**How to Write Great Story Beginnings**

Story beginnings are important, and in terms of getting published, they’re the most important part of a story. Your beginning is where the reader (or editor) decides whether to keep reading. Your beginning also sets the reader's expectations for the story’s middle and ending.

But don't let the importance of your story beginning intimidate you or make it hard to start writing. Some writers freeze up at the sight of a blank page; they feel that everything has to be perfect right away. It doesn't. Remember: even though the beginning is the first part of your story most people will read, it doesn't have to be the first part that you write. And you can always go back and improve your beginning later.

Your first task is to get something -- anything -- onto that blank page. If it doesn't come out right, then let it come out wrong. No problem. You’ll fix it afterward.

Unless you're very lucky, the perfect story beginning may not occur to you until you're at the revision stage. Then it is time to turn the first page, the first paragraph, the first line of your story into an invitation that the reader can't refuse.   
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Hooking your reader

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How can you capture the reader's attention right away? Here are some strategies to consider:

* **Make the reader wonder about something.** For example, let's say you mention that your character is terrified of going to school that day, but you don't say why (yet). The missing information raises a question in the reader's mind and provokes curiosity. The reader will want to read on to find an answer to the question.
* **Start with a problem or conflict.** This could be a small problem; for example, your character is about to miss her bus home. Even a small problem gives your main character something to do and creates some activity and momentum right away.
* **Start at an exciting point in the story.** Don't be afraid to start your story right in the middle of the action. But provide enough clues to orient your readers and make sure they can follow what's happening.

**More tasks of your story beginning**

Apart from hooking the reader, your story beginning has some other tasks to accomplish. You don't have to accomplish these tasks in the very first sentence, but you should take care of them early on:

* **Introduce your story's setting.** Does your story take place in 5th Century China? In contemporary working-class Detroit? In a boarding school for young werewolves? If you don't let your readers know soon, they are likely to feel disoriented and confused.
* **Introduce your main character.** In most stories, readers care about the plot because they care about the main character. The sooner you introduce your main character, the sooner the reader can develop an emotional relationship with him or her.
* **Let your reader know what kind of story it is.** Is it a comedy? Horror? Realistic contemporary fiction? A fantasy with elves and fairies? The reader develops expectations about your story based on the beginning and is likely to feel disappointed -- even betrayed -- if you switch gears partway through.

**Trouble-shooting**

Here are some common problems to watch out for as you’re revising your story beginning:

* **Starting with background information.** For example, sometimes inexperienced writers start out with little biographies of their main characters. These story beginnings feel a little bit like Wikipedia articles about people who don't exist. They are not very interesting to read. Don't feel like you have to provide all of the information upfront. You can start your story with a scene or action and gradually weave in background details when/if they become necessary for the reader's understanding.
* **Starting too early in the story.** If your story seems to take a long time to get interesting, consider starting right at the interesting point. You might have to lop off a few pages. Don't feel bad about throwing away part of your draft -- those pages you throw away are not wasted work. They are part of a necessary process of exploration that showed you where your story has to go.
* **Starting a different story.** The creative process often leads writers down unexpected paths. You start out with a certain story in mind then are surprised at where it leads. As a result, the story's beginning (even if it seemed perfect when you wrote it) may not be an ideal fit with the rest of the story. When that happens, ask yourself -- which version of the story do you like better? The version you started out writing? Or the version you ended up with? Based on your answer to this question, you know which part of the story you have to rewrite.

**Great story beginnings**

Below are a few examples of great story beginnings written by our Twitter followers. Look out how each of them sets up a scene and a problem in just a few words. Do they make you want to keep reading?

* (by @maryannestahl): *It looked dead, but I began to back away just in case.*
* (by @africanflourish): *They huddle around the last bundle, listening to the cries of the baby girl wrapped inside.*
* (by @UWishUWereMe666): *She smiles at me. "I have no intention of punishing you or breaking you." My hands spasm. "I plan to remake you entirely.*
* (by @MarliciaF ): *Alex measured the passage of time by the water dripping from the ceiling; it wouldn’t be long now.*
* (by @ASingleBell): *Nadika was glad to be officially alive again, but she wished she didn’t have to be alive in the king’s antechamber.*

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