aunt proclaimed her independence by categorically refusing to having her feet bound, resolutely tearing off the bandages as fast as they were applied.

*Falling Leaves: The Memoir of an Unwanted Child, by Adeline Yen Mah*

My mother's hand was open like a bisque cup, all porcelain, and Christ Jesus' fingers were tentacles entangled around her palm.

*Daughter of the Queen of Sheba, by Jacki Lyden*

The phone shouldn't ring this early.

*Her Last Death, by Susanna Sonnenberg*

I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through the dumpster.

*The Glass Castle, by Jeannette Walls*

Our mother died three times.

*The Kids Are All Right, by Diana, Liz, Amanda, and Dan Welch*

"Early childhood memories don't always remain in the right order or come back the moment they're called, preferring to remain stubbornly locked in secret compartments deep in the filing cabinets of my mind.

*The Little Prisoner, by Jane Elliott, Andrew Crofts*

Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

*Angela's Ashes, by Frank McCourt*

### [HERE ARE SOME FROM MEMOIRS I'VE WRITTEN:](#)

I knew I was in trouble when they took away my shoes.

*Shoes: A Holocaust Memoir*

The first time I saw Metro Meteor I noticed his eyes.

*Painting With Metro*

September 11, 2001: I can feel her body quivering. It's twelve thirty in the morning, and Roselle is afraid of the thunder. Again.

*Thunder Dog*

It was like a recurring nightmare, but I wasn't exactly scared. It was more like a shot of adrenaline...

*Miracle on Voodoo Mountain*

Once upon a time a girl from town met a boy from the woods.

*The Good, the Bad, and the Grace of God*

It's well before sunup on the south side of Mount Everest, and I'm in my tent at Camp 2, twenty-one thousand feet up in the sky, on my way to the summit.

*The Sky Below*

I grew up on the back of a donkey, a restless daydreamer who loved setting out to explore what I would come to see as paradise, although I didn't really appreciate Ireland until I nearly lost it.  
*Sanctuary*

---

## GOOD ENDINGS

**When a reader invests time and energy and heart in reading your book**, you most definitely want to leave them feeling satisfied with the ending! The question is, how do you do that? Because there are a million ways to end a book.

**I typically rewrite my endings several times.** It's a bit of a process of trial and error until it feels right. To make sure it works, I have some readers try it out to see if they like it too!

**What the reader will feel after a satisfying ending to a book:**

- The beginning promise(s) of the book or story has been fulfilled
- A sense of happiness, warm fuzzies, or satisfaction
- Takeaway – there are things to think about, aspire to, or tell others about
- A feeling that the ending has been carefully thought out and well crafted
- A strong desire to read the next book!

## 7 Different Ways to End a Book Well

8. **Bookends:** Also known as a circular ending. The story circles back to the beginning—same setting and/or characters, same idea, or same/similar wording.
  - **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF ENDING:** There's a feeling of unity and symmetry that can feel just right—like a round trip journey.
9. **Lesson, or Moral Ending:** The main character in the story (if fiction or memoir), or the wise guide (if nonfiction) has grown, changed, and learned something by the end of the book. Wisdom gained and shared, especially if hard-earned, is a good way to end a book.

- **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF ENDING:** Readers are looking for advice and guidance from someone they know and trust; by the end of the book, they will trust you!
10. **Warm Fuzzies:** This ending emphasizes emotions, either of the characters or of the reader, and leaves you feeling good inside. Making the reader feel deeply is the goal here.
- **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF ENDING:** If you can leave a reader feeling happy inside, they will want to read more from you.
11. **Dialogue Ending:** Your book ends with an important conversation between two characters, a powerful or poignant quote, or an internal dialogue. This kind of ending is relatable and memorable.
- **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF ENDING:** Dialogue is engaging and invites the reader to pay close attention.
12. **Unforgettable Image:** Use the power and beauty of words to paint an unforgettable image using vivid details that appeal to the many different senses (there are more than five!) This kind of ending touches emotions and conveys a mood.
- **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF ENDING:** Creating an immersive scene will help the reader remember your story or your ideas on a deep level.
13. **Cliffhanger:** This kind of ending leaves the reader hanging, and wanting more. This is a good ending to use if you're planning a series or a sequel, and works best if the next book is already available (so your reader won't have to wait).
- **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF ENDING:** Well-crafted cliffhangers are almost irresistible.
14. **Surprise!** Designing and crafting an unexpected twist can make for a nice surprise at the end of a book. If you're writing a novel or memoir, reveal something unexpected. If you're writing nonfiction, include an extra bonus or premium as a surprise.
- **WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THIS KIND OF ENDING:** The unexpected extra is fun for both reader and writer!

## ONE LAST KEY TO A SATISFYING ENDING:

A satisfying ending *rarely* shows up in the first draft. Try using a placeholder for your ending—a few paragraphs you dash off to hold the space for something better. All you’re trying for is an “okay” ending, so you can finish your first draft. But on the rewrite, when you have more clarity and a better sense of exactly who and what your book is, you can aim for a more satisfying ending. Writing an ending is not one and done; plan for 3, 4, 5, 6, or even more tries. I commonly write 3-4 endings, and sometimes more.

**KEY:** It won’t be 100% perfect, but if you put in the work, your ending will get better and better—especially if you get some reader feedback. (Be sure to use readers who are avid readers of the genre you are working in.)

### HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF SATISFYING ENDINGS

His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

*The Dead*, by James Joyce

Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger.

*Life of Pi*, by Yann Martel

But wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest a little boy and his Bear will always be playing.

*The House At Pooh Corner*, by A.A. Milne

It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.

*Charlotte's Web*, by E.B. White

For Siddalee Walker, the need to understand has passed, at least for the moment. All that was left was love and wonder.

*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, by Rebecca Wells

But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt.

*The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker

Up out of the lampshade, startled by the overhead light, flew a large nocturnal butterfly that began circling the room. The strains of the piano and violin rose up weakly from below.

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, by Milan Kundera

How wonderful the flavor, the aroma of her kitchen, her stories as she prepared the meal, her Christmas Rolls! I don't know why mine never turn out like hers, or why my tears flow so freely when I prepare them - perhaps I am as sensitive to onions as Tita, my great-aunt, who will go on living as long as there is someone who cooks her recipes.

*Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel

We sat there for a long time, till the crowd around us thinned, till the sun shifted and the light changed. Till we felt our eyes could meet again, without the tears.

*Sarah's Key*, by Tatiana de Rosnay

### HERE ARE SOME ENDINGS FROM MEMOIRS I'VE WRITTEN:

Want to start changing the world? Take heart; you don't need magic bracelets or a golden lasso. For that matter, you don't have to be a Harriet Tubman, either, or an Eleanor Roosevelt or a Jane Austen. To make a difference and change the world, all you have to do is look around and say this: "What can I do that isn't going to get done unless I do it, just because of who I am?" Then get up off the couch. And start a little adventure.

*So Long Status Quo*

As I rest on the cool tile, I listen to their sweet voices take turns praying.

"Thank you for food."

"Thank you for Mommy."

"Thank you for Daddy."

Then I trail off into my own thoughts about the transformations I have seen, from biting, scratching, and yelling to kissing, hugging, and whispering sweet prayers. I think to myself, This is redemption, this is beauty, and this is the miracle.

*Miracle on Voodoo Mountain*

A deep happiness descended over me, like a column of sunlight across my back. Metro and I had come so far. We trotted to the end of the field and reached the trailhead. I leaned down and rubbed Metro's neck. "Are you ready for some trail?"

He didn't respond, and I didn't expect him to. But I knew where he wanted to go. His ears turned forwards and his head lifted as his nostrils flared, drinking in the wild and dark beauty before us. Then we stepped out of the field and into the woods.

*Painting With Metro*

I looked up at the stars and talked to the One who made them. *God, where have I been? Where have we been? You are good and gracious and most awesome. Thank You for the life I have. I am so sorry for so much of what I've been and who I was.*

I leaned back into my camp chair. Austin was growing up, but so was I. I slipped to my knees right beside Austin. I lightly touched his face. "Thank you, Auz. I love you." Then I sat in my chair and drank my coffee. The best cup ever.

*The Unbreakable Boy*

Cling to God, and let His love radically change your life with the riches only He can bring. He's madly in love with you, you know.

*Desired By God*

### Guide Dog Wisdom

#### *What I Learned From Roselle on 9-11*

1. There's a time to work and a time to play. Know the difference. When the harness goes on, it's time to work. Work hard; others are depending on you.
2. Focus in and use all of your senses. Learn to tell the difference between a harmless thunderstorm and a true emergency. Don't let your sight get in the way of your vision.
3. Sometimes the way is hard, but if you work together, someone will pass along a water bottle just when you need it.
4. Always, but always, kiss firefighters.
5. Ignore distractions. There's more to life than playing fetch or chasing tennis balls.
6. Listen carefully to those who are wiser and more experienced than you. They'll help you find the way.
7. Don't stop until work is over. Sometimes being a hero is just doing your job.
8. The dust cloud won't last forever. Keep going and look for the way out. It will come.
9. Shake off the dust and move on. Remember the first guide dog command? "Forward."
10. When work is over, play hard with your friends. And don't forget to share your Booda Bone.

*Thunder Dog*

Our lives have been filled with love and laughter and lots of fun, but there have been stumbles and struggles and tears too. Life is complicated, but we know that if we continue to follow the Lord, step by step, He'll shine a light and lead us down the right path. He'll do that for you, too, if you only ask Him.

Once upon a time a girl from town met a boy from the woods. And you know what? They lived happily ever after.

The end.

Well, actually, it's just the beginning!

*The Good, the Bad, and the Grace of God*

But I have learned how to dream big and then set course to make it happen.

I've learned the essentials: keeping laser focused, visualizing the path to success, maintaining a strong support network, training for success but preparing for failures along the way, and having confidence tempered by humility and a dose of luck. If you are ready for the call of opportunity when it rings, and you are willing to put in the work required, it's remarkable how dreamlets emerge, tangible, from the fog of unrealized dreams. It's really not all that hard if you aren't afraid

to stumble every once in a while and then get back up. And back up. And back up again. The summits and calderas and skywalks and other bold life challenges are out there, waiting for you to dust off your dream. Everything is possible until proven impossible, and then you just need to become more creative. The sky is not the limit. And it never will be.

*The Sky Below*

Once upon a time, a lad from the village stood on the rock and looked down at the castle, dreaming about joining the battle. But he had to learn he wasn't strong enough to fight the battle alone. He needed help. One day he stopped running, called out, and help came. That help has never stopped. He decided to try to help others with the help he'd been given, and to share what he learned from the donkeys. And they all lived happily ever after . . .especially Jacksie!

*Sanctuary*

*Thanks to Kristine Nannini at YoungTeacherLove for letting me use and adapt some of her chart, "Examples of Narrative Endings."*