The goal of Novel 1 is to get you going with an opening of your book that will provide a sturdy platform from which to launch the rest of your project. While writing a novel is not a tidy process, a beginning that does certain things right will help sustain your writing and allow the story to unfold over the next however many hundred pages.

What are those things? A compelling voice. Engaging characters. A sense of mystery. A propulsive incident. Interesting questions. Strong and unique language. Something fresh. An exciting story. A tall order? Of course. But writing a great opening will energize you to get to the end. It’s also the part of your book that agents, editors, and eventually readers will look at when deciding whether or not to keep going. So it’s important to create a powerful beginning—keeping in mind that you will be revising once you finish your draft.

Your first class in the OWC curriculum stressed process, exploration, and the discovery of your story world. We are now switching tracks to a workshop-based approach, where you will be submitting an opening of up to 6999 words for your peers and instructor to critique and discuss. Along the way, we’ll also have both required and recommended readings, and have discussion questions each week.

To help support you in writing even more over the course of the next ten weeks you’ll have a special thread where you can post weekly check-ins and supplemental writing, not for feedback but instead as a kind of touchstone to provide accountability as you work toward your personal goal. The collective goal from here to the end of the certificate program is for you to make steady progress toward the completion of your novel.

A Note on How We Built This Class:

As colleagues for OWS, we (Sarah and Malena) were in the position to read each other’s curriculums and sit in on each other’s classes, and quickly came to realize that we share similar philosophies about novels and the teaching of writing. Last year, we began discussing what we thought
would be most useful to students beginning the first course in a sequence intended to culminate in the completion of a novel. We identified the craft points that we thought students would benefit most from focusing on as they worked to create powerful beginnings, and we took turns being the primary writer on the lectures that resonated most for each of us, though we have reworked every lecture together. You will be working with one particular instructor but benefitting from a new curriculum which is its own creative collaboration, and proof that two heads are often better than one.

**How This Course Is Structured:**

Every week of the ten week course will focus on a different craft element that goes into the construction of a strong, intriguing, unique novel beginning.

In weeks 1-2 you will do short (up to 750 words) writing exercises designed to help you generate or revise material from your novel. You’ll offer paragraph-length peer responses to at least three of your colleagues. Beginning at the end of week 2 (Friday), two students at a time will submit a full opening chapter (up to 5500 words) for the whole group to critique via a supportive and detailed letter of feedback. From week 3 on, after workshops begin, there will be optional writing exercises, not for instructor or class feedback (we’ll be focusing on the workshop pieces in those weeks), but for accountability, a sense of community, and an additional chance to develop your craft if you so choose.

During the workshop weeks, your primary course requirement will be writing constructive letters of response to the authors "up" for workshop, as you continue to work on your novel. This is in keeping with the MFA model of writing instruction, in which there is little to no time given to exercises, and almost all learning happens via workshop (though we will also have optional writing exercises for those who want to use them for generating new pages). While writing letters of response takes time, you will learn as much from critiquing others as you will from their critiques. For each workshop piece, we’ll all write a page or so of thoughtful, generous, honest, and useful response. Our responses will include identifying the aims and accomplishments of each selection, offering specific praise for its strengths, and asking equally specific questions and suggesting areas for further development in the next draft.
In week 2, we will talk about how to write a useful letter of response, and will provide a sort of template that you can use to guide you, since there's an art to usefully reading each other’s work in ways that make workshop fun and leave the writer eager to get back to work rather than ready to throw out the book. The postings don’t have to be polished or perfect, but it’s crucial to be both kind and honest in critiques and discussions.

Each week we’ll also have a thread with discussion questions related to our readings and the week’s themes. Each student must post at least one discussion point response per week; they can be as brief as a paragraph or as long as you want (keeping in mind that your first priorities are to work on your own novel and to respond to your colleagues’ creative work). If you have time and wish to respond to your colleagues’ ideas, this makes for a richer discussion. Responses to other’s discussion postings are optional, based on your own schedule and the time you have available for the class.

**Deadlines**

Your 750-word writing assignments in weeks 1-2 will be due by noon every Wednesday (all times in the course are Pacific time). You’re welcome to post earlier, including the weekend ahead of time, if that suits your schedule better. As long as you’re posting by the deadline, you will receive instructor feedback on these pieces by Monday of the following week. You will be responsible for reading and responding to 3 other students’ writing exercises by Monday evening of the first two weeks.

Your responses to discussion questions (one paragraph minimum) are also due on Wednesday by 2 p.m. PT, though if it works for you to post earlier, please do so.

You will pick your workshop submission date by signing up on a wiki page early on in the quarter. The page will open up on Friday of Week 1. Your workshop piece (up to 5500 words, no minimum) will be due on Friday at noon PT before the week that you are “up.” Peer critiques will be due by the following Wednesday at noon but can be posted earlier. I post my own critiques by Wednesday at noon, so as to let the conversation unfold before I weigh in, as I would in a physical classroom.

For the first few days of the week, the whole group, minus the authors, will discuss the chapters: what’s working and what needs further consideration.
From Wednesday at 5 pm PT through the end of the week, the authors are invited to join in the conversation, asking and answering questions. On Thursday each week, I will hold a weekly Zoom session at 12 (section A) and 1 pm (section B) where my hope is that the students being workshopped attend so that we may do some live workshopping of their chapters.

Aside from my Zoom sessions, which are not mandatory but encouraged, I'll be online in the classroom three days a week, typically on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons, but this can vary depending on what else is going on that week. I'm offline on the weekends, so will be out of the classroom and off email at that time.

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, weekday or weekend. Just keep in mind that the week closes on Sunday night. I'll spend Monday of each week reading the final posts that came in over the weekend. Then, at the end of the day on Monday, the previous week will become “closed for conversation,” though it will still be visible to you. If you are late with an assignment (after Sunday night) please post it in the new week, where there will be a spot for late work. This is a way to make sure that we keep moving forward, and that no one's submissions get overlooked.

**Grading:**

1/3: **Workshop submission.** It does **not** have to be a perfect chapter or a full 5500 words (that’s a maximum: we suggest a minimum of 3500 words, though most people will have longer sections) but it should be submitted on time (the date that you sign up for). You also need to make sure it’s formatted for reading: submitted in Word or RTF (not as a PDF), spell-checked and proofread, double-spaced, in a 12 point font with page numbers. You’ll also want to paste a version into your workshop thread, to make sure everyone gets to read it.

1/3: **Letters of critique.** These letters should be specific and strike the right balance between supportive feedback and constructive questions or suggestions for revision. These should also be posted on time, so that we
have a full discussion (in a real emergency, you can write to me about an extension).

1/3: Overall participation. Includes 2 mandatory writing exercises at the start of class; small group participation; posting at least once each week on discussion questions.

Since writing breakthroughs happen at different speeds and different times – sometimes troughs that appear endless to us are followed by huge leaps, but sometimes not for a while – your grade will be based on whether you’re turning in your work and writing thoughtful commentaries on your fellow writers’ pieces, rather than on “quality.” This gives you the most freedom to take risks with your exercises and drafts. I do not grade your writing based on its "quality," because a) this kind of grading is totally subjective, and b) writing for a grade gets in the way of writing out of a sense of passion and inner purpose. I merely grade writing based on the fulfillment of the requirements: that it’s fairly well copy-edited for obvious spelling and grammar errors and that it is on time. Your peer responses should be thoughtful and detailed enough to be useful to the writer and should demonstrate evidence that you are absorbing the craft lessons.

Note the importance of turning in your work on time, and keep in mind that computers break down, people get sick, bosses suddenly come up with large last-minute projects…you may want to post your assignments and workshop responses before Wednesday at noon, especially if you know you find deadlines challenging.

Please try to stay active in the online forums. You’ll get the most out of the class if you put attention into the reading and your responses to your classmates as well as your own work. and yet, life comes along, and there may be moments when you have to miss an exercise or can’t comment as fully as usual on others’ writing exercises. If life circumstances have gotten in the way, come back to class as soon as you can and find a way to use those circumstances (even if indirectly) in your work.

Email me if you run into trouble. Don’t lose heart! We are often most frustrated just before we make a big breakthrough. William Stafford famously wrote a poem a day and is often quoted (or misquoted in various versions – but he may have talked about this subject several times) as saying that he never had writer’s block. “When all else fails, I lower my
standards and keep going.” Paradoxically, it’s when we’ve lowered our standards that we take the biggest risks, and often do our most exciting work.

**Schedule in brief:**

Here is a schedule for topics that we’ll consider in relation to the novels we’re reading for class as well as the novels you’re writing; it’s a preliminary schedule and subject to change. You’ll have writing exercises for each of the topics (optional exercises after week three). We’ll explain and explore each of the topics to develop a shared vocabulary and set of concepts, then consider them in our discussions from a variety of angles. We’ll also work on process questions.

Note that in the required readings, what we’re assigning is the amount that you can find in a sample (using a Kindle or Kindle app, though you can also find these in libraries if you prefer). Even the first few pages give a great deal of information about the book’s situation and concerns.

**Required Readings:**

This class is principally a workshop. We are not assigning complete novels. Instead, you will read samples of books each week, usually assigned (all of the required reading selections are the amount you'll find in a sample: you can go to Amazon and look inside the book, or download the beginning for Kindle or Kindle app, or, if you prefer to read from a different source, you are welcome to do what works for you and your favorite reading device or computer).

We’ve chosen a set of samples as common readings, but you’ll also choose one of your own. This will allow you to pick a book similar to the one you want to write. If you're writing a novel-in-stories, a multi-generational family story, a thriller, a work of historical fiction, or a YA novel, or any other genre, form or situation, you can choose a novel that is in some way literary kin to your own work.

From among the samples (including your own choice and those we’ve assigned), you’ll decide on one of the books to read in its entirety. In the final week, there won’t be any other readings, but a set of discussion questions that you can apply to “your” book.
And one more note – people always find books that they want to read in their entirety, which is great. I ask only that, if you’ve read ahead of our selection, and want to note something, you might find ways to write about it without ruining the plot. (It’s a great skill for book reviewing later on, if you find yourself wanting to be part of the literary community in this way.) So instead of writing something like, “the death of so-and-so,” you might write, “the sudden and sad event in chapter three.” Instead of writing “when her brother turns out to be alive after all and running the camp” you might write “the moment in the camp when she learns family secrets that change her understanding of the past and her relationship to everyone around her.” (Some book reviewers, of course, feel free to give away plot twists, but it’s not the most helpful way to proceed, either for the writer who took the trouble to build the plot, or for readers who’d like to discover it for themselves.)

**Recommended Books:**

Here are a few highly recommended books that you may find helpful as craft references – you’ll have optional readings from these books in the course of class. In the forums, I’ll also provide supplemental essays on craft where relevant. For those of you with extra time, I’m always happy to recommend books that you might enjoy or that might prove useful to you in craft or subject matter.

**Title:** *Anatomy of a Premise Line*  
**Author:** Jeff Lyons  
**ISBN-10:** 1138838853

**Title:** *Stein on Writing*  
**Author:** Sol Stein  
**ISBN-10:** 0312254210

**Title:** *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot*  
**Author:** Charles Baxter

**Title:** *The Art of Time in Fiction*  
**Author:** Joan Silber
Week by Week Reading Schedule:

(The selections from the books will be the amount that you can read on a Kindle or Kindle app, though you’re welcome to read the selections available on Nook or Goodreads or whatever works for you. Since the Amazon links change often, sometimes hour to hour, instead of posting them, I’m going to suggest that you can find the Amazon versions, if that’s what you want to do, by pasting the author’s name and book title into Google: the page that takes you to where you can read the opening onscreen or download it to your own device will be in the top results. Or, if you find it easier, you can go to Amazon and search there.)

Week 1: Establishing the Contract

Required Reading:
Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*
Also, individual choices of opening chapters (Choose a book that is close in some way to the one you are trying to write, whether in genre, structure, situation, or voice.)

Recommended Reading
Saul Stein, Jeff Lyons, chapters 1

Week 2: Starting the Engine

Required Reading:
Emma Donoghue, *Room*
AS Byatt, *Possession*

Recommended Reading:

Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext, Beyond Plot*, “Introduction” and “Creating a Scene”

Week 3: Desire and Subjectivity (Character and POV)

Required:
Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*
Brian Morton, *Florence Gordon*

Recommended Reading:

**Stein on Character**
Lyons: Plot IS character

**Week 4: Building and Sustaining Tension/Workshop begins**

Required Reading:
Chimamanda Ngozi, Adichie, *Americanah*
Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl*

Recommended Reading:
Charles Baxter, *The Art of Subtext, Beyond Plot, “Digging the Subterranean”*
Stein on tension

**Week 5: Time In Fiction**

Required Reading:
Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

Recommended Reading:

**Week 6: Language as Lens**

Required Reading:
JM Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Recommended Reading:
Week 7: Story World

Required Reading:
Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*
Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story*

Recommended Reading:
Malena Watrous, “Setting Matters”
http://www.glimmertrain.com/b41watrous.html
Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Long Time” and “Switchback Time”

(And a note – depending on your speed as a reader, you may want to start on the book you choose for your complete novel, peeking ahead, if necessary, at the next few openings in case you’d like to read one of these.)

Week 8: Narrative Design

Required Reading:
Maria Semple, Where’d You Go, Bernadette?
Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From The Goon Squad*

Recommended Reading:
Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Slowed Time” and “Fabulous Time”

Week 9: Theme and Meaning

Required Reading:
Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*

Recommended Reading:
Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction: As Long As It Takes*, “Time as Subject”

Week 10: Moving Forward

As many of your colleagues’ Revision/Moving Forward Plans as possible.
Also, if you haven’t yet finished the complete book you’ve chosen, you’ll want to do that so you can then write something about what you’ve learned from the book, to share with your colleagues.