

5 Things You Should Do On The First Page of Your YA Novel

1.) Set the scene.

I'm not sure why, but I see many more children's manuscripts that start with, "My name is (blank)," than I've ever seen in adult fiction. And while it does work on the rare occasion, in general I think it sets the stage for an info dump instead of a scene.

On the first page, we should know what time period we're in (historical versus contemporary), where the character is at that particular moment in time, and what they are doing. Avoid the urge to have the character tell us, "My name is Cathy and I'm sitting in English, which I hate." Instead, *set us in a classroom and show us why Cathy hates English.*

2.) Introduce the main character.

Whether you're writing in first, second or third person, the reader needs to be introduced to your main character. We don't need to know their entire life story, but we do need to know some basic facts, including their gender and approximate age. We also need to get a sense of their personality.

In young adult fiction, you have a slight advantage in the way you can use clues in the character's dialogue, inner monologue or surroundings to tell us their age. A senior level executive in an adult novel could be anywhere from mid-thirties to late-sixties, but a senior in high school is generally 17 or 18.

To bring us back to Cathy:

"If it weren't for the fact that one more skip means I can't cheer for my last homecoming game, I'd be in the parking lot right now with all the other seniors."

From this line, we know that Cathy is a high school senior, so we can guess that she's 17/18. She's a frequent class skipper, values cheerleading more than school, and is probably mid to high on the school's social ladder. We also don't hear her as a typical cheerleader – there's no "OMG's!" or other bubbly slang. This makes her a little more interesting, because it sets her apart from the stereotypical cheerleader. This one line also helps to set the scene – we know that Cathy's at school, and probably sitting in a classroom.

3.) Set the tone.

The words you choose will tell the reader a lot about the story they're about to read. Romance, mystery and contemporary fiction all have a different tone. If the tone doesn't match the story we're about to read, it can be jarring for the reader and it may take them out of the story entirely. For example, if we read:

“So I was at the mall today, buying the most gorgeous pair of three inch stiletto heels with rhinestones up the sides, and then, you’ll never believe what happened! I found a body, gross!”

The reader is immediately pulled out. The statement that the character found a body gives the reader the impression that we’re about to read a mystery or thriller, but the tone is more Clueless than Clue. It’s hard to believe (without adequate background information about the character) that their first instinct would be to focus on the details of their shoes rather than their disturbing find. And it doesn’t seem like this character would be one that would go after the killer.

Ultimately, if the tone doesn’t match the plot of the novel, the reader will have a hard time suspending their disbelief and will start to focus on what’s not working in the story instead of the story itself.

4.) Show your voice.

Sometimes when you’re writing your first draft, the voice of the novel doesn’t come through until you’re already a few chapters in. You may also find that the actual start of the novel isn’t the first page you wrote, but three chapters in. Make sure that once you’ve finished your revisions, you’ve reread your first chapter to make sure that it still fits with the finished novel. Make sure it is just as strong as, if not stronger than, the following chapters, and that your voice is consistent throughout.

5.) Set us up for the journey.

By the end of the first chapter, the reader should be asking themselves a question — why does the protagonist hate Jeff? Who stole the notebook? How are they going to save their brother? The first page should put us in a scene that is going to help set up that question.

It may seem like there’s much to accomplish on the first page and not that many words to do it in. But many of these elements work hand-in-hand. The way you describe your character will also set the tone for the piece. What the character thinks is important is going to illuminate their future journey. If you’re still having trouble with your first page, reread the first pages of your favorite YA novels, and look at how the author accomplished the five things above.