

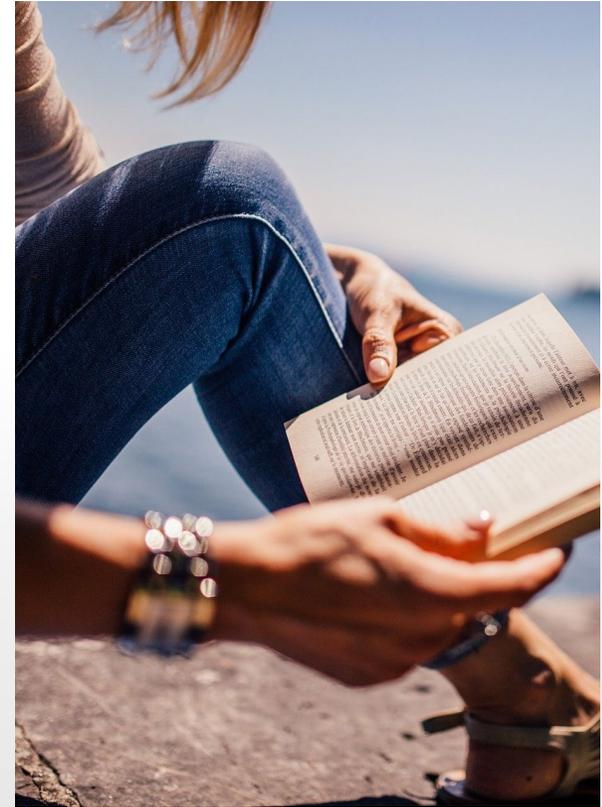


HOOKING READERS AND PUBLISHERS WITH YOUR OPENING PAGES

AND NEVER LETTING GO

STORY, INSIDE OUT

- There's the words readers see on the page
- Then there's the magic behind the curtain
- Why *those* words, at that time?
- Craft is key to writing stellar first pages
- But just as key, if you want readers to keep going, is everything they *don't* see



3 WAYS TO START THINKING ABOUT YOUR NOVEL: THEME, CHARACTER, AND PLOT

- You might be a theme-based novelist if:
 - What appeals to you most is the *reason* you want to tell a story and the message you want readers to take away
- You might be a character-based novelist if:
 - Before you write a single word, your characters speak to you. You know who they are, what they want, and how they see the world.
- You might be a plot-based novelist if:
 - What comes to you first is the Big Idea, sometimes in the form of a what-if question. What appeals to you most are the twists and turns of a story.

As authors, some aspects of writing come to us more naturally than others

Do you lead with theme, character, or plot?

Are you a plotter, pantsers, or plantser?

No matter our natural inclinations, we can borrow from other approaches!

Author, editor, and book coach [Susan DeFreitas](#) has written an amazing series of articles about the benefits and drawbacks of starting your novel with plot, theme, or character

Why not start with all three, before you've written a word, and reap the benefits?

**BUT WHAT IF
YOU COULD BE
ALL THREE?**

3 WAYS TO START THINKING ABOUT YOUR NOVEL:

STARTING WITH THEME

- Consider your theme or point:
 - Why this novel, now? Why does it matter to you?
 - Why are *you* the right person to tell this story, at this particular point in time?
 - What's the message you want readers to walk away with?
 - This “point” can evolve and change as the story does, but by fixing it in your mind at the beginning, it gives you a guiding light
 - The “point” should inform every scene you write, including the opening pages
 - Example: In Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* series, “true love transcends space and time”
 - **Resource:** [Starting Your Novel With Theme: 3 Strengths and 3 Challenges](#)

3 WAYS TO START THINKING ABOUT YOUR NOVEL:

STARTING WITH CHARACTER

- Who's showing up on your pages, and why?
 - Do you hear your characters “speak” to you?
 - What's their tone? Their emotion? Their voice?
 - Can you already envision their backstory?
 - Do you know why we should care about them?
 - Do they remind you of someone you love...or love to hate?
 - Who are they? What do they want, and why do they want it? What obstacles are in their way? What is their greatest flaw — the ghost that haunts them? What happened to make them this way? What do they need to learn/how do they need to change by the end of your story?
- **Resource:** [Starting Your Novel With Character: 3 Strengths and 3 Challenges](#)

3 WAYS TO START THINKING ABOUT YOUR NOVEL:

STARTING WITH PLOT

- What's driving the engine of your novel?
 - Are you most excited about the twists and turns that your novel takes?
 - Do you think in terms of “what challenge can I throw in my characters' path next, and how can they overcome it?”
 - How are the events of your novel intimately connected to your characters' goals, wants, and needs? How does each development in the plot drive your characters' evolution, and vice versa?
 - Are there enough reversals and surprises that the reader remains engaged throughout the story?
 - Do you have both internal and external conflict in your story? For example, if your book's a romance, is there a subplot that drives it forward, beyond the 'will they/won't they' of your main characters?
 - **Resource:** [Starting Your Novel With Plot: 3 Strengths and 3 Challenges](#)

DOORWAY INTO PLOT...

START WITH A WHAT-IF QUESTION...

Every great story can be reduced to a 'what-if' question. For instance, what if...

...a neglected orphan boy suddenly discovered he was a wizard? (Harry Potter)

...a World War II Army nurse found herself sucked back to 1700s Scotland? (Outlander)

...the Old Gods walked among us, warring with the New Gods of technology? (American Gods)

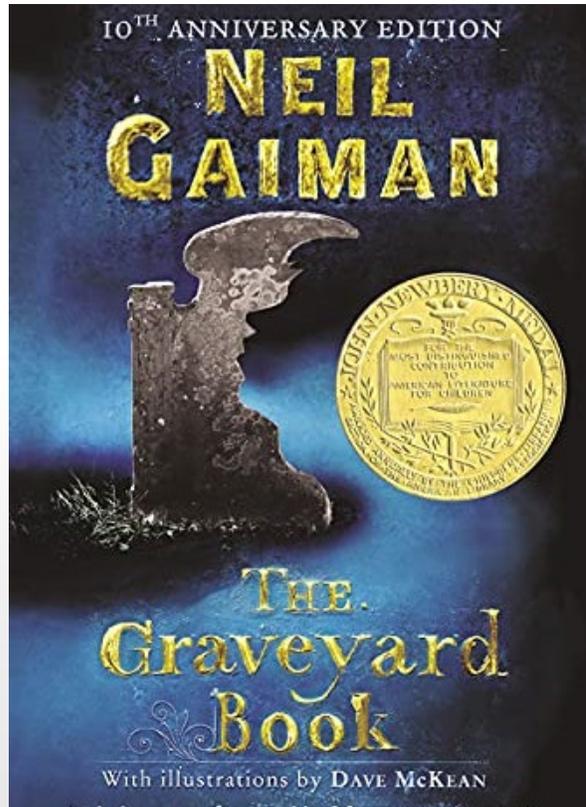
...the letters a girl wrote in secret to her old crushes were mailed to them without her knowledge or consent? (To All the Boys I've Loved Before)

...a girl who witnessed the shooting of her best friend by a police officer had to choose between keeping the secret or risking everything to tell the truth? (The Hate U Give)

BEGIN AS YOU MEAN TO GO ON: FANTASTIC FIRST LINES

- “The Man in Black fled across the desert and the Gunslinger followed.”
—*The Gunslinger*, Stephen King
- “You better not tell nobody but God.”
—*The Color Purple*, Alice Walker
- “I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm.”
—*Kindred*, Octavia Butler
- “There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”
—*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C.S. Lewis





BEGIN AS YOU MEAN TO GO ON: FANTASTIC FIRST LINES, PART 2

- “Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shiyu.”
—*Waiting*, Ha Jin
- “There was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife.”
—*The Graveyard Book*, Neil Gaiman
- “I’m pretty much f*cked.”
—*The Martian*, Andy Weir
- “A girl is running for her life.”
—*The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*, V.E. Schwab

YOU'VE GOT OUR ATTENTION. NOW WHAT?

- Make us care about your characters
- Make us curious about what's going to happen to them
- Start your novel in the right place—the moment right before things change (inciting incident)
- Use vivid, dynamic language. Show, don't tell.
- Don't bog us down with backstory, but don't strand us, either!
- Have a strong voice
- Above all, make us *feel*.



HOW TO BUILD CHARACTER INVESTMENT, RIGHT FROM THE START



- We must care about your characters, from the very beginning
- This doesn't mean we have to like them. We might *hate them!* But we must have empathy for them.
- Put them in desperate or dangerous circumstances. Make them funny. Have them do something we respect or admire (saving the cat!). Make them powerful or successful. Or, make them the underdog, so we root for them right away.
- Don't do just one of these things! Combine at least two, as soon as possible.
- Check out this post on Writers Helping Writers, [Build Character Empathy in Your First Few Pages](#), for additional tips and tricks.

AVOID CLICHÉD BEGINNINGS

- Don't start your story with the moment when your character wakes up, unless that's also the moment when everything changes for them forever!
- Don't give us incredible, heart-pumping action in the first couple of pages, only for us to realize it's all a dream...thus a) disappointing us and b) transitioning to the moment when your character wakes up (see above).
- Be aware of the clichés in your individual genres and avoid them. For instance, in YA fiction, don't begin your book with having your character look in the mirror, observe their reflection and think how ordinary they are...only for them to get bitten by a radioactive spider on page 2, and thus *Not Be Ordinary At All*.



Begin your book *in medias res*, which is to say, in the middle of the action



Your story's inciting incident should occur no more than 10% into the book



Don't start your story too soon, or we'll wind up having to slog through pages of backstory until we get to the moment when It All Begins



Don't start too late, or we'll have no idea what's going on



In essence: Don't distract or bore us. But don't bewilder us, either.

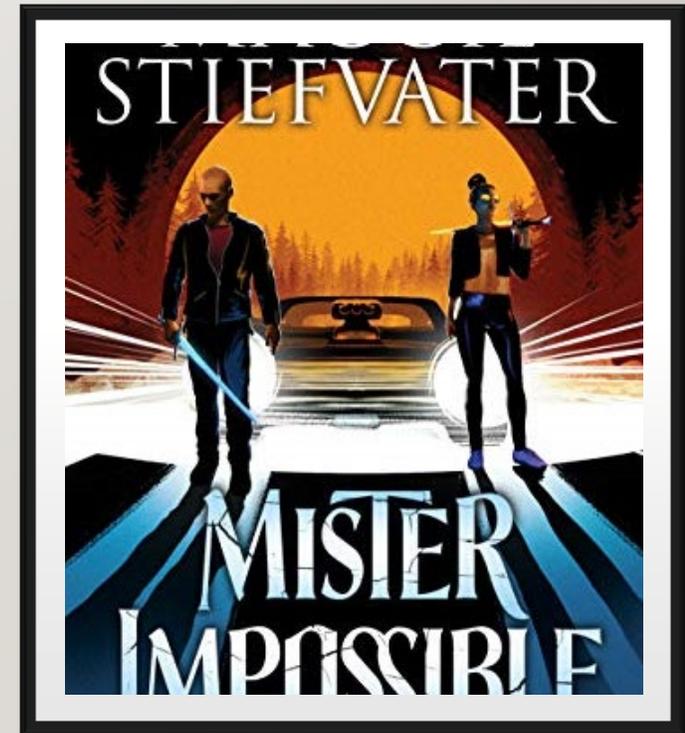
START IN THE RIGHT PLACE

TO PROLOGUE OR NOT TO PROLOGUE?

- There's debate on this subject, but most agents and editors suggest that writers, especially those new to the craft, steer clear of prologues
- Prologues are often used for “info dumps,” providing information that could just as easily be twined into the story
- Unless you absolutely need a prologue (e.g., to convey a striking difference between where a character was before the story began and where they are now), don't include one. Just jump into the action and hit the ground running.
- Example of a prologue done well: *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*, by V.E. Schwab

DON'T FORGET THE SENSORY DETAILS!

- Set the scene for your opening pages using all five senses
- Use vivid sensory details and figurative language to ground us in your story. This is our introduction to your characters' world. Make it count.
- Example: "I open my eyes to the cold, gray sky; to the howling ocean crashing against Jimeta's rocky bluffs." —*Children of Virtue and Vengeance*, Tomi Adeyemi
- Or: "Full winter daylight streamed in the window. It was quiet, but nonetheless Ronan had that feeling one sometimes has on waking, the feeling of having been woken by a sound. In this case, a scream." —*Mister Impossible*, Maggie Stiefvater



FIND YOUR CHARACTER'S VOICE



- Show us your character's personality. Are they funny? Sarcastic? Earnest? Rude?
- Show us your character's speech patterns. Do they use a lot of slang? Speak very formally? Curse a lot? Use short, choppy sentences or long, flowery ones?
- How does your character react to the situations in which they find themselves? Do they make jokes when under emotional duress? Cry during kindergarten graduations? Hide under a blanket during embarrassing movie scenes, because they can't bear to see the characters get humiliated?
- Make their voice strong and consistent, so we can't mistake them for anyone else

CHOOSE THE BEST POINT OF VIEW FOR YOUR STORY

- Choose your novel's point of view (POV) wisely and consider how it meshes with the type of story you want to tell
- Do you want to immerse the reader inextricably in the main character's perspective right from the start, at a neuronal level? Consider first person.
- Writing a sprawling fantasy novel where you want to give your readers a bird's-eye view of the world? Third-person omniscient may be the way to go.
- Want to give us your characters' perspectives, but also reserve a space for the narrator to insert observations of their own? You might want to write in third-person close/limited.
- Prefer the remove of third-person, but want to plunge us into your characters' perspectives, mind, body, and soul? Try your hand at third-person deep POV.
- If you're going to incorporate multiple POVs, have a good reason for this & maintain each character's voice
- Whatever you choose, commit to it and showcase it to full effect

CONFLICT, CONFLICT, CONFLICT



- If everything's A-OK in your character's world and looks like it's going to stay that way, we have no reason to keep reading
- Is your character in a situation that's about to require drastic action?
- Are they in the midst of doubting their choices? Is *someone else* doubting their choices?
- Has a day that's started out beautifully begun to crash and burn?
- Are they poised on the verge of making an important decision? Dealing with an unpleasant co-worker who could impact their career forever? About to sign divorce papers? Fleeing a party, only to have their car break down on the side of the road...and their ex is the only one on hand with jumper cables?

THE THREE TYPES OF CONFLICT...

- Self vs. self (your character is at odds with themselves, torn between decisions or world-views)
- Self vs. other (your character is at odds with someone else: the boyfriend they're fighting with or the boss who doesn't believe they deserve the promotion)
- Self vs. environment (your character is caught in the crosshairs of a natural disaster or accident beyond their control)
- Any of these will provide narrative propulsion and drive your story!



CLEAR AND COMPELLING STAKES



- Do we know what your characters want & why they want it?
- Do we know what will happen if they don't get it?
- Make your characters' goals clear from the very beginning, and make sure we're invested in whether they achieve them
- Put obstacles in your characters' way! Show the reader what happens when your poor characters are foiled in their attempts to reach their goals.
- Takeaway: clear & compelling stakes will drive your story forward & keep readers turning pages

WRITE ON A SCENE-BY-SCENE LEVEL

- Chapters may contain a single scene or multiple scenes
- Every scene that's present on the page should be there for a reason. We should learn something new about your characters, or the scene should drive the plot forward.
- This is crucial throughout the novel, but especially important at the very beginning
- If information doesn't absolutely have to be there, strike it
- Every sentence should suck us deeper into your characters' world, teaching us who they are, what's happening to them, and why it matters





CREATE CURIOSITY AND QUESTIONS

- End every scene by leaving a question in your readers' minds:
 - Will your character steal the car or not?
 - Can they trust their unreliable memory, or should they rely on someone else's version of events—even if it means they go to jail for murder?
 - Or even, on a more prosaic note, will they make it to the grocery store before closing time?
- Even if it doesn't end on a stereotypical cliffhanger, a scene that doesn't leave the reader wanting to know more gives them no reason to keep reading

THE IMPORTANCE OF PACING

- Familiarize yourself with your genre so you have a sense of how fast-paced your novel needs to be
- For example, a mystery novel will typically move at a far faster pace than a work of literary fiction
- Once you've done this, be ruthless with your literary scalpel. No matter how beautiful a turn of phrase might be, if it doesn't advance the plot or give us crucial information about a character, it's got to go.
- Create a "cut file" for well-loved phrases and save them for future projects



IDENTIFYING THE INCITING INCIDENT

- The inciting incident is something that *happens to* your main character, an incident after which their world has changed forever
- It sets the main events of your story in motion, what Joseph Campbell calls “the hero’s journey”
- In romance novels, it’s when your two (or more) main love interests meet
- There’s a “before” and an “after” in every novel, and the inciting incident divides them
- Everything before the inciting incident qualifies as setup—but that’s no excuse for it to be boring! If you’ve done your setup well, we’ll understand why the inciting incident matters so much to your character.
- Some inciting incidents would affect everyone (e.g., car accident, major trauma), while others are highly personal to your story. The more personal the incident, the more crucial the setup.
- Your inciting incident should always take place within the first 50 pages of your story—and, even better, by page 30
- Whatever your inciting incident is, make sure it’s connected to the “theme” or “point” of your novel

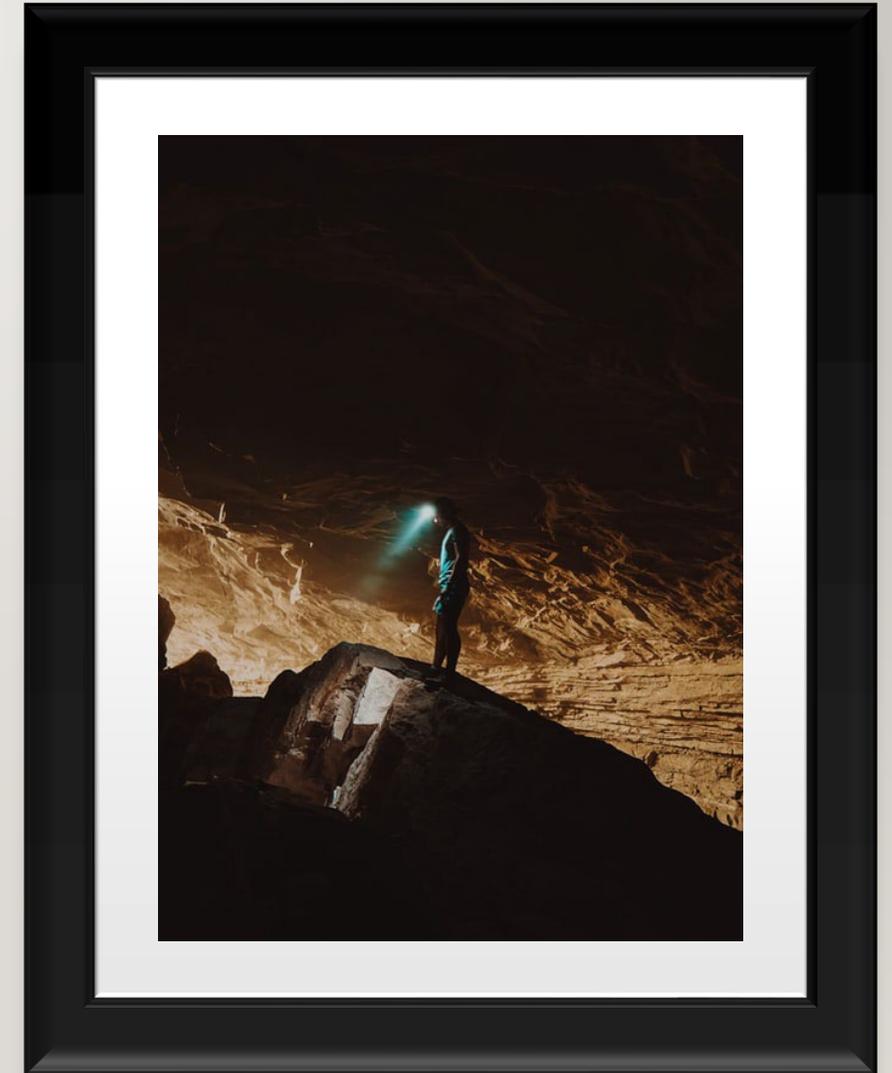
FULFILL THE “PROMISE OF THE PREMISE”



- What’s your book “about”? How would you sum it up in an elevator pitch or logline?
- If you’d describe your book as “a heartbroken woman falls in love again, only to discover her lover is the son of her worst enemy,” and the first 50 pages give us nary an inkling of this, readers are going to feel duped and upset
- Write your manuscript’s back cover copy—what you’d envision would appear on the back cover if you walked into a bookstore and pulled it off a shelf. Then, make sure that your first 50 pages hit all the high points. This, in the movie business, is called “delivering on the promise of the premise.”

SHINE A FLASHLIGHT ON WHAT MATTERS

- Show the reader what's important to pay attention to, right from the start
- Highlight crucial information about people, places, or encounters rather than giving us every detail of your character's appearance or surroundings
- Connect these details to character or plot development
- Set your scene, but choose your details carefully. Don't mislead the reader (unless you're doing it on purpose!).
- Think of the words you put on the page as a flashlight, directing us along a dark path. Don't shine the light at the trees instead of the ground, so we wander off into the abyss.



WRITING DESCRIPTION THAT ADVANCES CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

- Sometimes writers, wanting to paint a vivid scene but unsure what details to include, simply include Everything
- At the beginning of a book, this is especially detrimental. Readers don't know what's important and what isn't. When you show us too much, then don't follow through, we get confused, distracted, and—ultimately—bored.
- This is not good. A bored reader is a reader who will walk away.
- Don't open your manuscript with a list of details about your character: “Toni was wearing a white dress and had long brown hair. She walked into the restaurant and sat down at the counter.” We don't know Toni yet, so we have no reason to care about any of this!
- Instead...



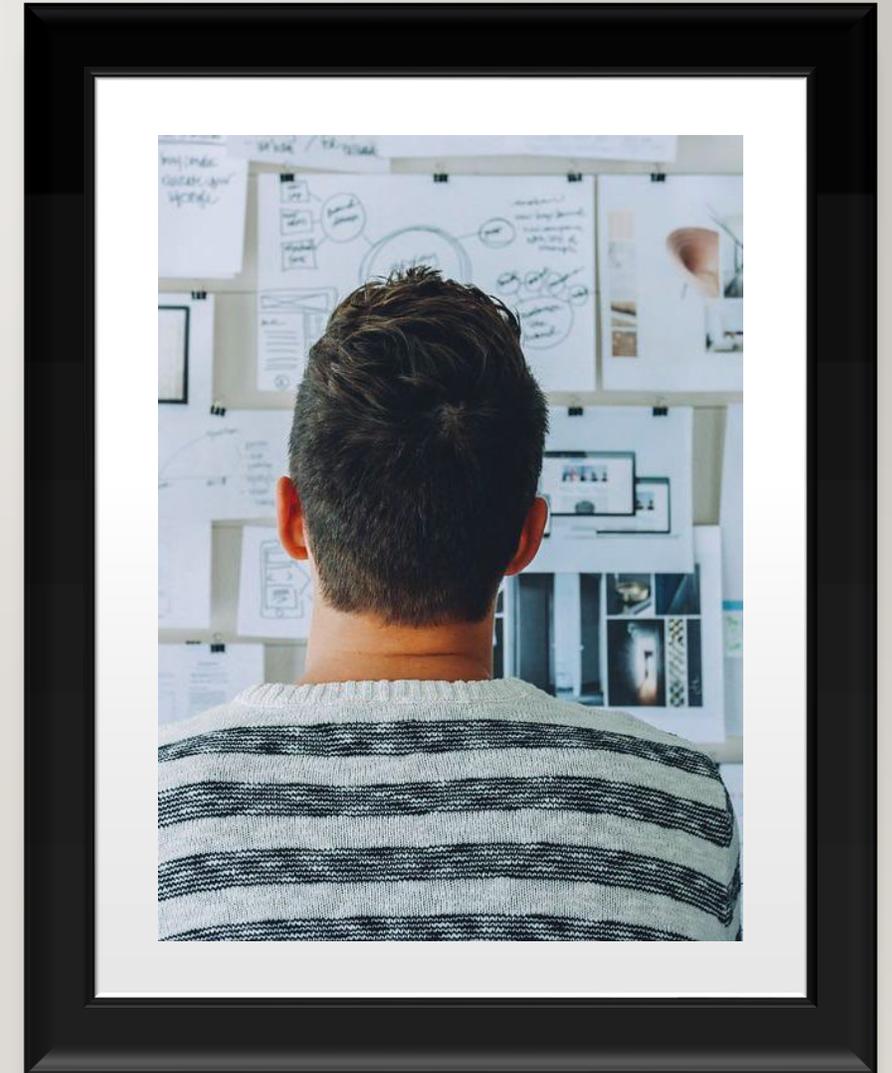
WRITING DESCRIPTION THAT ADVANCES CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT, PART 2

- Rather than introducing us to your characters and their world “lecture-style,” as Joe Ponepinto warns against in his piece, [Using Telling Details to Connect Description to Character](#), show us what your character’s world looks like as they would naturally discover it
- When you walk into a room, what do you notice? Probably, it’s what matters most to you: Is the floor filthy, even though your husband promised to wash it? Why can’t he keep any of his promises to you, even the tiny ones? Is the cat’s bowl empty? Did your kid splash orange juice on the counter, and then neglect to clean it up?
- These are all details that can tell you what a room looks like, but also show the reader how your character reacts to them & drive the plot forward



BEGIN YOUR BOOK WITH DETAILS THAT MATTER TO READERS

- The takeaway: Description and details are key to setting the scene, but choose them judiciously. Don't overload, overwhelm, or confuse your readers.
- Only incorporate those details (of setting, characters' appearances, etc.) that will:
 - Give the reader crucial information about a person or place
 - Set the tone or mood for your story (e.g., a dark alleyway; a bustling diner; a foggy moor)
 - Establish a deliberate red herring or seed doubt/a mystery
 - Sneak in backstory that helps us better understand your characters





THE STORY BEHIND BACKSTORY

- Backstory can be confusing. People will tell you, “Don’t bog down your story with info dumps! Keep us in the moment!” But then they might also say, “Help! What’s going on here, and why should I care?” What’s a writer to do?
- The idea that backstory has no place in your novel is a myth
- Backstory is all-important. Without it, we have no way to understand why your character is making certain choices, and even more important, why those choices matter. But incorporate too much backstory, and your novel will grind to a screeching halt.
- Don’t worry. Help is here!

WHAT IS BACKSTORY AND WHERE DOES IT BELONG?

- In her article, [Weaving Flashbacks Seamlessly Into Story](#), Tiffany Martin references the three kinds of backstory: context, memory, and flashbacks. Sometimes, these are broken out differently, as [backstory, character memories, and flashbacks](#).
- Here's what you really need to know. Every book has two stories: The front story (what's happening on the page right now) and the backstory (what brought your characters to this point in time).
- **The front story is where your novel needs to live.** There's a reason why you chose to start your novel here, rather than two months, six weeks, or four years before.





SO, HOW AND WHEN DO YOU BRING IN BACKSTORY?

- Include backstory only when it's crucial to what the reader needs to know
- Fold it in as contextual information, as part of a conversation or action
- Don't spend your first few pages filling the reader in on information that they can figure out from context clues
- Questions to ask yourself: Why does the reader need to know this now? Will it move the plot forward? Can I hint at it rather than explaining it directly? How can I connect it to the action that's already taking place on the page or to interactions with other characters?

“As readers, we are always trying to glean the reason for an action, and we put together our own backstory based on the clues a writer gives us. Sometimes those things turn out to be true, sometimes they don’t. That’s the fun part.”

—Garth Stein, author of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*.

In [How to Weave Backstory Into Your Novel Seamlessly](#), by Karen Dionne



BACKSTORY AND THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE



- Does the information contained in your opening pages belong on the page? Or is it something you, as the author, need to know—but your reader doesn't have to...at least, not yet, and not all at once?
- You need to know your characters' backstories. Not their favorite ice cream flavors, necessarily, but their goals, wants, needs, and what brought them to this point. In terms of what your reader needs to know and when they need to know it—well, that all depends on your story.

THE DANGER OF FLASHBACKS



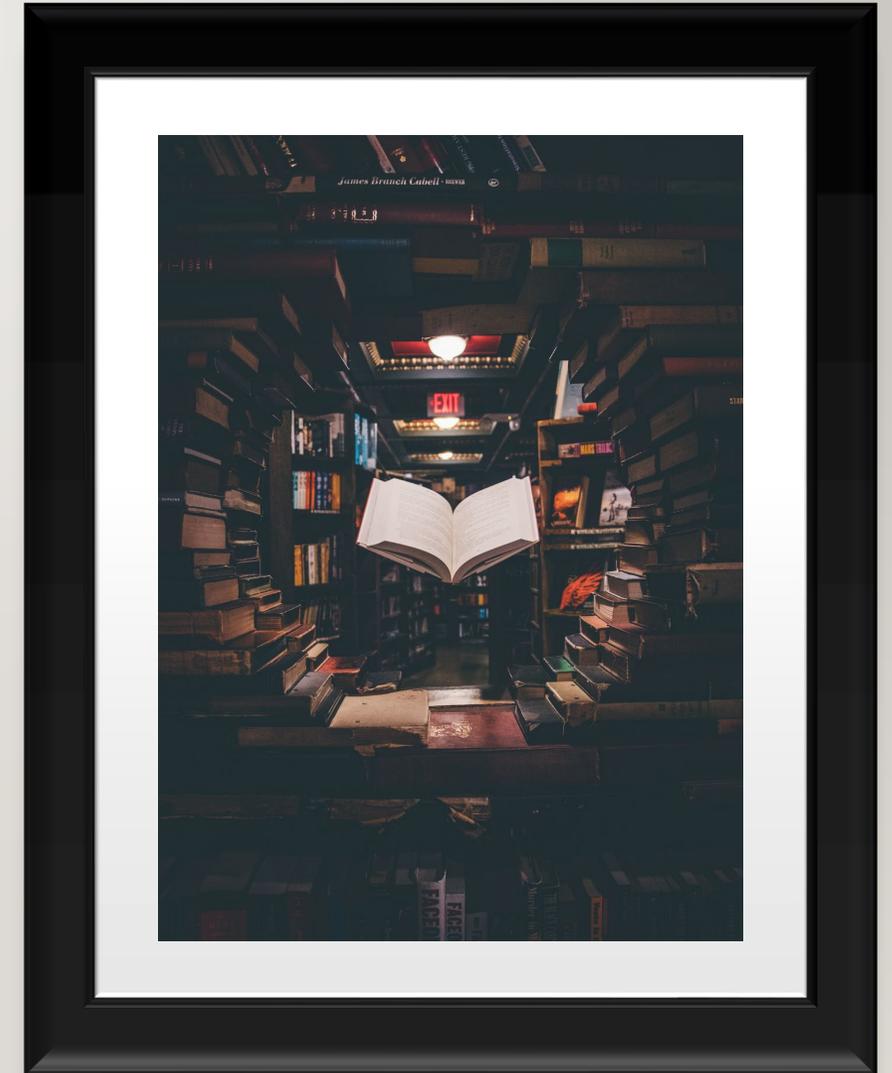
- Many writers, in the interest of making sure that readers truly understand what's going on in their story, will insert a flashback close to the beginning of their novel
- This is a dangerous tactic, as it runs the risk of interrupting the narrative momentum and derailing your readers before they've properly gotten started
- Do your best to fold in information as feels natural to the story, rather than diverting the story's flow so early on
- Remember: Your narrative momentum should carry your story forward, linking one incident to the next via the connective tissue of your characters' goals, motivations, and reactions

HOW TO FOLD IN A FLASHBACK, IF YOU ABSOLUTELY MUST

- Show us what's going on in the scene (front story)
- Provide a trigger or impetus for the flashback (how does what's happening now remind the character of what you're about to share?)
- Give us a detailed memory of the trigger or impetus that will lead into what [Tiffany Martin](#) calls “the anchor memory”
- Show us the “anchor memory” itself, which depicts a certain moment in time
- Transition us out of the flashback and into the front story
- Give us the reason for including the flashback (what does it inspire your character to think, say, or do differently?)
- For a detailed explanation and examples of this approach, read Tiffany Martin's fabulous article, [Weaving Flashbacks Into Story](#)

THIS ALL ADDS UP TO: STRONG NARRATIVE DRIVE

- A book with strong narrative drive:
 - Makes its characters' flaws, goals, and needs clear from the beginning
 - Makes you care about its characters from the start
 - Establishes conflict between the characters, the world, and the protagonists themselves
 - Sets up a compelling inciting incident and clear stakes
 - Has scenes which consistently provide new information and drive the plot (strong pacing)
 - Raises enough questions that the reader wants to keep going in order to find the answers



RESOURCES

[Build Character Empathy in Your First Few Pages](#), Becca Puglisi

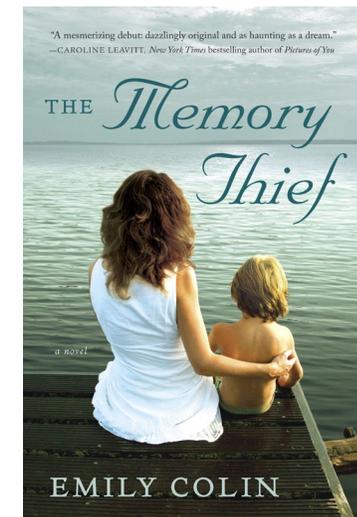
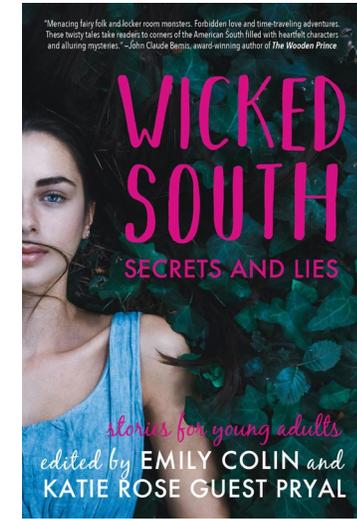
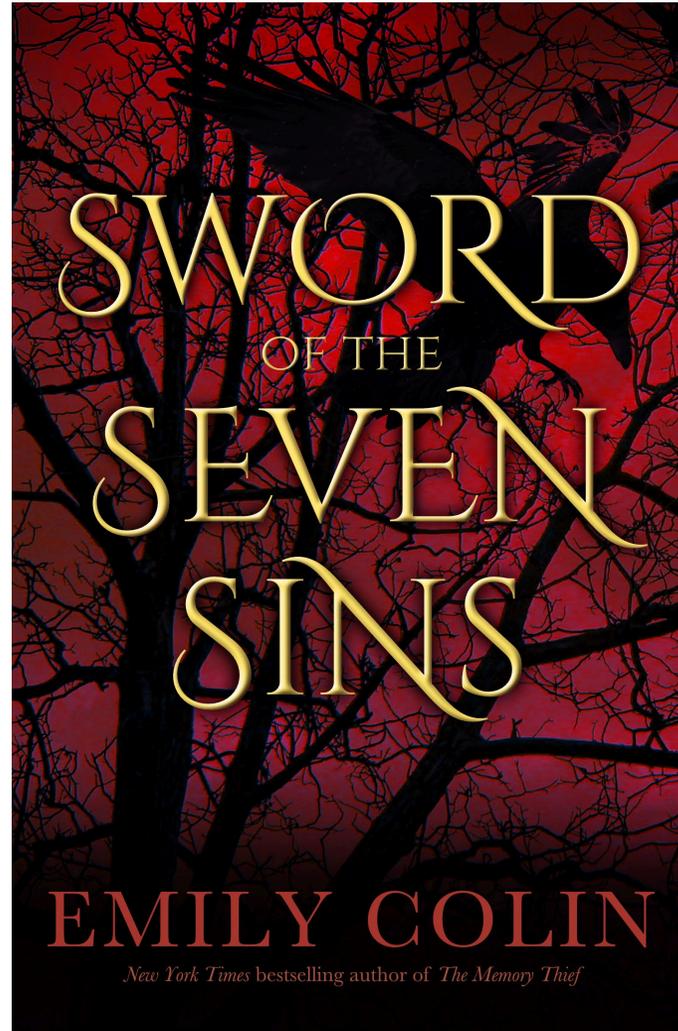
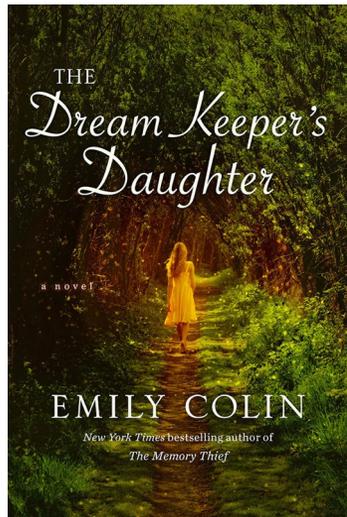
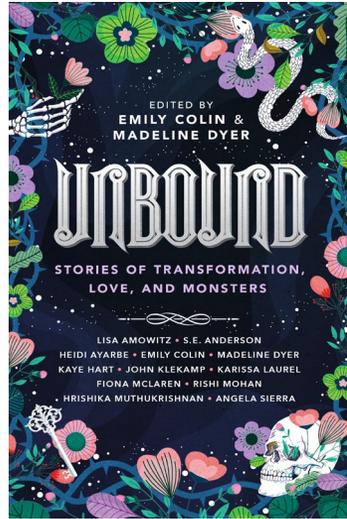
[Use Telling Details to Connect Description to Character](#), Joe Ponepinto

WIRED FOR STORY and STORY GENIUS, Lisa Cron

[One Stop for Writers](#) (Character, Emotion, Setting, etc. Thesaurus)

[The Mother Lode of First Page Resources](#)

Emily Colin, www.emilycolin.com



The End.

