

Nelson English Usage

Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum

The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest:

Where *WWW* means '*Wretched Writers Welcome*'

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*.

Your task is to write your own worst possible opening sentence. If you choose to, you can submit the entry electronically on the Bulwer-Lytton website at www.bulwer-lytton.com.

1 Think about the opening sentences of books you have already read. What did you like or dislike about the sentences? Is there a particular style of writing that puts you off as soon as you start reading?

2 Think about some of the flaws that can appear in writing style, including:

- clichés
- run-on sentences
- oxymoron
- tautologies
- wordiness
- dangling and squinting modifiers
- lack of originality
- bias
- propaganda
- unintentional humour
- excessive coincidences
- purple prose.

Remember that some authors use these 'flaws' deliberately to convey the traits of their characters and to make the reader aware that their narrators are unreliable.

3 Look at past winning sentences on the contest website. Do they have anything in common? Are there any you think are examples of good opening sentences, rather than bad ones?

4 Write several drafts of your sentence and share them with your classmates in groups of three or four.

Draft 1

Draft 2

Draft 3

Draft 4

5 Using the feedback from your group, write your final version of the worst possible opening sentence to a novel.

Final version

6 If you choose to do so, submit the sentence on the Bulwer-Lytton website.