

# How to begin a story to hook readers, editors and agents

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<http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-begin-a-story-to-hook-readers-editors-and-agents/>

This entry is part 1 of 5 in the series [PLOT writing](#)

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**This is about how to begin a story that will hook readers, editors and agents. More specifically, what to keep in mind when crafting the beginning of your story and how to choose the *type* of first sentence you want to craft.**

Writing a story with a great plot is key to keeping readers hooked, but it all starts with the first few pages. It's key that you grab and keep readers hooked to your story right away, and that transforms first-time readers to loyal ones. It's also what will attract the editor you want and the agent you need.

Grab readers with the beginning, and hold them transfixed all the way through to your awesome ending. We'll go in-depth with each of these stages of plot developing, but let's start at the beginning – *because if you want to win your readers over, this is where you do that.*

**The beginning:** this is what wins readers over.

**The middle:** this is what keeps readers happy, engaged, enraptured.

**The ending:** this is what keeps readers wanting more.

## What you'll get here:

- 4 key points to know about crafting your story beginning.
- 5 tools to establish momentum in your story beginning.
- 3 key points about crafting your first sentence.
- 7 types of first sentences, with really great examples.

So let's get started with the 4 key points you need to know about writing a really solid, compelling

beginning to your story. It doesn't matter what kind of story you're writing or what sort of characters. These apply to any kind of story material.

## **1. The first few pages are vital to hooking your readers.**

The beginning of your story determines whether people will choose to stick with your writing or push it aside for something that doesn't bore/annoy/irritate them. I'm a very picky reader, so if I'm not hooked by the third page, I put the novel down.

Keep this high expectation for your writing and test it on others who don't love you that much. (Generally speaking, it's harder for them to be seriously critical.)

If you're as picky as I am about what you read, you've got to consider that publishing professionals (editors, producers, agents, etc.) are going to be pickier than you or I. They hope to find a gem, but they expect to not find it - unless it's coming with the high praise of another publishing professional.

For storybooks, it's different: I do start at the beginning, but after page 3 I jump to the end. Then I go back, right into the middle of the story. If there's a strong sense of structure and character in what I've seen, I read the entire book.

There's a lot to keep in mind when writing a story, and the beginning is the make-it-or-break-it point. This is where an agent will decide to either keep reading or reject.

## **2. To really have impact, don't start at the beginning.**

We've grown-up with the idea that "It's always best to start at the beginning," because Glenda the good witch of Oz has told us these comforting words from the time we were little. While this is true for readers, and true to how we examine our lives, it *doesn't work for writing*.

If you want to craft a great read, start writing the ending of your story first. This is some of the most powerful writing advice EVER. For more details, read [3 Reasons to Start at the End](#).

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## **3. If you start the story with a line of dialogue, keep it short.**

I love stories that start with a character-defining bit of dialogue. What you want to be careful of though is not having too much dialogue (or a monologue!), because you need to take a step back from those spoken words to show us where we are.

So use 1-2 sentences of dialogue from either the main protagonist or a key side character, then follow that up with narrative that explains the situation.

## **4. Use momentum to capture readers.**

Different writers have done this in different ways, but **the key tools that all successful writers use to build momentum in the beginning are these 5 things:**

- 1. establish a distinctive narrative voice**
- 2. establish the point of view**
- 3. show the reader where and when we are**
- 4. show some characterizations**
  
- 5. express the essence of the plot we're about to face**

In a story with pictures, [a good amount of this information can be shown](#). You don't have to explain everything with words if you can show some of it. For a novel, that's another story. You have to get to the bones of your story and your characters right away, with words.

You don't build-up to that, you build upon that. Doing so is what builds your plot and ultimately brings us to the climactic moment. But beginnings shouldn't lag. In fact, they need to do just the opposite.

## **About First Sentences**

### **1. The first sentence is key.**

Like it or not, editors and agents are human, and that means that just like you or I, first impressions are extremely important, influential moments that are very difficult to overcome if your first impression flopped. If your first sentence is cliché or boring, it's going to be very difficult for anything afterward to overcome that.

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Your first sentence is vital. Your first paragraph even more so, and your first page has got to be compelling enough to entice a complete read-through. If your first illustrated storybook page describes how pretty the hills are and your character doesn't appear until page 4, you've lost before you've really begun.

I don't want to suggest that in-depth environmental descriptions and back-story details are writing devices of the past. Not at all! But I do want to suggest very strongly that there is a place in your story for such things, and it isn't in the beginning.

### **2. Don't be pretentious or hip just to establish a flashy first sentence.**

One of the newer trends I've been seeing in stories is a first sentence that is obviously written to be "a great first sentence." These smack of pretension and the obnoxious desire to be overly cool by being mysterious or gangster-drug inspired in some way.

These writers may get published anyway, but the interest in them will not stay. If your writing is written for the cachet (read: approval) of today, it won't last 10 years. Be authentic and your writing will last.

### **3. Be clear about the *type* of first sentence you want.**

There are different [types of genres](#), different [types of characters](#). There are also different types of first sentences. Here are some top-notch options for you to consider (there are other types, but these listed below are those that tend to get recognized as "great first sentences"):

#### **1. The urgent jump-start.**

This is when one action is happening (I watched silently from the window as...) and then another, dangerous or danger-implying action transpires (over 2,000 Martians crept over the mountain in only 10 minutes flat). This is common in action novels, but it can be used in any kind of book.

"That Spot! He hasn't eaten his supper. Where can he be?" –[Where's Spot?](#) by Eric Hill. We know right away that this is about a missing dog and that he hasn't touched his supper, which must be unheard-of.

"The sun did not shine, it was too wet to play, so we sat in the house all that cold, cold wet day. I sat there with Sally. We sat here we two and we said 'How we wish we had something to do.'" –[The Cat in the Hat](#), by Dr. Seuss.

This one makes you sit right up: "'Where's Papa going with that axe?' said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast." –[Charlotte's Web](#), by E. B. White. Right away, a sense of urgency is established and we are thrust into this story.

Here's another, funny-urgent beginning: "The kids in Room 207 were misbehaving again. Spitballs stuck to the ceiling. Paper planes whizzed through the air. They were the worst-behaved class in the whole school." –[Miss Nelson is Missing!](#) by James Marshall.

#### **2. The scene-setter.**

Whether through a bit of dialogue and narrative or pure narrative, we see how things are in this specific moment, and this specific moment will set the tone for the rest of what's about to happen.

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” –[The Hobbit](#), by J. R. R. Tolkien. We know right away from the tone that this is a tale and we know that sooner or later, the hobbit is going to leave his hole in the ground.

### 3. The character-setter.

This is a special kind of story start that conveys to us something specific about a character right Now, but it also hints that this will somehow change during the course of the story. This can be very difficult to craft well, but if you can pull it off, it will seriously draw in readers.

“There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.” –[The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader](#), by C. S. Lewis.

Here’s another, but crafted using first person narrative: “When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house, I had only two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home.” –[The Outsiders](#), by S. E. Hinton.

### 4. The elusive compelling start.

This is when we’re given a snippet of information that is key, but we aren’t meant to understand what it means just yet because we don’t know how we got there. This type of start is meant to entice us to keep reading so that we can find out what these first words are all about.

The danger with doing this is that it’s very easy to lose your readers by being too strange or so elusive that the reader just shrugs and starts with something else. If you go this route, you have to be cautious and be sure to be authentic.

If you’re mysterious, you should be doing that for a good reason – which means it should serve the point of the story. You should never be mysterious for the sake of being mysterious or of trying to emulate another writer.

DO emulate great writers, but don’t do it just because. Have purpose.

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“It was Mrs. May who first told me about them.” –[The Borrowers](#), by Mary Norton.

“Once upon a time there was a pair of pants.” –[The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants Series](#), by Ann Brashares.

### 5. The characterization focus.

This is when we're primarily shown something about the characterization of certain characters. What does that mean? Characterization is essentially when we see the characteristics of a character – through their intonation, gestures, etc. Here's a great example of showing characterization in a first sentence:

“Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.” –[Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone](#), by J. K. Rowling.

### 6. The background that brings us to the Forever.

This is something you often see in origin stories and fairytales. It's when we're given very specific information about how things are, and this influences how things are going to be, forever. Here's a great example of establishing background that gives us the forever (for those characters):

“Once upon a time there was a dear little girl who was loved by everyone who looked at her, but most of all by her grandmother, and there was nothing that she would not have given to the child. Once she gave her a little cap of red velvet, which suited her so well that she would never wear anything else. So she was always called Little Red Riding Hood.” –[Little Red Riding Hood](#), by Jacob & Wilhelm Grimm.

“Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies, with Uncle Henry, who was a farmer, and Aunt Em, who was the farmer's wife.” –[The Wonderful Wizard of Oz](#), by Frank Baum.

Here's an amazing example that is so short it could also be described as a POW sentence: “All children, except one, grow up.” –[Peter Pan](#), by J. M. Barrie.

### 7. The simply POW statement.

This is when a short first sentence just grabs us because it's so impressively simple and yet so unexpected. It pulls us in immediately, with the least possible words. It's narrative economy at its best. Here are some great examples of this:

“Johnny never knew for certain why he started seeing the dead.” –[Johnny and the Dead](#), by Terry Pratchett.

“Kidnapping children is never a good idea; all the same, sometimes it has to be done.” –[Island of the Aunts](#), by Eva Ibbotson.

“There was once a velveteen rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid.” –[The Velveteen Rabbit: Or, How Toys Become Real](#), by Margery Williams.

“Laura's baby brother George was four weeks old when it happened.” –[George Speaks](#), by Dick King-Smith.

## Write what you write on purpose, with purpose.

Whatever kind of first-sentence you decide to create, do that conscientiously. I don't mean you can't be

inspired or shouldn't use the words that come to you in the shower. What I mean is this: if you do decide to use what comes to you in an inspiration, **decide to keep it in the final draft on purpose. Know why what you're using is right.**

You will need to understand why the sentence(s) work if you want to be able to write well, reliably – and not just when you feel like it or when lucky inspiration strikes.

If what you write is only ever a happy accident and gets on the page without you having really thought about it, you'll never be able to write when you're feeling down or stressed.

You will *need* to write when you don't feel like it if:

- you want to keep to your deadlines.
- you want to fulfill your goals as a writer.

Be aware of what you need to express right from the get-go, and choose the type of first sentence that fits your story best. Do this and you'll be able to effectively grab your reader's attention right away. In a web-savvy world with Take A Peek Inside! clicks and Google Books, being able to do this is essential.

**Agents.** Craft the beginning of your story to capture the attention of the right agent using these tools and the agent will absolutely recognize that you have the writing techniques down.

**Readers.** Do this for the love of readers who are always looking for great stories - they might not *technically* understand why they love what you've written, but they'll know great stuff when they see it.

Grab your reader's attention right away - *and then keep it*. Over the next several weeks, I'll be going into detail about how to do this.

**What are the writing hurdles you face *right now*?** Write below, let me know – or, as ever, send me an email. You know I like getting those. I'll do my best to respond as quickly as possible, but please allow for a couple of weeks.

**Keep creating, no matter what.**

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[How to Write Rising Action in Act II >>](#)