

6 Ways to Hook Your Readers from the Very First Line

January 20, 2010 Suzannah Windsor Freeman

Although I consider myself an avid reader, I must admit I have a short attention span when it comes to getting into books. If you fail to grab my attention in the first few lines, I start spacing out.

Most readers are like me. Most people don't want to spend the first 50 pages trying to get into a book.

Here are a few things I find annoying in the first lines of a story:

- Dialogue. Nice somewhere on the first or second page, but not in the first line. We won't know who's speaking or why we should care.
- Excessive description. Some description is good, but not when it's long winded. Skip the purple prose and opt for something more powerful.
- Irrelevant information. The first few lines of your story are crucial, so give your reader only important information.
- Introducing too many characters. I don't like to be bombarded with the names of too many characters at once. How are we supposed to keep them straight when we don't know who's who?

The last thing you want to do as a writer is annoy or bore people. Instead, try one of these 6 ways to hook your readers right off the bat:

1. Make your readers wonder.

Put a question in your readers' minds. What do those first lines mean? What's going to happen? Make them wonder, and you'll keep them reading.

- "Those old cows knew trouble was coming before we did." ~Jeannette Walls, *Half Broke Horses: A True-Life Novel*

- “A secret’s worth depends on the people from whom it must be kept.” ~Carlos Ruiz Zafon, *The Shadow of the Wind*

2. Begin at a pivotal moment.

By starting at an important moment in the story, your reader is more likely to want to continue so he or she can discover what will happen next.

- “It was dark where she was crouched but the little girl did as she’d been told.” ~Kate Morton, *The Forgotten Garden*
- “I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975.” ~Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*

3. Create an interesting picture.

Description is good when it encourages people to paint a picture in their minds. Often, simple is best so it’s the reader who imagines a scene, instead of simply being told by the author.

- “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.” ~Daphne DuMaurier, *Rebecca*
- “She stands up in the garden where she has been working and looks into the distance.” ~Michael Ontaatje, *The English Patient*

4. Introduce an intriguing character.

The promise of reading more about a character you find intriguing will, no doubt, draw you into a story’s narrative. Most often, this is one of the main characters in the book.

- “I was born twice: first as a baby girl on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974.” ~Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*

5. Start with an unusual situation.

Show us characters in unusual circumstances, and we’ll definitely be sticking around to see what it’s all about.

- “They had flown from England to Minneapolis to look at a toilet.” ~Nick Hornby, *Juliet, Naked*

6. Begin with a compelling narrative voice.

Open your story with the voice of a narrator we can instantly identify with, or one that relates things in a fresh way.

- “As I begin to tell this, it is the golden month of September in southwestern Ontario.” ~Alistair MacLeod, *No Great Mischief*
- “I am ninety. Or ninety-three. One or the other.” ~Sara Gruen, *Water for Elephants*

No matter how you start your book, keep your readers in mind. What will make them want to continue reading? What will potentially make them put down your book?