

Write an Awesome Inciting Incident: 3 things to do

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<http://greatstorybook.com/write-awesome-inciting-incident-3-things/>

This entry is part 4 of 7 in the series [PLOT writing](#)

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The Inciting Incident is the single plot point that launches a protagonist out of their status quo and into the adventure they're about to undertake.

So when you get right down to it, absolutely *every* story of *every* genre for *any* age group must have one of these.

Artwork by Jonny Lindner.

So how do you write a slam-bang awesome inciting incident? I'll tell you.

What you'll find here:

- An awesome explanation of what an inciting incident really is.
- Where the inciting incident has to happen – ALWAYS!
- 3 aspects of a well-crafted inciting incident.

It's a Special Turning Point

In any plot, there are several Turning Points. The Inciting Incident is the special name given to one of those turning points – and it's the very first one in your story.

To be clear, this isn't the first plot point or the first thing that happens. It's the first Turning Point - the first time something happens to alter the main character's normal life.

To *incite* means to prompt, to stir-up or urge something on. So the **inciting incident** is literally the moment when our [protagonist](#) is pushed out of their comfort zone and forced to make a lot of decisions they normally wouldn't have to make.

Stories are all about learning. An adventure (read: any kind of story) is ultimately the path taken to learning something important.

- If the characters learn the lesson in time (a.k.a. before the end of the story), then we have a happy ending.
- If the characters *don't* learn whatever it is they need to learn in time, we have a tragedy.

Key Note about this turning point

The inciting incident is different from all other turning points in your story because it's the only one that most often isn't decided upon by the protagonist. For all the other turning points in a story, the main character makes decisions and those actions (or inactions) cause certain things to happen.

The first major plot point is different because it's the boat-rocker, the boot up the bum, the whiplash moment. This is what shakes everything up, and for that reason, it's [also part of the hook](#). (Note: the inciting incident and hook are not the same thing.)

The hook of a story relies heavily on the strength of your inciting incident. So you've got to make it good.

Important Placement

Where exactly does the Inciting Incident fall?

- The Inciting Incident is typically the last moment of the first act.
- The Inciting Incident is the very first Turning Point. There are no Turning Points before it.
- It's also the event that propels us into [Act II](#). Always, no exceptions. You will never find an Inciting Incident anywhere near the middle or end of a story. (If you do, there's something very wrong.)

Awesome Inciting Incidents do THIS

No matter what, all inciting incidents must do these things. It doesn't matter what kind of story you're writing.

1. Tip your hat to the story's end.

The inciting incident is where the author tips his hat to [the story's end](#). Whatever your inciter is, it

absolutely must point to what will happen at the climax. Here's an example:

The set-up: a nice girl pines for a guy for X Reason. **The inciting incident:** right when she believes he's about to ask her out, he instead asks for her stepsister's cell number because he wants to ask *her* out.

If the guy our protagonist is pining for ends up dating her stepsister, then the climax of this love triangle has to involve some sort of confrontation between these characters. All three.

Whatever interrupts the normal life of our protagonist must have a *permanent impact* on them and the decisions they make (at least, if this is to have a happy ending).

2. The main character (usually) does *not* decide the inciting incident.

Unlike all the other plot points, the inciting incident is typically an unexpected outside force or influence that happens upon the protagonist and sets them on a different course. All the other key plot points (a.k.a. Turning Points) *must be* decided by the main character. Not this one.

(You might wonder when the inciting incident could possibly be caused by the actions of the protagonist. It's when that character is in a certain situation and behaves, for a moment, out of character - and then this can act as a catalyst for their story.)

The reason this outside force or unexpected happening has so much impact on the protagonist is because of context. It has to be – and that brings me to the next point.

3. The inciter must come with context to have depth.

The reason the inciting incident comes as the second half of Act I is because we need time to establish who this protagonist is and what they care about most in life. You get to do that in the Set-Up.

If you're clever about it, you can get heavy with contextual details so that the impact of your inciting incident is even greater.

Applying Context in Layers

The set-up: a nice girl pines for a guy who is a drummer. **The inciting incident:** right when she believes he's about to ask her out, he instead asks for her stepsister's cell number because he wants to ask her out. **The context:** The nice girl protagonist isn't remotely musical and her stepsister manages to steal every boy she's interested in because of her sultry singing voice.

Take just the context and switch it around. What if the nice girl protagonist is the one with a sultry singing voice and not the stepsister, who is a Tax Auditor? What would be her reaction if the drummer chose the stepsister over her – even though she's a singer?

You have a completely different story.

Add a bit more context to this: What if the Stepsister Tax Auditor is currently auditing our protagonist? What if our protagonist had promised to sing at an important event the stepsister planned - and then had to cancel at the last minute?

Get Incited!

When you craft an inciting incident, keep the climax of the story in mind, weave as many contextual layers as you can, and have that outside influencer be something that really takes the hero by surprise. If one of these aspects are lacking – or perhaps just not as polished as they could be, you know you’ve got some rewriting to do.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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