**How to write your first chapter**

Some questions to answer before you re/write your first chapter

What is the genre of your novel?

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What is your novel about?

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What are the themes in your novel?

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Who is your main character? (NB: If your novel is from multiple perspectives, write down the one whose PoV we will start with.)

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What is unique about your character?

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What are your character’s motivations?

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What are your character’s goals?

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What is the main source of conflict? (The thing getting in the way of your character achieving their goal?)

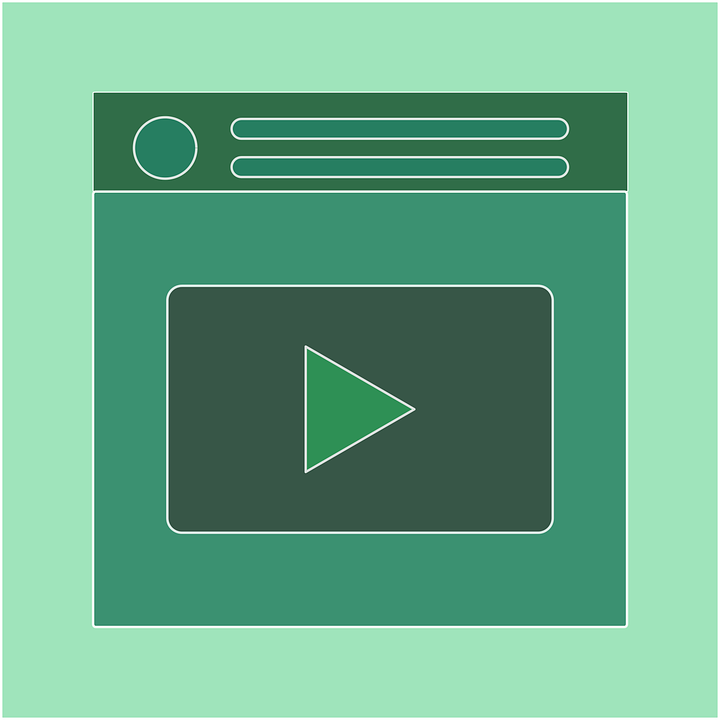
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What is the catalyst/inciting incident? (ie the point of no return for your character)

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Where do you think your story will start?

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Some resources to look at

<https://bit.ly/3IIhiMw>

This is a playlist of some YouTube videos that you might want to take a look at before you attempt any of the below questions.



Before you start writing your first chapter, take a look at some others from books you admire. Think about all of the above questions as you read but also think about the following:

1. Why do you care about the character?
2. What is unique about the character?
3. How does the chapter set up the themes/tone/conflict for the novel?
4. What questions did you have after the first sentence/page/chapter?

Some novels I found helpful to study:

* The Quiet American by Graham Greene
* The Liar’s Dictionary by Eley Williams
* The Binding by Bridget Collins
* Ninth House by Leigh Bardugo

A step by step guide to writing your first chapter

The first chapter should be a microcosm of what’s to come. Ideally, your first chapter should be a microversion of **all** of the following:

* tone/atmosphere
* themes
* voice
* conflict

If you think you have already nailed this, you can skip to the next section where you can troubleshoot your first chapter. But if you want some help, try the following tasks. And try it on a blank page. No copying and pasting from a previous draft!

Conflict

Start with conflict. I only say this because writers tend to end up writing a first chapter full of all the info about setting and character (in which tone, themes and voice might come across more easily) and forget to actually have their character **do something**. Conflict forces the character into action. Conflict makes the reader care about the character by allowing the reader to see their goals and motivations. And character, voice, themes and tone will all fall naturally *out* of conflict.

Here’s an example:

| Your story is about a divorcee trying to find love. The catalyst is your character meeting their main love interest. The major conflict is some sort of friction they have to overcome. However, your first chapter happens before any of this. What does this first chapter need? Well, you need your character’s motivation (divorceed, ready for love again). You could just say this. But a more effective way is to introduce it using a micro conflict. For example, your character is at a dinner party and is the only single person there and has to force a smile as everyone shares photos of their kids etc on their phones while receiving pity about being single. The micro conflict is having to force a smile while being miserable about being single, which fits into the larger themes of the story. |
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**Task 1.** Using the main conflict in your story, create a micro conflict for your character in chapter one. Think carefully about how this conflict shows the reader about the character’s goals and motivations.

Character/voice

Now that you know what your character is going to do, you need to think about how you are going to tell the reader about it. If you’ve already written your novel, maybe you have a good idea about the voice, but you might want to try this exercise anyway.

**Task 2.** Write the scene that illustrates the micro conflict you created above but just focus on the conflict and your character. Think about being zoomed in to just your character. Add something intriguing/mysterious that makes your character unique, but don’t explain it. Only add details that are vital to the conflict (eg, the photos on the phone, the character’s stiff jaw from forcing a smile). Don’t worry about backstory, flashbacks, setting description, or other characters. Just describe the character and the conflict (and remember to show, not tell).

**Task 3.** Rewrite your task Task 2 from a different PoV (eg if you wrote it in third, switch to first or second and vice versa). How does this change the voice? Is there something you could use here that would make your voice unique? I’m not suggesting you rewrite your novel from a different PoV but compare your sentence structure, imagery, and your tone and mine this different PoV for everything you can. Especially sentence structure. If your sentence structure hasn’t changed with the change of PoV, there’s a good chance your sentence structure needs work. Vary it. Make it unique to your character and voice. Now go back to your Task 2 and make any adjustments.

**Task 4.** Using your modified Task 2, ask yourself the question: is this enough? Could you go from this point to your catalyst/inciting incident without confusing the reader? One thing you might want to consider is whether or not you’ve given the reader enough of a snapshot of the character’s “normal” life so that when the catalyst occurs the reader can recognise the change. If the answer is no, zoom out a little (eg, describe the meal or the place settings or the people surrounding your character) but keep your character *doing* something and keep everything you write connected to the micro conflict in the chapter. You might need to rewrite your Task 2 a bit. Do not add anything you don’t need. You want to keep the reader curious so don’t info dump or fill in backstory. Do add in odd things that aren’t explained yet. Do not add any characters we are never going to see again. Keep zooming out slowly until you *can* jump to the catalyst/inciting incident (which should really come in chapter two). This is your first chapter.

First chapter troubleshooting

* Does something actually happen in your first chapter?
  + Do you have some sort of conflict?
  + Do you build tension?
* Does the reader know what genre your book is? Check the following is consistent with the rest of your book/genre:
  + tone
  + setting
  + register
  + language
  + magical/fantastical/sci fi elements present (or not)
* Does the reader know about your character?
  + Age?
  + Gender?
  + Goals?
  + Motivations?
* Does the reader care about your character?
* Does the reader have a clear idea of the themes of your story?
* Is your voice unique?
  + Does your sentence structure do enough work to convey the narrator’s voice?
* Have you read your chapter out loud?

If you have included any of the following, try to delete:

* backstory
* flashback
* character looking in a mirror to describe their looks
* waking up in the morning
* a dream sequence
* explanation of the world
* explanation of the politics of the world
* characters that don’t show up again
* your character goes through a list of actions without the reader knowing why

Now try to answer the following questions:

1. Why does your reader care about your character? (Like, are you sure they care?)
2. What questions does your reader have after the first sentence?
3. What questions does your reader have after the first page?
4. What question does your reader have after the first chapter?