It's a Start

Sue Burke – https://sueburke.site/

The opening paragraphs of your novel or short story should set the tone, voice, setting, genre, characters, stakes, conflict, trajectory, intrigue, and point of view — some of these things, at least. And grab attention. And make readers feel they're in skillful hands. Starting is challenging.

Here are 17 ways to start your story. Additional ways no doubt exist, and some of these ways are overlap, but this list may help you test ideas for what best serves the story you want to tell. Often it's a good idea, after you get to "The End," to reconsider the opening and possibly test several options.

1. **UNEXPECTED** — Something that seems counterfactual, dramatic, arresting, or jarring. It can disturb your reader and set the tone for a wild story.

When I picked her up at the Stop 'n' Shop on Route 28, Dot was wearing a short black skirt and red sneakers just like the ones she had taken from the bargain rack the night we broke into the Sears in Hendersonville five years earlier. (John Kessel, "The Baum Plan for Financial Independence")

We are happy to be traveling together in the alligator. To survive the crisis in the city outside, we have had ourselves made *very small*. (Kit Reed, "Perpetua")

2. **IMAGE** — Begin with evocative sensory details for one specific thing, action, or process: sound, sight, touch, taste, smell. You are promising the readers this will be important.

For nine straight miles, the hot-rolled steel rails cut a path through the woods, a metal chain thrown into soft mud. Discarded, rotting railroad ties littered the tracksides, the stench of creosote saturating the forest air until birds no longer frequented the trees. It was wholly quiet, cathedral still, waiting. The waiting never ended. (E. Catherine Tobler, "To Drive the Cold Winter Away")

Reactors, formed of polished obsidian, moaned in the cavernous vaults. Supporting pillars of fluted bone stood in the shadows; around them, black flames licked upwards, reaching toward the city above. (John Meany, "Diva's Bones")

3. **ACTION** — People and things are in motion. Someone is doing something that is crucial. Often called *in medias res.* Establish the conflict for the reader as soon as you can.

After ascending seventy-two flights of iron stairs, creeping past tentacled sentinels lurking in pools filled with black water, and silently dispatching wizened old warriors armed with glaives and morningstars that proved a close match for his pistols and poisoned glass knives, Mr. Zealand at last stumbled into the uppermost room of Archibald Grace's invisible tower. (Tim Pratt, "Life in Stone")

As soon as the last member of Night Team A hauls his tired ass up the ladder, you lead your team down it, into the time bubble. The bubble smells like sweat, and Megan hits on the fan first thing, like always, though you all know it won't chase out the smell: you don't give the fan time to make the bubble smell decent. You don't have the time to give it. (M. Shayne Bell, "Lock Down")

4. **SIMPLICITY** — A brief, straightforward statement can set the stage or tone. Utter clarity can feel very inviting.

The American boy lived with his parents in a small villa high on a hillside above a cove where young people danced at night, laughing and shouting, their voices rising through the olive trees as he fell asleep. (Bruce McAllister, "The Seventh Daughter")

This is what William Wachter wrote in his spiral notebook during study hall, the first day. (Gene Wolfe, “Golden City Fair”)

5. **QUESTION** — With or without a question mark. It can be implied, abstract, literal, in dialogue, even addressed directly at the reader.

“Are you having an affair?” Miranda asked him. Tom watched her as she sat on the edge of the bed rubbing her feet, pinched and red after a night of performing in spike heels. (Martha Soukup, “ The House of Expectations”)

Welcome, friend, and listen closely! Listen with an open heart, for this is the tale of a town, of a boy, of history remade and reimagined. Dream with me, will you? Watch, and allow hope to enfold you. (Trae Hawkins, “Father Time Dares You to Dream”)

6. **CURIOSITY** — An opening with some missing information or with a minor mystery can make the reader ask questions and want to seek the answers about where, why, who, what, how, or when. Avoid being cryptic, however.

There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. (Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*)

After she had finished her work at the North Pole, Jannina came down to the Red Sea refineries, where she had family business, jumped to New Delhi for dinner, took a nap in a public hotel in Queensland, walked from the hotel to the station, by-passed the Leeward Islands (where she thought she might go, but all the stations were busy), and met Charley to watch the dawn over the Carolinas. (Joanna Russ, “Nobody’s Home”)

7. **QUOTE** — Someone else’s famous words can set the tone. Quotes can be invented, too.

“Like every African dictator, he was confusion’s masterpiece.” — *The Telegraph,* August 2003. One cloudy noon in late October, a turtle moseyed past the edge of the Great Swamp and down a mud-caked road. He dawdled past rows of trees whose roots the bayou fed living organisms. (Eugene Bacon with E. Don Harpe, “De Turtle o’ Hades”)

“What we call learning is really remembering,” Socrates says in the *Phaedo*; for our ideas, in their abstract perfection, could not be formed by observation of this sloppy and imperfect world. For Descartes, too, such immutable ideas as “God,” “mind,” “body,” and “triangle” could not be derived from the swirl of sense-impressions reaching our eyeballs and fingertips, but must be already present at our births. (Raphael Carter, “Congenital Agenesis of Gender Ideation”)

8. **FRAME** — The story is introduced as a story.

This is my favorite book in all the world, though I have never read it. (William Goldman, *The Princess Bride*)

The storyteller said: He was a sorrowful prince, young Livna’lams, seven years old and full of sorrow. (Angélica Gorodischer, “The End of a Dynasty”)

9. **DIALOGUE** — The trick here involves using remarkable and significant dialogue. Be sure the reader finds out who is speaking as soon as necessary. A single line of dialogue as well as a longer exchange can be effective.

“But these are two species,” said Captain Garm, peering closely at the creatures that had just been brought up from the planet below. (Isaac Asimov, “What is This Thing Called Love?”)

"Is it okay if you're one of the ten people I send the letter to," said the voice on the telephone, "or is that redundant? I don't want to screw this up. 'Ear repair' sounds horrible." (Tim Powers, "Pat Moore")

10. **EMOTION** — Famously, *The Iliad* by Homer begins with an angry man. Intense emotions can be magnetic.

True! — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am: but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease has sharpened all my senses — not destroyed — not dulled them. (Edgar Allen Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart")

There is so much blood. Roger didn't know there was this much blood in the human body. It seems impossible, ridiculous, a profligate waste of something that should be precious and rare—and most importantly, contained. This blood belongs inside the body where it began, and yet here it is, and here he is, and everything is going so wrong. (Seanan McGuire, *Middlegame*)

11. **CAPTIVATION** — Use a unique, even poetic voice, approach, or writing style to captivate the reader by making a strong first impression. Remember that even a third-person narrator has a voice.

The Prince is giving a ball! Relax, you're not going. For one thing, you're not invited. There are ways around such obstacles, but they're not open to you. Not with those thighs. Sorry not sorry. (Julie Danvers, "Ugly")

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone. (Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*)

12. **PHILOSOPHY** — State the big idea, theme, belief, or guiding principal that will propel the story. Your characters, protagonist, or narrator may find the idea motivating.

All known forgeries are tales of failure. The people who get into the newsfeeds for their brilliant attempts to cheat the system with their fraudulent Renaissance masterpieces or their stacks of fake checks, well, they might be successful artists, but they certainly haven't been successful at forgery. (Vina Jie-Min Prasad, "A Series of Steaks")

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way. (Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)

13. **CHANGE** — Stories involve change. Express a change plainly at the very start. A small change can be a small hook to catch more fish than a big hook.

I never went back to my room that night. I knew I had an hour at the most before they would have guards at the door. What was on my back, at my belt, in my pockets was all I took — that and all the *tilgit* the cook could scrape together and cram into my pouch. (Peter S. Beagle, "Quarry")

Her back was broken. Henry knew it as soon as he saw her trying to crawl out of the street, her hind legs useless. (Terry Bisson, "Death's Door")

14. **PROTAGONIST** — Introduce the reader to the person who will be central to the story, and possibly that person's point of view and thoughts. This can be first-person or third-person.

She was born a thing and as such would be condemned if she failed to pass the encephalograph test required of all newborn babies. There was always the possibility that though the limbs were twisted, the mind was not, that though the ears would hear only dimly, the eyes see vaguely, the mind behind them was receptive and alert. (Anne McCaffrey, "The Ship Who Sang")

The Duke was an old man, and his young wife had never known him when his hair grew dark and heavy, and lay across the breasts of his many lovers like a mantle. (Ellen Kushner, " Death of the Duke")

15. **SETTING** — In many stories, the setting acts like a character. Start by building that unique world with a large brush or tiny strokes of specific detail about the setting and its people. Opening at a distance and closing in can show the reader what is significant.

It was like an Earth forest in fall, but it was not fall. The forest leaves were green and copper and purple and fiery red, and a wind sent patches of bright green sunlight dancing among the leaf shadows. (Katherine MacLean, "Contagion")

There was a start-up about a half-mile ahead the day before, a fever of distant engines and horns honking as others signaled their excitement — a chance to move! — and so he'd spent the day jammed behind the wheel, living in his Apartment On Tape, waiting for the chance, listening under the drone of distant helicopters to hear the startup make its way downtown. (Jonathan Lethem, " Access Fantasy")

16. **PROLOGUE** — Done well, a prologue can set up the backstory and history, or establish the theme or setting of the story. Brevity and significance matter. This nod to the past can be seen through the eyes of the narrator, another character, or even the antagonist.

Between 1347 and 1450 A.D., bubonic plague overran Europe, killing some 75 million people. The plague, dubbed Black Death because of the black pustules that erupted on the skin of the afflicted, was caused by a bacterium now known as *Yersinia pestis.* The Europeans of the day, lacking access to microscopes or knowledge of disease vectors, attributed their misfortune to an angry God. (Dale Bailey, "The End of the World as We Know It")

The cupboards locked, the kitchen swept clean with a broom of pine twigs, the children each dressed in their one good outfit — a sleight of hand transforming a band of free-range ragamuffins into a sort of pocket-sized town council — the sun creeping down, down, down toward the boreal horizon, and at last none of us could deny it: Jonathan wasn't coming. [scene break] (Louis Evans, " A Seder in Siberia")

17. **FLASH-FORWARD** — Start with a dramatic scene or reflection from farther along in the story as a way to set up the conflict and characters and show the direction the story will take.

Your father is about to ask me the question. This is the most important moment in our lives, and I want to pay attention, note every detail. Your dad and I have just come back from an evening out, dinner and a show; it's after midnight. We came out to the patio to look at the full mooon; then I told your dad I wanted to dance, so he humors me and now we're slow-dancing, a pair of thirty-somethings swaying back and forth in the moonlight like kids. I don't feel the night chill at all. And then your dad says, " Do you want to make a baby?" (Ted Chiang, "The Story of Your Life")

It's got so the young sprouts nowadays seem never to have heard of androids. Oh, they look at them in the museums and they read the references to them in the literature of the time, but they never seem to realize how essential a part of life androids once were, how our whole civilization, in fact, depended on them. (Anthony Boucher, "Q. U. R.")