



Module 5 : How to Get Started From Getting the First page Spot-on to Creating the Perfect Setting

- The importance of the first page and first line
- Examples of some great first lines in existing children's books
- What you can do to make your first page stand out
- What not to do in a first page

In this chapter we will cover the following topics in detail:

- The importance of the first page and first line
- Examples of some great first lines in existing children's books
- What you can do to make your first page stand out
- What not to do in a first page

5.1 Introduction



Every editor at every major publishing house receives countless manuscripts every day.

They will pick up your manuscript, have a glance at the title, word count, genre, and age range, and then read the first line. If it is appalling they will put the book down and not pick it up again. If it is mediocre, they might do the same, or they might read on a few lines. If it is good, you have a chance that they will read the first page. The same principle applies to the first page. Only if they believe that the first page has real promise will they read on.

Sadly, the same thing will happen in bookshops. Customers will take a look at the cover art, and if they like what they see, will take a peek at the first page. As a reader I am sure you will recognise the dismissal you give certain books if they do not grab you in this initial perusal.

So, you get the idea.

Your first line and your first page are incredibly important.

They are the sales pitch for your book. If the rest of your book is mind-blowingly amazing and your first page falls flat, chances are you will not see success.

Added to this, writing your first line and first page can be one of the most challenging parts of writing your book, which is the reason that some writers fall at the first hurdle. Remember, you do not have to get it perfect the first time; your first draft will only be read by you, so just blow through it initially and come back to refine it. This should help relieve the difficulty of putting pen to paper in the first instance.

The good news is that there are many tips, tricks, techniques, and exercises you can employ to help you with this aspect of your book. We will start by looking at some outstanding first lines (or first few lines) from existing successful children's books to think about what makes them great.

The Little Prince, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

'Once when I was six years old I saw a magnificent picture in a book, called True Stories from Nature, about the primeval forest. It was a picture of a boa constrictor in the act of swallowing an animal. Here is a copy of the drawing.'

Here is a prime example of grabbing the reader's attention right from the start - you cannot get much more attention-grabbing than a large snake swallowing an animal. However, De Saint-Exupéry does not take us to the scene of the snake's grisly meal, as that would be too much for a book aimed at younger children. Instead, he gives us an age to relate to (six) and an activity that we are likely to enjoy (reading), as well as an interest that many children share (animals, the more bizarre the better).

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, J.K. Rowling

'Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense.'

This is almost like an invitation for the reader to discover how the story will defy the Dursleys' attitude. We have immediately got two characters to dislike, which goes a long way towards engaging an audience. Rowling cleverly weaves the Dursleys' voice into her third person narrative, giving us a strong sense of how annoyingly mundane we find them.

The Wind in the Willows, Kenneth Grahame

'The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his little home.'

This is a different sort of invitation for the reader. We immediately get a sense of setting and character from Grahame; an endearing fluffy mole, bustling around his little home until it is spick and span. There is little happening of any moment, but a mole cleaning his home is an engaging image which pulls the reader into the story.

Charlotte's Web, E.B. White

' "Where's Papa going with that axe?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.'

White starts her first page with dialogue here, which drops the reader right into the action. It is a question too and one filled with potential menace, so the reader is curious to know what the answer will be. We also meet two characters and have a setting for them; a lot achieved in just one line.

The Secret Garden, Frances Hodgson Burnett

'When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen.'

This line is provoking in a lot of ways, not least because we are unsure if we want to cast Mary as a heroine or a villain. Most readers will feel sympathy, even empathy, for a girl sent away from her parents, whose situation we do not yet know. Even worse, on reaching the house of her uncle, Mary seems to be disliked. We are not sure yet if we want to feel sorry for Mary or agree with her uncle, or both. But we want to find out.

5.2 Tips for your first page



When you are reading within and around your target genre and age range, take note of the first line and the first page; is it effective? Why?

Having looked at some examples of engaging first lines, we can move on to the entire first page. The main thing at this point is to maintain the reader's motivation to keep reading. There are some guidelines for how to achieve this below. How you use them will differ slightly depending on which age group you are writing for, but they are all applicable for any first page.

1. Leave the reader asking a question

You can do this in many ways. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, J.K. Rowling inserts a clear question on her first page:

'The Dursleys had everything they wanted, but they also had a secret, and their greatest fear was that somebody would discover it.'

We want to know what this secret is, especially in the light of the Dursleys' prejudice against anything strange or mysterious'; as a reader, that is exactly the sort of thing we would be interested in.

2. Set the tone for the book

This can be slightly tricky to pinpoint, but it boils down to the first page being an advert for what the rest of the book is like. Do not make your language, writing style, the nature of the dialogue, or the type of description you use, different on the first page. It should be in-keeping with the overall subject matter and execution of the main body of text, and be an excellent example of it too. In *The Hobbit*, J.R.R. Tolkien exemplifies his writing style and the tone of his narration in his first lines:

'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.'

3. Introduce a main character

Your characters are the heart and soul of your book, and you should include at least one prominent figure in the first page, if not more. The reader is looking for something to connect to, and a page of description about the weather or backstory is not going to achieve that. This is done perfectly in *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*, by Sue Townsend:

'My father got the dog drunk on cherry brandy at the party last night. If the RSPCA hear about it he could get done.'

4. Set the pace

If you are writing something that is a fast-paced page turner, establish this on the first page. Similarly, if you are writing something more sedate and relaxed, begin your book like this. The pace should never be slow though; when writing literary fiction for adults you may be able to get away with this, but children and young adults want action and development in their stories from the outset. Make sure your story starts to move right away, giving the reader a sense of progression that makes them want to keep reading.

5. Start in the middle of things

You may have a great deal of backstory for each of your characters, but the first page is not the place to reveal it. The reader does not need to know everything, or even very much at all, about what has happened before hand, at this point (if ever in some cases; we' will discuss backstory later). In *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, Judith Kerr does just this, without any preamble:
'Once there was a little girl called Sophie. She was having tea with her mummy in the kitchen. Suddenly there was a ring at the door. Sophie's mummy said 'I wonder who that could be?'

6. Ground your reader

This is another way of saying that you should have a setting firmly established for your action, even at this early stage. We may not need to hear much about it, but even with a few words you can give the reader a sense of time and place that makes the story more real and engaging.

7. Speak to your market

This does not mean you need to launch into third person omniscient narrator, Victorian novel style. It means you need to keep the person who will be buying the book foremost in your mind as you make decisions about content, language and style. This rule holds for the entirety of your book, but is even more pertinent for your opening page. If you are writing a young children's book, keep in mind that it will be a parent, teacher, librarian, or other adult that will probably be deciding whether to buy the book or not. Likewise, the editor will want to see you addressing your target audience; if you are writing a first chapter book, do not make the first page too shocking or too simple, but age appropriate.

Ian Fleming does a great job of relating to his reader while making sure not to patronise them in his opening line of *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang*:

'Most motorcars are conglomerations (this is a long word for bundles) of steel and wire and rubber and plastic, and electricity and oil and gasoline and water, and the toffee papers you pushed down the crack in the back seat last Sunday.'

8. Make the reader feel something

As we saw in the first lines above, the first page should elicit an emotion in the reader, and this is tied up with all of the other points above, especially the one about introducing characters. You could present the best-executed piece of writing in a technical sense, but if it does not cause some sort of

emotional response, you will not make the reader want to keep reading.

5.3 Avoid these common first page mistakes

Here are some things NOT to do on your first page, based on feedback from editors and their particular dislikes about manuscripts they receive:

1. Do not be generic

It is impossible to be completely original, but make sure your ideas are your own and not a reproduction of what you have read before. Make your characters individual and fully fleshed, not just examples of a type.

2. Do not start with a flashback

A lot of editors see flashbacks and prologues as a lazy way of starting the story at a crucial point, without having to design the narrative thread to make it flow.

3. Do not start with backstory

We touched on this above, but spending several pages filling the reader in about the history of the story and characters seems to be universally disliked by editors.

4. Do not tell us; show us

If you have read anything about how to write before, you will have come across this widely used commandment. It basically means that you have to use what is happening in the story, in the form of character dialogue, reactions, interactions, and perceptions, to give the reader information about their personalities and even appearance, rather than just writing a passage about their physical and emotional qualities. It is much more convincing for the reader to deduce these things for themselves by 'observing' the characters, rather than just taking your word for it.

5. Do not get bogged down in description

A full page of description of the setting is unlikely to grab a reader's attention, however well written. Different editors and readers will be comfortable with differing amounts of description, but you can be sure that without some action, your book will not make the cut.

6. Do not make your language too flowery

As with the point above, different readers and editors will appreciate different levels of complexity in language. If you choose most of your words from a thesaurus it will be evident straight away.

Generally, and especially when writing for children, the simplest word is the best.

Assignment

Scene Setting

Time: 30 minutes

This task will get you to think about what type of book you want to write and how you are going to go about creating it.

Download the worksheet below and print out and complete.

[Download Worksheet](#)

In Summary

The first line, and the entire first page, are your sales pitch and advertisement for your book.

You only get a brief chance to convince an editor to commission your work, or a reader to buy it, so you need to make the most of it. You can do this by pulling the reader into the story by using tension, curiosity, empathy, or dislike, amongst other things. You should establish the tone and pace of your book, and introduce at least one main character in a concrete setting, keeping your target audience in mind all the time.

Avoid generic openings or characters, as well as long passages of description or backstory, and make sure you keep the rule, 'show, don't tell' foremost in your mind.

[Tweet "I just completed Module 5 of the Children's Story Writing Diploma Course"]
