

## First Paragraphs – Examples:

### Memoir:

“Early in the summer of 2014, while I was busy preparing for my last year of high school, two farmers disappeared from their fields just outside Kocho, the small Yazidi village in northern Iraq where I was born and where, until recently, I thought I would live for the rest of my life. One moment the men were lounging peacefully in the shade of scratchy homemade tarps, and the next they were captive in a small room in a nearby village, home mostly to Sunni Arabs. Along with the farmers, the kidnappers took a hen and a handful of her chicks, which confused us. “Maybe they were just hungry,” we said to one another, although that did nothing to calm us down.” *The Last Girl* by Nadia Murad 2017, published by Tim Duggan Books, an imprint of Crown Publishing Group.

“Dad says he’s going to die next week,” Vanessa said. The phone line from Zambia was good for once. No echoing, no hopping, no static. Still, I felt the distancing power of the whole of the Atlantic Ocean between us.” *Leaving Before the Rains Come* by Alexandra Fuller 2015, published by Penguin Press.

### Debut Novel:

“The morning burned so August-hot, the marsh’s moist breath hung the oaks and pines with fog. The palmetto patches stood unusually quiet except for the low, slow flap of the heron’s wings lifting from the lagoon. And then, Kya, only six at the time, heard the screen door slap. Standing on the stool, she stopped scrubbing grits from the pot and lowered it into the basin of worn-out suds. No sounds now but her own breathing. Who had left the shack? Not ma. She never let the door slam.” *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens 2018, published by G. P. Putnam’s Sons.

“The end of Ory’s world began with a deer. He went outside at dawn to where the trees began, to check the game trap. Followed the trip wire, pushed away the leaves, uncovered the hidden metal cage. Empty.” *The Book of M* by Peng Shepherd 2018 published by William Morrow an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.

### Commercial Fiction:

“On a cold morning in early October of 1946, Pete Banning awoke before sunrise and had no thoughts of going back to sleep. For a long time he lay in the center of his bed, stared at the dark ceiling, and asked himself for the thousandth time if he had the courage. Finally, as the first trace of dawn peeked through a window, he accepted the solemn reality that it was time for the killing. The need for it had become so overwhelming that he could not continue with his daily routines. He could not remain the man he was until the deed was done.” *The Reckoning* by John Grisham 2018 published by Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House.

“Jack Reacher caught the last of the summer sun in a small town on the coast of Maine, and then, like the birds in the sky above him, he began his long migration south. But not, he thought, straight down the coast. Not like the orioles and the buntings and the phoebes and the warblers and the ruby-throated hummingbirds. Instead he decided on a diagonal route, south and west, from the top right-hand corner of the country to the bottom left, maybe through Syracuse and Cincinnati, and St. Louis, and Oklahoma City, and Albuquerque, and onward all the way to San Diego. Which for an army guy like Reacher was a little too full of Navy people, but which was otherwise a fine spot to start the winter.” *Past Tense* by Lee Child 2018 Delacorte Press an imprint of Random House.

### Horror Novels:

“There were times in each day when Ben believed a happier life waited only for them to claim it. He was a dreamer by trade, and it didn’t seem far-fetched to hope their troubles would depart as quickly as they had surfaced. Such optimism was purest in the clear mornings when he took Hudson on the day’s first walk.” *House of Echoes* by Brendan Duffy 2015 published by Ballantine Books an imprint of Random House.

“The girl with the dark hair walks down the wooden front stairs and lowers herself into the yellowing lagoon of ankle-high grass. A warm breeze ripples through the blades, leaves, and crab-like petals of clover flowers. She studies the front yard, watching for the twitchy, mechanical motion and frantic jumps of grasshoppers. The glass jar cradled against her chest smells faintly of grape jelly and is sticky on the inside. She unscrews the aerated lid.” *The Cabin at the End of the World* by Paul Tremblay 2018 published by HarperCollins.

### **First Lines – Tips**

“First and last lines need not be fancy. Even a utilitarian line can work well if it yanks us straight into, or amplifies, a scene’s main action.” Donald Maass in *The Fire in Fiction*, page 72, 2009, Writer’s Digest Books.

“As you plot the beginning, make sure your protagonist is an active participant in her own story.” Martha Alderson in *Writing Blockbuster Plots*, page 51, 2016, Writer’s Digest Books.

“Economy of language doesn’t mean using fewer words. It simply means that every word needs to count and to represent more than the few syllables it takes to utter.” Les Edgerton in *Hooked*, page 158, 2007, Writer’s Digest Books.

## How to Write the First Paragraphs of Your Novel

By Liternauts posted March 12, 2015

<https://www.liternauts.com/how-to-write-the-first-paragraphs-of-your-novel/>

1. Don't start talking about the weather.
2. Draw your reader's attention – something interesting should happen.
3. Put something in motion – have some action.
4. Use short paragraphs and direct sentences.
5. Set the time and space coordinates.
6. Specify the rules – readers should be able to identify the mood, the style and the genre.
7. Leave the backstory for later.
8. Learn from the best.

Think of the potential reader who walks by a bookstore or the editor to whom you sent a manuscript. They have hundreds of available books, and they haven't even heard of most of them. When they pick up one that catches their attention because of the beauty of its cover, the originality of its title, or any other reason, they'll leaf through it for no more than thirty seconds (just a quick glance at the first few lines of the text). What do you think they should find there: A catchy beginning or the weather forecast? Learn how to hook your readers from the first page of your novel.

### 1. Don't start talking about the weather.

Comments such as, "It's cold" or "Look how much it's raining today!" are elevator conversations – topics we turn to when we don't know what to say. If your story starts with one of those sentences, you're transmitting that "elevator feeling" to your readers. Unless the weather affects the development of your story from the beginning (or unless you're writing a novel dealing with a meteorologist who studies climate), it's not a good idea to begin by talking about the heat or the rain.

To give you a practical example, imagine these two possible beginnings:

- A description of the clouded-over streets and the rain falling down the windows because a day of bad weather after two weeks of sun has ruined little Sam's trip. In this case, the story focuses on the rain, and Little John has just a minor role
- A description of little Sam eagerly getting up and running to the kitchen and the surprise on his face when he realizes his parents aren't preparing the food for the trip. An account of how the rainy sound coming from the street confirms his horrible suspicion – the good weather is gone. This time, the story focuses on Little John, and the rain is just an external circumstance affecting him.

## **2. Draw your readers' attention**

I guess this point is clear – you need to capture your readers' attention from the first line of text. Something interesting should happen in the story from the very first page. Try to avoid resorting to routine, ordinary actions nobody cares about such as waking up, turning off the alarm clock, going to the toilet, etc.

For example, the novel *Blindness* begins amid the chaos of traffic. A traffic light turns green, but not everyone starts moving their car. There's one man who waves his arms and shouts something instead. After pedestrians approach him to see what's happening, the man gets out of his car and yells, "I'm blind!" At this point, the book has us hooked.

## **3. Put something in motion.**

I found this piece of advice in *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* by Patricia Highsmith. The author recommends starting with a moving element like a train, a car, someone running, etc. Her exact words are:

- "I prefer a first sentence in which something moves and gives action, rather than a sentence like, 'The moonlight lay still and liquid on the pale beach'."

The movement needn't be as noticeable as the examples I listed earlier. It can be more subtle like a door that closes and the character leans against the wall, blinking, in the following extract from *Five Hours With Mario* by Miguel Delibes:

- "After she has closed the door behind the last visitor, Carmen leans her head slightly against the wall until she feels the cold touch of its surface and blinks several times, as dazzled. Her right hand is sore and her lips are swollen from so much kissing."

## **4. Use short paragraphs and direct sentences.**

Patricia Highsmith also recommends you not begin with a paragraph that's too long. She states the opening paragraph should be "between one and six lines" in order to not tire your readers from the first sentence. As an example, here is the beginning of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* which is one of her best-known works:

- "Tom glanced behind him and saw the man coming out of the Green Cage heading his way. Tom walked faster. There was no doubt the man was after him. Tom had noticed him five minutes ago eyeing him carefully from a table as if he weren't quite sure, but almost. He had looked sure enough for Tom to down his drink in a hurry, pay, and get out."

## **5. Set the time and space coordinates.**

Generally, when and where the story happens should be made clear on the first page or the first chapter of a novel. Does it take place in the present? In the past? In the future? In which place? Consider the first lines of George Orwell's 1984:

- “It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.”

From the first paragraph of the novel, the author describes a world that doesn't look exactly like ours. In the next paragraphs, he writes about a lift, a tele-screen (which at that time, unlike today, belonged to the field of science fiction), and Big Brother. In this case, you may have noticed the novel begins with a description of the weather, but the author does it to show how the weather affects the protagonist and to set the story and create a specific atmosphere as well.

## **6. Specify the rules.**

Every work of fiction is an invitation to play. From the very moment we sit down to read a book, the author is telling us about the rules of the fictional universe in which he or she wants us to participate. When you're writing, you should define these rules as soon as possible. If you want to tell a magical tale with witches, potions, and paraphernalia, you could open your story with a supernatural event. Make it clear from the start that magic is part of the game; if you don't, your readers might think they're reading a realistic account and feel that a magical episode doesn't fit in that context.

In addition, your readers should be able to identify the mood, the style, and the genre of your novel from the beginning in order to know whether they're interested in it or not. Take a look at the first paragraph of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, the first book of the Harry Potter series:

- “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.”

## **7. Leave the backstory for later.**

The backstory is a set of events created for a plot, presented as preceding the story, and leading up to that plot. In simple words, it's what happens before the story you're telling in your manuscript takes place, and it's usually introduced through the memories of a character or through the narrator.

Should you start a novel or a tale with the backstory? Definitely not, because your readers aren't interested in it from the first page. It would be like telling your life story to someone you've just

met! First of all, you must intrigue them as you introduce them to the world described in your story as well as the characters and their conflicts. Once you've got that part done, you're allowed to feed your readers with the backstory (by that time, they'll want to have that information).

Nevertheless, keep in mind that leaving the backstory for later doesn't mean your story can't begin with a scene from the past. For example, you can refer to an episode of your protagonist's childhood in the first chapter and then focus on his adult life for the rest of the novel. That's not the same as interrupting the story's progression in order to introduce an explanation about the past life of your protagonist!

### **8. Learn from the best.**

If one of the main rules to improve your writing is reading a lot, you'll probably have guessed that in order to write good beginnings, you ought to make yourself familiar with them. And not just that! Try to pay attention to the ones you like. Write them down, and ask yourself these questions: How are they constructed? Why are they effective? What is their secret?