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LEY TAYLOR JOHNSON

HOW TO WRITE A DYNAMIC ACT ONE

A GUIDE FOR NOVELISTS

HOW TO WRITE A DYNAMIC ACT ONE

A Guide for Novelists

Ley Taylor Johnson

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Foreword

Writing a book is hard. If you're like me, you know that writing the beginning of a book is particularly hard, as it's where you have to do all the heavy lifting to get your story off the ground. There are so many things to juggle, so many things to line up before the inciting event rolls in, and so many things you have to balance in preparation for payoff later on down the road.

Maybe you've picked up this book because you've been struggling for what feels like ages and just need some guidance. Maybe this is your first foray into long-form fiction writing and you want some help getting started. Either way, you've come to the right place.

Even the greatest story idea won't get far if it isn't well-written. Presenting a structured, polished, and stylish draft is what's going to get the attention of agents, editors, publishing houses, readers—in other words, all the people you want thinking highly of your story. Regardless of the publishing route you decide to take, a strong mastery of both story and craft is the key to success.

This book takes a look at your story's first act from both a story and craft perspective, not just on *what* to write, but *how* to write it. We'll cover the role each scene plays in Act One and discuss how elements like narrative voice, characterization, foreshadowing, and more can help you make those scenes come to life and serve your overall story as best as possible. And, although we'll cover the general conventions and trends that have been successful in the publishing industry, we'll teach you how to do it in a way that's still true to your personal writing and storytelling style.

I hope you find the inspiration and assistance you need to emerge with a functional, professional, and satisfying first act. Let's get started!

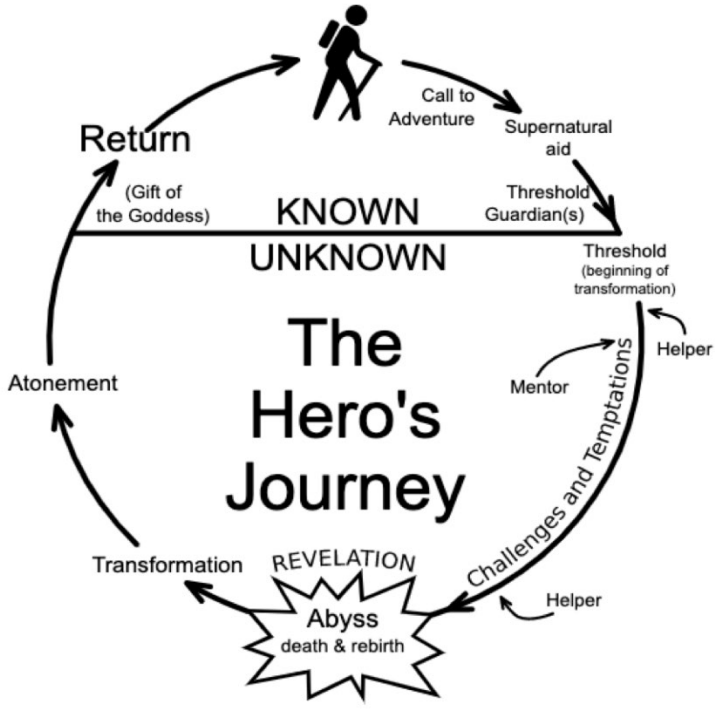
Part 1: The Purpose of Act One

What Is Act One?

We can't start a book called *How to Write a Dynamic Act One* without first talking about what Act One is. Put simply, it's the first act of your story.

Yes, I know—no need to roll your eyes. It really is the simplest explanation! Much like stage plays, novels follow a three-act structure. The first act of a stage play introduces the story's major players and the central "problem" that the play aims to solve. The same goes for the first act of a novel, albeit a little more involved this time around (you also have to build the stage and all the set pieces while you're at it).

You can think of Act One as your Setup stage. This is the point in the story where you introduce your protagonist, the world they live in, and the basic plot info that gets them started on their adventure. If you're familiar with the concept of the Hero's Journey, you can think of Act One as the span of time from the "Call to Adventure" to the "Threshold," where the hero passes from the Known to the Unknown.



As you can see from the graphic above, Act One doesn't take up too much room in the grand scheme of things. In fact, it only accounts for about 20% of your overall story. In an average-length novel (about 90,000 words), that's only 18,000 words!

That may seem like either too much or not enough, depending on the relationship you have with your writing. Whatever the case may be, it's not as daunting as you might think. Act One itself can be broken down into a handful of **essential scenes** that each serve a specific purpose, or serve to answer a specific question. It's a lot easier to tackle when you have a set checklist to follow!

We'll talk more about those essential scenes in Part 2: The Anatomy of Act One. For now, let's begin with a quick introduction to the three most crucial elements of Act One: Plot, Characterization, and Worldbuilding.

Plot, Characterization, and Worldbuilding — The Three Must-Haves of Act One

There are three main things your first act exists to establish—plot, characterization, and worldbuilding. In our introduction to Act One, we talked about how the first act serves to open the story, taking readers from a relatively normal day in your protagonist's life to the point at which they enter the Unknown and begin their adventure.

Since your focus in Act 2 will be your major plot and subplot beats, Act One is the point at which you should establish the background details—the things about your story, characters, and world that stand to change as a result of the plot taking place.

These may seem like fairly general details, so let's break down why each of these things are so important, and how you can establish them in your first act.

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Plot

As we stated previously, Act One is where you set the stage for the rest of your story. In addition to introducing your main cast, you'll also be identifying the major "problem" that will be addressed by the events of the book. This is where your plot comes in.

While you don't want to give away everything your story is about, you do want to drip-feed details that your readers can pick up on to identify what's happening, why it's an issue, and why your protagonist needs to get involved. This gives your story a sense of direction even in the early scenes, and helps make it more believable that your protagonist would be willing to take action when the inciting event finally comes knocking.

As you plan out your first act, think about your current status quo—the state of the world and your protagonist's life. You can come up with the specifics later, but it's good to have an idea of what threatens that status quo, who specifically it's a threat to, and how it has the potential to get worse if nobody steps up. This will give you some insight as to the kind of details you should begin foreshadowing as you lead up to your inciting event.

Characterization

Next up is characterization, which is my personal favorite part. Characterization is hugely important to Act One because it's how you introduce your protagonist to your readers. The qualities that you put to paper—their voice, beliefs, strengths, flaws, etc.—are the qualities that will draw readers in and make them commit to spending an entire novel/series with them. They're also the qualities that help inform the decisions your protagonist makes for the rest of the story.

Regardless of who your protagonist is and what their circumstances are, there are a few key things you need to establish about them in Act One. First is their voice, which is frequently the biggest indicator of who they are as a person. Knowing what they think, how they think about it, and how they choose to express it gives readers a clearer picture of the protagonist's personality, and is what they'll most likely latch onto in the opening scenes. Second is how they react in the face of an obstacle, which shows readers how they're likely to respond to the challenges presented in the inciting event. Last (and most certainly not least) is their character strength/flaw, which lies at the core of their character arc and influences every choice they make throughout the story, regardless of where they are in their character development.

We won't be getting into character arcs in this book, as they're a beast unto themselves, and most character development happens outside of Act One. We will, however, talk a bit more about setting up early challenges for your protagonist to help showcase their voice and problem-solving strategies.

Worldbuilding

Finally, we have worldbuilding. This isn't just the stuff of high-concept fantasy and science fiction—even if you're not building a whole new universe from scratch, you still need worldbuilding to help ground your readers in whatever setting you're working with. This could be a brand new planet ruled by a revolutionary form of government, or it could be a small neighborhood in a city your readers have never been to. Whatever your setting, worldbuilding helps establish the details that make your protagonist feel at home in an alive and lived-in world.

Worldbuilding is simultaneously the simplest and most complicated of the three core aspects of Act One. On the one hand, worldbuilding tends to go hand-in-hand with plot, meaning you can establish important details as you foreshadow the plot events yet to

come. Ideally, the details you provide will be specifically relevant to whatever plot point you're referencing, providing context where necessary without telling your readers too much or too little. On the other, that subtle balance can be hard to achieve. You don't want to overwhelm your readers with lengthy info dumps that slow down your pacing and distract from the story, but you also don't want to give them so little detail that the feel lost as the story progresses around them. You have to be generous, but you also have to stay on topic.

In Part 2, we include a list of questions that your first act should aim to answer. These questions can help you not only identify which worldbuilding details are necessary, but also where they can be most effective in your scenes. Look for opportunities to sprinkle in your information while still keeping the scene's primary focus on your plot and/or protagonist, and you'll manage to avoid washing readers away in a flood of worldbuilding.

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Now, all of this might seem a little daunting to manage. Story beginnings are tough, and they're even tougher when it seems like there's a dozen little things you need to track as you go. This is where outlining comes in.

Why You Should Outline Your First Act

This book operates under the assumption that, at least to some extent, you are a "plotter." If you're not familiar with the term, it's a label thrown about in certain online writing circles to describe someone who "plots" their novel—in other words, uses some form of outline to guide their drafting process.

Not everyone operates this way, and that's fine. Far be it from me to tell you that your writing methods are wrong! I just strongly invite you to reconsider, at least as far as the purposes of this book are concerned. We're focusing on craft here—writer-tested, editor-approved methods of creating and strengthening your story's first act. It's not easy to do all that stuff on the fly, which is where your outline comes in.

Our advice is structured in such a way that you'll end up with a sort of rudimentary outline just by following along, but it's still worth putting together something that's a little more detailed.

If you're still on the fence, allow me to make my case.

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Outlines give you clear goals and direction.

No matter how much we wish it worked differently, a good story doesn't just write itself. Sometimes you get lucky—the planets align and your plot simply clicks into place, and your characters start running through all sorts of adventures as soon as you've written their feet. The rest of the time, you have to wrestle everything in line yourself.

Outlines allow you to get ahead of your plot bunnies before you ever actually put pen to paper, slotting in all your major story beats and ensuring the surrounding scenes build up to them effectively. This is especially important in Act One, where you're tasked with writing a bunch of setup information while trying not to bog down the pacing before you ever reach the inciting event.

Knowing exactly what you're building to and exactly how many scenes you have to do it with will help you cut the chaff and prioritize only the strongest and most important scenes. Jessica Brody (author of *Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*) refers to outlines as a

series of road markers to keep you from losing track of your story. According to Brody, creating an outline—or "beat sheet"—helps keep you "in line and on the right path toward [your] final destination: a satisfying end to the novel."

Outlines help you fit in new ideas.

Of course, this isn't to say that you're never allowed to incorporate new ideas. No story idea truly survives the first draft—by the time you're done writing, you'll inevitably end up with new ideas that need to be incorporated in more naturally from the start. When it comes to making fundamental story changes (whether that's a new subplot or a complete restructure), it's much easier to manage when you have your entire plot laid neatly in front of you.

Using your outline, you can compare your current draft to your original outline to see where things differ. From there, you can put together a revision plan based on the changes you'd like to add, keep, or remove. This allows you to approach revision holistically, rather than getting overwhelmed by a bunch of minor details right at the start.

Outlines make self-editing and revision easier.

Finally, it's worth pointing out that you don't have to be married to a single outline (or even a single outline style!) the entire time you're writing. If your current outline isn't serving its intended purpose, you can feel free to make tweaks or change up the entire format at any time. Sarah Domet (author of *90 Days to Your Novel*) says you should think of outlines less as a binding document and more as a recipe that can built upon and modified as you go. "Recipes guide us," she says, "but the creativity still belongs to the head chef." If you're not usually much of a plotter, even something as simple as a list of bullet points that can easily be expended on or rearranged will suffice!

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In short, there are a lot of benefits to starting your writing journey with an outline. Taking the time to put even a basic outline together is beneficial regardless of your usual methods, and will help you out at every stage of the writing process. If you're not sure how to begin, stick around for "Part 2: The Anatomy of Act One," where we'll be breaking down each of the major scenes in Act One. Knowing the purpose of each scene and what your own story's major beats are will help you put together a simple outline that's tailored to your needs.

Part 2: The Anatomy of Act One

Act One in Three Parts: The Essential Scenes

Your first act can be broken down into three categories: the Opening Scenes, the Catalyst, and the Act 2 Transition. Each category serves a specific purpose for setting up your story, whether that's establishing important setting details or leading your protagonist to the plot hook. This makes it easier to prioritize your content and make sure you're not spending too much time on minor details.

We'll take an in-depth look at how to write the essential scenes in Part 3—for now, let's run through a quick overview of each of the categories and the role they play in your first act.

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Opening Scenes

The Opening Scenes are the first images in your story. They set the tone and show readers what to expect, and create an early set of stakes for the protagonist. They also establish the protagonist's status quo—the setting, their characteristics, and how they interact with the world around them. These scenes hint toward the underlying theme of the story by showing the protagonist's conscious goals and/or unconscious needs.

Ideally, you should have 3–4 Opening Scenes leading into your Catalyst. This gives readers time to get acquainted with the foundation of your story without getting overwhelmed by details that won't matter as much once the plot kicks off. Use this as an opportunity to introduce your protagonist through various scenarios, then jump into the action.

Catalyst

The Catalyst introduces a complication to the status quo, presenting the protagonist with information and/or an opportunity that directly relates to their goals/needs. It should mark a major tone shift in your story—the point where the plot begins to encroach on your protagonist's life, forcing them to take action if they want things to turn out in their favor.

The Catalyst itself can be divided into three parts: the Inciting Event, the Debate, and the Resolution. In other words, the protagonist is presented with the plot hook, weighs their options, and ultimately makes a decision to act on it. Each of these parts can be its own scene, or you can combine them in any way you like. As long as all three points are touched on, you're set!

Act 2 Transition

Finally, there's the Act 2 Transition. This scene moves your protagonist from the known to the unknown, from the life they knew to the adventure they'll be on for the rest of the story. Keep in mind that this scene, while it does connect Acts 1 and 2, should be tonally and thematically distinct from the latter—the focus is on the protagonist's feelings about their new life, rather than the new life itself.

Since this scene serves primarily as a setup for Act 2, you don't have to spend too much time on it. Keep things simple and to-the-point, leaving any non-essential character or setting introductions to Act 2. Stick with your protagonist's emotions, and you'll be ready for the next stage of your story in no time.

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Though this is by no means a full outline, you can think of these categories as a sort of template by which you can start to structure your outline. Identifying the purpose of each of your scenes will help you better categorize them, giving you a better idea of where they belong in your first act.

Don't worry if you don't yet know the purpose of each of your scenes. We've got something for that, too…

Questions Your First Act Should Answer

Now that we've covered the three categories your essential scenes should fall into, it's time to discuss what exactly makes an essential scene. In your first act, each scene should provide readers with the information they need to understand your world, plot, and protagonist before the story takes off.

Thankfully, readers need less information than you might think. There are only a handful of questions that *must* be answered in your first act. As long as you establish a few key details, you can rely on the writing process (and readers' imaginations) to fill in the less-important blanks.

If you're struggling to determine whether or not a scene should be considered essential, or if you're struggling to come up with an idea for a scene in the first place, consider the following questions. Each of your scenes should answer one or more of these questions, so you can use them as a guideline to plan or categorize your first act as needed.

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What is the current status quo?

What does the default state of the world look like?

What is a looming (but not necessarily pressing) threat in the world?

What does your protagonist's day-to-day life look like?

What do they want to change, and why do they want to change it?

What problem and/or obstacle is the protagonist facing?

What are the protagonist's goals, and how does this problem/obstacle prevent them from achieving those goals?

What is their current approach to this obstacle, and how is it doomed to fail?

What do they need in order to actually overcome this obstacle, and why can't they have it?

What information, obstacle, or opportunity does the Inciting Event present?

How does this overshadow or further complicate the stakes the protagonist is currently facing?

What does the protagonist stand to lose if they accept the plot hook? If they *don't* accept the plot hook?

What changes occur going into the second act?

What about the status quo changes as a result of the inciting event?

What about the protagonist's life changes as a result of accepting the call to adventure?

What are the protagonist's overall feelings going into these changes?

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By answering these questions (in whatever order or combination you need), you should end up with a fairly basic outline of what your scenes should accomplish. From there, you can organize your scenes based on how they fit into the essential scene categories and craft a more detailed roadmap of your first act.

Part 3: Writing the First Act

Things Your Opening Scenes Should Achieve

You've done it—you've finally crafted the perfect plot, and you know exactly what your Inciting Event needs to be to get your protagonist started on their adventure. Now you just have to figure out how to get them there. You only have a handful of scenes with which to set up your character and story, and they need to be gripping enough that readers stick around long enough to get to the good stuff. So what do you do?

There are a variety of ways you can choose to open your story—jumping straight into the action, giving your protagonist a relatively boring start to their day, or one of countless other options—but there are a few things your opening scenes should achieve in order to best set your readers up for the story to come.

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Expand on your opening line.

This may seem like an obvious one, but it's important to get right. Your opening line may be the first thing that grabs your readers' attention, but it's nothing without proper backup. Your opening scenes should build on your first line, giving readers the details they need to connect that line to the rest of the story. If you've chosen to go with an emphatic, attention-grabbing first line, make sure your opening scenes provide context that gives the line meaning. If you've decided to wax poetic about your story's core theme, make sure your scenes ground readers in a specific, personal story that illustrates that theme.

This serves a threefold purpose—not only are you introducing the story itself, you're also building out the primary tone of the story and further establishing your unique writing

style. It's not as complicated as it may sound, though! As long as you follow the other tips on this list, this part should come naturally with the actual writing.

Give your protagonist a problem to solve.

Setting up an immediate obstacle for your protagonist is a great way to introduce them to your readers. Simply by creating a conflict that needs resolving, you can highlight key aspects of your protagonist's personality and set up a source of tension that will propel the story forward before you get to the inciting event.

This is also the point where you can establish the current status quo—in other words, the "normal" state of the world and characters. These details will help ground readers in the scene and show them the facets of the world that will be forever changed by the course of the plot. By showing the protagonist facing an issue in the relative comfort and safety of their daily life, you can show readers who they are, how they react to problems, and what their idea of "comfort and safety" looks like before the plot sets in.

Start at the right spot.

For this tip to make sense, it's important to understand one thing—the plot begins at the inciting event, and the story begins at the top of your protagonist's character arc. You want to open up close enough to the inciting event that readers aren't bogged down with details that become unimportant once the plot gets going, but not so late that we don't get to know the protagonist and where they're coming from.

The key to writing effective and compelling opening scenes is to set them at the point in the story where the protagonist is most willing to start making changes in their life, but just before they're actually given the opportunity to do so. This helps readers understand

their motivation for going on an adventure—essentially, why *they're* the protagonist, instead of some other character.

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Knowing what purpose your opening scenes serve and what you should aim to achieve when writing them takes away much of the difficulty of writing your story's beginning. Simply follow these tips, and you'll be moving on to your inciting event in no time.

How to Write a Great Opening Line

It's impossible to understate how important your opening line is. It offers readers their first impression of your story, introducing them to the world, characters, and overarching tone in just a handful of words. In a lot of cases, readers use these lines to determine if your book is for them. If you manage to get their attention, they're more likely to continue reading through to the end.

In other words, the pressure is on to make that first line stand out. This is what's called "hooking" your readers—getting them to ask the right questions and decide that your story's worth reading. They need to know that something interesting is happening to the protagonist, that there's something interesting yet to be revealed, and that it's all going to unfold in an interesting way. If your opening line doesn't deliver that hook, it won't be as effective, and you're more likely to lose readers' attention.

So, how do you create that hook? I hate to be the one to tell you, but there isn't really a tried-and-true method for creating the perfect opening line. There's too much variation

between stories, and too many factors at play to create a clear template. Ultimately, it comes down to what it is about your story that you want to highlight from the get-go.

In general, it's best to go with **theme, stakes,** or **style** as your primary focus. Other elements of your story (character, worldbuilding, etc.) will naturally follow, so they don't necessarily need to be the driving force behind your opening line.

Below, I've included examples of each type of opening line, as well as an explanation as to why they work for their respective stories.

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Theme

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." — Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

Pride and Prejudice has one of the most recognizable opening lines in all of fiction. What makes it so iconic is that Austen begins not by introducing her main characters or immediate pressing stakes, but by stating the core assumption that drives the entire story forward. By identifying this principle in the first line, Austen helps readers understand a large facet of her characters' motivations, as well as a prominent aspect of the society the story is set in.

To apply this to your own writing, consider the things your characters either know or accept to be true about the world they live in. Do any of them offer insight into your protagonists' motivations or the story as a whole? By presenting these themes in your opening line, you can set the stage for readers and easily segue into a scene in which your characters are acting on or responding to this theme in some way.

Stakes

"Dellaria Wells had misplaced her mother." — C.M. Waggoner, *The Ruthless Lady's Guide to Wizardry*

This particular opening line is from the story's first chapter, itself titled "Wherein Dellaria Hunts About for a Wayward Relation, Is Not the Recipient of Maternal Warmth, and Is Presented with an Opportunity for Gainful Employment." These two things working in tandem create a story opening that presents interesting stakes and the promise of intrigue yet to come. In this first line, Waggoner offers an immediate conflict to be resolved as readers begin the story.

Stakes are an easy way to make it clear that something interesting (read: distressing) is happening to your protagonist. The stakes you create in your own opening line don't have to be major—in fact, they don't even have to be happening in the moment. The goal is to convey to readers that the protagonist must either take action or risk the problem growing worse. The drama that decision creates makes for an effective hook that will keep them reading well past the first scene.

Style

"In the myriadic year of our Lord — the ten thousandth year of the King Undying, the Kindly Prince of Death! — Gideon Nav packed her sword, her shoes, and her dirty magazines, and she escaped from the House of the Ninth." — Tamsyn Muir, *Gideon the Ninth*

There's a lot of information to be gleaned from the first line of *Gideon the Ninth.* From this line alone, readers can ascertain that Gideon lives in a religious society overseen by a highly respected, immortal god with heavily implied connections to necromancy, she has

only a few precious belongings that matter to her (including a sword and some nude magazines), and that she's being held somewhere mysterious against her will. There's great characterization and world building present, but the main appeal is the style itself. Muir's word choice—including such gems as "myriadic," "Undying," and "escaped"—hints toward the dark, precise, and somewhat irreverent tone that's present through the entire story.

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That's a lot to accomplish all at once, but it's deceptively easy. Ideally, you'll use your opening line to present crucial information about your story, whether that's through characterization, worldbuilding, or tone. Your approach to each of these factors is a major part of your signature writing style, and can go a long way toward catching your readers' attention. In other words, you can hook readers simply by showing off how uniquely suited you are to telling this particular story.

Mistakes to Avoid with Your Opening Lines

Now that we've covered some potential starting points for your opening line, let's take a look at what *not* to do. There's not necessarily a wrong way to open your novel, but as we've discussed before, it's important to create a line that's interesting and functional, and will provide readers with the "hook" they need to get invested in your story. Sometimes, the lines you write can confuse readers more than they help them, so here are a few mistakes to avoid to make the most of your opening line.

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Don’t make it too short.

Now, you may be worried about making your opening line too *long.* This is true to an extent—while you don’t want to bog readers down with irrelevant information, you also need to make sure they have enough information to work with as they continue reading the scene.

Your opening line should introduce readers to your story. Short, punchy, or otherwise vague statements don’t do much by way of introduction, as they rarely give readers enough interesting detail to latch onto. Make sure your opening line is long enough (and detailed enough!) to ground them in your story and incentivize them to keep reading.

Don’t begin with dialogue.

Dialogue is a great way to jump into a scene that’s already in progress, but it’s ineffective for setting the stage and can leave readers feeling disoriented. Consider all the questions an opening dialogue line presents: Who is speaking? What tone are they using? What’s the context of this line?

None of these are the questions you want readers asking right away. They’ll spend more time trying to get their bearings than they will getting acquainted with your story. Save the dialogue openings for later chapters and make sure your opening line is *giving* readers information, rather than making them aware of the information they lack.

Don’t lie to your readers.

While it can be tempting to hook readers with immediate drama that gets resolved quickly and cleanly, it’s not a great way to build your reputation. If you set readers up

with high stakes that turn out not to be real (inaccurate or over-the-top descriptions, "joke" opening lines, a beginning that's "just a dream"), they won't fully trust you to tell the truth throughout the rest of the story.

The stakes you set up in your opening line should be real, no matter how minor they are. Readers will care about a problem if it's clear that the protagonist cares about it—all you have to do is establish their expectations and follow through. Misleading readers by hyperbolizing or falsely raising insignificant stakes will never be as effective as simply setting up a scene clearly and honestly. Remember: "dramatic" doesn't always mean "engaging."

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Your opening lines don't have to be perfect, but they should be effective. Knowing what you'd like your first line to say about your story and communicating that with your unique personal style is a sure-fire way to start your novel off strong. Give readers the information they need in a clear, accurate, and engaging way—if you manage to get their attention, they're more likely to continue reading through to the end.

Things to Do Before Your Inciting Event

Now that you've got your opening lines sorted out, it's time to move on to the rest of your opening scenes. The problem is, story beginnings are notoriously difficult to write. Since most major plot beat don't happen until the second act, a lot of writers are left floundering with what feels like slow, tedious detail as they attempt to write their opener.

If you're a plotter like me, you might seek out templates or checklists to make the process easier. Unfortunately, these guides aren't a catch-all solution for every story. Maybe you're jumping straight into the action and don't need to spend more than a scene or two on extraneous setup, or maybe you've got a lot of in-depth worldbulidng that just a few scenes isn't enough to cover.

Thankfully, your first act really only serves one major purpose — to introduce your protagonist and the world around them. As long as you establish a few key details before your plot kicks off with the inciting event, it doesn't matter exactly how many scenes you have or what your final word count looks like.

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Give your protagonist a problem to solve.

We'll start with an easy one — we already talked about this at the beginning of Part 3! It just goes to show how important a simple conflict is to your first act. All you really need to do here is place something between your protagonist and their immediate goal. It can be a major obstacle with legitimate stakes, or a comparatively minor inconvenience that they're saddled with unexpectedly. It doesn't really matter, as all readers need to see is how your protagonist reacts in the face of a challenge.

It's important to set this up before the inciting event, as it gives readers a glimpse into who the protagonist is and what their life is like before the real plot comes knocking. You get to establish a few early character traits and showcase their strengths and weaknesses when it comes to problem solving, all while creating a (necessary) source of tension that'll drive the story forward and keep readers interested throughout all the preliminary worldbuilding.

Create set of stakes.

This one is a bit more complicated, as it involves laying some groundwork over multiple scenes leading up to your inciting event. Certain aspects of your story will be permanently altered by the course of the plot, so it's important to take a few scenes to establish what the "before" picture looks like. This includes larger things like the setting and current world state, but also smaller details like your protagonist's family life and daily routines (in other words, the things that your protagonist stands to lose if they engage with the inciting event).

A protagonist without something to prove and something to lose has no business going on adventures. Showing the details of your protagonist's life and what it means to them will make your inciting event far more impactful, as readers will better understand what's at risk if the protagonist doesn't act, and what they stand to leave behind if they do.

Give your protagonist personal motivations.

Further to that point, you've got your protagonist's personal motivations. This part should come somewhat naturally as you cover the other two points, as all you're really doing is providing the *why* — why your protagonist is driven to overcome their challenges, and why they're willing to risk the relative safety and ease of their status quo. Maybe they take up the call to adventure because they want to protect their loved ones, or maybe they're desperate to prove they're capable of protecting someone in the first place. Maybe it's both!

Whatever they may be, your protagonist's motives should be more or less clear by the time the inciting event rolls around, because your readers should be able to confidently predict how they'll react. We can safely assume they'll engage with the plot hook because we know there's still story left to read, but the response should still be

believable. Your protagonist's motivations lie at the core of their character arc, and establishing them clearly at the beginning of the story creates a solid foundation on which you can build and develop that arc later on.

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Though each of these points is designed to highlight a single aspect of your protagonist, they all paint broad enough strokes that you have some room to breathe. As you write your first few scenes, more general information about the setting and background details of your story will naturally fall into place. Before you know it, you'll have a detailed and effective start to your first act that's ready to kick off the action with your inciting event.

How to Write a Compelling Inciting Event

Now that you've reached the inciting event, it's time to bring all the setup work you did in your opening scenes to fruition and kick your plot off with a bang. The inciting event, as we mentioned in the beginning of Part 2, is the point at which your protagonist's life and the current course of your story is interrupted and fundamentally changed. Something out of the ordinary happens, and it makes enough of an impact that things will never quite be ordinary again.

There's a lot of work that goes into making inciting events stand out from the rest of your scenes. It's not just about the content—even the most exciting events can seem bland if they're not properly introduced.

We've compiled a list of tips on how to write a compelling inciting event, using the same books mentioned in the section about opening lines as examples. In case you haven't read them (or need a refresher course), here's a quick breakdown:

Pride and Prejudice: Lizzie meets Mr. Darcy at the ball at Pemberley, where he refuses to dance with her.

The Ruthless Lady's Guide to Wizardry: Delly takes a strange but lucrative job as a bodyguard for a high-society lady.

Gideon the Ninth: Gideon poses as Harrowhark's cavalier and accompanies her to Canaan House for her Lyctor studies.

Now that we have our inciting events in mind, let's take a look at what makes them work and what you can do to strengthen your own inciting event.

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Foreshadow your inciting event in the opening scenes.

The key to writing a good inciting event is to foreshadow it ahead of time. There's nothing worse than being blindsided by a plot that comes out of nowhere—it messes with your pacing, and even worse, it feels out of place in your story. Foreshadowing lets you drip-feed clues into your opening scenes, creating a sense of anticipation around the inciting event that results in stronger payoff when the event actually happens.

Pride and Prejudice: The Bennets plan to attend the ball at Pemberley so that Jane can socialize with Mr. Bingley. Lizzie hears that Mr. Bingley has a mysterious and incredibly wealthy friend who will also be in attendance.

The Ruthless Lady's Guide to Wizardry: Delly is a known gutterwitch who relies on thievery to scrape by. She's got a drinking problem, but her mother struggles with more dangerous addictions.

Gideon the Ninth: Gideon wants desperately to leave Ninth House, but her escape plans have been repeatedly foiled. Harrowhark needs a cavalier, but Gideon knows a terrible secret that Harrow doesn't want made public.

In all of these examples, we learn things about the protagonist and their circumstances that start creating a sense of stakes. Jane wants to marry Mr. Bingley, Delly needs money, and Gideon wants her freedom. We also begin to see that the current status quo isn't entirely sustainable. Jane needs opportunities to socialize if she wants a proposal, Delly needs a better source of income if she wants to stop living paycheck to paycheck, and Gideon needs a better plan if she ever wants to get out of Ninth House. All of these details leave us expecting a change and speculating what exactly that change might be.

When writing your opening scenes, look for ways to start hinting at your inciting event before it occurs. Giving readers a few details beforehand will help you more successfully introduce your inciting event and build up tension surrounding your protagonist's choices.

Don't just interrupt the status quo—wreck it.

A good inciting event is one that can't be ignored. Your protagonist should be directly confronted with a plot hook that forces them to make a difficult or otherwise undesirable choice. On the one hand, they act in such a way that takes them away from the relative comfort and familiarity of the life they know; on the other, they don't act, and that life feels a little less comfortable and familiar now that they're wondering what could have been.

Pride and Prejudice: Lizzie knows herself to be pretty, smart, and desirable. Mr. Darcy's rejection of her is surprising and hurtful, but she's forced to spend time around him if she wants to support Jane and Mr. Bingley's romance.

The Ruthless Lady's Guide to Wizardry: Delly knows that her current lifestyle isn't sustainable. She's under threat of eviction and incarceration, and this suspicious bodyguard job promises her the money she desperately needs.

Gideon the Ninth: Gideon's life promises nothing but more abuse and even more failed escape attempts. Harrow's deal is based on lies and exploitation, but it's the way out she's been looking for.

Besides interrupting the status quo, you might notice something else these inciting events have in common—they don't *really* give the protagonist a choice. It may seem as though they can elect not to take the plot bait, but it's clear that their lives would end up worse if they didn't. Lizzie would feel guilty if Jane didn't receive a proposal from Mr. Bingley, Delly would likely end up homeless or in jail, and Gideon would die in Ninth House after being made *more* miserable by denying Harrow. The status quo is interrupted either way, but one of the options offers the protagonist a more desirable outcome in exchange.

When crafting your inciting event, think of the ways your story will change even if the protagonist doesn't follow the plot hook. This will help you establish better stakes, and give your protagonist a bit more room to debate, rather than simply going for the easiest option.

Keep your protagonist's agency in mind.

For those who don't know, "agency" is your protagonist's ability to directly impact the story at hand. It encompasses the decisions they make, the reasons they make them, and how those decisions affect the world and characters around them. While part of the idea

of inciting events is that they're happening *to* your protagonist, forcing them to react when they want to act, it shouldn't feel as though they're being shoved unwillingly into the rest of the story. In other words, your protagonist should happen to the plot as much as the plot happens to them. The best way to do this is by giving your protagonist a separate set of motivations.

Pride and Prejudice: Lizzie wishes for her sister's happiness more than anything else. While she does have to tolerate Mr. Darcy if she wants to support Jane, it gives her an opportunity to present Jane as a desirable match. She also can't help but be intrigued by Mr. Darcy.

The Ruthless Lady's Guide to Wizardry: Delly is tired of being on the back foot and wants to live in comfort for once. The bodyguard job is the only thing standing between her and homelessness (and possibly jail), but it's also a chance to turn things around. She can also use the money to help sponsor her mother's rehabilitation.

Gideon the Ninth: Gideon just wants to get out of Ninth House. The deal Harrow offers her isn't good or fair, but it guarantees her freedom with more glory and privileges than escaping would give her. Harrow is also, frustratingly, the closest thing she has to a friend.

All of these protagonists have something they're running toward, in addition to whatever they're running away form. While the main appeal of their respective plot hooks lie with avoiding a negative outcome, they all potentially have something to gain as well. Lizzie gets to learn more about the mysterious stranger who defies the manner she's come to expect of people of his station, Delly has a chance to help her mother overcome her drip addiction, and Gideon gets an adventure far away from the cold death of Ninth House. These personal motivations sweeten the deal and give them a reason to make the choice for themselves, rather than being paralyzed by choice until the plot makes the decision for them.

We've talked about the importance of these personal motivations in earlier sections, but this is the first opportunity to take advantage of them. Your protagonist should have some sort of *raison'd'etre* that pushes them to make the choice that other characters wouldn't—there's a reason they're the protagonist, after all!

This isn't to say that their choice should be easy, though. Just that they should have something that motivates them to move forward despite the risks. And, speaking of risks…

How to Establish Stakes

The latter half of your first act is driven almost entirely by stakes. Simply put, stakes are the things that are at risk (mostly for your protagonist) as a result of the central plot conflict. They're what stands to be lost and/or gained by your protagonist taking action and proceeding with whatever adventure you have cooked up for them in regards to the plot.

Stakes are a crucial part of your story because, without them, there is no story. Now, the severity of your stakes will differ based on various factors—genre, age demographic, tone, themes, etc. Maybe the fate of the world is at stake, or maybe your protagonist wants a second chance with their first love. The important thing is that your stakes should feel real and personal.

There are two major kinds of stakes you should be concerned with: story stakes and character stakes.

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Story Stakes

Story stakes are relatively straightforward, as they're the most directly related to the plot of your story. Something about the protagonist's life and/or the world as a whole is threatened by the events of the plot, and the protagonist must take action in order to ensure their desired outcome.

As long as you're appropriately foreshadowing your plot and including necessary worldbuilding details in your opening scenes, you should have your story stakes well covered by the time your inciting event is through. These stakes will also stay more or less consistent throughout your story, so future plot points will become about enhancing, building upon, and complicating the stakes you've already established.

Character Stakes

Character stakes are a bit more complicated, as they're specifically related to your protagonist's inner struggles. These stakes may or may not have an impact on your overall plot, and may change over the course of the story as your protagonist progresses through their character arc.

You can establish strong character stakes by giving your protagonist additional motivations outside of their main plot ambitions. Showing what your protagonist's values and fears that are illustrated through their characterization in the first act will help readers understand what's at risk for them personally, and will help make their investment in the plot more believable as a result.

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The important thing here is that you want this part of your story to feel believable. Real people typically don't go jumping headfirst into adventure, especially not if they've got something important to lose. *Protagonists,* however, can be convinced as long as the motivations are clear, strong, and personal.

How to Close Out Your First Act

As your first act comes to an end, it's time to take stock of everything that's changing as you shift from one status quo into another. While the idea of a transition might initially seem plot and context-heavy, you can actually save the detail work until you're more firmly established in Act 2. For now, your focus should be on that in-between space—the tone and emotion, and the impact it all has on your protagonist.

Here are a few tips to help make your transition scenes as effective and emotionally charged as possible.

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Set the tone.

The Act 2 transition scenes are a sort of liminal space between acts, and the tone should reflect this. These scenes mark the point in your story where it becomes clear that your protagonist has left their old life (or some aspect of their old life) behind and are beginning something new, but doesn't have quite enough information to feel fully grounded in that new reality.

Depending on the overall mood of your story, the tone you're aiming for might differ somewhat. You might aim for awkward and disorienting, somber, or even optimistically anticipatory. Look for opportunities to use mood words that highlight your desired tone and lean into them wherever possible—you can always come back and tone things down later if you need to.

Don't give too many details.

Like I said above, you can save a lot of the major Act 2 details until…well, Act 2. You don't need to completely introduce all your new characters, rules, expectations, and settings during these transition scenes. As a matter of fact, the less detail you can provide without leaving readers completely in the dark, the better. This helps hike up the sense of unfamiliarity, and helps readers empathize with your protagonist when they're feeling out of their depth.

Since you can't ignore details completely, focus on only the most need-to-know elements of your second act. Focus on broad strokes—characters your protagonist (and readers) need to meet right away, set pieces to establish your protagonist's "home base," and a general overview of their new role in the story. These act as the clearest, most tangible differences between where your protagonist came from and where they are now.

Focus on emotion.

From there, it's all about leaning into your protagonist's emotions. They've just made an extremely important, difficult, or otherwise impactful decision, and something about their life has permanently changed as a result. These transition scenes are potentially the first chance they've had to catch their breath and think things over, so it's the perfect time to give them space to do that.

Transition scenes are naturally slower paced, so you don't have to worry so much about maintaining external tension through these scenes. Instead, it's an opportunity to intentionally slow things down and explore your protagonist's inner conflict. Let these scenes be introspective, focusing on how your protagonist feels about the choices they made and the choices yet to come. Don't be afraid to embrace a more stream-of-consciousness flow as they work through their feelings!

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Now that you've established all of this, you're done drafting your first act—congratulations! You're ready to move onto the grand adventures and challenges presented by Act 2.

Part 4: Self-Editing the First Act

The Right Time to Self-Edit

The tragic truth of the matter is that there isn't really a *right* time to self-edit your story. Everyone's writing process looks a little different, so everyone's editing process will look a little different as well. There's certainly more structure involved in the editing process, since you're stepping slightly out of the creative zone and starting to worry about things like *cohesion* and *pacing,* but like all things writing-related, there's no one-size-fits-all solution.

The most recommended time to self-edit is a few weeks (or months) after you've completed your first draft. You've done the darn thing, so now it's time to put it on ice for a while and take a much-deserved break from the grind before you come back with a red pen. I'm sorry if you were hoping for some different advice here—love it or hate it, that's exactly what you need to do.

Listen; it's the recommended way for a reason. Not just because it's the method that ensures you *actually finish your draft,* but because it gives you the time and distance needed to be able to look at your writing through a more objective, critical lens. If you self-edit right away, your opinion of your writing is going to suffer heavily from recency bias. You'll either be too precious about how long it took to write a given scene to make necessary cuts, or you'll tear part perfectly serviceable writing because it's not as good as you wish it were.

Furthermore, self-editing too soon often correlates with self-editing the wrong things. Sure, stuff like syntax, character voice, and flow are all important, but they're less important at this stage of the game. You should be focused on holistic edits and craft elements—stuff like the aforementioned cohesion and pacing, but also character arcs, scene effectiveness, tension, and much more.

So, seriously, take some time. Put this book down, close your word processor, and simply bask in the fact that you wrote a novel. Enjoy some time off, and don't come back until you're ready *and excited* to start asking yourself some hard questions about your story.

See you then!

Assessing a Scene's Effectiveness

All right, welcome back. Now that you've had some time away from your manuscript, it's time to put on your self-editing cap and take a look at your scenes. Our purpose here isn't to start cutting things—at least, not yet. This is simply where we determine whether or not it might be worth cutting a given scene, or if it just needs a bit of pruning to stay in shape.

It can be a little intimidating to get started, so we've put together a few tips for you!

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Break down your scenes into an outline.

This part of the process will be a lot easier if you plotted out your first act ahead of time, as all you have to do is look at your existing outline and add or remove any scenes that wormed their way into or out of your draft during the discovery writing process. If you haven't put together an outline yet, don't worry! We included a list of essential scenes in Part 2 that should help you with this step.

Trust me when I say this is a crucial part of the process. It's going to be a lot easier to evaluate your scenes when they're neatly organized in order, especially if you include a quick synopsis or summary to remind you what each of the scene's major beats are.

Identify the core purpose of each scene.

This is where the actual assessment part begins. Once you have your outline, take a look at each of your scenes and determine what each of them are doing to serve your first act. In part 1, we covered the main roles of the first act—to set up plot, characterization, and worldbuilding. Each of your scenes should fulfill one of these three things.

You can refer to the essential scene breakdown and the checklist included in "Questions Your First Act Should Answer" if you need some additional guidance here. Determining how a given scene is categorized and which important setup questions it answers will help you determine if the scene is actually effective, or if it's just ticking off a box.

Determine what isn't working.

Once you've done this, you may end up with a few scenes that *technically* meet your requirements, but still don't seem to fit quite right. In these cases, you'll need to do a more in-depth assessment that looks at how well the scene is functioning.

This is where a set of extra eyes can come in handy, as we're not always the best judges of our own work. Checking in with alpha readers, critique partners, or your book coach can help you identify the ways in which a scene that's ostensibly doing its job could be doing it better.

Here are a few questions that might help you figure out the problem. If you have other questions you use to review your writing, feel free to add those in as they apply!

Is the narrative perspective working? Does it feel too close or too distant from the protagonist compared to the rest of the story?

Are the character voices clear and consistent?

Does the writing flow well? Is it easy to understand?

Is the pacing too slow or too fast?

Does the scene reveal any new information, or contextualize any information that's already been revealed?

Does this need to be its own scene, or can the information easily be added to another existing scene?

How well does this scene fit into Act One as a whole?

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Now that you've evaluated each of your scenes, it's time to take a closer look at the ones you found lacking.

Cutting Scenes in the Drafting Phase

It's very tempting in first drafts (and second drafts, and third drafts…) to go full scorched-earth on scenes that no longer serve your story or live up to your writing standards. *Avoid this temptation.* Your scene being ineffective doesn't automatically

mean it's bad, it just means it doesn't quite fit into the story anymore. You have a few options at your disposal before you need to start slashing up your manuscript.

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Reconsider

No, this isn't a free pass to call take-backsies on the results of your assessment. It's more of an invitation to look closer at your scene and determine *why* it's not working for the story. I want to reiterate here that you should really be looking for second opinions on your scenes, whether you love them or hate them. Self-doubt and Imposter Syndrome run rampant among writers, and there's a chance you're judging your work a lot more harshly than you need to.

Knowing exactly what isn't clicking about a given scene (rather than just knowing it doesn't click) can give you much better direction when it comes to revision. This should always be the first step in deciding if and how to cut a scene, as you can sometimes turn things around just by slipping a bit of foreshadowing into your existing dialogue scene, or adding some worldbuilding details you'd originally saved for later. It's best to save your work where you can!

Rework

Working is a bit more complicated, as it generally involves more active revision than simply changing a detail or two. More often than not, it means changing something fundamental about your scene. Perhaps the scene doesn't answer a crucial question *because* the dialogue goes on too long—the characters get off topic, or they start arguing such that they never quite get back to the topic at hand.

This is where reworking comes in. Doing large-scale revisions on a single scene is certainly more work than simply deleting it, but again, it preserves more of your original writing. It may also give you an opportunity to make things more cohesive and consistent, as certain things about your story or writing style may have changed over the course of the original drafting process.

Relocate

If you can't rework a scene where it's at, it may help just to *move* it. This is especially true of ineffective scenes in Act One, as it's easy to get ahead of yourself when you first start drafting and include details that don't necessarily need to come in until later. You might not need that particular flashback in Act One, for example—it can instead be triggered by an event in Act 2 that jogs the protagonist's memory.

Keep in mind that you may have to do some not-insubstantial revision to make a given scene work in a different place. You may need to allude to different events, set it in a different place, or find a way to seamlessly combine it with another scene. This often results in a stronger final product simply through paring down bloated or repetitive content, but be prepared to do a little more than simply copy-pasting!

Remove

A lot of writing circles are particularly brutal about the advice to kill your darlings, saying that you need to kill off your characters or cut away any scenes that feel fluffy or self-indulgent. I'm not a fan of this interpretation, as I feel like it frequently encourages writers to just make their work unnecessarily boring and sad just to make it seem more "literary."

Our preferred version is this: Sometimes it's necessary to cut scenes that aren't serving your story, even if you like them. You're inevitably going to end up with one of your favorite scenes on the chopping block, facing the reality that as much as you love it and as fun as it was to write, it's just not doing anything productive for your story. And you'll know it needs to be cut, you'll know your editor and/or agent will advise you to cut it anyway, but you'll still find it hard.

This is where you have to kill your darlings. You have to be willing to make the necessary changes to improve your story. If you've gone through all of the above options and you still can't salvage it, it's time to break out the Konmari Method. Recognize that it no longer sparks joy in your manuscript, thank it for its service, and remove it from your draft.

Just don't get rid of it entirely. It's a good idea to have a backup file (or preserve your original draft, if you're revising in a brand new document) to save all the snippets that don't meet the requirements for your next draft. Sometimes the scenes contain a particularly good line you can reuse later, or you captured your character's voice really well and want to use it as a reference later. Whatever the case, keeping it on hand while keeping it out of your active draft is a great way to clean up your manuscript without completely scrapping your hard work. It also makes it a little easier to make those necessary cuts, as you know it won't just be gone forever!

Conclusion

And there you have it! With all these tools and tips at your disposal, I hope you're able to emerge from this book with an effective—or at least workable!—first act that brings your story into the world with all the grace and style it deserves.

To help you move forward, I've included a handful of additional resources below that I've found incredibly valuable when writing Act One and beyond.

Good luck, and happy writing!

Additional Resources

Plot Perfect: Build Unforgettable Stories — Paula Munier

Plot versus Character — Jeff Gerke

Save the Cat! Writes a Novel — Jessica Brody

The Secrets of Character — Matt Bird

Story Genius — Lisa Cron

Story Physics: Harnessing the Underlying Forces of Storytelling — Larry Brooks

Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft — Janet Burroway, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, Ned Stuckey-French

90 Days to Your Novel — Sarah Domet

About the Author

Ley Taylor Johnson is a freelance fiction editor and writing coach. Having spent all their life in the rainy PNW, they know the value of spending time inside with a good book, and have channeled their passion for storytelling into a career helping indie authors bring their stories to life.