The First Twenty Pages

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Emily Harstone

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Introduction

The first twenty pages are the most important pages of any manuscript you write.

These first twenty pages are what you will need to submit to publishers and agents. Many writers have a problem with this. They don't see why agents and publishers don't accept full length manuscripts as initial submissions. They complain that the first twenty pages of their work aren't their strongest.

These complaints are understandable. But here's the truth: If your work does get published, these twenty pages contain the first words your readers will encounter, perhaps as a Kindle sample or while browsing in a bookstore.

I haven't bought a book in the past decade based solely on the cover. I have, however, bought hundreds based on the first few pages.

Most readers, if they don't like the first twenty pages, won't read any further than that. No matter how terrific the end of your book is, readers will have to make it past the first twenty pages in order to reach it.

The first twenty pages have a lot of work to do. They have to establish plot, character, and setting in a way that makes the reader commit to reading more. You need to do a good job with the first twenty pages for a reader to invest their money and time to read the book as a whole.

This eBook is all about those first twenty pages, what you need to cover in those pages, how to establish your writing style, tone, etc.

But in order to get to those first twenty pages, you first have to come up with an idea and develop a plot, as well as make a few basic stylistic decisions, so I am also going to discuss what has to happen before you write those first twenty pages.

When I first started teaching the Manuscript Publishing for Novelists course for Authors Publish, I had already spent a lot of time thinking about the first twenty

pages. After all, I'd written a handful of novels and served as a submission advisor for years.

However, after reviewing hundreds of authors' first twenty pages as part of teaching the Manuscript Publishing for Novelists course, I have developed even more detailed ideas about the first chapters.

I also came to the realization that, for most authors, these first twenty pages are often just the author telling themselves the story, which is a very different act from telling the reader a story. Because of that, I often advise writers to cut the first five, ten, fifteen, or even twenty pages.

Another option, and one I've taken on several occasions, is to write an entirely new first twenty pages after completing the manuscript.

Towards the end of my first year teaching the Manuscript Publishing for Novelists course, I developed a completely different course called The Novel Writing Workshop, which focuses on writing a novel. The bulk of this new course is about writing the first twenty pages, and developing the course led me to write this book.

At the end of the manuscript writing course, I offer feedback on each author's first twenty pages. After teaching the first round, I was impressed—but not surprised—to find that most of these first twenty pages did not require major revisions. The authors had gained the tools to begin their books strongly.

I have taken aspects of that course and turned it into this eBook as a way to share some of the most valuable content with authors outside of the course context. While in the course I'm able to go more in-depth and offer developmental feedback that helps on a fundamental level, here I'm able to cover the fundamental principles of how to write the first twenty pages of a publishable book.

If you've never written a manuscript before, or even if you've written any number of unpublished ones, this is the book for you.

You don't have to take the principles from this book and write a brand new novel starting with the twenty first pages. Instead, you can just use the principles from this book to revise the first twenty pages that you have already

written, or you can use them to write a new first twenty pages to go with your already existing manuscript.

Depending where you are in your writing life, you might want to read this book sequentially, starting with the first chapter and reading in order to the last, or if you already feel confident that you know most of the material well enough, feel free to skip around.

This book is designed for fiction writers. The intended audience of your book could be an eight-year-old or an eighty-year-old, the same basic principles apply. Many of the principles in this book could also apply to memoir, but they do not apply to other non-fiction works or children's picture books.

I hope that this eBook gives you the tools to write or revise your first twenty pages into something that editors, agents, and readers can really connect with.

As always, I very much welcome feedback at support@authorspublish.com.

Before the First Twenty Pages

When I first started writing, I went with the tried and true method of putting one word after the other. I was thirteen at the time. Now that I have spent a great deal of time and effort advising others on how best to publish their novels, I have a different perspective.

Some of it comes from talking with authors about their work, and some of it comes from successfully finding publishers for that work.

A great deal of my perspective comes from reading debut novels, actively attending conferences, participating in the publishing community, and talking directly with agents and publishers.

By working with a wide range of clients as a submissions advisor, I have discovered that many of the extensive rewrites and dispiriting encounters with agents and publishers could easily be avoided by thinking about your novel in terms of publishing—before you start writing.

I'm not saying you should scrap all your ideas just because they don't appear to be publishable. But, if you approach writing a book with the following factors in mind, it should help you write a better, more publishable book, and one that likely won't require major revisions.

It is important to note that since discovering these factors, I enjoy writing just as much as I did when I was writing just for myself. The writing still reflects me, it's just more accessible to others.

Generating an Idea

Ideas can be generated so many different ways, and if you already have one, feel free to skip this section.

Most of my best ideas come while trying to fall asleep. It takes me an hour to fall asleep on an average night, and during that time I tell stories to myself. I'm not sure if this helps me fall asleep faster or slows me down, but I have been doing it for twenty-five years now and it's a hard habit to break.

These ideas usually arise out of boredom or thinking about a TV show or movie I like, and thinking about what I'd like them to explore plot-wise that they haven't.

I also come up with ideas while walking, running, and hiking. A friend of mine refers to all of her ideas as shower thoughts.

Ideas can also spring up while talking to friends. I keep notebooks of all my ideas. For some people, coming up with ideas isn't hard, it's picking the right one to pursue that is difficult.

If you do struggle with finding ideas, here are some suggestions.

> Make it so that you have a small portion of time every day (ten minutes or so) where you can't do anything—this includes playing with your phone or staring at your computer—but stare at a blank piece of paper and a pen. You can doodle if you must, but the important thing is to create in yourself a state of boredom so that you can generate ideas. If all your time is busy and efficient, the idea might simply be waiting for more space to come.
> Try walking, hiking, or running without wearing headphones so that you don't have any distractions. Not listening to music or podcasts while exercising can give you the space to generate ideas.
> Start writing lists of the dumbest ideas you can think of—often, something surprisingly smart will come out of this.
> Try changing your habits to encourage idea generation. This could be as simple as turning off the TV and reading more.

Determining Whether an Idea is Viable

Not all ideas are good ideas, but more importantly not all ideas were meant to be novels. My husband put down a book the other day and said, "This would have been an excellent short story. Instead, it was a mediocre novel."

Sometimes the ideas are great in small doses but don't hold up over the long run. Creating the right characters to support your idea can help with that, but characters shouldn't have to do all the heavy lifting.

Sometimes the idea has already been done too many times for it to really work as a manuscript without adding an additional element.

Sometimes the idea is good but you're not the best person to transform the idea into a story, often because you don't have life experiences that connect with the work. Research can help, of course, but it can't, for example, replace local knowledge.

I feel like the best way to determine whether the idea is viable is to talk about it with people. In my experience, some of the best feedback I have received regarding ideas is from people I'm not particularly close to, because they care more about the idea and less about hurting my feelings as a person.

Thankfully, my husband is also very blunt about such things, and he's famous for not sugarcoating his feedback to anyone, and that's actually very helpful for novel writing.

One of the most helpful ways to get real feedback is to make it clear that you won't take it personally if the feedback is harsh. The tricky part of this, for most writers, is actually not taking offense when the feedback is harsh.

If it doesn't come naturally to you, thankfully it's a skill you can develop over time. But be self-aware; don't ask for honest feedback and then be upset when you receive it. If you know that you need time to digest the honest feedback, ask that they give it to you via email rather than in person or over the phone.

Determining whether an idea is valid doesn't only rely on other people. Writing the idea out and then writing down three repercussions of that idea can make it clear how deep the idea is.

It's also important to note that not everyone starts with an idea. A favorite writer friend of mine first creates characters, and exploring these characters generates the plot. She has to discover the story as she writes it, and it is all through the lens of a character.

To test a character's strengths, you can write down possible plots that would interact naturally with that character.

Often, though, the plot will be what makes at least some aspects of the character clear.

Reading for Your Writing

When I was a teenager, I remember being shocked by the fact that most of the adults around me didn't read more than one book a year. They all told me that they were busy, and when I was older, I would understand. I wouldn't have time to read then either.

I now read around a hundred books a year. I did that before I had a full-time job. I continued to read that much after getting a full-time job and getting married. When I was pregnant, I assumed having a child would change all that. And while becoming a mother has changed every aspect of my life, I still read about one hundred books every year. I am not counting children's books either. The habit of reading is such a part of me that while other things have gone by the wayside (watching TV, news, movies, etc.), no matter how busy I am, I always make sure I have time to read, even if it is just ten minutes before bed.

I believe that reading is an important part of being a writer. I think of it as part of my job as a writer to continue reading. There is a lot of attention paid to the idea that writers have to read to be good writers, and that is true. But I think, to be a published writer, you don't just have to read, you have to read strategically, in a way that supports your life as a published writer.

Read the Genre You Write In

I know a lot of authors who write young adult (YA) fiction and don't actually read it. A friend of mine who is writing a YA novel confessed that the last YA book she read was in high school. She is now in her fifties. The same goes for literary fiction, surprisingly. I think this is less likely to happen in genres like science fiction, but I could be wrong.

I am going to use YA as the example genre in this section because most people have some familiarity with it, even if that familiarity is dated.

Even if you don't love the genre you're writing in, you should be reading it. You should have read the classics. In the YA genre, classics include books like *The Outsiders* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. You should also have read at least three books that have been published in that genre in the last few years.

This is important for a number of reasons. If you don't read within your genre, you don't understand what is standard and what is not, what is controversial and what is just par for the course. You can't come in with just a one-book filter—if all you read of YA was *Divergent*, your filter would be very different than that of someone who had only read *The Fault in Our Stars*.

The more you read in your chosen genre, the more you can learn from the good choices (and the mistakes) that other authors make. One of the YA books I read, and loathed, had a very well-written fight scene. The book was mostly a waste of time, but that one scene really helped me write one of the most important scenes in my own novel. Of course, you can learn some of those lessons outside of your genre, but not always.

Read Books That Have Been Recently Published

First, you learn what is being published right now and who is publishing it. But what's even more important, at least from a publication standpoint, is that many publishers and agents want you to compare your book to two or more recently published books in your query letter. The more you read, the more accurate those comparisons can be.

It is important to read outside of your genre too. I think the best writers are diverse readers who read a whole range of writing.

Read Debut Books

"Debut book" is a term used to refer to the first book an author publishes.

One of the mistakes many authors make is they read books by established authors like Stephen King and John Irving that don't comply at all with length standards, and have long, ponderous first chapters and all sorts of other quirks.

These books would not be published if they were debut books. Reading them gives you the wrong impression of what is being published now.

Reading debut books gives you a good feel of what is making it through the slush piles and actually reaching agents and editors.

Also, since most authors thank their agents in their debut book, you can usually see who is representing them. It gives you a feel for which agents are actually successfully representing new authors.

By reading the author's bio, you can often learn what literary journals they have published in or what other steps they took (writing conferences, MFAs, etc.) to get where they are.

I have also found that I tend to prefer debut books. They are typically very well crafted and much better than a lot of later efforts an author puts out when publishing seems less like a challenge and more like something that's inevitably going to happen.

Research for Your Book with Books

I love researching on the internet. It is so easy to look up facts. One of the novels I wrote relies heavily on geography, so I found myself googling a large number of maps and asking the internet specific questions like, "How long does it take to get from Venice to Umag by boat?"

But in order to get deeper into the lives my characters really lead, I had to read books. The internet is a great way to resolve specific questions or look at maps or pictures, but much of the information lacks depth.

That book involves refugees in transit between countries. I found that while podcasts helped, nothing was able to beat a good, long book for really conveying the experience. Not all stories require research, but if yours does, including books as part of your research is always a good idea. The information found in books is more likely to be correct and books tend to go far deeper into a subject.

Pay Attention to the Publishers

The first thing I do when I see a book is look at the publisher. Doing this now seems obvious to me, but for over two decades, I read books without, for the most part, noticing who published them. Most readers don't pay attention to the publishers, and if they do, it is just in passing.

If I enjoyed the book and have never heard of the publisher before, I usually look up the publisher up and do research on them. If the same publisher has published a number of books that have something in common with mine, I add their name to my "To Submit" file.

I have learned quite a lot by paying attention to who publishes the books I read. Some of it is relevant to what I write, and most of it is not. For example, I know a lot about children's book publishers because my child loves books, but I don't ever plan to write one. Still, that information helps me be more informed about how publishing works. It is a part of the bigger picture.

Even if you are not submitting directly to a publisher, it helps to know what publisher might be a good fit for your book. Author friends of mine who have mentioned a potential publisher for their novel in their agent query letter have had a very high success rate of landing an agent, and they often land a publisher that way as well.

Browse in Bookstores, Buy in Bookstores

When I go into a bookstore and browse through books on the shelves, I also pay attention to publishers. Sometimes, if I have read an eBook that I like and the publisher claims to have good distribution, I look for the print version in the book store. If I can't find it, I ask the booksellers about it. At a good bookstore, they often know if they carry that publisher or not. The same goes for publishers I have read about online but am not otherwise familiar with.

Browsing through a bookstore educates you in many ways. You should be looking at covers. What trends are prevalent right now? What subjects seem well covered? What books seem to move? What are the booksellers recommending?

What a lot of people do now is browse in bookstores but buy elsewhere. Often, they just take pictures of the covers of the books they want to buy. This is not good, because it is so important that independent brick and mortar bookstores continue to be there.

Read the Front Matter and Back Matter

The front and back matter contains a wealth of information, particularly in certain genres. Front matter is everything before the actual text of the book, things like the table of contents and acknowledgments. Back matter typically includes a bibliography and the author's bio.

The acknowledgments and the author's bio can often be the most helpful parts of books. Acknowledgments often reveal the author's agent (if they have one) and editor (many who freelance and could theoretically be hired to polish your book).

In the case of poetry and short story collections, acknowledgments are very helpful because they reveal where the author's work has been published before, and what journals and magazines have published them. The literary journals listed are usually a mix of the established and known (such as the *New Yorker*) and newer, up and coming journals that are still becoming established but are most likely already respected within the publishing community.

Focus on submitting to those literary journals and magazines and your odds of having a full collection published usually increases dramatically.

Establish an Overarching Plot

I need to stress that everyone interacts with plot in a different way. For me, creating a plot is more like planting a seed. A "What if?" idea occurs to me—for example, what if the generations following an apocalypse have books as their only source of entertainment and education? I then create characters to explore that possibility. The plot springs from the circumstances of the idea.

Some people need to have the plot all storyboarded on their wall or bulletin board with post it notes so they can move the individual scenes around. Others plan out their manuscript with a spreadsheet. I know writers who do an individual timeline for each character that extends far past the scope of the novel.

Most of the writers I work with end up creating a synopsis of their novel before they've written it, and they then get feedback on that synopsis and make edits to the plot accordingly.

Tomi Adeyemi has an article and worksheet on plotting a NaWriMo (National Novel Writing Month) novel that is very basic but also very helpful.

There's also the much more in-depth and very helpful book Plot & Structure: Techniques and exercises for Crafting a Plot that Grips Readers from Start to Finish by James Scott Bell.

The important thing to know what kind of writer you are in terms of plot and take the appropriate steps forward with a strict time limit in mind.

I cannot stress enough the importance of a strict timeline. I've had friends spend a decade on plotting a novel without writing down a single word. You can spend forever figuring out your manuscript without ever writing a word of actual text.

Personally, I know I'm ready to start writing when I know what the ending is, not necessarily in terms of plot but in terms of character development. I don't know how I'm going to get there, only that a certain plot point is the final destination. As long as I know what I'm working towards, I'm good to go.

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If I figure out too much of the details of how I'm going to get there, I'm less engaged with the plot, and I don't feel the same pull to write more, because I already know what's going to happen next. It's not exciting or engaging for me to have a fully developed plot before I start writing. It feels more like a rewrite rather than a first draft.

For example, the manuscript I'm writing now started out as a novella composed of short vignettes spanning large periods of time. I'm expanding all the vignettes and turning them into fleshed out and detailed scenes, so while the plot arc of the work as a whole remains the same, the length is growing from 22,000 words to 60,000 words.

The transformation seems to be working well, technically. The scenes are strong and the story is coming together nicely, but it feels less like fun for me and more like work. Still, it will be completed, which is the important part.

But my overarching point is this: it doesn't matter how you figure out your plot, only that it works for you and leads to a completed manuscript.

Establishing a Character

Before I start writing, I need to know what the main characters are going to be like. Sometimes I know more about the characters than the plot, and sometimes it's the other way around.

But you can't start writing without having a main character who is functional and consistent, who is distinct and well developed. That doesn't mean you don't get to know them a lot better as the story goes along—you should, but you have to start from a firm foundation.

The important thing with creating characters for a novel is to make sure they are not just based on yourself and people you know. Try to craft new characters.

One of the biggest pitfalls in character building, which I see in many of the manuscripts I provide feedback on, is accidentally creating a "Mary Sue." Mary Sue is a term used to describe a fictional character (often female) who is seen as too perfect.

So, start out by creating someone with flaws. Flaws make a character more appealing and more real. But just assigning a character virtues and flaws is hardly a fail-proof system.

Before writing even a word of the actual book, I think you need to know who your main character or characters are, what motivates them, and what their dislikes and likes are.

I think a lot of authors focus on their characters' appearance, which is why it is so often discussed in great detail during the first chapter. And while of course that is a factor, knowing what they look like is not nearly as important as knowing who they are.

You should be able to answer the following questions about your main character(s) before starting. If their answer to that question changes over the course of the story, that is fine, natural even, but you should know what their answer would be at the beginning.

1.   What is their primary motivation in life?

2. Who are they closest to?
3. What is one defining moment from their past?
4. If a stranger asked them for a favor, would they say yes or no?

I usually develop a character by spending a lot of time thinking about them. I do this while attempting to fall asleep. I imagine the character in various scenarios that have nothing to do with the novel, and I imagine how they would react. Over time, these scenarios become more nuanced, and their reactions to everyday encounters become clearer.

Everyone develops characters differently, but one of the things I suggest doing, no matter what kind of story you write, is to set a three-minute timer before writing and spend those minutes free writing about your character, just to get your brain started.

It's common for me to write out at least five to ten of these little scenarios before I start writing the book in earnest.

I think it's best to focus on little vignette-style stories that don't relate to plot or to focus on dialogue between two characters.

I particularly like focusing on stories that reveal something about a character's personality by showing rather than telling.

For example, for a stubborn character, I might write down a brief sketch of them refusing to wear their husband's gloves, even though it is very cold out.

I also like developing characters by answering simple personality quizzes online, not as myself but as the character. I like exploring their thought process this way.

If you are seeking even more character development exercises, [this article](#) has some good suggestions.

Determine Your Genre Beforehand

Genre is the style or category of writing an author chooses. Figuring out your genre is important because genre determines a lot about your story. Different genres have different expectations in terms of length, content, and even main characters.

For example, a work of middle-grade fiction has to be on the shorter side of things. The content generally can't be too dark, the language tends to be "clean," and an adult character will never be a "Point of View" character. Also, the characters themselves won't be as complex as they would be in YA or adult fiction. The problems they face would not be as intense.

Different genres also have different expectations in terms of audience. For example, most early reader books have an intended audience of first to second graders and their parents, as the parents are often still assisting with reading at that point.

If you know what genre you are writing in, it can also help you to read other books in that genre to help strengthen your own.

Reading other contemporary books in your chosen genre can also help you determine the rules that govern your genre. As previously discussed, I think it's very important to focus on reading debut books (the first novel published by an author) in that genre, because those books are most likely to comply with the rules of that genre.

For example, Kate DiCamillo's first book, *Because of Winn-Dixie*, follows the general rules of most middle-grade books. The main character's age is a year or two older than the intended audience, which is very typical, and the subject matter is age appropriate.

Since then, DiCamillo's been given more free range by her publisher. The main character in the Mercy Watson series is a pig, which is not unheard of, but the main characters in the spin-off series, Tales from Deckawoo Drive, are all adults, which is rare with early readers and would never be published by a non-established author. The books are still very good, and beloved by our household, but they could probably not have found a publishing house if DiCamillo had started with these books.

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If you are unfamiliar with the different kinds of genres that are common, this is a good starter guide. It is important to note that there is a difference between how genres are labeled for readers and how agents and publishers often view them.

For example, there's no section of upmarket (a book that straddles the middle ground between literary and mass market fiction) books in a bookstore, but that's a word every agent knows. You can usually identify upmarket fiction by the style of the cover (large title on top of a more abstract design), and by its placement in a bookstore, usually on tables labeled "book club."

It's also very helpful to talk to people who work in bookstores about genres because they are more likely to know the nuances than general readers.

Whenever I read a book now, I look up the genre on Goodreads and I've found that's really helped me have a more definitive feel for genres and their boundaries.

Choose Tense and Point of View Before You Start Writing

Most writers have a default setting. They automatically write a certain way, be it past tense or present, first-person point of view ("POV") or third person. Figuring this out ahead of time is very helpful and can make a huge difference in terms of rewrites, revisions, and editing.

You can write a story in past tense or present tense. Both are commonly used in novels. You just have to be consistent.

Past tense (walked, drank, was) is and always has been more prevalent.

Using present tense (is, hopes, walks) is comparatively rare, but it's more common than it was a decade ago. Present tense is most common in debut novels, short stories, and literary fiction.

Past tense is more common in everything else, particularly genre fiction.

Past tense is more familiar to readers and they are less likely to notice it at all. It reads more seamlessly. Yet present tense gives you a sense of immediacy that past tense doesn't.

Either way, it is something to figure out when you start writing.

Historically, I have always written in rotating first-person POV, which involves a lot of I's and chapter headings that include names. But I've realized, as a reader, I very much prefer third-person limited. It's easier to read and it feels more honest. It's also much trickier to get rotating first-person POV books published outside of genre fiction. It's much easier to handle a large cast of characters with rotating third-person limited POV.

Below is an outline of the different POVs from which you can write.

First-person: Written from the perspective of the "I." We get to learn all of the character's thoughts and feelings this way (unless they are an unreliable narrator). It can be very immersive, but it is hard to pull off more than one POV in a manuscript like this and make them all feel unique. It can be used most effectively from one person's POV.

Second-person: This is from the perspective of the "you." It is sometimes used in short stories and never used in manuscript-length work in a sustained way. It is very limited and for the most part distracting.

Third-person objective: The facts of the story are reported by an impersonal observer. This can work well in short stories but is very tricky to pull off in a manuscript-length work.

Third-person omniscient: An all-knowing narrator interprets events and also conveys the thoughts and feelings of the characters the book contains. This is more common, although still unusual. *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket is narrated this way.

I find it harder to connect with individual characters when reading books that are narrated in this style.

Third-person limited: Focuses on a single character, but the story is not told in the character's words, which creates distance between reader and character. This is by far the most common and flexible form of third-person narration and is seen in most novels that are not first-person POV.

If you've written manuscripts in the past, see what tense and POV they contain. This can help you figure out what works for you.

I think it's important, for the most part, to avoid using an obscure POV (anything other than third-person limited or first-person or past tense), unless you have reasons to justify the choice you are making, such as the nature of the story or the genre.

It's also really important to stick to one style of POV. I've noticed a lot of first-time authors have sections or chapters that are in second-person while the rest of the story is first-person. It might seem like a minor mistake, but it's much harder to connect with a story if the POV is inconsistent or unclear.

I've also seen a lot of stories that are told in third-person limited for the most part and then slip into third-person omniscient, *and* into first-person.

That is so hard on the reader. Editors and agents are looking for work with consistent POVs and tenses.

This is something that most authors have a hard time spotting in their own work. Most authors are surprised when I point out shifting POVs to them. Once I've alerted them to the issue, it's obvious, and they can navigate a way forward from there.

For that reason, I have started to really encourage writers to get someone who is a reader—a beta reader (unpaid first reader), a friend, a spouse—to read through at least the first ten pages before proceeding.

Ask them specifically about POV and tense shifts, because these are changes that are much easier to make early on.

Determine That You are the Right Person to Write the Story

There have been a lot of active conversations about cultural appropriation for the last decade, but it is particularly prevalent for a good reason. The recent controversy over the book American Dirt is a good example of this.

I expect this conversation to be even more active and ongoing in the foreseeable future. Five years ago, writers could get away with much less cultural awareness than they can today, and I think that shift is an excellent one.

Now, I'm not saying that you won't get a book published about a culture you are not a part of (because the previous link makes it clear that you can), but it is much harder if you are not an established author, and more importantly, at least from my limited perspective, why would you?

The same could be said of identity, to a certain degree. For example, I will never be a gay man in my twenties. So, while I could probably write a convincing secondary character with that identity, for him to be a point-of-view character would be difficult for me to pull off.

I do not think this applies to male authors writing women, and vice versa, if done correctly (and it isn't always).

Currently, cultural and identity appropriation is taken seriously, and your manuscript is not as likely to be accepted by an agent or a publisher if it contains these issues.

I'm not saying your manuscript can't intersect with different cultures and experiences that you have not personally had; that would also be a problem. But do research, be open-minded, seek other people's opinions, and take them into consideration. Treat anyone you talk to with the utmost respect.

Often, there are ways into a story that aren't so laden with traps, be it the outsider's perspective, or altering the universe in which the story takes place.

But more importantly, you personally are equipped to write certain stories that no one else can.

I have always pushed against the saying "write what you know," because my characters have always been more adventurous (and frankly, more dangerous) than me.

But I have come to learn that even when I write fantasy, I tend to put a fair amount of my own personal truth in it, even if it is a fictionalized version of that truth. I think this makes a story stronger and easier to connect with for agents and publishers.

It is of the utmost importance to me that authors write the story they want to write. I have discovered that by knowing the things that I have outlined above, writers can still write the story they want to write, but knowing that information greatly increases their chances of getting published while decreasing the number of revisions.

The First Twenty Pages

Actually writing the first twenty pages is far more important than planning to write the first twenty pages, although it is often a lot more straightforward.

I agree with Stephen King who said, "The scariest moment is always just before you start." This includes the whole planning stage, and I think for most writers, this extends to the first page. For most writers, once they have gotten that far, it's much easier to keep putting one word after another as they write their novel.

For that reason, it can be tempting to avoid all the pre-planning and plunge straight into the novel writing itself. If you were thinking about doing that and skipped the first section, I'm going to strongly encourage you to go back and read it. A lot of the information—particularly the information pertaining to tenses and POVs—is relevant, even during revisions.

As scary as it is to have to pre-plan the story and to put off the actual writing, it is often very much worth the effort. By doing that work at the beginning, you can avoid having to do major ongoing revisions or even entire rewrites.

This chapter focuses on how to write the first two chapters in a way where you don't have to write them all over again. Most first books, and even most second and third books, involve major revisions of the first two chapters, even if the rest of the first draft is relatively clean and easy to follow.

In my first six manuscripts, I ended up writing brand new first chapters every single time. This is often because I wasn't familiar enough with the genre I intended to write the work in, or I didn't understand which cliché tropes to avoid.

I also usually started the work by easing myself into the world. The story I was telling in the first chapter was really for my own education and not to connect with my readers.

Common Mistakes to Avoid in the First Chapter

The first chapter is the most important chapter in many ways. It's the first part of your story that agents and editors read, as well as the first part of your story that readers read.

I generally read the first three chapters of a book before deciding whether to continue, but most of the people I know, if they don't love the author already, stop after the first. That's why it's so important.

I read hundreds of first chapters a year, as a reader, a teacher, and as a submissions advisor. Below are the weak links that tend to sink first chapters.

Weak First Paragraph

The first paragraph is so important. It should tell you something vital about either the story or the main character. Often, the first paragraph serves no purpose but to establish setting. That is not enough. This is your first impression. A weak first paragraph is like a limp handshake.

Emphasis is often placed on the first line, and a great first line can help, but it isn't nearly as important as the paragraph as a whole. If a simple first line supports a better first paragraph as a whole, go with that instead.

The first paragraph should tell the reader at least one thing that pulls them further into the book. It doesn't have to be self-contained, it can raise questions.

Info Dumping

Info dumping is an informal term my husband and I made up while reading *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson. A book I love, but one that has dozens of pages that are just focused on providing contextual information with little impact on plot or characters.

I use this term to describe information that's not integrated into the story. It is information that's presented all at once. It is always told, not shown.

This is particularly prominent in fantasy/sci-fi novels where extensive background/world-building is at play, but it can also be misused to tell a character's backstory in mainstream fiction.

A lot of first-time authors focus on doing all the world building and backstory development in the first two chapters with the idea that it won't deter readers. Unfortunately, in my experience, this is rarely done successfully

Many published books do a pretty good job of integrating world-building directly into the storytelling. I always recommend studying *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins as a good example of world-building without info dumping. Just reading the free sample on the Kindle will give you an indicator of why—the integration is seamless.

Incorrect Pacing

Pacing refers to the flow of the story. During the first chapter, most authors have one of two approaches.

The first is to rush through as much plot as possible to hook the reader into the story. The problem with that is it generally involves telling not showing, and it usually makes it very difficult to connect with the characters or even absorb what is happening in a meaningful way.

The second common problem with first chapter pacing is actually the opposite, because they are too busy introducing the main characters and the setting, nothing is actually happens in terms of plot, and even though the reader is learning things, it's hard to connect with the characters or to feel like things are moving forward.

In my experience, the best way to make sure your pacing is working is to record your work digitally and then listen to the recording. See where you're engaging with the story and where you are tuning out. It's even better if you can get someone else to listen to the story.

I talk more about pacing in the section entitled "What Needs to Happen in the First Twenty Pages."

Common Tropes

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There are certain ways books start that are overused. These common tropes are likely not to appeal to agents, publishers, or readers. These clichés include, but are not limited to:

- Characters waking up to the sound of an alarm clock,
- Characters waking up drugged/not knowing where they are,
- Dream sequences,
- Description of the weather/season,
- Characters describing themselves in the mirror, or a third-person description of character,
- Overt foreshadowing ("Lilly didn't know that this time tomorrow, her dog would be dead."),
- Premonition ("Tom was sure today he would meet the love of his life."),
- Simply a description of setting (genre-specific to sci/fi fantasy),
- Simply focusing on the character's backstory,
- Killing a secondary character, and
- Prologue involving a life-threatening situation with a character we are not going to meet for a long time.

The Problem with Prologues

I had never thought much about prologues until I started to teach novel writing. From the first day, it became very clear to me that I had to think about prologues.

A prologue is the opening of a story that establishes the context and gives background details often from an earlier story that ties into the main one. The prologue is most commonly set in the past, although I've also seen the prologue used as a flash forward, which is to say that the prologue hints at what is to happen near the end of the story.

Either way, there is almost always a time leap involved in a prologue, which means that it is almost always disconnected from the primary timeline/plotline of the story. The only exception to this that I can think of is when the prologue focuses on a character who is not a main character, or simply isn't introduced until much later in the story. Sometimes, for example, the prologue focuses on the villain of the story.

I have encountered self-published and unpublished manuscripts where the prologue is in the same timeline/plotline of the novel as a whole and features the same character. In that situation, I always advise the author to just call it the first chapter instead, because readers expect a leap if it's called a prologue.

I have always read prologues, but I discovered that many of my students, often the ones writing prologues to their work, have skipped them as readers.

They felt that as a reader they didn't need that information, but as a writer they wanted to have that additional context. If that is the case, the prologue is a good thing to write for yourself only, and not for inclusion in the manuscript.

I do feel like a prologue is almost always code for an "on ramp," and for that reason, you can almost always get rid of it and integrate the information it contains into the text itself.

If information is integrated into the story, in a way that shows rather than tells, the readers are much more likely to connect with this information.

Often, authors feel overwhelmed by the amount of information they have to integrate into the text. It's never as overwhelming as it seems and most information can be integrated seamlessly. It's good to look at texts that do a good job of this. I feel like *Oryx and Crake* by Margert Atwood is a good example of this, as is the Murderbot series by Martha Wells.

Other authors—Gillian Flynn is a good example of this—like to share pertinent information slowly, in a way that ramps up the tension, while still revealing enough details in a timely fashion for the readers to commit (withholding too much for too long is also often not a good thing).

I've also encountered a lot of prologues that focus on revealing something that's going to happen much later in the manuscript, usually a major character death or disappearance. They use this as a way to up the stakes for later in the novel, to encourage the readers to commit to the story.

This strategy rarely works because the character whose life is at stake is not developed in the reader's mind enough at that point to carry weight. It usually comes off as a cheap ploy. I tend to discourage this strategy.

This isn't to say prologues never work—they very much can. You just have to make sure that yours does. Make sure that whatever information the introduction contains is compelling and engaging in and of itself. That it can almost function like a standalone short story.

Also, it's important keep in mind that some people are more likely to skip it entirely, just because it's a prologue.

What Needs to Happen in the First Twenty Pages

A lot of people write the first twenty pages as an "on ramp." It's the road they take to get on "the highway" that is the rest of the book. They are simply setting up the real story.

That's why it's important to start writing with a plan. That way you are not setting up the story for your own purposes as a writer, but you are creating something that is worth sharing with others.

If you discover that your first twenty pages are just you preparing to tell the actual story, cut it, but do save it somewhere in case you can use it later—perhaps as promotional material.

In the first twenty pages, it's important to cover a lot of ground, but your primary tasks are to establish characters and setting (even if it is going to change) and introduce the plot. You have to do that in an engaging way. A lot of authors try to introduce their characters by telling readers what they look like and what they act like. The most effective way to introduce and establish characters is by *showing* readers who the characters are.

Showing rather than telling is an oft mentioned literary technique for a reason. Showing is about using description and action to help the reader experience the story. Telling is all about using exposition and summary to convey what is happening.

Telling always happens, and a little of it is good, but showing is best.

Many writers place exposition in dialogue, thinking that this transforms the exposition from telling into showing. This is not the case.

The most effective way to write the first twenty pages is to focus on showing.

In *The Amateurs* by Liz Harmer, we know who the main character is because, in the first twenty pages, we see that she's still taking photographs after an apocalypse, even though in most other respects, she's grounded in the time she lives in, because she's focused on supporting her community and acquiring food.

In *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel, an actor playing King Lear on stage collapses, and only the POV character, Jeevan, realizes it's not part of the play; he rushes towards the stage while everyone is too busy watching. This shows us so much about him.

The point you should take away from this is to make your character seem real through what they do, not through what you tell the readers they do.

Now, sometimes these moments—the photographs and the actor on stage—are important to the plot, and sometimes they just serve to make the characters more real and vivid. Either way works. It really depends on the plot of the manuscript.

In *Station Eleven,* what happens in the first twenty pages affects the plot on every level.

But in *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon, the main plot doesn't start until about 40 pages in. Yet the first 40 pages are in no way wasted. The main character is established by showing how they behave and that gives weight to what happens next.

More importantly, the plot of those first 40 pages is inherently interesting. It feels engaging because of how the story is told. Often, when authors convey a character's backstory, they present it in a way that makes it feel like reheated, week-old leftovers, not in any way compelling.

By focusing on details and specifics, Diana Gabaldon works around that. The narrative voice is strong and that helps as well.

Authors often feel like they need to rush into the central plot of the book, but certain stories can't be told that way because we need to witness what happens firsthand, before the central plot starts, in order to really understand the consequences of what is lost or what has changed.

Just because what happens first isn't part of the central plot, doesn't automatically make it an on ramp; it can be highway too—just a different part.

The setting is also important to establish in the first twenty pages. Even if the setting is going to change (like it does in *Station Eleven*), the initial setting

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usually sets the tone for the book, and it usually helps the reader imagine the story in a better and more cohesive way.

Detailed and specific settings are particularly helpful. You don't have to spend a ton of time on this. Often, a few well-crafted sentences can make a huge difference.

Just to spell it out very clearly, the things you have to do in the first twenty pages are:

1. Establish your main characters through their actions (showing not telling). Often if the first twenty pages are not focused on the main plot, the story that shows us who the main character really is, is what engages the readers.

2. Establish the setting.

3. Set the main plot in motion or establish the world/relationship/characters that the main plot will destroy so we can feel that loss.

Creating Scenes That Serve Multiple Purposes

Throughout the manuscript, but particularly in the first third, it is important to have scenes that serve more than one purpose.

These are scenes that are satisfying in and of themselves, but they also often have a larger purpose, sometimes a straightforward one, and sometimes not.

In *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, the opening chapter is so important because it introduces both protagonists (one whose last name is actually Protagonist), it builds the corporate world in which *Snow Crash* is set, and it does this during a very action-oriented chase scene.

The chapter effectively sets the tone for the novel. It also serves as the meeting for the two protagonists, although that isn't clear at first.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, a snake accidentally escapes from a reptile house due to Harry's magic, and Harry speaks to the snake.

The scene alone serves multiple purposes, but it also lays groundwork for a bigger surprise in the second book, where it turns out that wizards can't normally talk to snakes.

A great exercise is to find a book that you love, take a few of the early chapters, and break down how each scene is working. Figure out what's being conveyed and how. This can really help you moving forward.

The last time I wrote a novel, which was about two strangers who have to raise a baby together while investigating the murder of the baby's parents, I decided every chapter had to convey three things:

1. I had to reveal something new about the murder, even if the reader didn't realize it at the time.

2. I had to move the two strangers closer to each other.

3. The chapter had to have a grounding moment with the baby to make it feel more real.

It was a lot harder to write with these three things in mind, but the story as a whole was much stronger and there was less of a need for revisions because I'd already developed the story in a layered way.

Ideally, your first two chapters should contain the following three elements:

1. Share with the readers a story that establishes the main character's (or characters) personality through showing, not telling. For example, show the main character calmly giving birth, rather than telling us she has a high pain threshold.

2. Explore inter-character dynamics (or character versus setting dynamics, if the plot largely involves one person, like *The Martian* or *Robinson Crusoe*).

3. Raise a larger question, be it romantic, mysterious, or something else entirely, that the remainder of the manuscript will work towards answering.

How to Establish Strong Characters

"Plot is no more than footprints left in the snow after your characters have run by on their way to incredible destinations."
—   Ray Bradbury

The most important thing to remember when writing a book is that the plot should change the character in a natural way, or the character should fail at what they are attempting because they refused to change.

Most books follow the trajectory of the first suggestion. The second is rarer, but it does happen.

However, if your main character doesn't evolve and change, at least one of your supporting characters must shift. You know what they say about change: it's inevitable.

It's also gradual. There's nothing more frustrating as reading something where the main character remains the exact same until the last second and then changes in a snap. A character's arc of change should be hinted at throughout the novel.

Eleanor & Park by Rainbow Rowell does a great job of showing a whole range of change in a natural way. *The Magician's Assistant* by Ann Patchett does a terrific job of this as well (although I feel like she fails to do this in *The Dutch House).* John Irving does this so splendidly in a *Prayer for Owen Mean*y.

A lot of writers tell us things are changing, but that can be heavy-handed and not particularly convincing. The key is to have the characters' actions show this change.

Epiphanies can work as part of this, presenting the ah-ha moment that makes everything fall into place, but they shouldn't be the only factor at play.

In *Paper Town*s by John Green, it's an epiphany that helps the main character move on, but it's everything he does before that—in terms of working on his

bravery, first with the help of others and then on his own—that makes it possible.

Epiphanies aren't just blessings that fall from the sky, they have to be worked towards.

One of the reasons I suggest writing stories about your character that don't end up being part of the overall narrative arc is because it teaches you more about how the character reacts in different situations, and you can see how those situations might, or might not, change them.

I think it's important to remember that this shift within the character, depending on the genre, does not have to be particularly dramatic. It can be a small change.

For me, one of the most satisfying character growth moments was one of my main characters figuring out how to forgive her significant other. She had already reunited with him, but the forgiveness took more time.

Take a look at your favorite books and write out how one or two of the characters grow and shift during the story. Take specific note of scenes that convey character change in a gradual but believable way.

In Conclusion

Once you are finished writing the first twenty pages, you may want to go back and revise them, as many writers do. If you are working with a developmental editor—someone who specifically focuses on helping you revise for content and publishability (or readability)—I don't recommend you do this.

Instead, I think the best route forward for most writers is to continue writing the rest of the story. One of the reasons I suggest this is so that you can gain perspective on your first two chapters.

Usually, when writers first write something, they view it through rose-colored glasses, but over time, they can see it in a more realistic and well-rounded way. So by writing further into the book, you give yourself a better sense of perspective on the first two chapters.

Also, by writing more, you can see if the plot of the novel actually matches up with your plans or if it deviates. Maybe because the plot has changed, your first two chapters, even though they were well written, need to be re-worked or even rewritten.

Maybe the context of the novel as a whole will just lead you to make relatively minor revisions of the first two chapters.

Writing the first two chapters, much like research or plotting, can take up a lot your time, even if that is not your intention. It's important to pace yourself.

If you have any additional questions or comments, or elements you'd like to see in a potential second edition, please send me an email at support@authorspublish.com.