

# Setting the Stage

**THE CHALLENGE:** In 100 words or fewer, write the opening paragraph to a story based on this prompt: A nosy man eavesdrops on his co-workers and immediately regrets it.



Out of more than 600 entries, *Writer's Digest* editors and forum members selected the following five story openers:

**1** An icy wave cascades across my face. It's jarring, but not jarring enough to snap reality back into focus, as I'll hoped. My widest eyes reflect back at me in the mirror. Why did I look behind that door when they came into the office? I guess I never could resist eavesdropping on a little juicy office gossip, but that? How could I help? John Davis died! I reach down to splash more water across my face and my eyes flick to the mirror and catch it. There, reflected in haunting reverse, my narrow eyes stare back at me. John Davis. —Stephan White

**2** Minutes pass before I remind myself to breathe. The office that once surrounded me evaporates. I try to pinch myself out of this nightmare but I can't move my hands. I'm sinking into a sea of hurt. A chuckle brings me crashing back to reality. The chuckle belongs to Brian, my first friend here at the firm. It's the same chuckle he has when he's beating me on the court. The same chuckle he had when he became my boss. Now, he's chuckling to his water cooler audience as he describes the doggerel I uttered just before my wild ball throw. —Lauren Zelenak

**3** “See you after work for drinks!” The words circled in Sam's head like the lyric of a love song stuck in a scratch of an LP. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. Drinks. He imagined the shot of whiskey searing its way down his throat and bringing the warm relief. With a shaking hand, he downed the cold water he kept on his desk. Why did I take off my headphones to listen to them? he thought. Sam tore off “Day 1” from his 100 Days of Sobriety calendar and checked it in the trash. —Jesse Pelton

**4** I stood transfixed, overhearing the conversation from my hiding place in the walk-in cooler. The words *revolutionary suicide pact* jangled inside my brain. The assistant cook protested about killing babies and toddlers while our boss told her to keep quiet and start mixing the potion. I peeked out at the two arguing and hoped for a quick, silent escape. I gazed past them to a window where the teeming rain forest framed our outpost's front gate and armed mission members patrolled under the banner flapping in the noonday breeze, proclaiming “Welcome to the People's Temple, Jonestown.” —Judith Grout

**5** I opened the office door and there they were, my three co-workers—dumb George and Angela. I couldn't believe how casually they were standing there having this conversation. Although I did have to creep in a little closer to hear exactly what it was they were saying, the fact that they would openly discuss such a matter in our place of business was appalling. And here I thought I was joining a company with high class. Never would I have guessed that my co-workers would be reliving the ending of *The Dark Knight Rises* before I got to work. —Blake Alexander