

workshop #4 The first paragraph

Introduction

When an agent or editor receives your submission, they'll read your pitch letter (see workshop #1), then turn straight to the first page of your manuscript. If they like what they read, they'll read on; if not, your submission will go straight into the recycle bin.

Think of your own behaviour in a bookshop. First you look at the cover and the title. If you're intrigued, you'll turn to the blurb on the back. But it's not until you've read the first paragraph that you head for the check-out desk.

Before she was published, best-selling author Joanne Harris was so convinced that editors weren't reading her manuscripts properly that she printed out 30 blank pages to attach to the first page. Only five out of 20 editors even noticed! The rest rejected the book after a cursory glance at the first page.

That's how important the first paragraph is.

7 key ingredients

A good first paragraph needs to surprise the reader and hook them into character and setting. Read my list of key ingredients and see whether you agree. Is there something else you'd like to add? Something you'd disagree with?

- **a character:** We want to meet someone important to the plot straight away
- **the setting or subject matter:** We want to know where we are and/or what's going on; we want to read about somewhere or something we find intriguing
- **a distinctive voice:** We want to assess the writing style (is it sardonic, witty, poetic?); we want something appropriate, perhaps idiosyncratic
- **motivation:** We want to know something about the personality of the character we're meeting. Are they nervy? Vain? Obsessional?
- **action:** Something must be happening, or about to happen; we want the story to start

- **sensual detail:** We want to be transported into the world of the book; for this to happen our senses need to be engaged with direct, concrete, vivid detail
- **no description:** What we don't want is empty description – why should we care about the scenery when we haven't met the main character yet?

6 first paragraphs

The six first paragraphs below were all written by great writers – but they are not all great first paragraphs. Read each one carefully and give it marks out of seven according to how well it fulfils the above criteria for a good first paragraph.

The Other Boleyn Girl by Philippa Gregory

I could hear a roll of muffled drums. But I could see nothing but the lacing on the bodice of the lady standing in front of me, blocking my view of the scaffold. I had been at court for more than a year and attended hundreds of festivities; but never one like this.

By stepping to one side a little and craning my neck, I could see the condemned man, accompanied by his priest, walk slowly from the Tower towards the green where the wooden platform was waiting, the block of wood placed centre stage, the executioner dressed all ready for work in his shirtsleeves with a black hood over his head.

The Little Stranger by Sarah Waters

I first saw Hundreds Hall when I was ten years old. It was the summer after the war, and the Ayreses still had most of their money then, were still big people in the districts. The event was an Empire Day fete: I stood with a line of other village children making a Boy Scout salute while Mrs Ayres and the Colonel went past us, handing out commemorative medals; afterwards we sat to tea with our parents at long tables on what I suppose

was the south lawn. Mrs Ayres would have been twenty-four or -five, her husband a few years older; their little girl, Susan, would have been about six. They must have made a very handsome family, but my memory of them is vague.

Day by A L Kennedy

Alfred was growing a moustache.

An untrained observer might think he was idling, at a loose end in the countryside, but this wasn't the case. In fact, he was concentrating, thinking his way through every bristle, making sure they would align and be all right.

His progress so far was quite impressive: a respectable growth which already suggested reliability and calm. There were disadvantages to him, certain defects: the shortness, inelegant hands, possible thinning at his crown, habit of swallowing words before they could leave him, habit of looking mainly at the ground – and those few extra pounds at his waist, a lack of condition – but he wasn't so terribly ugly, not such a bad lot.

Labyrinth by Kate Mosse

A single line of blood trickles down the pale underside of her arm, a red seam on a white sleeve.

At first Alice thinks it's just a fly and takes no notice. Insects are an occupational hazard at a dig, and for some reason there are more flies higher up in the mountain where she is working than at the main excavation site lower down. Then a drop of blood splashed onto her bare leg, exploding like a firework in the sky on Guy Fawkes night.

This time she does look and sees that the cut on the inside of her elbow has opened again. It's a deep wound that doesn't want to heal. She sighs and pushes the plaster and lint dressing tighter against her skin. Then, since there is no-one around to see, she licks the red smear from her wrist.

White Teeth by Zadie Smith

Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood Broadway. At 06.27 hours on 1 January 1975, Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate face down on the steering wheel,

hoping the judgment would not be too heavy upon him. He lay forward in a prostrate cross, jaw slack, arms splayed either side like some fallen angel; scrunched up in each fist he held his army service medals (left) and his marriage license (right), for he had decided to take his mistakes with him. A little green light flashed in his eye, signalling a right turn he had resolved never to make. He was resigned to it. He was prepared for it. He had flipped a coin and stood staunchly by its conclusions. It was a decided-upon suicide. In fact it was a New Year's resolution.

Beyond Black by Hilary Mantel

Travelling: the dank oily days after Christmas. The motorway, its wastes looping London: the margin's scrub-grass flaring orange in the lights, and the leaves of the poisoned shrubs striped yellow-green like a cantaloupe melon. Four o'clock: light sinking over the orbital road. Teatime in Enfield, night falling in Potters Bar.

There are nights when you don't want to do it but you have to do it anyway. Nights when you look down from the stage and see closed stupid faces. Messages from the dead arrive at random. You don't want them and you can't send them back. The dead won't be coaxed and they won't be coerced. But the public has paid its money and it wants results.

Do you see what I mean? *Labyrinth*, *Day* and *The Other Boleyn Girl* all focus immediately and closely on the main character involved in something interesting and idiosyncratic. *White Teeth's* first paragraph gets going eventually, after some off-putting date information; *The Little Stranger's* is distant and detached, with a huge cast of characters; *Beyond Black's* launches with 50 words of description before getting on to the meaty material about dead spirits.

When should you write it?

My advice is to write your first paragraph last.

Why? Chiefly because you don't always know at what point your book should begin. Barbara Trapido starts writing in the middle of the plot, and reorders her chapters several times before

settling on a final draft. Most novelists end up discarding their first three chapters.

And many writers sweat so long over the first paragraph, they never get started at all. Beryl Bainbridge has a rule not to write a second page until she's completely satisfied with the first. She has been known to get stuck for months trying to decide on first line. So, do yourself a favour – leave it till the end.

Discard your first page

For the purposes of this workshop, I want you to set aside your book's current structure and your opinion about where it should start. This workshop is not designed to help you rewrite your existing first paragraph. It's designed to help you create, from first principles, a completely new first paragraph for your book.

Two of the following exercises will seem familiar if you've already worked through the first three workshops in this series. That's because the series is designed to dovetail to create a coherent and enticing first impression of your book. It will do no harm to repeat them. Who knows? You may come up with something even better than before!

EXERCISE 1

Identify your book's USP

USP is shorthand for 'unique selling point'. Think about your novel and take a few minutes to list the following:

- the most unusual settings in your book (e.g. a ballet school, an Indian slum, the office of a provincial newspaper)
- the most interesting topics in the book (e.g. arachnophobia, postnatal depression, animal rights)
- the most unusual activities (e.g. sexual stalking, cordon-blue cookery, sky-diving)

Look at your lists. Make sure they are specific, concrete and unusual. If anything vague or abstract has crept in, expunge it immediately. Now choose your favourite three: from any or all categories, but limit yourself to a total of just three.

These are some of the things that will set your book apart from the 150,000 new titles published each year – and the estimated one million manuscripts circulating at any one time... They are important aspects of your USP. *You need at least one in your first paragraph.*

EXERCISE 2

Choose a distinctive character

Who is your main character? If you have more than one main character, choose the most interesting one, the one your reader will find most engaging and intriguing.

Now list some of the more interesting and unusual things about this person, in the following categories:

- some unusual or distinctive aspects of their appearance (e.g. psoriasis, flame-red hair, beer belly)
- his or her occupation and socioeconomic situation (e.g. penniless street musician, wealthy art collector, working-class athlete)
- some unusual or distinctive aspects of their personality (e.g. scatter-brained, studious, anorexic)

Reread your lists and underline your three favourites. *You need to convey at least one distinctive aspect of your main character in your first paragraph.*

EXERCISE 3

Lights, camera, action!

Take your central character and put him or her into one of your unusual settings or situations – and give them something to do.

List the kinds of activity your character might be involved in; think of ordinary and extraordinary things and list them all. Alison, in *Beyond Black*, communicates with the spirits of the dead; Alice in *Labyrinth* is on an archaeological dig. *You need at least one activity in your first paragraph.*

 EXERCISE 4

Use a zoom lens

The purpose of this exercise is to inject some sensual immediacy so that your reader will be able to imagine the first scene in your book.

Think of your distinctive character in your unusual setting or situation, engaging in some kind of activity – and answer the questions below. Please answer them in the third person – ‘he’ or ‘she’, not ‘I’. This is to encourage you to zoom in on concrete images, as in a film, rather than on what the character is feeling. When people write in the first person, there is a tendency to concentrate on a character’s inner thoughts – and that’s not a good thing in a first paragraph.

Write down answers to the following questions, in complete sentences, in the third person:

- where is this person? (e.g. Martin is crouching in the undergrowth outside the school fence)
- what is under their feet?
- what can they see in the distance?
- what can they feel with their hand?
- what can they smell?

Choose your three favourites. Try to choose the most vivid and/or unusual. You will need at least one memorable and vivid concrete image in your first paragraph.

 EXERCISE 5

Putting it together

Now you’re ready to write your first paragraph. Stay in the third person and write 100-150 words about

- your distinctive and fascinating character
- in one of your favourite unusual situations
- performing some vividly imagined activity

Give yourself five minutes to produce a first draft. Could it be the new first paragraph of your novel?

The second paragraph

Of course, you will have to start introducing motivation and plot as soon as possible. But it’s

difficult to include all these things in the first paragraph. Your primary task is to introduce your reader to a character they care about who inhabits the unique and beguiling world of your novel.

Mslexia Roadshow workshops are devised and written by Debbie Taylor. Visit the website for the full collection of Get Published workshops:
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