

## Sherlock Holmes: the openings of a selection of stories

Look at the opening lines to a variety of Sherlock Holmes stories and then answer the questions that follow:

Mr Sherlock Holmes, who was usually very late in the mornings, save upon those not infrequent occasions when he stayed up all night, was seated at the breakfast table. I stood upon the hearthrug and picked up the stick which our visitor had left behind him the night before. It was a fine, thick piece of wood, bulbous-headed, of the sort which is known as a 'Penang lawyer'. Just under the head was a broad silver band, nearly an inch across. 'To James Mortimer, MRCS, from his friend of the CH', was engraved upon it, with the date '1884'. It was just such a stick as the old-fashioned family practitioner used to carry – dignified, solid, and reassuring.

'Well, Watson, what do you make of it?'

Holmes was sitting with his back to me, and I had given him no sign of my occupation.

From: *The Hound of the Baskervilles*

It was in the spring of the year 1894 that all London was interested, and the fashionable world dismayed, by the murder of the Honourable Ronald Adair, under most unusual and inexplicable circumstances. The public has already learned those particulars of the crime which came out in the police investigation; but a good deal was suppressed upon that occasion, since the case for the prosecution was overwhelmingly strong that it was not necessary to bring forward all the facts. Only now, at the end of nearly ten years, am I allowed to supply those missing links which make up the whole of that remarkable chain.

From: *The Empty House*

'From the point of view of the criminal police,' said Mr Sherlock Holmes, 'London has become a singularly uninteresting city since the death of the late lamented Professor Moriarty.'

'I can hardly think that you would find many decent citizens to agree with you,' I answered.

'Well, well, I must not be self-righteous,' said he, with a smile, as he pushed back his chair from the breakfast-table.

From: *The Norwood Builder*

We have had some dramatic entrances and exits upon our small stage at Baker Street, but I cannot recollect anything more sudden and startling than the first appearance of Dr Thorneycroft Huxtable, MA, PhD etc. His card, which seemed too small to carry the weight of his academic distinctions, preceded him by a few seconds, and he entered himself – so large, so pompous, and so dignified that he was the very embodiment of self-possession and solidity.

From: *The Priory School*

1. All of the Sherlock Holmes stories are written in the voice of a particular narrator. Is that voice first; second or third person?
2. What effect does the style of the narration have? As a reader do you feel the narrator is distant; friendly; formal; aggressive; condescending? Discuss how the writer evokes this reaction in you (gets you to feel this way).
3. Are the stories being narrated at the time at which they happen or is the narrator (Dr Watson) looking back and reflecting on what happened? Why do you think the author (Conan Doyle) does this?
4. Look at the time of day the stories begin. What effect does this have?
5. Why do you think Conan Doyle often starts with conversations between the two men: Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson?
6. In two of the stories we are told about clues in the first paragraph. Why do you think this is?
7. What impression do you get of Sherlock Holmes from these opening lines? How is this created? Look at the language used and Holmes' behaviour.
8. What sort of person do you think Dr Watson is? How does Conan Doyle make you feel this way? Discuss your ideas with a partner.
9. In one of the extracts we get the impression that Holmes is an excellent detective; how is this shown to us?
10. The 'action' of the story begins straight away in each of the stories. How does Conan Doyle do this?

Now it's your turn! Using the clues you have been given attempt to write the opening lines of your mystery story in the same style as Conan Doyle. You might want to start with one of the following sentences.

- We were just finishing our breakfast when the maid appeared to tell us ...
- Pacing the floor in front of the fireplace, Holmes considered for a moment ...
- 'Here's a mystery for you Watson,' said Holmes as he carefully folded the newspaper to show me a small article within it ...
- All of Sherlock Holmes' successes are amazing for one reason or another but the one that really stands out in my mind is ...