

The Power of Your Novel's First Sentence

by Joseph Suggs

Here's what happens (and I bet you do this too): a book jumps out at you at the bookstore. It might be the colors, an image on the spine, an author's name, or the title, but something draws your attention and you single the book out of the masses. You glance at the cover, turn it over and read a few lines of the back cover copy. You open the book and read a little of the inside jacket copy, then turn to the first page, and ... You read the first line. Which sucks, so you close the book and return it to the shelves. That's it. That's how much time you have to hook the interest of readers today.

If your first sentence doesn't capture a reader's imagination, that reader is off to the next novel. Of course, if you're John Grisham or Stephen King, readers will cut you some slack and stick with you longer. You've already gained their trust in the past, so a poor first sentence is forgiven. But if you're just starting out and looking to build an audience, that first sentence is your calling card. It's your first, and often only, chance to make an impression.

So what makes a great first sentence? Fortunately, you have a variety of choices. The two primary hooks for a powerful first sentence revolve around character or action. There are a handful of others. However, for the purposes of this article, we're going to focus on these two. Let's take a look at action first. Action refers to movement. Tension, action, conflict ... these are fairly interchangeable terms. The point with an opening action sentence is to immediately grab your reader by the shoulders and give him or her a shake. It's like the first drop in a great rollercoaster ride ... there's no turning back because you have your reader's complete attention.

Here are some samples:

The bomb went off under the table of the corner booth at Mindy's Coffee Shop, where Judge Arnold Cummings ate breakfast every morning at precisely 8:35. - Sheila Hamilton tugged desperately on the reins but she'd already lost control of the panicked Morgan and it was clear that something bad was about to happen.

As the car flipped down the embankment, George Luther couldn't help wonder what else could possibly go wrong today.

A moment before the lightning strike would change his life forever, Malcom Zebrowski was celebrating his thirty-third birthday with a group of people he'd never met before today.

These samples immediately pull the reader into the movement of the story. Your reader not only wants to know what happens next, but in all likelihood, a number of questions have already sprung to mind, begging for answers. For example, in our first sentence ... was the bomb meant to kill the judge? If so, why? Who planted the bomb? What lead up to this moment? These are all legitimate questions that encourage your reader to keep reading. And that's the whole point of a powerful first sentence ... hook the reader.

So let's take a look at some character openings. These are based in character descriptions that create curiosity. Your reader finds this particular character so quirky or interesting that he or she just has to learn more. Here are some samples:

Emily Bauer was tiny in stature, standing only 4'-11", but she feared no one and those who crossed her spent the rest of their days glancing over their shoulders in dread.

Max Ristow spent most of his life coping with migraines, until the day he met his dead sister on a beach in Monterey.

Howard Duncan dragged his right leg when he walked, the result of an accident that had killed both of his parents when he was six and left him with permanent nerve damage to the right side of his body.

Some people called her a saint, some a sinner, but most people considered Tammy Hathaway a woman of her word. Curiosity. Wanting to know more. Wondering who this person is and how he or she ended up here. These are all pieces of the character puzzle that a strong opening sentence can kick into gear.

So there you go ... two opening sentence strategies to make your novel irresistible to the casual reader. A good opening can be your book's greatest champion. Give it the love and attention it deserves.

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About the Author:

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