



What Makes a Great First Page of a Novel?

What to Include in Your Opening Page

Note that the following elements do not *all* have to be present to make a great first page, but your first page should contain as many of the qualities listed here as possible.

- **The point-of-view (POV) is quickly established.** Novels are primarily stories about characters, and readers like to immediately know whose story they're reading. A strong POV helps the reader understand right away whose story this will be and whether or not that character will be worth following. Nothing is gained by being coy and withholding the main character from page one. Put them front and center.
- **A particular voice is apparent.** Voice in fiction can mean both the author's style and the way the main character's (or characters') POV is coming across. Many publishers will say they're looking for a *unique* voice, but what does that really mean? Unique in relation to *what*? I prefer to think of voice as something particular to the author and/or the character(s). Write like yourself (not like Hemingway, Jemison or Gabaldon or anyone else), and make sure your characters also sound like themselves, not like anyone else.
- **The story begins *in media res* (in the middle of things).** What this means for a reader is that there's an immediate sense that you're entering a story that's already in progress, that contains some action that's already taking place. Starting your novel by "setting the stage" with all the backstory you think the reader will need to know is the death-knell for novel openings. The story *truly* begins at the moment when something new and different is happening for the character, and readers do not need or want to know everything that leads up to that moment. You have the entire rest of the novel in which to insert bits of backstory; don't do a big information dump at the outset.
- **The novel opens in a specific setting.** Readers need to feel grounded in a *specific place*, so put your character somewhere specific right away and describe that space with just enough vivid detail that the reader can visualize it (and imagine the rest of it beyond the details you've laid out). Once readers feel like they have a sense of the scene, they can relax into the story.
- **There's some sense of conflict.** Readers want to be looking for answers to questions that are raised in the narrative—that's what keeps them turning pages. So make sure something's going on in the opening page that either specifically indicates trouble or hints that trouble's on its way.
- **There's a sense that a larger narrative theme is emerging.** It's great if you can at least hint that there's something bigger going on than the story at hand, a theme that's going to develop throughout the course of the novel. If you're not sure what I mean by theme, and you need some examples, read this: <https://literarydevices.net/theme/>.

- **The sentences are lean and strong.** Make sure there are no unnecessary words on the page. Lean prose is strong prose. I don't mean you need to write short, Hemingwayesque sentences, or avoid lovely language—I simply mean that every single word on the page needs to serve a necessary purpose. Strip out all extraneous words.

What to Avoid in Your Opening Page

- **Backstory.** It's exceedingly common for writers to write an entire first chapter that's nothing but backstory—I call this throat-clearing, or stage-setting. Writers often believe they need to tell readers everything possible about what leads up to the true beginning of the story. For instance, if a story begins on the day a character gets caught shoplifting, start the story at the instant she gets caught; do *not* share a lot of information about who she is and how much she's shoplifted in the past and why she shoplifts in the first place. All of that is backstory, and the most important pieces of that story can be woven in throughout the rest of the novel in the places where they're most relevant.
- **The waking up scene.** For better or for worse, opening a novel with your main character waking up has become clichéd, so much so that any publisher or editor who takes a look at your first page will likely stop reading then and there. Typically, the waking up scene falls under the category of backstory, since most often the character wakes up and takes care of his morning ablutions and only then does something happen to get the story going. Are there exceptions? Sure. Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, where his main character wakes up and finds himself transformed into a giant insect. But you better make sure you have a uniquely compelling reason to start with the wake-up; it's an uphill battle to work against a cliché. Related to this is **the dream opening**—opening the story while your character's dreaming has also been so overdone as to become clichéd, so steer clear of that as well.
- **Long passages of descriptive landscape.** If the landscape is going to play a central role in your novel, as important as your main character, it's fine to open with a landscape scene, but it's best to quickly turn to your main character in relation to that landscape so that readers can latch onto a character right away. If the landscape is *not* as important as your character, don't describe it in your opening.
- **Withholding the main character's name.** Some writers think that withholding the main character's name or identity helps create suspense or tension—it doesn't. Readers need to know whose story they're getting into and they want to know that quickly. Name your character from the outset.
- **The talking heads.** Readers want to feel grounded in a *specific place*, so make sure your characters are in a setting that's described with at least one or two vivid details so that the reader can picture the place. Without a setting, you risk the weird "talking heads" phenomenon, when characters are engaged in dialogue but they seem to be nowhere at all. Create a setting right away.

- **Generic settings.** Settings are critically important in fiction. Readers want to inhabit scenes that are as vivid as the space they're sitting in while reading your book. They want to be able to envision the scene as if they're watching a movie, so steer clear of generic descriptions and focus on one or two vivid, unique items in the scene that *show* it clearly.
- **Boring dialogue.** Your characters need to speak in a way that's unique to them, and they need to be talking about something that matters. Dialogue must always serve a purpose: reveal character, advance story, reflect theme, enhance settings or amplify tone. If your characters are just jaw-boning about nothing in particular, you're sunk.
- **Disembodied dialogue.** If you're going to open the first page with dialogue, make sure you immediately attribute that dialogue to a specific character. Don't just throw out a line of dialogue and leave the reader to wonder who said that, where they are when they say it, who they're saying it to, etc.

What to Watch Out for When Entering a Competition

Particularly when you enter your work in a contest, you must pay careful attention to the following things to ensure your work doesn't instantly end up in the trash bin. Your submission copies need to be polished and error-free, as perfect as you can make them.

- **Make sure there are no typos.** You'd be surprised at how many writers submit sloppy work that hasn't been proofread. To contest judges, this indicates a lack of seriousness about your work.
- **Check your punctuation, grammar and spelling.** Poor punctuation, bad grammar and incorrectly spelled words will quickly land your work in the "no" pile. Here again, proofread your work and then get someone else to proofread it, too. Make it perfect.
- **Turn off track changes.** If you have comments in the margins of your pages, either notes to yourself or notes from a feedback partner, make sure you remove those in your submission copy. Your submission copy needs to be clean and final, and margin notes will disqualify you.
- **Follow the submission guidelines to the letter.** Make sure you *carefully read and follow all the submission guidelines*; anything that does not follow every single one of those guidelines means immediate disqualification. If, for instance, the guidelines specify Times New Roman 12-point font, don't send your entry in Calibri. Similarly, if the guidelines specify *double-spaced* pages, don't single-space your pages, or try to fudge things by using one-and-a-half; it won't work and you'll be disqualified. In the case of the Page One Prize, which is all about *one page*, don't send in more than one page, and definitely don't send an entire chapter. You might be surprised at the number of people who don't follow the guidelines at all, as if they've not even read them. Don't be one of those people! Double- and triple-check that you've followed the submission guidelines.