

Opening Pages

There is no formula for writing opening pages of a book. The only thing you need to do is ground the reader in your story. Don't tell the reader what happened, instead let him experience it. **Make it real.**

Pathways to a compelling hook:

When I think about opening pages that I like, the thing that stands out across the board is **DETAIL**, usually about a person, a place, or a thing. Beyond that, there are various pathways that might lead you to a good hook:

Voice

"So, I had assumed it was optional. I know that women bleed every month, but I didn't think it was going to happen to me. I'd presumed I would be able to opt out of it — perhaps from sheer unwillingness. It honestly doesn't look that much use or fun, and I can't see any way I can fit it into my schedule. I'm just not going to bother! I think to myself, cheerfully, as I do my ten sit-ups a night. Captain Moran is opting out!" (Caitlin Moran, *How to Be a Woman*)

Atmosphere

"I reached down the pant cuff with the eraser end of my pencil and poked it. Frozen solid. But definitely human. "Goddamn." I took a deep breath through my cigarette. I didn't want to use my nose. It was late January, the air scorching cold. The snow was falling sideways as it usually did in Detroit this time of year. The dead man was encased in at least four feet of ice at the bottom of a defunct elevator shaft in an abandoned building. But still, there was no telling what the stink might be like." (Charlie LeDuff, *Detroit, An American Autopsy*)

Dropped en scene:

"Late one afternoon in the summer of 2006, I found myself in a small village in northern Vietnam, sitting around a sooty kitchen fire with a number of local women whose language I did not speak, trying to ask them questions about marriage." (Elizabeth Gilbert, *Committed*)

Bait/Missing info:

"Kell wore a very peculiar coat. It had neither one side, which would be conventional, nor two, which would be unexpected, but several, which was, of course, impossible. The first thing he did whenever he stepped out of one London and into another was take off the coat and turn it inside out once or twice (or even three times) until he found the side he needed. Not all of them were fashionable, but they each served a purpose. There were ones that blended in and ones that stood out, and one that served no purpose, but of which he was just particularly fond." (V.E. Schwab, *A Darker Shade of Magic*)

Balance in the prose:

"The house stood on a slight rise just on the edge of the village. It stood on its own and looked out over a broad spread of West Country farmland. Not a remarkable house by any means — it was about thirty years old, squattish, squareish, made of brick, and had four windows set in the front of a size and proportion which more or less exactly failed to please the eye." (Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*)

Efficiency:

"Everyone my age remembers where they were and what they were doing when they first heard about the contest. I was sitting in my hideout watching cartoons when the news bulletin broke in on my video feed, announcing that James Halliday had died during the night." (Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One*)

Opening Scenes to avoid

- Wake-up scene
- Dream
- Weather
- Running scene/car crash
- Drug-induced confusion
- Extreme violence
- Death of a relative
- Extensive exposition

Genre guides

There is no opening pages formula, but there are guidelines within the genre you're writing, for example:

Mystery — Dead body within the first 10 pages or so

Middle Grade/Memoir — It's all about that VOICE

Literary — Beautiful/intriguing prose

Historical/Fantasy/Magical Realism/Horror — A glimpse of the world/atmosphere to tip the reader that they're entering some kind of Oz. Sometimes, especially with magical realism and horror, it's more of a mood than a place.

Read the first few pages of books that might be considered “comps” for yours, and try to get a feel for what's genre-standard.

The P-word

Prologues can work very well for many books. But do not use one as a crutch. If you're considering a prologue to liven things up and hook the reader, don't.

A few good reasons to use a prologue:

- To reveal **Key Information** that the reader *needs to know* to understand the story, but would otherwise have to be put in a flashback because it doesn't fit with the time frame
- To provide **Dramatic Irony** by revealing something to the reader that the main character will not know (usually for thrillers or horror)
- To introduce a **Frame Narrative** structure

If you use a prologue:

- Keep it short
- Make sure that your first chapter still has an amazing, hooky opening

Diligence & Professionalism

Sometimes it's not about the content, but the way you present it. Please remember the following:

Follow Submission Guidelines — If the agent likes to see the first three chapters, don't send a full manuscript, and don't send nothing. Send the first three chapters (and yes, include the prologue too).

Simplify your format — Include the sample in the body of the email; Times New Roman, 12 font.

Proofread — Have a friend read for typos in your first pages. Read your first paragraph a dozen times. Do not let a trivial mistake ruin your hard work!