

# Nelson English Usage

*Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum*

## Write the first paragraph to your own favourite novel

### Part One

The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction contest, created in 1982, challenges writers to create and submit the worst possible opening sentence to a novel that they can imagine. The contest is named after Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, who originated the most famous of all opening lines: *It was a dark and stormy night*.

In the Bulwer-Lytton exercise, you were asked to write the worst possible opening sentence of all time. In this extended assignment, you will try to do the opposite. Keep adding to this document throughout the term, as you will submit all of it to your teacher when the full assignment is complete.

You must examine the stories you like the most, as well as consider those that you did not like at all. Throughout the tasks, you will find examples of very different styles of opening paragraphs. You should re-read them each time you work on this assignment.

### Task 1: Library research task

Over two classes, you will select novels in your school library at random, borrow them, and read the opening paragraphs to each. You must do this for at **least five different novels**. Then, complete your assessment for each paragraph using the tables below.

At least one of the novels you choose must have been published before 1950, and at least one must have been published after 2002.

An example has been done for you. Pay careful attention, because it also explains how to complete the tables. After you have completed your assessments, submit them to your teacher.

<i>Wuthering Heights</i>	Emily Brontë	ISBN (13 digits, under barcode on back cover) 9780140620122
What does the blurb say about this book?	The blurb indicates that although <i>Wuthering Heights</i> is popular and considered a classic now, it was met with mixed reviews when published because it was very shocking about cruelty, and very blunt in its depiction of human nature. This suggests it was ahead of its time.	

Describe the cover of the book. Does it suggest anything in particular?	The cover shows an artist's rendering of the Yorkshire Moors. It is very intense looking, with most of the cover in a vivid, stormy blue, with an outcropping of rocks and grey/brown ground clearly visible. It suggests very volatile weather – a kind of violent, wild setting.
Type the real first paragraph in full	1801.—I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist's heaven: and Mr. Heathcliff and I are such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. A capital fellow! He little imagined how my heart warmed towards him when I beheld his black eyes withdraw so suspiciously under their brows, as I rode up, and when his fingers sheltered themselves, with a jealous resolution, still further in his waistcoat, as I announced my name.
Your assessment (comments)	The opening paragraph is very light-hearted and seems at odds with the blurb and the cover. The narrator talks about serious things in a black way – a misanthropist's heaven – but sounds rather boring in how <i>pleased</i> he is with everything. He's obviously not at one with the environment he is entering, and that poses a question: why is he even narrating? The situation that is 'so completely removed from the stir of society' however does evoke the wildness of the moors on the cover, and there is a sense of foreboding about the narrator whose heart 'warmed towards' Heathcliff after his black eyes withdrew 'so suspiciously under their brows, as I rode up.' If read carefully, in conjunction with the blurb and cover, the overall assessment from the first paragraph has to be that the narrator is naive and has no idea what's going to happen to him.
Your score (out of 10)	7/10
Would you read this book?	Maybe – although the narrator is a bit annoying, I am curious about what he's actually walked into, and why the novel seems to be written from the perspective of a stranger.
What does it tell you about things you do or do not like to read?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cover images and blurbs that do appear not to match the opening text are a bit off-putting</li> <li>• Overly cheerful characters are not very interesting</li> <li>• A sense of the ominous or foreboding is a reason to continue reading</li> </ul>

Book title #1	Author	ISBN (under back cover barcode)
Blurb analysis		
Cover analysis		
The actual first paragraph		
Your assessment		
Your score		
Would you read this book?		
Does your assessment of the first paragraph tell you anything about what you like to read?		

Book title #2	Author	ISBN (under back cover barcode)
Blurb analysis		
Cover analysis		
The actual first paragraph		
Your assessment		
Your score		
Would you read this book?		
Does your assessment of the first paragraph tell you anything about what you like to read?		

Book title #3	Author	ISBN (under back cover barcode)
Blurb analysis		
Cover analysis		
The actual first paragraph		
Your assessment		
Your score		
Would you read this book?		
Does your assessment of the first paragraph tell you anything about what you like to read?		

Book title #4	Author	ISBN (under back cover barcode)
Blurb analysis		
Cover analysis		
The actual first paragraph		
Your assessment		
Your score		
Would you read this book?		
Does your assessment of the first paragraph tell you anything about what you like to read?		

Book title #5	Author	ISBN (under back cover barcode)
Blurb analysis		
Cover analysis		
The actual first paragraph		
Your assessment		
Your score		
Would you read this book?		
Does your assessment of the first paragraph tell you anything about what you like to read?		

## Task 2: Assess a specific paragraph

### Hands

As a teenager, once, I recalled a day when I was a child where I had come to admire my hands. The adolescent me remembered standing on tiptoe in front of the bathroom sink, washing my hands all the more thoroughly as, for the first time, I noticed their slender, smooth loveliness. At that point, it was the only striking moment I could remember where I had been driven to vanity – lathering up and splashing water around the place in celebration of it, even. Wretched with puberty and sickness, I remembered that day and decided that my pretty hands had been taken and replaced with something monstrous as punishment, because – and only because – of that one striking moment of self-love. Even godless teenagers are not without superstition. So as a kind of precaution, and as acknowledgement of the punishment, I, the wretched teenager, decided at once to never admire anything of myself again, lest I suffer the same fate twice.

Using the *Wuthering Heights* assessment example as a guide, assess the opening paragraph of *Hands*.

Your assessment (comments)	
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### Additional questions to consider

- 1 How old do you think the author and/or narrator of *Hands* is?
- 2 What do you think *Hands*, as a novel, would be about?
- 3 What point of view does *Hands* use?



- 4 What tense does *Hands* use?
- 5 Do you think *Hands* would be about past, current or future events?
- 6 Is the language of *Hands* very formal, casual or standard? How can you tell?
- 7 Is there any rhythm or repetition to the choice of words? List examples.
- 8 Do you think the narrator of *Hands* is male or female? How can you tell?
- 9 Do you think the narrator of *Hands* is a happy person, or a sad one? How can you tell?
- 10 Just from the opening paragraph, do you think *Hands* would be a romance, a comedy or a stragedy? Explain your reasons.