

Day 3: Hook Line and Sinker

When I was 8 years old, I shocked my family and a local archaeologist by discovering artifacts dating back almost 3,500 years.

When I was in eighth grade I couldn't read.

While traveling through the daily path of life, have you ever stumbled upon a hidden pocket of the universe?

The spaghetti bubbled and slushed around the pan, and as I stirred it, the noises it gave off began to sound increasingly like bodily functions.

I had never seen anyone get so excited about mitochondria.

Cancer tried to defeat me, and it failed.

I have old hands.

Flying over enemy territory, I took in Beirut's beautiful skyline and wondered if under different circumstances I would have hopped on a bus and come here for my vacation. Instead, I saw the city from the window of a helicopter, in military uniform, my face camouflaged, on my way to a special operation deep behind enemy lines.

My younger sister, Jessica, arrived home one day reeling about the shirt that her friend had worn to school. It had simply read, "Genocide, Homicide, Suicide, Riverside."

Some fathers might disapprove of their children handling noxious chemicals in the garage.

I was paralyzed from the waist down. I would try to move my leg or even shift an ankle but I never got a response. This was the first time thoughts of death ever crossed my mind.

As an Indian-American, I am forever bound to the hyphen.

I have been surfing Lake Michigan since I was 3 years old.

On a hot Hollywood evening, I sat on a bike, sweltering in a winter coat and furry boots.

I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks.

Make Them Want More

Don't you want to read more? Didn't these first lines make you curious? So how do you get that stellar first line? How do you get started with your essay in the first place? Here are some examples from essays that some of my students have developed and how they found their first line.

Example 1: The Good Story

"Here comes a puff!" my dad shouted back to me over the howling wind. Three seconds later the wind lifted and tipped the boat and as I stretched my body over the side, I knew the feeling of the osprey soaring overhead; pure freedom!

Crafting this first line: This student wrote about one of his greatest passions, sailing. He did a great job of creating a visual picture right at the beginning of his essay. You can picture him leaning over the side, the howling wind, the smile on his face. The instant picture creates a connection for the reader and they want to read more.

Example 2: Be funny (but appropriate)

Crouching in the grass, the tiger parents spot their prey. They slowly approach her, watching for any distractions. At the first sign of laziness, they pounce, surprising the girl back into doing her homework. The recent Tiger Mom controversy has brought a new perspective into American culture.

Crafting this first line: This student uses a bit of humor to hook the admissions officer in. She is writing about a relatively serious topic, but by poking fun at the it, she has made it even more interesting.

Example 3: Think Outside the Box

Sometimes I really wish I could write in cursive, not the semi-connected scrawl I normally use. When I see people who write in perfect cursive, I can't help but be overcome by jealousy at the graceful, fluid movements creating equally inspiring marks on the page.

Crafting this first line: This student had the advantage of having a really different topic to draw her first line from. Who would think of writing her college essay about handwriting? Having an "outside of the box" topic can automatically hook an admissions officer and make them wonder where you are going with your idea.

The perfect first line of your essay may not be easy to come by, but don't focus on that first. Sometimes it is easier to write the entire essay, then think of the appropriate introduction. Also think about what is the part of your essay that stands out the most. What is the most unusual aspect? What is the part that most people can relate to? There is a creative first line in your essay somewhere!

Day 3: Show Don't Tell!

Specific Details create word pictures that can make your writing easier to understand and more interesting to read. This exercise will give you practice in revising sentences to make them more concrete and specific.

Read Sample 1:

Current inventory: thirty-two note pads, ten packs of Pilot G-2 pens, and pure willpower.

I come from a long line of list-makers. It shows up on both sides of my family, so by the time this trait reached my generation, it hit a peak. I'm a first-rate **lister**.

My chronic list-making tendencies began in fourth grade when I begged for a white board and a set of Expo markers for Christmas. I started creating daily color-coordinated to-do lists replete with little checkmark boxes, and fun facts for my family to enjoy—perhaps to compensate for the fact that my large white board reigned over the kitchen space.

And, while I've retired the white board, I still stick with a note pad. I keep a note pad by the telephone, one on the counter, and of course, one in my backpack—some of them have new app ideas, some of them have new book ideas, maybe there's even a revolution in there somewhere.

Read Sample 2:

Since childhood, I have been an obsessive builder and problem solver. When I was 6, I spent two months digging a hole in my backyard, ruining the grass lawn, determined to make a giant koi pond after watching a show on HGTV. After watching Castaway when I was 7, I started a fire in my backyard--to my mother's horror--using bark and kindling like Tom Hanks did. I neglected chores and spent nights locked in my room drawing pictures and diagrams or learning rubik's cube algorithms while my mother yelled at me through the door to go to sleep. I've always been compulsive about the things I set my mind to. The satisfaction of solving problems and executing my visions is all-consuming.

Day 3: Show, Don't Tell! Instructions

Revise the following sentences to make them more concrete and specific. If you don't like these sentences, you can also take sentences out of your own essay.

Original	Description
The sun came up.	At 6:27 on March third, the sun rose in a cloudless sky and flooded the earth with liquid gold.
My day was very busy.	Due to an avalanche of work, I ate lunch at my desk today while catching up on my email.
The food in the cafeteria was disgusting	
I sat by myself in the coffee shop.	
The kitchen was a mess.	
I felt sad.	
The waiter seemed to be impatient and annoyed.	
I felt tired after practice.	
There was a strange smell in the attic.	
My friend and I get along.	
It was noisy in the room	
I'm ticklish!	

Create your own list of favorite words and start using them.

For instance, in headlines:

Without sensory words:

5 Tips for Turning Boring Information Into a Practical Tutorial

With sensory words:

*5 Tips for Turning **Drab** Information Into a **Tantalizing** Tutorial*

In business emails:

Without sensory words:

Unfortunately, I'm currently too busy to take on new projects.

With sensory words:

*Unfortunately, my schedule is **jam-packed**; and I'm unable to **squeeze** in new projects.*

In product descriptions:

Without sensory words:

The long-lasting cabinets are made from the best material, guaranteed for 10 years.

With sensory words:

*Our cabinets remain **squeak-and-creak** free. That's guaranteed for 10 years.*

On your About page and social media profiles:

Without sensory words:

Irreverent copywriter on a mission to eradicate gobbledygook and to make boring business blogs interesting.

With sensory words:

*Irreverent copywriter on a mission to **stamp out** gobbledygook and to add **sparkle** to business blogs.*

To make your metaphors more vivid so your message sticks:

Without sensory words:

Imagine your writing is slowing readers down.

With sensory words:

*Imagine your readers trudging. Their shoes feel **heavy**. **Squelch**. **Sploosh**. **Squelch**. **Sploosh**.*

Day 3: Sensory Words

Sight	Smell	Taste	Sound	Touch
bleary	acid	appetizing	bellow	balmy
blurred	aroma	bitter	blare	biting
brilliant	aromatic	bland	buzz	bristly
colorless	fetid	creamy	cackle	bumpy
dazzling	foul-smelling	delectable	cheer	chilly
dim	fragrant	delicious	clamor	coarse
dingy	moldy	flavorful	clang	crawly
faded	musty	flavorless	crackle	creepy
faint	nidorous	gingery	creak	cuddly
flashy	odiferous	luscious	grumble	dusty
gaudy	odor	nauseating	gurgle	feathery
glance	odorless	palatable	hiss	feverish
gleaming	old	peppery	howl	fluffy
glimpse	perfumed	piquant	hush	furry
glistening	pungent	refreshing	jabber	fuzzy
glittering	putrid	ripe	mumble	goopy
gloomy	rancid	rotten	murmur	greasy
glossy	rank	salty	mutter	gritty
glowing	reeking	savory	rant	hairy
grimy	scent	scrumptious	rave	icy
hazy	scented	sharp	roar	limp
indistinct	smell	sour	rumble	lumpy
misty	spicy	spicy	rustle	moist
peer	steno	spoiled	screech	oily
radiant	sweet	stale	shriek	powdery
shadowy	waft	sugary	shrill	prickly
shimmering	whiff	sweet	sizzle	scratchy
shiny		tangy	snarl	shivery
smudged		tasteless	squawk	silky
sparkling		tasty	squeal	slimy
streaked		unappetizing	swish	slippery
striped		unripe	thud	spongy
tarnished		vinegary	thump	springy
twinkling		yummy	whimper	squashy
		zesty	yelp	sticky
				sweaty
				velvety

Day 3: Quick Essay Editing Round

1. DON'T PAD YOUR PROSE WITH EMPTY FILLER WORDS (Cut Grammar Expletives)

Grammar expletives are literary constructions that begin with the words *it*, *here*, or *there* followed by a form of the verb *to be*.

(*Expletive* comes from the Latin *explere*, meaning *to fill*. Think smelly literary landfill).

Common constructions include *it is*, *it was*, *it won't*, *it takes*, *here is*, *there is*, *there will be*.

The problem? When *it*, *here*, and *there* refer to nouns later in the sentence or – worse – to something unnamed, they weaken your writing by shifting emphasis away from the true drivers of your sentences. And they usually require other support words such as *who*, *that*, and *when*, which further dilute your writing.

Example: *There are some bloggers who seem to have...*

The *there are* expletive places the sentence's focus on some nebulous thing called *there* instead of the true focus of the sentence – *some bloggers*. And the writer must then use another unnecessary word – *who* – that's three unnecessary words in one unfocused sentence.

Train yourself to spot instances of *there*, *here*, and *it* followed by a *to be* verb (such as *is*, *are*, *was*, and *were*) and adjust your sentences to lead with the meat and potatoes of those sentences instead.

(Tip: Use your word processor's *find* functionality and search for *there*, *here*, and *it* and determine if you've used an expletive).

Other before-and-after examples:

- **It's** fun **to** edit – **Editing is** fun
- **It** takes time **to** write – **Writing takes** time
- **There are** many people **who** write – **Many people** write
- **There's** nothing better than blogging – **Nothing's better than** blogging
- **Here are** some things to consider: – **Some things to consider are:**

Caveat: If you previously described an object using *there*, *here*, and *it*, you're not guilty of an expletive infraction. For example:

- I love editing. **It's** fun. (This is not an expletive construction since I previously described what *it* refers to.)

2. DON'T WEAKEN THE ACTION WITH WIMPY WORDS (Avoid Weak Verbs; Use Visceral and Action Verbs Instead)

Not only does *to be* conspire with *it*, *there*, and *here* to create nasty grammar expletives, but it's also responsible for its own class of sentence impairing constructions.

Certain uses of *to be* in its various forms weaken the words that follow. The solution is to replace these lightweights with more powerful alternatives.

Let's see some before-and-after examples:

- She **is** blogging – She **blogs**
- People **are** in love with him – People **love** him
- He **is** aware that people love him – He **knows** people love him

Other verbs besides *to be* verbs can lack strength as well. Use visceral verbs or verbs that express some action. Let's edit:

- Give out – Offer
- Find out – Discover
- Make it clearer – Clarify
- I can't make it to the party – I can't attend the party
- He went to Mexico – He traveled to Mexico
- Think of a blogging strategy – Devise a blogging strategy

3. DON'T CRIPPLE YOUR DESCRIPTIONS WITH FEEBLE PHRASES (Avoid Weak Adjectives)

Weak adjectives sap the strength from your writing just as nefariously as weak verbs. Use the best adjectives possible when describing nouns and pronouns. And be mindful that certain words, like *really* and *very*, usually precede weak adjectives. Take a look:

- Really bad – Terrible
- Really good – Great
- Very big – Huge
- Very beautiful – Gorgeous

Even if you don't have a telltale *really* or *very* preceding an adjective, you can often give your writing more impact by using stronger alternatives:

- Dirty – Filthy
- Tired – Exhausted
- Scared – Terrified
- Happy – Thrilled

Even worse than using weak adjectives is using weak adjectives to tell your readers what something *isn't* as opposed to telling them what something *is*:

- It's not that good – It's terrible
- He's not a bore – He's hilarious
- He's not very smart – He's ignorant

4. TRIM FLABBY WORDS AND PHRASES (Avoid Verbose Colloquialisms)

Today's readers have limited time and patience for flabby writing. Their cursors hover over the back button, so say what you mean as concisely as possible before your readers vanish:

- But the fact of the matter is – But
- Editing is absolutely essential – Editing is essential (*Absolutely* is redundant)
- You're going to have to edit your work – You'll have to edit your work or You must edit your work (*Going to* and *going to have to* are flabby expressions)

- **Due to the fact that** editing takes time, some people avoid it – **Because** editing takes time, some people avoid it
- Every **single** person should love editing – Every person should love editing (*Single* is redundant; and shouldn't married people love editing too?)

5. DON'T PUSSYFOOT AROUND YOUR VERBS AND ADJECTIVES (Avoid Nominalization)

Nominalization occurs when a writer uses a weak noun equivalent when a stronger verb or adjective replacement is available. Like expletives, nominals usually introduce other unnecessary words when used.

Count the number of words in the before-and-after examples below, and you will witness how badly nominals weaken your writing:

- **Give** your post a **proofread** – **Proofread** your post (verb form)
- Alcohol **is the cause of** hangovers – Alcohol **causes** hangovers (verb form)
- The plane's **approach was met with the scramble of** emergency crews – The plane **approached** and emergency crews **scrambled** (verb form)
- He **shows signs of carelessness** – He is **careless** (adjective form)
- She **has a high level of intensity** – She is **intense** (adjective form)

6. THROW OUT THE RULEBOOK ON PUNCTUATION (Use the Occasional Comma for Clarity)

The rules around punctuation can be complicated, even for the humble comma.

But do you truly need to know the difference between a serial comma, an Oxford comma, and a Harvard comma to write a great essay? Of course not. (And it's a trick question – they're all the same.)

Use commas sparingly if you prefer, but if excluding a comma MAKES YOUR READER STOP READING, add another bleepin' comma – regardless of what any comma police may say.

Let's look at an example:

You can ignore editing and people reading your post may not notice but your ideas will get lost.

By not including a comma between *editing* and *and*, I read this sentence and asked myself, "I can ignore editing *and* people reading my post? Really?" Of course, readers work out the intended meaning a moment later, but by that time, they've already stalled.

So, regardless of what comma rule I may break by adding a comma to this sentence, as long as my readers don't get confused and stop reading, I don't care – and neither should you.

Let's look at another example that needs a comma for clarity:

One day, when you find success you can pull out your golden pen and write me a thank-you letter.

By not including a comma between *success* and *you*, I read this sentence and asked myself, "Is success something you can pull out of a golden pen?"

Regardless of your stance on commas, you ultimately want your readers to keep reading. You want them to continue down your slippery slope of **powerful content** all the way to your call to action – without getting jarred from their trance to contemplate commas with their inner editors or a Google search.

7. BE AS MANIPULATIVE AS POSSIBLE (Use Noun Modifiers Whenever You Can)

You won't use this technique often, but at least be mindful of it.

When we use two nouns together with the first noun modifying the second, we are using noun modifiers. I like them because they hack the flab from our writing by shortening our sentences. Let's review some examples:

- Tips **on** editing – Editing tips
- Great advice **on** how to boost traffic – Great traffic-boosting advice (*Traffic-boosting is a compound noun here*)
- Information **regarding** registration – Registration information

These sentences have prepositions between the noun sets. Whenever you spot this construction, try to implement this noun-modifying technique.

Day 3: Writing Exercises for Emotions

EMOTION: FEARLESS

Exercise #1: Tell Your Best Friends Why They Suck

I'm sure you love your friends dearly, but let's be honest, sometimes they annoy the heck out of you.

Write a letter to each of your friends, telling them what you hate about them. Tell them everything you wish they'd stop doing and saying.

Don't actually send it — I don't want to be responsible for ruining all your friendships — but don't hold anything back.

And when you're done, move on to family members, coworkers, and so on.

Exercise #3: Recall Your Most Painful Experiences

Think about the most painful experiences in your life — the ones that didn't just make you shed a tear or two, but made you bawl bucketloads.

Now write an account of those occasions and let all the emotions flood out.

You should be dripping tears onto your keyboard while you do this.

Exercise #4: Confess Your Deepest, Darkest Secret

Write about a secret that you've kept locked away out of embarrassment — something about yourself that nobody knows and that you don't want anybody to know. Now's the time to unleash the beast.

Remember, whatever you write is for your eyes only, and once you're done, you can tear it up right away.

Exercise #6: Describe Your Most Mortifying Moment

Everyone has a moment they wish they could erase. The shame and indignity of something you said or did. The toe-curling embarrassment that still makes you groan in agony whenever the memory pops into your head.

Put it down in writing. Remember every mortifying detail. Relive the humiliation and spew it all onto the page.

EMOTION: HUMOR

Exercise #12: Find Analogies for Everyday Life

Analogies (and their cousins, similes and metaphors) are a writer's best friend. They can create powerful imagery, make complex ideas easy to understand, and add color and fun to your writing. But coming up with a great analogy is hard — unless you consistently practice.

So make a list of everything you did or experienced yesterday such as getting up from bed, brushing your teeth, walking the dog, doing yoga, and so on. Now, for each activity, come up with a metaphor or analogy.

For example:

- Every day I get up, I feel like a zombie. Some dark and evil force (the alarm) wakes me from my 'rest in peace'. I claw myself out from under the covers and shuffle to the kitchen, moaning and probably drooling a little. I have only one drive at that moment: I must eat (breakfast, not brains), and I won't stop until my hunger is sated.
- Brushing with an electric toothbrush is like taking your teeth to the carwash. You push the brush onto each side of your teeth until they're clean and then you rinse.

Training your brain to make connections between two unrelated things will make you more creative and imaginative. Practice it enough and you'll find that metaphors and similes will come to you naturally as you write your posts.

Hint: Finding great analogies is crazy-hard. Use [this guide](#) to make sure you're doing it right.

Exercise #13: Look at the World Through Distorted Glasses

One reliable way to make people laugh is to put everything in the world into new and absurd contexts.

You pretend you don't know what an object or custom is actually for, and then guess at what its true purpose is.

For example, you might look at an iPad and decide it's a:

- Frisbee for square people
- Skating rink for mice
- Chopping board for the insanely wealthy

See how that works?

Don't worry about sounding silly. The trick is to think completely outside the box.

Exercise #14: Pile on the Exaggeration

Another good way to go for laughs is to exaggerate something to the point of absurdity.

Good. Now brainstorm twenty endings to each of these sentences:

- My house is so small...
- My cat is so lazy...
- My friend is so bossy...
- My home town is so bland...
- My job is so boring...

Don't worry if they're not all comedy gold. The idea is to practice. The more you do it, the easier it becomes.

And when you're done with this list, continue practicing. Use things you own or people you know, define a few of their characteristics (e.g., my car is red, tiny, old, guzzles gas, has powerful brakes, etc.), and then make a list of exaggerations.