



Chapter One

It was a dark and stormy
night.

It was a sweltering, soggy
night.

It was a foul and frigid
night.

The first chapter is both a blessing and a curse.

It is easy to come up with an idea, sit down, and begin to tell yourself the story. Many authors have file folders full of first chapters of books that will never be written. I have a few of my own.

A good first chapter does not happen quickly or easily. It has a terrible burden to carry. It must:

1. Introduce the story world.

Orient the reader right away by defining the setting. Are we in the past, present, or future? Are we on earth, in space, or visiting a fantasyland?

2. Define the genre.

Is it a fantasy, a romance, or a historical mystery?

3. Set the tone.

Will this be a lighthearted tale, a tearjerker, or a creepy thriller?

4. Introduce the main character and make him relatable.

I would say likable, but that has not always been the case. Your character does not have to be a white-hat hero, but he or she should be someone the reader can root for. Loathsome characters are hard to care about.

5. Describe the character's status quo that is about to change.

Introduce the character's normal life: the rut he is stuck in, the exciting future he is planning, or the cushy life that will be up-ended by the story problem. This way, the reader will be invested in the outcome. The outcome should be questionable along the way. Even in a genre such as romance, where you know the couple will eventually live happily ever after, you need to make the reader doubt they will.



6. Introduce the overall story goal.

You need to give the main character goals and aspirations that are understandable, not necessarily admirable. The reader needs to root for them to achieve their goal: get the girl, save the world, stop the killer, or gain revenge. Alternatively, you could have a hero aim for the wrong goal and the reader will root for him to realize it in time or fail and learn his lesson.

There can be several story goals. The character may have a personal goal in addition to the overall story goal. In fact, the story is richer if he does and if these two goals cause conflict. The first chapter can introduce the personal goal or the overall story goal. If the first chapter introduces the personal goal (as part of the character's normal world), it should end with the inciting incident and chapter two can illustrate the overall story goal created by this incident. You should do the same for the antagonist when you introduce him.

7. Define the stakes.

What happens if your character fails? What price will he pay? What will he lose? Are the stakes his alone or applicable to the entire world?

8. Introduce the inciting incident.

In order for the game to commence, something has to change - drastically - to start the hero on his journey toward the goal. What catalyzes the character to take the irrevocable action or make the tough decision?

9. Entice the reader with your "voice."

After perusing the cover, readers usually open a book and read the first few pages to see if they are intrigued by the way the writer writes. If the voice is bland and boring, there is a good chance they won't risk money on it. There are many solid, if pedestrian, authors who do quite well in the industry. Make sure your craftsmanship is at least above average. When a writer comes along that blows you away with their wordsmithery, it's like winning the literary lotto.



10. Make them buy the book.

If you do not successfully seduce them with your premise, story world, character, and voice, they can easily put the book down. There are so many books to choose from now, a reader can be picky. Give them a good reason to keep turning pages.

Writing a successful first chapter tests your craftsmanship, but it shouldn't paralyze you.

Put down whatever comes to you. Tell yourself the story. You may realize you started at the wrong place, or the story may change drastically as you go. The first chapter is the most rewritten chapter, but don't spin your wheels or overwrite it. Get the first draft out of the way.

When you are ready to revise, it is time to rip that first chapter apart and make certain all of the elements are present.

The first chapter is a reader's first impression. Make certain it is a good one.