

# The Backward Prompt

Using Great First Lines from Literature to Invent Your Own Way Forward

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**O**NCE UPON A TIME, at an education conference far away, on the shuttle from the airport, a teacher from the Air Force Academy was telling me about his new computer program to help student writers.

“It’s modeled on the flight simulator,” he said, “where you’re strapped in for virtual flight, and when you get in a tight spot—say, a couple Gs on a roll—you can flip a switch and Chuck Yeager takes over the controls. You get to feel what it would be like to fly by his instincts. With a few of the right moves, the Yeager Program pulls you out of a tail-spin and gets you back on course.”

I paused to absorb this visceral approach to teaching life-or-death skills.

“So,” my friend went on, “I thought, why not do that for writing students? You could be composing at the computer, and when you got in a tough spot, with a few keystrokes, Hemingway could take over. Or Faulkner. Those are the two I’ve tried so far. Suddenly

your writing turns out these terse, perfect sentences... or these long atmospheric—things.”

Then we were at the hotel, and we said goodbye.

I stood in the lobby in a bit of a daze. When you get in a tough spot as a writer, I thought, do you want to let someone else take over? What a concept. Isn’t the whole purpose of writing to find a way to get into an engaging tough spot—on purpose—and then to invent your own way forward?

I remembered this meeting recently when we were trying to think of new instructors to hire at the Northwest Writing Institute where I teach, at Lewis & Clark College in Oregon. We went through a list of local writers, and then someone said, “What about Emily Dickinson—what would it be like if we could hire her?”

“I’m not sure what she would be like as a teacher,” said one in the circle.

“But her poems—they teach like crazy,” said another. And our idea was born: Find a way for the work of writers we admire to act as a “flight simulator” to get a student writer going. Once students have begun their pieces, once they have momentum, the teacher can drop away the initiating text like the first stage of a rocket, and let the students ride their creative momentum in their own directions.

Hence the idea of what we have come to call “the

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backward prompt”: working backward from a poem, story, or other patch of language you admire, invite writers to compose something in that voice or realm. It’s a common idea, I’m sure, but at the Northwest Writing Institute we have become fond of borrowing evocative lines from literary and student works we admire and using them to launch our next round of writing.

As Donald Graves once said, if you want students to write literature, read them beautiful things and simply ask them to write. They will make the connections and write under the spell of what they have heard. The teacher does not need to explain the connections. Just read. The poem or story you have read does the teaching.

To start, simply choose a line: the three most common categories we use for these prompts are first lines from published short stories, lines from poems, and lines from class.

You probably don’t need to read the rest of this essay, since you will begin to think of your own favorite openings for short stories that could launch student writers into fits of story-making, character-introducing, and setting-exploration all their own. But for the record, here are a few I’ve tried. For a round of story-writing, we might begin with these first lines from published short stories:

**I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work.**

—“Sonny’s Blues,” by James Baldwin

**There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck.**

—“The Rocking Horse Winner,” by D. H. Lawrence

**None of them knew the color of the sky.**

—“The Open Boat,” by Stephen Crane

**The grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida.**

—“A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” by Flannery O’Conner

**Her name was Connie. She was fifteen and she had a quick nervous giggling habit of craning her**

**neck to glance into mirrors, or checking other people’s faces to make sure her own was all right.**

—“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” by Joyce Carol Oates

**People were telling one another that a newcomer had been seen on the promenade—a lady with a dog.**

—“The Lady with the Dog,” by Anton Chekhov

Students write down one of the lines, then write their way forward into a story of their own. Of course, it may be a richer exercise if the students have read some work by Baldwin, O’Conner, or Chekhov—though not necessarily the story quoted in the initiating evocative line. The point is to set the students free to explore an implied mystery, not to follow or avoid what the original writer wrote.

Sometimes I put these sentences onto cards, with the title and author on the back, and pass them out in class. Students trade for favorites, and begin. Sometimes I put these lines and a couple dozen more into a handout, and let people read through the whole list, with several students perhaps beginning with a common sentence. In any case, once we have each begun a story, the instruction is to remove the “borrowed” sentence from the top, make a few adjustments, and keep going with a story that is completely your own. The catalyst has done its work, and is no longer needed.

For lines of poetry, often a first line (to write from), or an evocative end-line (to write up to), will get us all writing. Such a line can be like the classic church-key—capable of opening a wide variety of flavors long bottled up in my students’ minds. Again, once the poems have been written, the catalyst line is removed. And again, I’m sure you have your own favorite provocative lines of poetry, but here are a few from my own recent practice:

**my colored child/hood wuz mostly music...**

—“Make/n My Music,” by Angela Jackson

**My father was a tough cookie...**

—“My Mother Really Knew,” by Wing Tek Lum

**The rain of the white valley the clear rain  
the rain holding the whole valley while it falls...**

—“June Rain,” by W.S. Merwin

**At the wonderful table of my grandfather...**

—“The Best Meal I Ever Had Anywhere,” by Ellen Gilchrist

**All I could see from where I stood...**

—“Renascence,” by Edna St. Vincent Millay

**I only wish I could have it just once more...**

—“Blueberry Boy,” by Leo Connellan

**This empty house three miles from town...**

— “The Pasture Gate,” by Jimmy Carter

**Through the dark sod as Education...**

—“Through the dark sod...,” by Emily Dickinson

Of course, it is important to have the whole poems to read to your students, in order to make those opening lines connect to an atmospheric mystery that would carry your students into their own work.

Finally, and my favorite form of prompt: lines from class. After we’ve written and shared our work, I ask students to write down lines they admire—or envy. Lines that might start a chain of creation in their own work. From a recent writing class, here is a list of lines from finished writing that became successful prompts for the next round of writing:

**I dare you to...**

**I gather the remnants of those gone before...**

**It was my kind of mistake...**

**One more thing to make my life complete...**

**When I go to the water’s edge...**

**The wild thing that I am...**

**It is my favorite story...**

**No hard evidence, and yet...**

**Once in the future an old woman who was me...**

**One flavor always lives with me...**

Of course, again, you might need the full texts of your own students’ writings to share, so that these evocative fragmentary beginnings would deliver students into their own worlds. Or you might not, if the single line implies enough story to begin.

To get started, try delving into your books of poetry and fiction, and collections of any student writings you may have, and start selecting the evocative lines that could set your students on a course that will be both welcoming and their own. My rule of thumb for writing class: Everyone has a place to begin, but no one knows where they are supposed to end up. The sequence goes like this: virtuous plagiarism, intuitive freedom, moving on from stolen beginnings, and the opening vista of original discovery.

This is what literature invites us to do. 🍷