

Never Start With Weather

The Source

This seems to be a reaction against Bulwer-Lytton's infamous opening: "It was a dark and stormy night." That became the poster child for purple prose.

Elmore Leonard's writing rules (2001) included "Never open with weather" as a reaction against what he saw as padding in popular fiction. Leonard wanted immediate action and dialogue, not atmospheric description.

The principle was about avoiding decorative throat-clearing - starting with weather when it serves no purpose except to delay getting to the story. Leonard was reacting against genre fiction that opened with pages of weather/setting before anything happened.

The Morph

Absolute prohibition. Don't mention weather in opening pages. Don't describe setting first. Start with action/dialogue only.

The morphing:

1. Leonard advises against opening with decorative weather
2. Becomes "never open with weather"
3. Becomes "never describe setting in opening pages"

4. Writers delete perfectly good atmospheric openings because they "break the rule"

The Reality

One Hundred Years of Solitude opens with weather in memory. Gabriel García Márquez clearly didn't get the memo.

Neither did:

- George Orwell (1984: "It was a bright cold day in April")
- Annie Proulx (The Shipping News opens with weather)
- Richard Wright (Native Son: "Brrrrrrrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiing!" followed immediately by cold weather)
- Dickens (A Tale of Two Cities: "It was the best of times..." includes weather)

Weather works when it establishes mood, theme, or symbolic resonance. It fails when it's just decorative throat-clearing. The difference is whether the weather serves story or just delays it.

What Works

Opening with weather works when:

1. It establishes mood essential to the story
2. It creates symbolic resonance: cold=emotional coldness, storm=turmoil
3. Weather itself is plot-relevant

4. It grounds us in a specific time/place immediately
5. The weather description is itself beautiful or striking

Opening with action/dialogue works when:

1. Immediate engagement matters more than atmosphere
2. The genre expects quick pacing (thriller, action)
3. Setting can be established later without loss
4. You want disorientation as an effect

What Fails

Weather openings fail when:

1. They're purely decorative with no thematic purpose
2. They delay the real beginning unnecessarily
3. They're clichéd: "dark and stormy night" without fresh observation
4. They go on for paragraphs with no character or action in sight

Action/dialogue openings fail when:

1. The reader is disoriented with no grounding
2. Essential atmosphere is lost

3. The opening feels abrupt when the story needs a gentler entry

The Actual Principle

Open your story where the story begins. If that's weather that establishes essential mood or theme, use it. If that's action or dialogue that grabs immediately, use that. Avoid decorative throat-clearing regardless of whether it's weather, description, or exposition. The question isn't "Is this weather?" but "Does this serve my story?"

Or more simply: Begin at the true beginning, whatever that is.

Why This Corruption Matters

This corruption is damaging because:

1. It privileges one opening strategy (action) over all others
2. It makes writers delete effective atmospheric openings
3. It confuses "immediate action" with "effective beginning"
4. It ignores that different stories need different openings
5. It makes a mechanical rule out of a legitimate concern about purpose

The real principle - don't waste the reader's time - is sound. The corruption - never open with weather - arbitrarily bans a technique that can be highly effective.