

GREAT BEGINNINGS

How to Hook a Reader with the
First Line, First Paragraph, and First Five Pages
of Your Middle Grade or Young Adult Novel

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WHY ARE BEGINNINGS SO IMPORTANT?

Your opening paragraphs set the stage and entice a reader to turn the page...or not. So how do you make your writing stand out in the minds of agents, editors, judges, and readers in a crowded marketplace? With a **HOOK**.

A strong hook uses literary techniques to create an enticing beginning, crafted to capture a reader's interest.

THREE TIPS FOR
AN ATTENTION-
GRABBING FIRST
SENTENCE



1/ Begin in the middle of the action

Why it works:

- Drop into a scene that's in progress for immediate momentum
- Create interest with tension or conflict
- Curiosity around the situation will intrigue the reader
- Beginning with dialogue? Add a few details to ground the scene, but keep the action moving

2/ Craft an opening sentence that raises questions

Why it works:

- Begin with a surprising statement or situation
- Set the scene efficiently with an image using a sensory power word
- Use an emotional power word to capture interest
- An active verb kicks things into high gear
- With this combination the who, what, where, when are all be established in broad strokes, leaving the why unanswered

3/ Lean into strong emotion from word one

Why it works:

- Drop into the story at a pivotal moment
- Begin with a word that is emotionally charged and capitalize on it
- Use it in a different way to increase curiosity
- Drop into the story at an emotional moment
- Ticking clock
- An immediate emotional connection is forged with the protagonist encountering a universal truth

Fun fact: Try using iambic pentameter in your first sentence

Why it works:

- Skip the rhyme but keep the naturally appealing rhythm of ten beats in an unstressed-stressed rhythm, short alternating with long (da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM)
- A punchy, attention-getting opening sentence

SIX
TECHNIQUES
FOR A FIRST
PARAGRAPH
(or two)
THAT WILL
HOOK YOUR
READER



1/ Something unique

Why it works:

- An uncommon voice or point of view will make your protagonist stand out
- Language and word usage that's singular raises questions about setting
- Distinctive scenarios capture attention and lead to curiosity about plot

2/Voice

Why it works:

- Five S's of Voice -
 - Show, don't tell
 - Sensory detail
 - Specific detail
 - Simile (like or as), metaphor
 - Strong Verbs

3/ A character who drives the action

Why it works:

- A compelling character with the agency to make decisions drives the story forward
- You want to know what they'll do next and how they'll take the plot in unexpected directions

4/ Emotional connection

Why it works:

- Using interiority, the senses and physicality of the protagonist put us in their shoes
- A will they or won't they moment of declaration helps us understand their state of mind
- In a universal situation, or a universal response if we don't know the context of the situation, we can relate

5/ High stakes

Why it works:

- A high-stakes beginning captivates
- Tension, excitement, and vivid imagery incite empathy and emotions
- Raises questions about what happens next

6/ Pivotal moment

Why it works:

- Intensity draws in the reader
- Get to know the protagonist in an instance that demonstrates character
- Keep things moving with a thumbnail sketch of time and place

Fun fact: The word prologue is Middle English from Old French via Latin from the ancient Greek dramatic device called 'prologos' (pro=before and logos=saying)

THE FOUR BASIC TYPES OF PROLOGUES:

- 1/ MAIN CHARACTER/FUTURE
- 2/MAIN CHARACTER/PAST
- 3/OTHER CHARACTER POV
- 4/ THEMATIC OR BACKGROUND

- A prologue can be a powerful and enticing way of teasing the plot and revealing critical information needed to understand the opening pages
- They can provide background to world-build, set the stage for an antagonist, or reveal critical information needed to understand the opening pages
- Avoid pitfalls by ensuring the prologue is short and not an info dump or trying to make up for what the opening chapter lacks in suspense or excitement



Ways to keep your
readers' attention in
the first five pages
using six key
elements

1/ Plot –

Do you show the character near the moment when their regular world meets the inciting incident?



2/ Character –
Who is telling the
story? Why should
the reader care
about them and
their world?




3/Setting -

Do you use details that include a sensory aspect?

Tone -

Is there an emotional backdrop showing the reader what to feel through the details your MC includes and how they describe them?





4/Theme –
Can you show two sides
of your theme through
the struggle between the
protagonist's beliefs and
the opposing views of a
secondary character and
the antagonist?

5/ Conflict—

Do you create tension in the scene to hook the reader with forward momentum?

Do you vary the types of conflict to ensure the tension level is at its peak (man vs. self, man vs. man, man vs. society, man vs. nature, and man vs. supernatural)?



6/Genre –

Do you include the conventions of the genre to flag what kind of story this is to the reader?

What are the tropes and how do you subvert them to make them your own and elicit surprise?



Fun fact: You
can stress test
your opening
pages

- FIVE TECHNIQUES:

- Write a logline for your first five pages - "When (inciting incident), (the protagonist) must (achieve the objective) or risk (stakes) before (ticking clock)."
- Write or rewrite your end and middle, then revisit your beginning
- Change tense and/or POV
- Experiment with beginning your story one page later, two pages, or five pages later
- Isolate the dialogue and see what your MC says and doesn't say

Additional resources:

- **PODCASTS -**
 - *The S*** No One Tells You About Writing*
 - *Fiction Writing Made Easy* (specifically the 'First Chapter Analysis' series)
- **BOOKS -**
 - *The Writer's Guide to Beginnings* by Paula Munier
- **TECHNOLOGY -**
 - Grammarly

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME! Please visit either of our websites for more information.

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