

STARTING THE ENGINE:  
HOW TO MAKE THAT FIRST CHAPTER SPARKLE!

Here's what I see with my writing students: Just about all first-timers, giddy with the chance to actually tell stories, try to tell them all in the first chapter. Every time they introduce a character, they flash back to his whole history. If they mention cooking breakfast, they digress into an essay on the best way to make an omelet. If it's a historical, they tell you everything about how the French court worked under Louis XIV; if a chick lit piece, you find out way too much about magazine publishing or fashion.

The point being premature exposition. The reader doesn't care.

Yet.

She's going to care, if you do it right, she's going to hang on your every word, but what you need to give her right here is something to hang onto. Better yet, *someone*—a vivid protagonist—as well as something to look forward to. Something suspenseful. Something that makes her think, “What's going to happen next?” That may sound like an opinion only a mystery writer would have, but listen to Aunt Julie: If she's not wondering what's going to happen next, she's not going to turn the page. Your book is dead on Page One.

So--three things to avoid in the first chapter: flashbacks, digressions, and exposition. On that last--you can do a sentence or two here and there; that'll hardly be noticed. But do keep it to less than a paragraph. There'll be time for exposition later, once

the reader is hooked and more receptive.

One more word about getting her hooked—suspense is not nearly so much about who killed whom or whether the good guys will beat the ticking bomb as it is about what will happen to, and between, the characters. If I care who's going to win the bomb race, it's because the author's gotten me to care about the potential victim *and* his potential savior.

What you want to do in that first chapter is introduce your protagonist--and yes, it *must* be the protagonist. I had one student manuscript in which you never met her till six chapters in and even then had no idea she was going to be important to the story. So—introduce your character, and then start the engine of the story.

Okay, start the engine--but how do you turn on the ignition? Easy. Just put the character through a scene (or scenes) that either tells you who she is or gets the plot moving. But make sure it stays in real time (no flashbacks) and make sure it has action. (Note: conversation can be action. Interior monologue probably isn't.) I think the latter kind of scene, in which you start the plot, is self-explanatory, but let me illustrate what I mean by the first---establishing character without getting into the story. I just read a first chapter of a historical in which the author takes the reader with the female spy to deliver the fruit of her latest mission to Cardinal Richelieu, for whom she works--though this particular mission has nothing to do with the rest of the story. But it didn't have to--its function was to establish the character as a spy and also introduce the Cardinal, all through action.

One other thought--it's so pleasurable for some new writers to digress and flash back all over the place that sometimes they just have to do it, and then break it down

later. That's do-able too, as long as you don't get blind-sided by finding out late in the game that that's what's going to have to happen. Lawrence Block, one of my favorite writing gurus, says flip the second and first chapters if you need to.

That's easy for Block to say. He's a very skilled writer and you're likely a beginner. When I wrote my first published novel, though by no means my first novel--a mystery called DEATH TURNS A TRICK-- I remembered that advice, but my skills were so poor that I had to start the book at the sixth chapter, and then flash back for five chapters. If you should find that book on eBay and happen to read it, please be kind. It's very much a first novel, and it shows. Use it as an example of how *not* to plot. But you can also think of it as an example of how a writer teaches herself as her career continues. Writing novels never ceases to be a learning curve. Even now, after more than twenty of them, I'm always learning, always absorbing new techniques.

Be sure to remember that the scene is the basic unit of dramatic writing. The reader will put up with a paragraph of exposition—maybe even a few—but mainly she wants to see something happen. So ideally (maybe after a rewrite or two) your book will open with a scene, a little story in itself.

**And even more ideally—listen to this one—it'll begin in the *middle* of that scene.**

#### FIRST SENTENCES: BEGIN IN THE MIDDLE

How many times have you picked up a book and judged it by the first sentence? Your readers will return the compliment. It's the most important sentence in your book.

Let's take a look at one in a book you probably know—say, *Gone With The Wind*.

We all know the famous opening line, or a bit of it : “Scarlett O’Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm, as the Tarleton twins were.” We then get a paragraph describing Scarlett, but we know from the first that she’s with the Tarleton twins. It’s a scene on the porch and it’s actually very expository—we learn a lot about these people and the world they live in—but **we enter in the middle**.

How about THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE? “They threw me off the hay truck about noon”. *That’s* getting right into the action. It takes the character about two more sentences to get to the little restaurant where most of the story will occur, and by the second page, he’s got a job there. The author’s already set the scene, already introduced the three main characters, and already foreshadowed the love triangle at the center of the story. James M. Cain is probably the fastest scene-setter in the English language, so you may not want to try this at home. But think about the scene you want to begin your book with and think about a great first sentence, the one that’s going to end up being your best.

We just talked about two of the most famous:

Let’s look at some more:

*Call Me Ishmael.*

*Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again*

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...*

*It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.*

*You don’t know me, without you have read a book by the name of “the Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” but that ain’t no matter.*

What do all those have in common? Two things. One is that they bring up more questions than they answer—who on Earth is Ishmael? What’s so special about Scarlett? Where’s Manderley? They make you feel as if you came in in the middle of something, and you’ll have to run to catch up. In other words, they’re intriguing, they make you want to read on.

The other is that they set a tone, and they do it with language, whether it’s straightforward, as in the Melville, or full of furbelows, as in the Jane Austen, or colloquial and humorous, as in the Mark Twain. Let’s take a couple and change them a bit—

Call me Pete.

Judy Jones was not beautiful...

Last night I dreamt I went to Ditchley again.

Not nearly as good, are they? Every word counts, and in a first sentence it counts triple. But don't obsess about it. Really. Beginnings often evolve over the course of many rewrites.

You may have heard about writers who write their last chapters first—I have no idea why anyone would do this, but if you keep in mind that you can always write your first sentence *last*, it may give you a bit of peace of mind. Because the great thing is that it takes only a keystroke. You really don’t have to make such a momentous decision up front. I still tend to rewrite openings-- and whole first chapters--many times.

WARMING UP

As we've noted, a common structural error is too much exposition at the beginning. The reader doesn't need to know everything there is to know about your main character in the first few pages. Save some of this and let him evolve gradually before the reader's eyes. But on the other hand it may be easier to write it this way and fix it in the rewrite.

Here's part of my critique about a work-in-progress I was fortunate to see:

*The first chapter is wonderfully descriptive and expository—no doubt it got a lot straight in your head about where you were going with this. But I know it'll be completely different in the rewrite—because the reader doesn't need to know everything about the protagonist's work history, family background, and antecedents by page two. The writer may, though—he may not only need to know it for himself, he may find it comes in handy later in the book. So if that's the way your novel speaks to you—and in the early stages especially, novels very often do speak—that's the way you should write it.*

Let me add for emphasis: *The first time around.*

Another thing I've noticed about new writers, as well as very experienced, sometimes best-selling, award-winning authors with whom I swap manuscripts, is that many of us just start rattling on to warm up. We might start the book with some hideous cliché, like the protagonist getting a phone call, and go on for six pages before that part's over. The character can't find the phone, he doesn't want to find the phone because it might be his ex-wife and he's got a hangover, he does find the phone, but too late, the caller hung up, but the phone ringing starts again...uh, hello? Could you wake up, please? No worries, *that's* not going to see print. The imaginary book above is probably

going to start with the character acting on the phone call, and the author flashing back to the call in one or two sentences. Something like this:

*“It was 5 a.m., already so hot I was sweating in shorts and T-shirt, and I was probably the only white guy for miles around. I just hoped to God whoever answered the door would have some clothes on. And I hoped even more that it wouldn’t be my fifteen-year-old daughter.*

*“My ex-wife had finally tracked her down half an hour ago and Courtenay said since the night was effectively over—she’d spent it at her boy friend’s house--did she really have to come home now? My ex wanted my opinion. Christ on a crutch—how could there be two schools of thought on that one?”*

That was my first version, but I can see a way to make it more immediate, this time by switching sentences instead of chapters. And adding one:

*“I just hoped to God whoever answered the door would have some clothes on. I hoped even more that it wouldn’t be my fifteen-year-old daughter. And I was just praying he wouldn’t have a gun.*

*“It was 5 a.m., already so hot I was sweating in shorts and T-shirt, and I was probably the only white guy for miles around.*

*“My ex-wife ....etc. etc.”*

If this were really a book, it might be even better to start it with the fight that’s bound to ensue between the guy and his daughter or her boy friend. (That is, assuming she’s there and alive.) I don’t know if a ringing doorbell is that much better than a ringing phone. But on the other hand, I’d want to keep the flashback to a minimum.

If you're comfortable with a few warm-up pages, have at it. Just start. Put one word after another, as one of my newspaper mentors once told me when I was on deadline and about to burst into tears. It doesn't even matter *which* words, just string them together till you get your bearings. And in the next draft, start the story when it gets interesting.

### BEGINNINGS TO AVOID

That ringing phone I mentioned is something you should skirt like the aforementioned ebola virus. It's a cliché, it's boring, and it's lazy. Never start with a phone call.

Never start with a PI getting the case, especially if it involves a gorgeous blonde client walking into his office.

In fact, for that matter, never start with the genesis of the central problem of the book. Start in the middle. One way to think about a story is this: The protagonist's life (or the social order) is disturbed, then order is restored. Remember that if the characters are having a good time, the reader isn't. So let us meet the main character in his disturbed state. An exception might be a quick cut to make a point:

*"I snuggled closer to Tom, dreading the morning race to get the kids to school, thinking how hard and warm his body was, barely noticing the squeal of our new puppy's birdie toy, not yet registering that someone must have stepped on it.*

*"The next thing I heard was a gunshot."*

Never start with a passenger on a plane that's about to land, contemplating his life and his future. You have no idea how many beginners do this.

And Elmore Leonard says never start with the weather.

Not a bad idea. Don't set the scene either. The reader doesn't care where she is or what it looks like, she wants to know who she's with. Unless of course there's something very compelling about the scene:

*"I couldn't move more than a few inches in any direction; I couldn't sit up. Yet whatever I was lying on was soft, as if an effort had been made to make me comfortable. I'd never seen dark so dark, black so black, nothingness so complete. It was starting to dawn on me that I was lying in a coffin."*

In a case like that, I believe I'd keep reading.

#### EXTRANEOUS DIALOGUE

Perhaps because of the warming up phenomenon, extraneous dialogue is common in beginning chapters. So let's have a quick review:

One of the most common mistakes new writers make is extraneous dialogue. That's extra dialogue. Dialogue you don't need. Dialogue the only purpose of which is to deliver half-baked jokes. Unwitty witticisms. Unnecessary transitions. Pleasantries we take for granted. If your characters are at a funeral, say, this conversation should not take place: "Hi," I said.

"Hey," he replied.

"You okay?"

"Fine, you?"

"My mom's been sick, but that's nothing compared—" I stopped and blurted.  
"Sorry about your brother."

“Yeah,” he said. “He never forgot you. Or the way you ran out the night before the wedding.”

What’s the important part of that exchange? It begins five lines in—with “Sorry about your brother.” Until then, it’s distinctly unsnappy dialogue.

### TAKEAWAY

1. Your first chapter is your only chance to hook the reader. So don’t digress, don’t flash back, and don’t fall prey to premature exposition.
2. Just get the reader to fall in love with your protagonist and start the engine of the story.
3. Remember that the scene is the basic unit of dramatic art—and start in the middle of one.
4. Aim for a killer first sentence, but don’t obsess about it. You can write it last.
5. Warm up if you must and trim the fat later—along with all extraneous dialogue.

Never start with a ringing phone, a P.I. getting a case, or a pensive airline passenger. In fact, a really good idea is to Google “cliché beginnings for a novel” to make sure you avoid them.