

# Easy Ways to Start a Story

(Even When You're Stuck)

Sensory-based and action-driven opening lines  
for telling nonprofit stories



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# Easy Ways to Start a Story (Even When You're Stuck)

*Sensory-based and action-driven opening lines for telling nonprofit stories*

Let's get right to it.

Most people don't start their stories well. They warm up. They ramble. They kill the emotional momentum before it ever has a chance.

And that's a disaster - because if you don't grab your donor by the heart in the first few seconds, you've already lost them.

This booklet fixes that.

It's not theory. It's not a masterclass. It's a *cheat sheet*.

These are plug-and-play story openers that *work*. They get attention. They hold it. They pull your reader (or listener) into a moment so vivid, they forget they're reading and start *feeling*.

You can use them anywhere - appeals, thank-you notes, newsletters, donor visits, even from the stage.

And here's the magic: once you've tried a few, you won't need this booklet. You'll start writing your own.

Now let's get you into your story. Fast.

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## HOW TO USE THESE OPENING LINES

Here's what to do: Pick a line that feels close to the story you want to tell. Use it to *start* your story. Then keep the story going.

These openers are designed to help you skip the warm-up and land right in the middle of a moment that matters. You'll probably want to customize the wording or add a specific detail - but the point is to get into telling your story, not be perfect.

Once you drop into the scene, the rest of your story will come more naturally.

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## 1. I SAW... (*Visual entry points*)

- “I saw her standing in the hallway alone.”
- “I saw something I didn’t expect.”
- “I saw the tears before I heard the words.”
- “The hallway was empty - except for one small figure.”
- “Her shoes were soaked through.”
- “His hands were shaking as he held the envelope.”

**Example:** “I saw her standing in the hallway alone. She was holding a teddy bear by one arm, swaying slightly on her feet. No one else was around. I didn’t know her name yet, but I knew she was waiting for something - or someone - who wasn’t coming. That was the moment I realized just how many kids walk into this place with nothing . . .”

## 2. I HEARD... (*Auditory entry points*)

- “I heard her whisper, ‘Please don’t leave me.’”
- “He said, ‘I’m not worth saving.’”
- “‘Can I tell you a secret?’ she asked.”
- “The voicemail started with, ‘I don’t know who else to call.’”

**Example:** “I heard her whisper, ‘Please don’t leave me. She didn’t say it like a demand. It was more like a question - a quiet plea. I was standing just outside the door when I heard it, and suddenly, this wasn’t just another intake. It was the start of something I couldn’t walk away from . . .”

## 3. I FELT... (*Emotional or physical sensations*)

- “I felt my stomach drop.”
- “I felt the weight of her words settle on my chest.”
- “I felt frozen, like I didn’t know what to say.”
- “It hurt to hear him say it - but he wasn’t wrong.”

**Example:** “I felt my stomach drop. The doctor hadn’t even said anything yet - just looked up from the chart. But I knew. That look had weight. That look had a name. I had seen it too many times before . . .”

#### 4. I SMELLED... (*Visceral, grounding details*)

- “I smelled disinfectant and something sweet.”
- “The air reeked of mildew and something else I couldn’t place.”
- “His jacket smelled of smoke.”

**Example:** “I smelled disinfectant and something sweet. It hit me the moment I walked through the doors. A strange mix - part hospital, part cafeteria, part childhood memory I couldn’t place. It made me stop, just for a second. And then I saw her, curled up under a waiting room chair...”

#### 5. I REMEMBER... (*Memory-based entry points*)

- “I remember the first time I met her.”
- “I remember thinking, ‘This can’t be happening.’”
- “I’ll never forget what she said next.”

**Example:** “I remember the first time I met her. She looked me straight in the eye and said, “Don’t give me the speech. Just tell me the truth.” No one had warned me she was funny. Or fierce. Or thirteen. But in that moment, I knew she was going to change everything . . .”

#### 6. ACTIONS – “I was...” or “I did...”

- “I was introduced to her by a social worker who looked nervous.”
- “I was standing in the lobby when he walked in.”
- “I was filling out paperwork when I noticed her shoes.”
- “I was trying not to cry.”
- “I reached for the door, then stopped.”

**Example:** “I was introduced to her by a social worker who looked nervous. He didn’t say much - just motioned toward the bench outside his office. She sat there, hands clenched tight around a paper bag. I asked if I could sit down. She nodded. And that’s how the conversation started . . .”

#### 7. EMOTIONAL SETUP LINES

- “I was nervous to meet him.”
- “I didn’t expect to feel anything.”
- “I didn’t want to tell her the truth.”
- “I felt proud and heartbroken all at once.”

**Example:** “I was nervous to meet him. I’d read the file. I’d heard the stories. But nothing prepared me for how calm he was. How polite. How soft-spoken. I expected resistance. What I got was a question I didn’t know how to answer . . .”

## 8. TIME MODIFIERS TO ADD CONTEXT

Time modifiers are one of the simplest and most powerful tools you can use to start a story. Why? Because they flip a switch in the donor’s brain.

When you say something happened *yesterday* or *this morning*, the donor immediately thinks:

- This is recent (so it matters now).
- This is real (because it’s specific).
- This is relevant (I should pay attention).

A time cue sets the stage, creates urgency, and gives the brain a reason to *keep reading*. It also helps the donor feel like they’re stepping into a living, unfolding moment - not just reading a recap.

Use these at the beginning of any sentence to give urgency or clarity: Use these at the beginning of any sentence to give urgency or clarity:

- “Yesterday...”
- “This morning...”
- “Last week...”
- “A few minutes before the ambulance arrived...”
- “Three days before her birthday...”
- “After the diagnosis...”

### Examples:

- “Yesterday, I saw her sitting outside the clinic with her arms wrapped around a trash bag.”
- “Last week, I got a call I never expected.”
- “This morning, he told me something I still can’t believe.”
- “Three days before her birthday, her mom disappeared.”
- “After the diagnosis, he stopped talking.”

These simple time cues make your story feel grounded, urgent, and real.

## COMBO STARTER FORMULAS

Use these templates:

“[Time modifier] + I saw / heard / felt + [brief teaser]”

“Last week, I saw something I can’t shake.”

“They didn’t know + [what was coming / what would happen next]”

“She didn’t know her world was about to collapse.”

“It started when...”

“It started when he missed his first appointment.”

“I thought I understood, until...”

“I thought I understood hunger, until I met Carlos.”

## COPY-AND-PASTE STORY STARTERS

- “This morning, I met someone who reminded me why your gift matters.”
- “She didn’t want to tell me at first. But then she said the thing I’ll never forget.”
- “He didn’t ask for help. He just stood there, shaking, with one sock missing.”
- “We thought she’d be okay. Then the test results came in.”

## REMEMBER:

Start *inside the moment*. You can always fill in the backstory later if necessary.

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