

Editing 101: How to Write Your Opening Scene

[Paul Fairbairn](#)

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Try one of these 3 strategies to hook your readers with a compelling opening.



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Starting a story is easy, right? You begin at the beginning and stop when you reach the end. Nothing to it.

Except it's not quite that straightforward, is it? I should know, because I've written some real snorters in my time — and commissioning editors have sometimes been selfless in pointing out my crimes against literature.

So don't despair if your current opening doesn't set the world on fire — or even raise a smoky fizz. A little self-awareness can fix most problems. When you come to edit your first draft, pay particular attention to how it begins. If it feels flat or uninvolving, try one of the following strategies. It might be all that little flame needs to roar into life.

1. Start with action

You've heard this before, I know. It's standard advice on every writing course in the world. Begin *in media res* they say, because things are so much more impressive if you say them in Latin.

However, it is true that an action-packed opening can grab your reader very effectively, but be careful. It's all well and good to start with guns blazing or tires squealing, but readers like to read about people, and if your opening scene is all about the sound and the fury at the expense of character, the reader will move on.

When you've got a lot of action up front, make sure your protagonist is in the thick of it, so we can see it all through their eyes and experience it through the filter of their emotions. Here's a prime example from *The Woods* by consummate thriller exponent, Harlan Coben:

I see my father with that shovel.

There are tears streaming down his face. An awful guttural sob forces its way up from deep in his lungs and out through his lips. He raises the shovel up and strikes the ground. The blade rips into the earth like it's wet flesh.

I am eighteen years old, and this is my most vivid memory of my father . . .

We're certainly *in media res* here, but Coben places us firmly in the point of view of his narrator. The first-person voice helps of course, but we see everything through the protagonist's eyes — even though his father is the focus of the scene. And as this opening plays out, we get more information about the protagonist and hints about what might be going on.

But 'action' doesn't have to be all roaring gunfire, and cars leaping down streets in San Francisco, and fathers digging graves in the moonlight. 'Action' can be any event that generates drama or reveals conflict—what movie types call 'the inciting incident'. It *might* be a car chase, but it could be a domestic argument, or a heated

conversation between political leaders, or even a single character's indecision in the face of a potentially life-changing choice.

The bottom line:

We all love a story that begins with action, but when you're editing your opening scene, have two things in mind. Firstly, keep your narrative tightly focused on your protagonist; make sure your reader knows who to care about by getting your main character front and centre.

And secondly, remember that stories flow from conflict. No conflict, no story, so all that action better be the result of some dramatic dissonance. If there's no conflict and *only* action, what you have is the literary equivalent of a Michael Bay movie. Is *that* what you want?

2. Start with a mystery

This is my own favourite. I love books that start with a question or a slightly mystifying scene (note 'slightly' here). Good thriller writers are very adept at this . . . and Lee Child is better than just good. Take this opening line from his *Make Me*:

Moving a guy as big as Kever wasn't easy. It was like trying to wrestle a king-size mattress off a waterbed. So they buried him close to the house.

Plenty of questions and intrigue here and Child goes on to raise even more questions after this. But he doesn't become so mysterious that it all gets too much; we read on because we want to find out more. And Child eventually delivers on that too.

Even more compelling — at least to me — is the opening of Peter Straub's ambitious and remarkable *Ghost Story*:

"What was the worst thing you've ever done?"

"I won't tell you that, but I'll tell you the worst thing that ever happened to me . . . the most dreadful thing . . ."

Because he thought that he would have problems taking the child over the border into Canada, he drove south, skirting the cities whenever they came and taking the anonymous freeways which were like a separate country, as travel was itself like a separate country.

This opening scene ratchets up the tension as the protagonist, who appears to have abducted a little girl, transports her across the country. We quickly fear for the girl, but Straub drops plenty of hints that things may not be as they seem. It's a masterclass in mystery, and while Straub doesn't reveal his hand as readily as Child, he shows us *just* enough to keep us engaged. And keeping the tension stratospherically-high helps too . . . though it doesn't do much for my blood pressure.

The bottom line:

Like Child and Straub, you need to be careful that your mystery isn't *too* mystifying. If it is, the reader will leave in bewilderment. It's good to keep them in the dark long enough to tease them, but any good tease needs a reveal eventually, or it's merely frustrating. Just ask your favourite exotic dancer.

3. Start with character

As we've already noted (you were paying attention, weren't you?) readers like to read about people. It really is that simple, and if you don't have a compelling protagonist and/or antagonist, you're going to struggle to keep any reader engaged. So, with that in mind, you can begin your story with your main character — but ensure they're fully realised and you're tightly focused on their point-of-view.

Here's a great example from Patricia Highsmith's *The Artist*:

At the time Jane got married, one would have thought there was nothing unusual about her. She was plump, pretty and practical: she could give artificial respiration at the drop of a hat or pull someone out of a faint or a nosebleed. She was a dentist's assistant, and as cool as they come in the face of crisis or pain. But she had enthusiasm for the arts. What arts? All of

them.

If you're going for this approach, you need a quirky character and really close identification with her, such that the reader can't help but get involved. Highsmith's character has a contradiction at her heart, which immediately makes her more real — we're all a mess of contradictions in the real world — but she's the sort of person we might want to spend some time with: she's practical, pretty, capable, but sensitive enough to be artistic. Give me her number and I'll call her myself. And yet, we can sense that there's more to Jane than meets the eye; Highsmith's skill is in making us engage with Jane even as we feel there's a 'but' coming.

If you're opening with character, you can also use dialogue to kick things off — naysayers notwithstanding — and as long as you're clear about who's speaking and what they're speaking about, it can work well. Because readers like to read about people, they like to read dialogue too . . . as long as they know what's going on.

Try this:

"Who'd have thought a dead guy could be so heavy," the tall guy said.

"Just shut up and get him in the damn hole," the fat guy said and dragged Kever's bulky body across the grass to the hole they'd dug behind the house.

Getting his corpse down the stairs and out the door

had been like wrestling a king-size mattress off a waterbed.

Not as laconic as Child, but hooky enough, I guess. Though I think we can see why he sells 20 trillion copies of each novel and I don't.

However, most readers would stick with something like this for a while longer, if only to find out why these two guys were burying a body in the yard. And while it starts with dialogue, we quickly find out who's talking and what they're talking about. Indeed, it's that 'dead guy' reference that forms the pointy end of the hook.

The bottom line:

Readers of fiction want to read about people, and you can't really have a story without at least a couple of characters (or maybe one character, arguing with herself). But if you're opening your story with a character, they need to be quirky, unusual, mysterious, or downright odd. To grab your reader in these circumstances, the character needs to be different enough to make the reader say, "Hey, wait a minute. Who *is* this guy?"

And don't be afraid to open with dialogue, if you think it fits. Just make sure it's clear and you quickly show who's speaking and what they're speaking about. You don't want it to become one of [the ways not to start a story](#).

The Very Bottom Line

In the end, it all boils down to the *Five Ws*:

- Who
- What
- Where
- Why
- When

If you answer all — or even just most — of these in your opening salvo, you've made a great start. Reread your first chapter now and see how it scores. Get rid of anything that doesn't address at least one of these, and see which type of opening (or which combination of the three) yours most resembles. And then cut everything that doesn't serve your purposes.

There are many more ways of starting a story — including various permutations of these three — and we'll doubtless get around to more of them in the future. But for now, simplicity is our friend.

I've said before that you should [finish what you start](#) . . . but if you want your readers to finish it as well, you need to snag them at the very beginning.

Throw them that hook and they'll be glad you reeled them in.

I've been an author, editor, and writing coach for nearly thirty years and I've taught Creative Writing for more of them than I want to admit to. If you'd like to find out more about working with me, visit www.paulfairbairn.co.uk for more information.