

# Your Story—Where to Start? *How to Start?*

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*Begin as you mean to go on.*

That's usually good advice in life—and in writing.

## Be Consistent

A noticeable (and unintentional) discrepancy in style, tone, approach to character and plot in your story's opening, compared to the remainder of the book, will distract and possibly confuse your reader. I've seen stories in which the beginning has clearly been worked and reworked numerous times (sometimes, I suspect, with the assistance of writing groups).

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**The object of any story opening, of course, is to catch the reader's or editor's interest, to immediately “hook” her or him.** Problem is, if the succeeding chapters don't match the beginning in tone and in approach to character and plot, the reader may feel as though two different books have been rather haphazardly joined together.

**A degree of consistency, of reliability, throughout the story is important.**  
*Except when it isn't...*

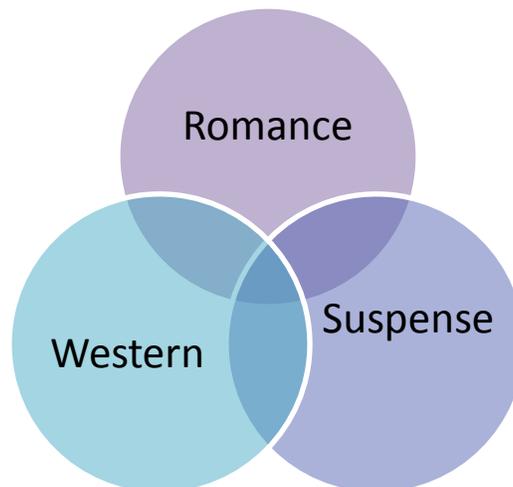
(**A brief digression.** I'm speaking here, about the infamous “unreliable narrator,” which reflects the author's intent as well as that of the character in question. This approach is currently popular, as we all know. It's especially prevalent in domestic thrillers, a major trend that arguably began—in its most recent incarnation—with Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. Check out Terrence Rafferty's interesting article on this type of fiction, frequently if not predominantly written by women, in the July/August issue of *The Atlantic*. Other examples are Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train* and *The Couple Next Door* by Shari LaPena.)

In stories of that nature, you're faking trustworthiness and reliability, just like the protagonist/s, and that's the point. It's all about defying the other characters' (and the reader's!) expectations—and giving the reader the perverse pleasure of shock. **In that kind of story, we could say you're meeting the reader's expectations by *not* meeting them.** As Rafferty says, “People revealing their secrets and being secretive (often simultaneously) is a fair working definition of social-media culture, and of the post-*Gone Girl* crime novel, too. In book after book, characters *share*, compulsively but selectively, until revelation and artful concealment become nearly indistinguishable.”

## Meeting Reader Expectations in Genre Fiction

For most genre fiction, however (perhaps especially romance), you'll need to **approach your characters and your story without irony or deception**. Straightforwardly. With *sincerity*. You're meeting the reader's expectations—the expectations associated with your particular genre—in a more conventional way. Keep in mind that when you're blending genres, you're increasing the expectations you need to meet.

For instance, if you're writing a western romance, you have to provide the story with a credibly rendered ranch or western background, which plays a legitimate role in the characters' lives, as well as a properly developed and resolved romantic relationship. In romantic suspense, your reader needs to see an acceptable solution to the mystery *and* a believable resolution to the romance. And again, these two (or three or however many) story strands have to be legitimately linked. They can't simply exist as parallel plots. **Each story "type" within your book has to influence and act upon the others—starting with Chapter One!**



It's worth pointing out that romance is among the most flexible of genres in the way it can incorporate and work with other genres. Also worth noting is that genre fiction addresses the essential elements of life: marriage, sex, family (in romance fiction); justice and redemption (mystery and suspense); man—and woman—vs. nature, a classic conflict that is acted out, in various ways, in westerns, science fiction and fantasy. In the latter, the reader expects a view of a new and evolving world—for good or ill.

### **But . . . back to the beginning.**

***Yes, you do want to catch readers' and editors' attention, to pull them into the story and keep them there.***

**Step one is to decide *what* you need to convey in your opening, and this is based on your characters' ultimate goal. Step two is *how*.**

Your opening should generally allow your reader to connect with at least one major character.

There are various ways of doing this. But again don't set up expectations that you aren't going to meet—or ask questions you're not going to answer—unless, as I mentioned earlier, that's your plan all along.

Okay, connecting with a major character or characters. It doesn't have to be done in a simple, obvious or straightforward manner, but it *could* be. For instance, Hero X and Heroine Y meet at a party and start talking. You could also open your story by using a secondary character or by showing a conversation *about* the main character (or characters). Or you could create an immediate context—say, the character's home or workplace, which should convey important information about him or her.



Lots of options, in other words, and you'll have to choose what works best for your characters and their story. Award-winning veteran romance writer Roz Denny Fox put it this way: “Ideally, a story should hit the ground running—in shoes worn by a viewpoint character.”

And you can do that even if you open with an intriguing discussion concerning one of these characters.

Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey* suggests you “Create identification by giving heroes universal goals, drives, desires or needs.” At the same time, these goals, desires and needs have to be personal; they have to be particular to *this* character, in *this* situation.

Based on experience (as a reader and an editor), one suggestion I'd make is that you open your story with some kind of significant change—or a situation, a catalyst, that initiates the change in your characters' lives and sets everything in motion. After all, most fiction (and drama) is about a change in people's lives, about the beginning of something or the end of something—and frequently both.

This change is usually related to the conflict (or vice versa).

Something to keep in mind is that you need to open your story in the right place—which you can't always tell until you've written a few chapters or, in fact, the whole book. One very useful guide for writers is *Technique in Fiction* by Robbie MacAuley and George Lanning. As they say, “Beginnings lead off, but they must have the seeds of finality in them.”

So the story's ending must fulfill the implicit promise made by its beginning.



I'd also suggest that a writer of genre (or genre-based) fiction may have something of an advantage here, since the framework of a mystery or romance or western or science fiction novel determines (in the broadest way) a specific kind of ending or resolution. In a romance, hero and heroine overcome the obstacles facing them and achieve a committed relationship. In a mystery or thriller, the crime is solved and justice is done (to some extent, anyway). A western often involves the discovery or rediscovery of the connection between people and the natural world. Science fiction is about the characters'

connection with an alternate world. And so on. An overstatement, maybe, but **all forms of genre fiction** could be said to explore the establishment or re-establishment of *order*, whether social, emotional, natural, scientific, etc.

## **So, you know where you're going, where your characters are going, but you need to decide *how* to set them on the path to that ending.**

A few points to consider:

- **Does your opening include all the *necessary* background information?** Or are you including too much (the dreaded "info dump")? You don't want your story's background to overwhelm the foreground. Nor, on the other hand, do you want to be obscure and unclear.
- **Is every detail relevant?**
- **Does the opening introduce too many characters?** You don't want to confuse the reader.
- **Is the tone and style consistent with the rest of the story?** If they're at odds (e.g., a humorous opening, while the story is dramatic and emotional), that needs to be a conscious decision on your part and requires a careful balance.
- **Are you using the most effective point of view** in your opening? If you're not sure, you might try starting with another character.

I'll close with some practical advice from another award-winning author, Margot Early. She said: **"The purpose of the opening is to tease the reader's curiosity to an intolerable level**, compelling him or her to continue reading in order to satisfy it. This is done by introducing a high-stakes central conflict but revealing *only* enough to intrigue the reader. If the reader learns everything worth knowing in the opening, why keep reading?"

Why, indeed? Remember, the conflict is connected to the coming *change* in the characters' lives and circumstances. **The goal is to create a gripping story, one that comes to a satisfying and utterly credible conclusion.** And it all starts with your very first words!