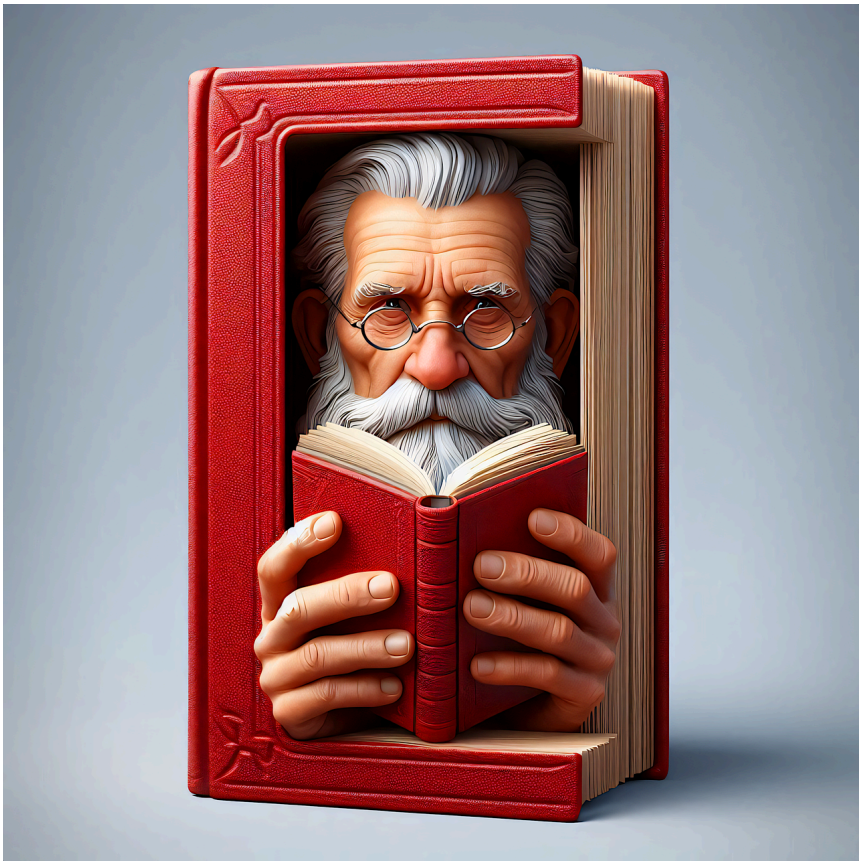
WRITE AN UNFORGETTABLE FIRST CHAPTER



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FIRST CHAPTERS THAT LEAVE READERS WANTING MORE

There are a million ways to write a first chapter, which means there is no single, right way to do it. But there is a simple truth about your first chapter that you shouldn't ignore, and that is the need to craft the chapter in a way that hooks readers and pushes them forward in the story. If you don't take the time to do that, you could lose them almost immediately.

This short book will outline techniques designed to draw readers in and keep them turning the pages, while also profiling the type of information and writing mistakes you want to avoid. My goal is to help guide you in 'how' you choose to construct your all-important first chapter.

Let's get started.

1) WHAT *IS* YOUR FIRST CHAPTER?

This may seem like a stupid question, but it's not. Your first chapter is not necessarily the beginning of your story. Your story begins when something happens to change the course of regular events in the life of your main character, in other words your inciting incident. And in some cases, the inciting incident may come two to three chapters into the story.

But wait. If your first chapter isn't the beginning of the story, what else could it be?

Your first chapter could be an opportunity to introduce your lead character in a way that readers gain insight into who they are and what their life is like. Consider the opening scene in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. We meet Dorothy, along with her aunt and uncle, and see how lonely and frustrated Dorothy is with her life. This is a perfect set up for what's to come when she runs away from home and the tornado hits.

You might also write a first chapter that's a flashback to provide context to the story. The movie *Titanic* opens with sepia tone film clips of the magnificent boat getting ready to

leave with people waving goodbye from the deck. It then switches to more recent underwater footage of two submersibles going down to the wreck. Since this is a historical event, we all know what the juxtaposition of scenes here means, artfully done by director James Cameron. But clearly, it's not the story yet of the two lovers, which comes later.

Murder mysteries often open with the murder. While the murder itself may act as the inciting moment, in many stories an opening murder is used to explain the mindset of the main character(s). For instance, there are multiple books that follow the disintegrating relationships of a group of friends who are keeping a secret (perhaps the murder) which happened when they were children. In this case, the opening chapter profiling the murder explains the psychological mindset of the characters we meet as adults and provides the reason for their disintegrating relationship.

If you've seen the movie *Princess Bride*, you'll know that it's a fairytale about two lovers. And yet, the movie opens in real time with a grandfather visiting his sick grandson, offering to read him a story. The story he reads just happens to be the aforementioned fairytale about two lovers.

The point here is that stories don't have to be told chronologically. You can ***open*** your story any way you want. This is one of the many creative decisions you will make as the author. The goal is to select an opening that will best set up the story (give the readers the information they need to understand and follow what comes next) or frame or emphasize the overriding theme of the story. To me, the opening of *The Wizard of Oz* sets up Dorothy's trip to Oz, while the opening of *The Titanic* off-sets the tone for its melancholy theme.

This is your choice, so think it through carefully.



2) NECESSARY INGREDIENTS FOR A FIRST CHAPTER

No matter how you choose to open your book, there is a list of things that really should be contained within the first chapter (or two). I qualify this statement because there are always exceptions.

An Introduction of Your Main Character

Readers *want* to meet your main character early because it's your protagonist that will lead them through the story. So, don't hold off too long on this or frustration could set in.

A second reason to introduce the main character early is that they hold the key to the narrative drive of the book, or the fuel that moves the story forward. Narrative drive is fundamental and relies on the main character making a critical choice near the beginning of the book. How the story unfolds over the following pages hinges on that choice—to chase the woman he loves, to solve the murder, to leave their spouse and start a new life, to forge ahead on some noteworthy project, to buy that rundown mansion

that turns out to be haunted, to outrun a forest fire, to compete in the Olympics, to find a way home from a deserted island, and on and on.

A third reason to introduce your protagonist early is that the story revolves around them. Once we meet your lead character, you can begin filling in with the secondary characters and/or the antagonist. That doesn't mean you must introduce your lead character first. Just don't leave it too long or your readers will begin wondering what the story is about and may get frustrated and put the book down.

Establish The Stakes in the Story

It's important to establish the stakes of whatever big decision your protagonist makes early in the story. In other words, what is he/she risking by making that choice? You want to do this near the beginning of the story to give readers an idea of where the story is going and to create enough tension to keep them reading. Establishing risk and tension will do this.



Ground Your Reader-Tell Us Where We Are

While the story's setting(s) can do much more than establish location (I wrote an entire micro book on this called *Make Setting Matter*), it's important to ground your reader early on in the story's location, time period, and world. Whether your book is set in the

swamps of Louisiana, the deserts of Africa, or in another universe or dimension, the first chapter allows you to paint a picture in the reader's mind and draw them into the story via the location. If you don't do this, if you only vaguely refer to a location, your reader can feel lost and begin to ask questions like, "Where am I?" The goal, however, is not to force them to read lengthy paragraphs describing the world you've created but to drop them into the scene set in that world. Here's an example of what I mean. Let's say the following paragraph is the opening of your book.

> Irene stared at the building and then quickly walked through the front door. She glanced hurriedly around the room before moving down a dreary hallway to the final door on the right. She paused, sucking in a tense breath. Her nerves were on the alert, but before she could open the door, her son Jacob called her name. She spun around and ran outside again.

This tells you nothing about the building Irene just walked into or her feelings about it. You can tell she doesn't like being there, but if this scene continued in this way, as a reader, I would be left wondering where in the world she was. What building had she gone into and why? What town was she in? And why is she even there? Here's a simple way to remedy that.

> Irene stared at the ramshackle house she'd grown up in feeling an intense loathing at the memories that flooded her mind. After several deep breaths, she stepped through the front door, pushing aside visions of a raging drunk old man, her grandfather, and the relentless cruelty of her grandmother. After a short glance around the empty living room, she quickly moved into the dreary hallway intent on getting what she came for. She stopped at the final door on the right. Her room. The room they had kept her hidden in for five years. She sucked in a tense breath, and then placed her hand on the doorknob, ready to face her past.
>
> "Mom!" her son called. "Come quick!"
>
> Irene spun around and hurried outside again, feeling a sense of relief at emerging back into the fresh air.

You can see with this short rewrite how identifying the lead character's background and feelings about the building provides context and helps to ground the reader. It's also done through action and not exposition, which puts the reader into the story.



Establish Mood or Tone

Setting the tone in the first chapter helps to prepare your readers for the story to come. Be careful, however, to match the style and content to the story you're about to tell. For instance, if you're writing a period drama, it probably wouldn't work to fill your first chapter with humor. The same is true for a murder mystery. That doesn't mean there can't be humorous moments in a period drama or a murder mystery, but to begin the book that way would be a bait and switch. And readers don't like that.

Introduce Your Readers to the Conflict

While you don't have to pinpoint the major conflict that will dominate the lead character's journey throughout the book in the first chapter, it's good to at least suggest it. And it's easier than you think.

For instance, perhaps your story involves a family with small children taking a camping trip when a raging forest fire breaks out. The bulk of the story will be about how they survive the horrors of the fire. In the first chapter, however, you could foreshadow the

fire as the family packs for the trip and the wife makes a joke about her husband packing a full can of lighter fluid and how big a fire he needs to barbeque a few hot dogs.

Or, perhaps your lead character struggles throughout the story with OCD, keeping him from achieving some major goal. Your opening scene might have him sitting in a meeting, listening to someone talk while he's focused on realigning the pens and pencils on his desk. That immediately gives us insight into his affliction.

If your female character will be stalked later in the story by a killer, the first scene could include something as simple as the young woman's mother saying to her, "I don't like you living alone." That statement suggests something sinister to come.

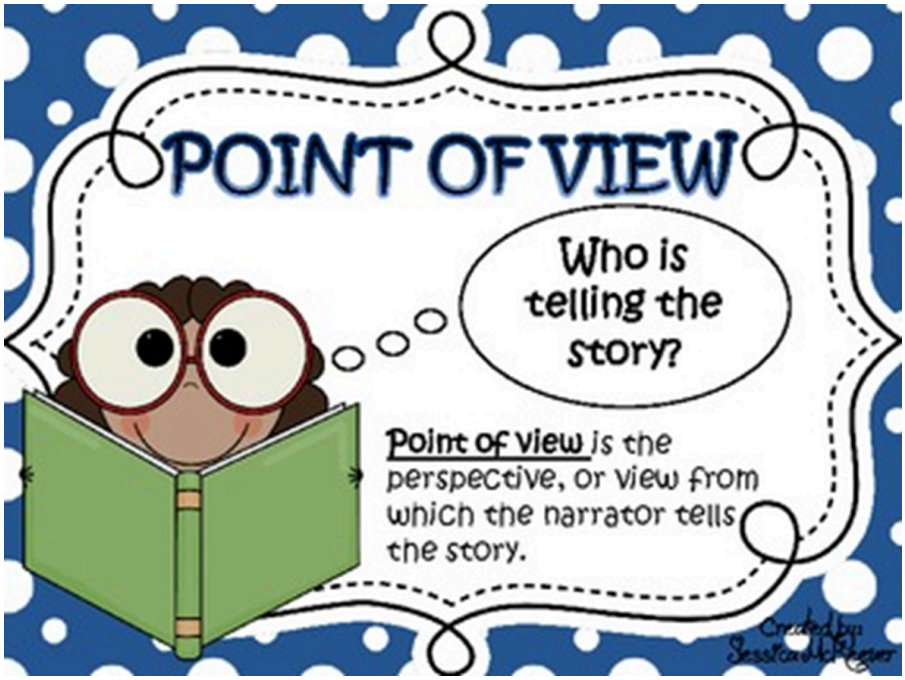
Introduce Readers to Important Secondary Characters

If your lead character will depend on other characters to make it through the story, such as Frodo depending on Sam for emotional support in *The Lord of the Rings*, it's good to allow your reader to meet them early in the story. Why? Because it helps to establish how important that relationship is and just how important that secondary character will be to the success of the story's journey.

Establish Ordinary Life

It's important to give readers an insight into your lead character's everyday life to put the inciting incident into context when it happens. For instance, in *The Lord of the Rings:The Fellowship of the Ring* we meet our main characters at a party to honor Bilbo Baggins before he suddenly disappears and leaves the magical ring for Frodo. We meet Frodo's friends and see the Shire. In *The Wizard of Oz*, we meet Dorothy, Toto, and her aunt and uncle in a scene on the farm (with the pig stye) before Dorothy takes her trip to Oz.

Allowing your reader to see what your lead character's world/life is like *before* you turn their world upside down and dramatically change things adds to the importance of the inciting incident and helps to raise the stakes as your character strives to achieve her mission.



Establish Point of View (POV)

In most cases, the author will establish the story's POV in the first chapter. Whether that's first or third person or the omniscient POV. There are, of course, exceptions. Many murder mysteries and thrillers will begin the story from the antagonist's POV as they commit the crime and then switch to the detective's POV immediately thereafter. Stories like *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, begin with one of the lead character's POV and then switch to a secondary POV and back again.

Just remember that anytime you change POV within the story, you need to be careful to do it in such a way that your reader can follow the switch easily. Changing POV in the middle of a scene, for instance, is traditionally a no-no because it can confuse the reader. Wait until the end of a scene or chapter.

3) HOOKING YOUR READER

It's critical to hook your reader and draw them into the story right from the beginning. Humans have a very short attention span (8 seconds), which means if they're not hooked right from the start, they're likely to stop reading.

How do you hook your reader?

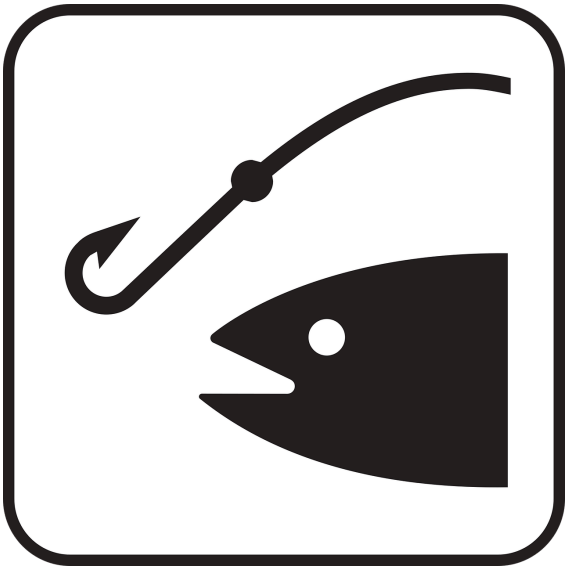
Create a Mini Plot

As you progress in your writing career, you'll learn that each scene/chapter is formed around a mini plot, which means that something has to happen in the scene, which includes action and conflict, ending with a resolution.

For instance, in the first short chapter (five paragraphs) of my book *Murder in the Past Tense*, we see two men throwing the body of a young girl into an abandoned well. She's wearing the prom dress her mother bought for her, which is now caked in blood. As the two men drive slowly away, we learn that with the girl's death, she not only leaves the boy she loves behind but her dream of becoming a teacher. In five short paragraphs, there is a beginning, middle, and an end to that scene.

Start With Action (in media res)

Rather than beginning your first chapter with a long description (exposition) of the story's time period or location, consider starting with your character performing some dynamic action. Opening the story 'in media res' (Latin for "in the middle of things") could be as simple as having your character driving somewhere, cooking dinner, giving a child a bath, or leaving work late at night. It's your character doing something they would normally do. But having them "do" something is more interesting than you, as the author, talking "about" something.



Create a Hook

Creating an opening hook is a technique used to grab a reader's attention and immediately draw them into the story. It's usually a dramatic first sentence or paragraph (sometimes an entire chapter) created through humor, creating a specific mood or tone, asking a question, or making a dramatic statement. The goal of the hook is to shock or startle your audience. Here are some examples:

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." — *1984* by George Orwell

"It was a pleasure to burn." — *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

"The small boys came early to the hanging." — *The Pillars of the Earth* by Ken Follett

From my books:

"Fall is the perfect time for a murder." — *No Place Like Home For a Murder*

"My uncle was dead. Not in the literal sense. He would die a minute or so later. But I didn't know that at the time." — *The Key to Murder*

"Her body was stuffed into a duffle bag and tossed carelessly into the old well as if it were nothing more than a bag of garbage. Those doing the

tossing waited to hear the thud when she hit bottom and then threw a few shovelfuls of dirt in behind her for good measure. Since the shovel was caked with her blood, it followed a moment later." — *Murder in the Past Tense*

"I've begun to think that murder follows me around. No really." — *A History of Murder*

Obviously, since I write murder mysteries, mine all have to do with the ultimate crime. You can see that while most of these hooks are a single sentence, some are longer. In the last one, you can also see that I added a bit of humor, which is an indication of the lead character's personality. Regardless, the goal is to catch the reader unawares and entice them to keep reading.

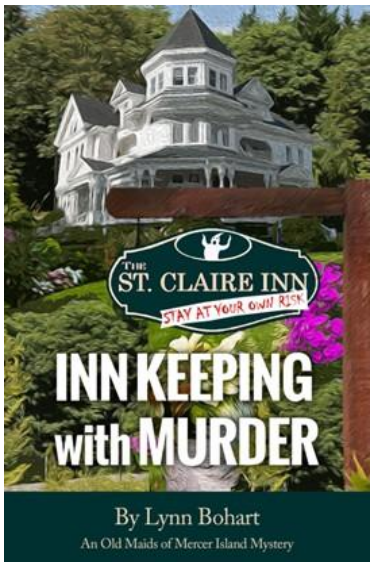


4) CAUTIONS WHEN CRAFTING YOUR FIRST CHAPTER

There are a few things to avoid when you write your first chapter.

a. Don't set the stakes too high in the first chapter or you'll have nowhere to go. Remember that to keep readers' attention, you'll want to keep raising the stakes as the story progresses.

b. Avoid including too much backstory for your lead character in the first chapter. At this point in the story, few people will care where your protagonist was born or if he loved his parents or not. Save it for later.
c. Be careful of info-dumps. This is when you feel compelled to share an abundance of information about the setting, character, or storyline through exposition. If you immediately force feed your reader a bunch of information that may or may not be relevant, you might lose them.
d. Don't feel the need to give every little detail about the location in the first chapter. It's enough to ground the reader in the location and include the kind of details that pique the reader's interest. Save some of that detail to be dribbled out later in the story.
e. Watch how much you 'show' vs 'tell' the reader. Telling can be a turn-off for readers, especially right in the beginning when they're anxious to get into the story.
f. Avoid introducing too many characters in the first chapter. The last thing you want to do is to immediately confuse or frustrate your reader.



EXAMPLE*: Inn Keeping with Murder*

This is the first chapter from *Inn Keeping with Murder*, the first book in my Old Maids of Mercer Island series. See if you can identify:

- An opening hook
- Introduction to the main setting
- Introduction of the main character
- A description of what life is normally like (stasis)
- A trigger (inciting incident)
- A conflict

Inn Keeping with Murder

CHAPTER ONE

It was early morning. An insidious breeze skimmed the lake as she stepped onto the porch of her million-dollar home on Mercer Island. The breeze came unchallenged and alone, bringing with it the smell of lake water and pine and just a pinch of foreboding. As the breeze slithered past the branches and rustled the leaves, it seemed to whisper her name.

Ellen Fairchild.

The sound made her pause. She lingered with her hand on the doorknob, listening, trapped between this world and that, her thoughts filled with shattered dreams. With a sigh, she pulled the door closed, expelling any final doubts from the recesses of her mind.

It was time to go.

The man in the moon smiled down on her from the dark sky above, sending flashes of light to dance across the lake water. All around her, the exclusive neighborhood was quiet, the imposing homes standing silently on guard while their inhabitants slept peacefully inside.

It was 2 a.m.

She stepped off the porch and climbed into the front seat of her new, sky-blue Lexus as a headache began to inch its way up the side of her head. She paused a moment to massage her temple before grasping the steering wheel, her perfectly manicured fingernails sinking into the rich leather. The internal message had now become her mantra.

It was time to go.

With a quick flick of her wrist, she turned the ignition key and started the engine. Then she put the car in gear and pulled out onto Placer Drive, where she paused to look over at the sprawling St. Claire Inn that took up most of the block on the lakeshore side of the street. The romantic Victorian, with its asymmetrical roofline and wrap-around porch welcomed guests year-round as the area's most popular bed and breakfast. Her close friend, Julia Applegate, owned it. The inn was as familiar to her as her own home.

Certainly, Julia would be asleep at this time of the morning, tucked away in the privacy of her apartment on the ground floor. The normal comings and goings of the staff and guests at the inn would be stilled, leaving only the big grandfather clock in the entryway to mark the passage of time. Ellen would miss the monthly book club meetings there. She would miss the friendly banter and wicked jokes between the women who had become as close as most sisters.

"But I have to go," she whispered.

She exhaled slowly and gave a nod as if to say goodbye to her friend. Then she turned the car toward the east side of the island.

As she rolled through the neighborhood, Sybil Moore's bedroom light glared from an upstairs window of her Tudor-style home. Sybil's house was right next to hers, and Ellen glanced up at the window, thinking that perhaps the neighborhood busybody was conjuring up some sort of witch's brew under the full moon. A smile played across her lips despite the blackness of her mood.

She wouldn't miss Sybil. She wouldn't miss her annoying accent or the way in which she phrased her vacuous thoughts. But then, of course, she wouldn't miss anyone anymore.

"Goodbye, Silly Sybil," Ellen said with a snicker.

The car moved on.

When it reached the large, modern home on the corner, she slowed to a stop. This house belonged to her best friend, Martha Denton. She peered up the drive to the plate-glass windows and broad decks, picturing Martha comfortably asleep in her big pillow-top bed.

"Goodbye, dear friend," she whispered with a heavy heart. "Please don't be mad. Please try to understand."

But, of course, Martha wouldn't understand. No one would.

A moment later, she had left her friends and the world she knew behind. By ten minutes past the hour, she had circled the island and turned onto Marchand Drive, a two-lane road which climbed to Widow's Peak, a small butte that stuck out on the east side of the island facing the Cascade Mountains. She passed pricey homes nestled amongst tall pines, long driveways with boats and recreational vehicles tucked under expensive awnings, and gated homes invisible from the road. This had been her world for over thirty years, and for thirty years it had been enough.

Now, suddenly, it wasn't.

She crested the hill facing I-90 and Bellevue to the east. She knew exactly where she was going. The kids called it, "Deadhead Curve," as a joke. It sat on the edge of a cliff on the

northeast corner of the island. As one teenager told her, "*You have to be a deadhead to drive it at night, especially if you've been drinking.*" At least one person had been killed on the crazy hairpin turn where there was nothing to stop you from going over the cliff except a flimsy guardrail. Beyond that was a long drop into Crenshaw Bay, filled with rocks and boulders.

Ellen drew the Lexus alongside the last home on this stretch of road and stopped just past the driveway on the uphill side of the curve. There were only bushes and rocks past this point.

She sat quietly for a moment, staring off into the distance, thinking about her husband and her two children who now lived on the East Coast. A sob caught in her throat. She had sacrificed so much and got so little in return. How had she let that happen? There was a time she thought she would own her own business just like Julia, using her creative talents to decorate many of the finer homes in the area. But Ray had disapproved. So instead, she puttered away in her garden, volunteered for the homeless shelter, and helped organize fundraising events. Meanwhile, he refused to retire and still spent weeks at a time out-of-town on business; right now, he was in Thailand.

It wasn't enough. It had never been enough.

Her fingers sought out the sockets around her eyes as the headache grew and sent shooting pains across her forehead. She was so tired, and the voice echoing in her head droned on and on, egging her to do this.

She brought her foot up to hover over the accelerator. All she had to do was to press down. That's all she had to do. The car would do the rest. It would be so easy. So painless.

She gazed at the little orange reflector lights embedded into the guardrail at the foot of the hill, warning drivers to beware. That's where the road turned sharply to the right and out of sight. It was only about a quarter of a mile. At full speed, the corner would be impossible to make, even for the Lexus. Beyond the railing, there was nothing except lovely, empty space and the moon, glinting in the distance, teasing her, beckoning to her.

"Do it," the voice said in the recesses of her mind. "God will greet you with loving arms. Do it now," the voice repeated. "And God will catch you. I am here. It's time to go."

As tears began to stream down her cheeks, she thought of the girl, Rita, whom she had befriended at the shelter. Rita had been pregnant and all alone, hoping for a better life. But something had gone wrong. She'd had a difficult pregnancy and then suddenly disappeared. Ellen had asked questions but received no answers. She'd even searched alleyways and street corners throughout Seattle one night, thinking Rita may have returned to the streets. But she'd found nothing.

And that's when the suspicious sounds and lights outside her home began, along with the feeling that she was being watched. Her priest, Father Bentley, had given her something to help her sleep, thinking it was just her nerves. But Ellen had finally realized that help would only come by letting go.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to no one and to everyone. "I'm so sorry."

Her foot finally tipped forward and pressed the accelerator to the floor, making the tires spin in place. Rubber burned, and puffs of smoke evaporated into the early morning air before the car finally jumped forward. Within seconds, she was racing downhill, heading straight for those little reflector lights. By the time she reached the curve, the speedometer had hit 60 MPH. But Ellen never attempted to make the curve; she was aiming for the Moon.

In the flash of an eye, the Lexus crashed through the guardrail and sailed off into the moon's welcoming embrace, leaving Ellen with only one lingering thought:

"What really happened to Rita?"

And there you have it. How to write a first chapter that will leave readers wanting more. Consider, however, that the first (second, third, and fourth) draft of your opening chapter will likely change once you finish the first draft of the entire book. In fact, you may decide to take an entirely different approach to how you open your book. And that's entirely okay. Sometimes it takes getting the whole story mapped out before we know just how we want to open the story and draw readers into it.

YOUR TAKEAWAYS

Here are the takeaways you'll want to remember.

1) Treat your first chapter as you would a door to an exciting adventure. In other words, deliver on the promise that something amazing will happen in this story, and the first chapter is just a taste of what's to come.
2) Introduce your main character.
3) Establish the character's everyday life and world he/she lives in.
4) Suggest a looming conflict.
5) Introduce your character's 'Watson' if there is one.
6) Start with action.
7) Establish the stakes.
8) Establish the mood or tone.
9) Hook your reader from the first sentence or paragraph with something unexpected.
10) Include a beginning, middle, and end to the chapter so that readers feel that something actually happened, setting them up for more to come.

FINAL THOUGHTS



Remember! When you're writing a novel, you're not writing for yourself. You're writing for the reader – or you should be. As Dominic Morgan, screenwriter, says, "A mistake writers make is not thinking of the reader but only thinking about what they want to write." If you approach your writing that way, in the end, *you* may love it but never gain a fan base.

Your ultimate goal is to get people to read the entire story. To do that, you have to create a relationship with the reader on the first page, draw them into the story, and then hold them there. Your first chapter has the power to do that, but it also has the power to push the reader away if handled badly. So, be sure you take the time to craft your first chapter in a way that makes readers turn the page to the next chapter.

Good luck with your writing. Reach out if you have questions. You can reach me at: Lildog67@icloud.com.

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LYNN BOHART - BIO

After retiring from a 35+ year career in the nonprofit world, Ms. Bohart launched her own freelance writing company, Lil Dog Communications, and now writes for clients all over the world. She holds a master's degree in theater, has taught "Crafting the Story" through Green River College for 10+ years, and has written for both Patch.com and the Renton Reporter.

Currently, she has eleven paranormal mystery novels, two short story books, and three nonfiction books on Amazon. She also offers several free and low-cost books on writing through her website.

As a mystery and true crime aficionado, she has redesigned her author website into ***The No Alibi Zone*** to showcase criminal investigations. Her bi-monthly newsletter called "Let's Talk About Murder," includes blog posts and interviews with people who talk about, write about, and investigate crime as well as information on writing, her summit presentations, and her books. You can sign up to receive the newsletter for free by going to her website: Sign up here.

If you're interested in Lynn's story coaching services, you can visit her website to get information or reach out to her at: Lildog67@icloud.com.

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