First Things First

Naomi Milthorpe

A dynamic group exercise using famous first lines to encourage close reading.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: introductory
Student Difficulty: easy
Teacher Preparation: medium
Class Size: any
Semester Time: first day
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: high
Estimated Time: 15 minutes

EXERCISE

It’s the first class of the semester. Maybe it’s the first literature class your students have ever taken. Either way, you want to make sure that they begin the year with close reading at the front of their minds. Using famous first sentences, this exercise is designed to stimulate detailed attention to a text’s form and content, and especially its style.

Choose a selection of striking first sentences from novels and list them on a single sheet of paper. The handout is for students to use and take away at the end of the class, so allow plenty of writing space around each sentence. Three to five sentences are ideal to keep the class engaged for the duration of the exercise. Be prepared either to project this same sheet on an overhead or PowerPoint or to copy it on a whiteboard or blackboard; choose a method that will also let you mark up the sentences for everyone to see.

Begin the class by outlining the idea that thinking critically about literature is not simply a matter of understanding story and character but also of paying attention to how language makes meaning. Emphasize to students that this exercise isn’t a test of their knowledge or a tool for working out the plot of the novel. Ask the students, with your brief introduction in mind, to take a few minutes to examine each sentence. Encourage them to use their sheets to make note of the things that stand out, that seem strange, that confuse them—anything at all. Then, beginning with one sentence, initiate a full-group discussion. (If you have time, you can also separate students into groups or have them work in pairs before reconvening as a group.) Start
simply: ask them about aspects of prose style and narrative form first, before introducing questions about content and generic markers.

Possible questions can include the following: What sort of words does the sentence use? What do you notice about punctuation and syntax? What is the sentence’s tone? Can we tell anything about the novel’s setting (its time or place), characters, theme, or other narrative elements? Does the sentence seem to be written in a particular genre?

As the students offer answers and ideas, annotate the sentences as you project them (encourage students to do the same on their sheets). Keep the discussion fast paced to prompt students to think on their feet and trust their instincts. This exercise need not take more than fifteen minutes, though the more examples you provide, the more intensive the exercise.

REFLECTIONS

“First Things First” works best as a short, sharp introduction to close reading and as a way to get new students talking and working together as a group. It has worked well in my courses to get past the initial class silence and really focus on skills development and critical thinking from the first moment the students enter the classroom. Providing the printed sentences on a sheet encourages close textual work, while using an overhead or PowerPoint fosters group cohesion.

In the past, I have used this exercise in introductory courses and always chosen sentences from novels that are not on the required reading list, in order to separate discussion of form from the baggage of plot or character analysis. But this exercise could also work in a more specialized or advanced course, using sentences from the genre or historical period you’ll be examining.

Some novels with good discussable first sentences include Toni Morrison’s Beloved (“124 was spiteful”), Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (“You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of ‘The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,’ but that ain’t no matter”), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (“In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I’ve been turning over in my mind ever since”), and of course Charles Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities (“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”). For its pithy imperative tone, I especially like to use Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick (“Call me Ishmael”). And who can resist, for its pleasurable blurring of the axiomatic and the ironic, Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife”)?

Canonical texts are especially suitable candidates for inclusion on your handout. For example, I always include Pride and Prejudice up front on my list, since some students may know the novel or film adaptation and feel
more confident in their readings, but be sure to ask them to try to forget about Lizzie and Darcy for a minute and think instead about tone, irony, and language. George Orwell’s opening sentence in Nineteen Eighty-Four (“It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen”) prompts immediate reflections about style. Students tend to notice that the sentence is fairly unobtrusive (“bland” is the word they often use), but they also note that the two halves of the sentence seem symmetrical, as if the second part mirrors the first. Particularly attentive students will usually counter that the second half of the sentence has a few too many syllables—something seems “off” in Orwell’s rhythm (you can ask students to consider whether this is a fault in the writing, or a clue about lack of balance within the narrative). Students usually also offer ideas about time (April and springtime, yes, but more important, how clocks striking thirteen is weird).

By the end of the class, your students should leave with greater confidence in their first impressions and with more experience in reading closely to gain critical distance. They will also leave with a sheet of paper covered in annotations, a good model for the kind of marginalia skills we expect of close readers. Finally, the exercise provides a handy reference point for the rest of the semester; whenever you want to turn to detailed close-reading exercises on passages or lines of text, you can remind your students of the importance of “First Things First.”

Dramatic Echoes

Hollis Robbins

A playful exercise in understanding literary style through dramatic interpretation.

Genre: drama
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: easy
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: any
Semester Time: midterm
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: medium to high
Estimated Time: variable, from 20 to 60 minutes

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