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First Sentences and Multigenerational Sagas: Grammar's Role when Introducing Literary  
Elements

A journey of a thousand miles may begin with a single step, but how does a journey of a hundred years begin? One of several generations? Where does a journey start if it is exploring the meaning of family, power, identity, and more? Any author who attempts to write a multigenerational saga must confront these questions. In search of an answer, we will look at the first sentences of some acclaimed multigenerational sagas and see the work they do when introducing various elements of fiction.

CHARACTER: *MIDDLESEX* BY JEFFREY EUGENIDES

Jeffrey Eugenides opens his 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning novel with a stunning first sentence: "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974." This sentence masterfully introduces our narrator—and presumable protagonist—in brilliant fashion.

With one colon, one semicolon, and six commas, we could expect the sentence to be a compound, or at the very least complex, sentence. Yet, when scrutinized, this opener reveals itself as a simple sentence; it only contains a single verb. What those punctuation marks achieve, rather than connecting multiple clauses, is controlling the pace and rhythm for the reader.

This rhythm emphasizes the most potent parts of the sentence and guides the reader to specific details: “born twice,” “baby girl,” “January of 1960,” teenage boy,” and “August of 1974.” Imagine the sentence without the assortment of punctuation. The sentence would fly by without ruminating on the striking and impactful details. Each new piece of information would stifle what comes before, and by the time we reach the period, we wouldn’t have been able to appreciate anything.

The precise control wielded by Eugenides leads us to understand our character by introducing only two details: being born as a girl in 1960, and then as a teenage boy in 1974. Yet this set up entices us so much that we hardly realize the next two hundred pages without meeting this character again.

SETTING: *EAST OF EDEN* BY JOHN STEINBECK

In classic Steinbeck fashion, we start *East of Eden* in Monterey Bay. “The Salinas Valley is in Northern California. It is a long narrow swale between two ranges of mountains, and the Salinas River winds and twists up the center until it falls at last into Monterey Bay.” With few exceptions, the novel takes place within the confines of the setting outlined from the initial sentences. The reader can easily place a background to the story thanks to detailed descriptions of what is arguably the most gorgeous scenery in America.

Nouns are to thank for this sense of place. We receive two proper nouns from the first sentence joined by a specific preposition. This preposition, “in,” is an everyday word, but it means more when discussing the relationship between locations; the reader knows that not only is the Salinas Valley *in* Northern California, but it is also comprises, belongs to, and—as we learn in the book—contributes to Northern California’s society, culture, and more. However,

Steinbeck doesn't say any of these things, opting instead for a simpler, more dismissible preposition which highlights the nouns.

Inherently, Steinbeck's practice of emphasizing nouns creates cohesion and simplifies understanding in his sentence. To be fair, the first sentence is as simple as a simple sentence can be, but it's then followed seamlessly by a compound-complex sentence that starts to introduce Steinbeck's iconic voice: the Salinas river doesn't just flow, it "winds and twists"; the river doesn't empty into the bay, it "falls at last." This use of both a complex predicate and an adverbial phrase, "at last," provides much more description than the first sentence without losing the focus of the setting.

THEME: *PACHINKO* BY MIN JIN LEE

The opening paragraph to Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* is a single sentence: "History has failed us, but no matter." Readers do not need to guess what Lee's novel is about. The blatant statement, told in casual tone thanks to the phrase "but no matter," outlines the emotional context of the plot.

In other novels, this direct display of theme would be criticized as being too upfront or on-the-nose. Likewise, if this sentence was the final line, many would consider it sentimental or melodramatic. By placing the message at the forefront of the novel, Lee tells the reader to take a certain perspective as they explore the interactions between characters for the next five hundred pages.

The tense of the sentence, first person plural, combines the unique voice of the narrative with the dismissive personality of the protagonist, Sunja. This line contrasts the following sentence drastically, and the result is emphatic. Lee uses this difference to orient the reader's

focus before following four generations of a Korean-Japanese family during a tumultuous time between the two nations, all the while letting the opening line linger in the background.

VOICE: *INSIDE, OUTSIDE* BY HERMAN WOUK

“All hell has been breaking loose around here, and my peaceful retreat in the Executive Office Building may be coming to a sudden rude end,” is how Wouk kicks off his 1985 autofiction novel about a Jewish Russian family early twentieth-century America, and it is surprisingly one of the more formal sentences found within the book.

“All hell has been breaking loose” is an undeniably casual phrase that drops the readers defenses, only to be followed up with the borderline-sardonic tone of “my peaceful retreat in the Executive Office Building,” a rather serious setting. The narrator’s voice is more similar to a good-humored friend telling a story at dinner than the start of a 643-page epic. But this was exactly Wouk’s intention, and he let us know from the first sentence.

Another key part of this sentence—which exists throughout the book—is the use of present perfect continuous tense, which has two functions. First, “...has been breaking...” shows that something (in this case, Watergate and the onset of war in the Middle East) is ongoing, almost unable to be stopped. Second, Wouk uses this tense to distinguish from the narrator’s present thoughts and his recollection of the past.

## CONCLUSION

The beginning of long novels, especially those which span multiple generations, can be daunting. By engaging the reader with an element of fiction, it becomes much more exciting to start the journey. As we have seen, grammar will have a great effect on how these elements are conveyed and sets up the rest of the novel for the audience to enjoy.



Works Cited

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