

THE YOUNG ADULT NOVEL:

How to Write an Opening That Hooks Readers and Lands an Editor

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Course Description:

If your novel opening doesn't hook readers from the very first line, you risk losing your audience. Teens typically give a book less than a minute of consideration. This means you have to grab readers on page 1 and keep their interest. Because many teens bounce between computers, ipads, music, cell phones, and homework, retaining their attention is challenging.

Openings are equally important to agents and editors. The truth is an agent or editor may only read the first few lines or paragraph of your submission to evaluate whether to keep reading or move onto the next manuscript. Because there is so much an opening must accomplish—introduce character, ground the reader in place and time, present or hint at conflict, pique reader curiosity and evoke an emotional response in your audience—there are, thus, an equal number of places where a writer can fail. So, how do successful award-winning authors seamlessly weave these 5 threads into their openings without reading like information dumps? What can we learn and borrow from reading their work?

This 10-week on-line course is designed to answer these questions, as well as to show you how quickly your work needs to grab and hold attention. In the first half of the course we will study the opening pages from a wide range of Printz, Newbery and National Book Award authors in conjunction with writing exercises to spur the creative juices. We will also address critical plot points, story structure, plot, scene building, voice and revision. During the second half of the course, we will use the writing exercises to explore and workshop our own openings with the goal of nailing a solid opening chapter and/or the first 15 pages through multiple revisions. This course is open to both aspiring and experienced writers.

Required Reading:

Writing Young Adult Fiction for Dummies

Deborah Halverson

ISBN: 978-0470949542

<http://www.amazon.com/Writing-Fiction-Dummies-Language-Literature/dp/0470949546>

Blockbuster Plots

Martha Alderson

ISBN: 978-1877809194

<http://www.amazon.com/Blockbuster-Plots-Simple-Martha-Alderson/dp/1877809195>

The Sky is Everywhere

Jandy Nelson

ISBN: 978-0142417805

<http://www.amazon.com/Sky-Everywhere-Jandy-Nelson/dp/0142417807>

Handouts of selected openings from Printz, Newbery and National Book Award novels.

Recommended Reading:

Novel Metamorphosis: Uncommon Ways to Revise

Darcy Pattison

ISBN: 978-0979862106

<http://www.amazon.com/Novel-Metamorphosis-Uncommon-Creative-Strategies/dp/0979862108>

Note: feel free to buy any edition you want, including an ebook.

Grading:

For those who are taking the course for a grade, the breakdown is as follows:

1. Writing exercises (weeks 1-5) - 20% (each week's lesson will outline specific assignment)
2. Workshop submission – 40%
2. Forum/workshop participation – 40% (the success of the course depends on weekly responses to required reading and peer work)

Note: you can change your grading status at any point before the final class meeting (Friday of the last week of class) by contacting the Stanford Continuing Studies department.

Weekly Schedule:

MONDAY MORNING: Each new week officially starts on Monday. Every Sunday evening, I will send out an email to the class introducing the topic for the week, letting you know a little bit more about the craft point we will focus on, the reading we will discuss, and I will also direct you to the new Forum threads, including your Discussion Points about the week's readings and your weekly writing exercises. (NOTE: Because many of you may have busy work schedules, the weekend might be your preferred time to work. Because of this, I will always post the assignments and Forum threads the prior Friday so you can get a head start.)

TUESDAY: 5pm (PST): First responses to reading discussion questions due. You may continue weighing in and participating in the discussion throughout the week, but this is when you should post your initial thoughts on the prompts.

WEDNESDAY, 5pm (PST) Writing exercise due (the earlier you post, the more time you'll have to receive feedback). I respond to them in the order in which they come in.

TUESDAY, THURSDAY or WEEKEND: I will hold weekly office hours in the chatroom for our classroom on one of these days (exact time to be determined). Here we can talk more informally, discussing any general questions as well as specific issues you might be having with your exercises or stories. You can get immediate feedback on your concerns from me and from your classmates. You're not required to come to office hours every week, and feel free to drop in for shorter periods of time within that hour. During Week One, I'll get feedback from the class on what time of day would be most convenient for everyone. We'll kick Chat off in Week Two. Towards the end of the course, I plan to invite guest authors from the selected readings we'll be using.

THROUGHOUT THE WEEK: Respond to posts, participate in discussions.

WEEKEND: If you want, use the weekend to get a jumpstart reading assigned chapters and drafting your writing exercise. I will check in over the weekend, so feel free to start posting for the next week whenever you're ready. The classroom is always open!

Brief Syllabus of Weeks 1-10:

Week 1 (April 9): Introductions

Read: Chapters 1-19, *The Sky is Everywhere*
Writing Exercise: Who I was as a teen, Who I am now and What I want to gain from this course

Week 2 (April 16): Critical Plot Points & Story Structure

Read: Chapters 20-38, *The Sky is Everywhere*
Chapter 6, *Writing Young Adult Fiction for Dummies*
Writing Exercise: Critical Plot Point Writing Exercise
Forum discussion on *The Sky is Everywhere*

Week 3 (April 23): Openings

Read: Packet 1 - Openings
Chapter 4, *Writing Young Adult Fiction for Dummies*
Writing Exercise: Critical Response to Packet 1 on Openings

Week 4 (April 30): Character Development

Read: Packet 2 - Openings
Chapter 5, *Writing Young Adult Fiction for Dummies*
Writing Exercise: Critical Response to Packet 2 on Openings

Week 5 (May 7): Scene Building

Read: Scene Tracker, *Blockbuster Plots*
Writing Exercise: Dissect your opening scene using Scene Tracker

Week 6 (May 14): Voice

Read: Chapter 9, *Writing Young Adult Fiction for Dummies*
Writing Exercise: Submit opening of your novel up to 20 pages

Week 7 (May 21): Workshop

Read: Read assigned workshop pieces
Writing Exercise: Provide thorough comments on assigned workshop pieces

Week 8 (May 28): Workshop

Read: Read assigned workshop pieces
Writing Exercise: Provide thorough comments on assigned workshop pieces

Week 9 (June 4): Workshop

Read: Read assigned workshop pieces
Writing Exercise: Provide thorough comments on assigned workshop pieces

Week 10 (June 11): Revision & Next Steps

Read: Chapters 11 & 12, *Writing Young Adult Fiction for Dummies*
Handout: Next Steps
Recommended after this course: *Novel Metamorphosis: Uncommon Ways to Revise*
Writing Exercise: Submit revision of the first 100-200 words of your workshop submission based on workshop comments

How All This Works:

Each week begins with an introductory craft talk that you'll find in the **Schedule** section. To enrich and expand this discussion, I will often attach short readings from some of my favorite writers and teachers of writing. I will also assign reading from the books that I've asked you to get for this class (along with a few other selections) to illustrate and illuminate our craft discussions. You'll find these listed under **This Week's Reading**. Under **Topics for Discussion** I will pose a couple of questions based on the readings to help you think through how craft techniques are actually being used in published fiction, and how you can use them in your own writing. Under **Writing Assignments**, you'll find several different exercises designed to allow you to focus on an aspect of your fiction. Our group conversation begins when you post your comments and exercises in the **Discussion Forum**. The Forum is a bulletin board where all the action happens. Here, we'll have ongoing conversations about your work, the books we read together, and different fiction topics. This is where you'll post your work, and where our discussions will take place.

Weekly Writing Exercises:

The weekly writing exercises from weeks 1-5 are designed to allow you to practice the techniques we're discussing and to help you structure the opening of your own novel. I'd like you to complete as many of the writing assignments as you can. I will provide several options each week from which to choose to inspire your writing process. In week 6, everyone will submit the first 20 pages of their novel for workshop from weeks 7-9. For the last week of class, week 10, everyone will revise the first 100-200 words of their workshop piece based on the comments received in workshop.

Word Limits:

I ask that you keep your weekly writing exercises to around 700 words and the longer pieces to 20 pages. If you turn in more than this, you will not receive feedback on the writing that goes beyond the maximum. If the class shows an interest, I will happily create a special forum thread for students who want to write and share more than this, but I can't offer feedback on this supplemental writing. I wish I had time to read more than this, but I'm sure you understand why it's not possible in a classroom setting.

Mini-Workshops:

Becoming a good reader is an important part in your development as a writer. Learning how to identify the strengths and weaknesses in others' fiction will help you recognize the strengths and weaknesses in your own. Depending on the week and particular writing exercise, we may form small groups. The purpose of the groups is to foster intensive community, and to make sure all students receive peer feedback. You will be responsible for reading and commenting on the writing of the members of your group. To keep things fresh, and so that you receive feedback from a variety of students, we will periodically rearrange the groups. However, please note that groups are public. While you are always obligated to comment on the work of your group members, you may additionally respond to students outside your group. So if you

develop a strong rapport with a particular student, you may continue to read/comment each other's work once the small groups are rearranged.

Major Workshop:

All students will be required to submit one longer piece up to 20 pages in week 6 followed by thorough workshopping of each student's piece during weeks 7-9. This will be the bulk of the work required during these weeks as the objective will be to help your peers to strengthen their opening such that it lands an editor or agent and hooks readers. Through this process of careful reading and critiquing, you will be honing your own critical skills. Based on the submissions for weeks 7-9, I will offer mini-craft lessons where I'll point out what's working and why, as well as what's not and why.

Workshop Feedback:

One of the most important aspects of an on-line course is the fact that you'll get to see everyone's comments on a workshop piece beyond what would normally be discussed in a class environment. So please come prepared to share and to give everyone's writing your full attention. The more you invest in communicating what's working and what's not and why, the more you and your peers will gain as a writer.

When I critique someone's work, I read the piece twice – the first time through, I read for pleasure and an overall sense of the work. The second time through, I know enough to ask questions and pay attention to specific issues. I might describe what makes the piece memorable; articulate its underlying ideas; and offer some specific suggestions for revision. I will also provide my reaction to word choices and character credibility, as well as any other wonderings I might have as I read.

Read another's work as you would like your own work to be read. Don't shy away from making suggestions. Every writer likes to hear what's working, so be sure to be generous and kind in how you offer suggestions. But don't be too nice, offer constructive feedback, too, as this is how you and your peers will grow as writers. Comment with an eye towards helping another writer write the best fiction possible. Early on in the course, I will provide more guidelines on how to provide constructive critiques.

My Commentary:

I will comment with a short paragraph and line notes on each of your weekly exercises. I post these responses in the forum where anyone can read them. This is because, in a live course, I'd be making many of the comments during class discussions so that everyone benefited from them. Although we aren't sharing the same physical space, you should think of Forum and the discussion threads as a place to interact with each other. After posting your critique, you may read someone else's and find yourself wanting to elaborate on his or her comments or offering a different perspective. I will also read your comments to one another and pipe in when I have something to add. These discussions will be as lively as you make them. On your major workshop submission, I will write you a one page letter of response, also posted in the forum. Any questions, please feel free to address me on the Forum or via email.

My Online Presence:

I'll be online and actively responding to new posts in the classroom every other weekday. I generally work Monday, Wednesday and Friday, but sometimes vary these days if there's a holiday or I have some conflicting obligation. I also check my email at least once a day and respond as promptly as I can. The beauty of an online class is that we can all do our work when our schedules permit; we don't have to be working simultaneously. So log on when it's convenient for you, morning or night, daily or every few days. I will hold a one hour chat session, a kind of live office hour, once a week. Participation is encouraged but not mandatory.

A Final Important Note:

Although many students take online courses with the absolute best intentions of doing every last assignment, "real life"—family, illness, professional deadlines—often has a way of making that impossible. Sometimes, the frustration this causes prompts students to drop completely out of the class. If you have to skip a couple of exercises, this is also okay. As long as you're getting most of the work done and commenting on your classmates' submissions, you'll be fine. Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any concerns about your standing. If you foresee some bumps in the road, let me know. We'll work together to find the best possible solution for you.

This is your class. I'm the guide, yes, but the quality of our discussions will depend upon your engagement, insightfulness, and good humor. This course will be as good as you give. So, please participate fully and generously in discussions. Read your classmates' work with a keen eye and a sense of possibility. And please, let me know if there's anything I can do to make this a better experience for you. I welcome suggestions, detours, and even shortcuts on gravel roads. If there's something you want to discuss, let me know. If there's an assignment that you think would work in this class, tell me. This is your class.

One more note: writing workshops are built on trust. I think this is even truer in online workshops where we're not all sitting together in the same room. To build this trust, it's important that we all agree that the work you present here stays within the workshop. If you love someone's piece and want to share it with your husband/wife/best friend/crazy cousin, ask the writer first. Chances are, she (or he) will be thrilled and give you the go ahead.

Bio:

Annemarie O'Brien earned an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts in the Writing for Children and Young Adults Program. She edits children's books for Room to Read and teaches writing courses at UC Berkeley, Stanford and Pixar. Her debut young adult novel, *Dance with Borzoi*, will be published by Knopf (2013). It won the 2009 Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Award and was a 2010 Katherine Paterson Writing Prize finalist.