

Effective Story Beginnings*

Writing good story beginnings is a crucial skill for story writers for one very important reason: If the story's beginning doesn't grab a reader's interest, he or she will likely stop reading.

So let's look at some of the options for story beginnings and some things to avoid.

The Golden Rule of Story Beginnings

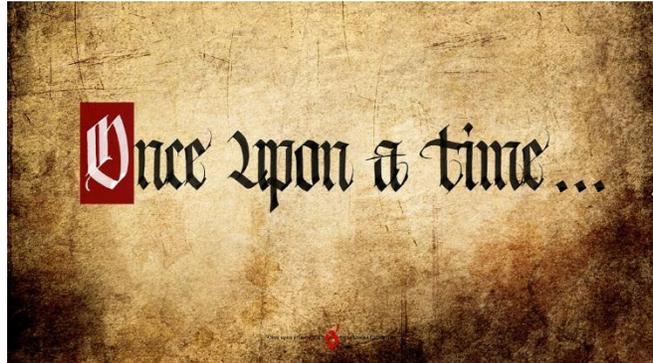
You can find exceptions to almost everything in this chapter, except for this first point:

Good story beginnings entice the reader to keep reading.

That's it. If the beginning captures a reader's interest enough to keep them turning pages, it's a good beginning. If it doesn't, it's not.

Here are a few techniques you can use to make your beginning effective and hook your reader:

- Connect the reader to a sympathetic character in a predicament
- Present an event (action or decision) that promises to ignite a chain of events with significant consequences
- Create suspense or mystery
- Introduce an intriguing idea, situation, or question that begs exploration
- Establish an unusual or intriguing narrative voice.



Mystery and Suspense

Readers love a little mystery and suspense, even in stories that are not primarily mysteries or adventures.

Mystery occurs when the reader anxiously wonders *what has happened or what's going on*. (For example, a character finds an unfamiliar dog sitting in the living room, causing the reader to wonder where the dog came from and why it's there.)

Suspense occurs when the reader anxiously wonders *what will happen next*. (For example, if a character receives a beeping package in the mail with instructions not to open it, the reader will start to wonder what's in it.)

Story Beginnings That Concern the Main Plot

Let's say you want to start with your overall main plot, which concerns the pursuit of the Story Goal. What can you do? Here are two possibilities:

Option 1

Start with the **Main Catalyst—the event that begins the story and without which the rest of the story would not happen: A boat sinks, forcing all aboard to start a society on a nearby island. A pirate learns the location of a treasure his former partner stole. A ninja cat hears about an injustice she must avenge.**

Seems obvious enough. However, sometimes this option may not work well, such as when the Main Catalyst is an event that happens long before the main character enters the story. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Main Catalyst is Sauron's loss of the ring, which happens 3,000 years before Frodo is born.

In other stories, the Main Catalyst occurs when the main character is too young to make the connection with the reader. For example, when Voldemort kills Harry Potter's parents, Harry is only a year old. We don't properly meet Harry until a decade later.

The challenge with Main Catalysts that occur well before the main character enters the story is that, typically, readers want to meet the main character on page one.

Option 2

An alternative is to skip the Main Catalyst and begin with the main character's encounter with something—a sign of some kind (a letter, a ring)—that eventually connects to the Main Catalyst. You can fill the reader in later in a flashback or through some other device to explain the Main Catalyst.

Again, the main point is to HOOK YOUR READERS. Make them want more!

Good story beginnings often show how the main character deals with a problem because that tells the reader who this person is. It establishes a baseline for the character before events of the story have a chance to pressure him/her into becoming someone else.

So create an event that lets the reader see the character's initial strengths, weaknesses, attitude, etc. Give the readers all the information needed to realize this is a character they want to spend time with. Create the connection between reader and character.

Establishing the Reader's Connection with the Main Character

To create a connection between reader and main character as quickly as possible, try one of these methods (or a combination of them):

- Open with the character's point of view and predicament.
- Give the character a dilemma, challenge, failing, worry, idea, feelings, etc. that the reader can relate to.
- Make the character admirable.
- Make the character likable (charming).
- In some kinds of stories (stories for kids, for example), make the character close in age and gender to age group you are aiming for.



Don't feel your story beginnings *must* do all these things, or even most of them. The important thing is that they hook the reader. The above techniques, in any combination, can help.

The OTHER Golden Rule of Story Beginnings: Avoid Preambles

At one time, most movies began with the credits. As name after name of the cast and crew and caterers rolled by, moviegoers would sit there, waiting for the story to start. And waiting. And waiting. The credits didn't take as long as they do these days, but still, it took a while. They don't do that anymore (except sometimes with the names of the lead actors, screenwriter, producer, and director).

Know why? Here's one reason: **AUDIENCES HATED IT!**

The opening credits to a movie were a kind of **preamble**, as are the previews we have today—ever have to sit through 20 minutes of them? It's brutal!

In story writing, preambles are relatively long narratives that come before anything much happens in the story (even if they *talk* about action). They sometimes detail the character's physical appearance, describe the character's bedroom, give the history of the rebellion, and so forth. This information isn't always bad to provide—in fact it's often necessary to the story as a whole.



However, your story's **beginning** will be far more effective (not boring) if it involves an **event** instead of a preamble. **An event is an irreversible change that sends the characters in a new direction (and makes the reader wonder what will happen next).**

But don't think that an event has to be violent or flashy. It can be something exciting, like an explosion, but it can also be something relatively unexciting, such as the discovery of a dog in the living room. Nor does the event have to happen on page one. Just make it come *early*.

So try not to begin a story with pages of description, backstory, or anything else that can be called preamble. You don't want your reader thinking, "Is anything actually going to happen in this story?" Instead, use an event to start things happening right away.

Avoiding Preamble

Even if the beginning is directly related to the main plot, it still needs to avoid any preamble that gets in the way of forming a connection between reader and character.

You may be thinking: *WHAT? No intense action? Wouldn't that be a way to hook the reader right away?*

The answer is, it depends. If the scene is the story's Main Catalyst, then yes, action can be an effective beginning for some readers. But readers often will not care about the action **unless they connect with the main character first**. For the same reason, opening with a long dialogue can be a problem—unless readers have first connected with the main character.

BOTTOM LINE: Let readers meet your main character very close to the beginning and see him or her in an action relevant to the main story.

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