

You write your novel's first draft until you reach the end. After letting it rest, you come back to this hot mess of a story, ready to rewrite, revise, rewrite again. What do you look for in your novel's first ten pages?

Writing Tip for Today: Of course you will be revising scenes, smoothing out transitions and improving pacing--among other things. But your novel's opening is crucial to hook your reader. Let's consider a few things your novel's first ten pages must accomplish:

Character to Care About

If character is story (and story character) it makes sense that your Main Character (aka protagonist or hero) must be someone readers can care enough about to follow. That is why you must sketch your Main Character's biggest desires and motives (even hinted at) in those first few pages. Sometimes you can accomplish this in the first lines. I get a lot of first-time novelists who are writing multiple viewpoint novels--stories that share the points of view of more than one character. While this can enrich a story, be careful: I think it's better to develop a single POV character who is well-drawn and sympathetic than to force readers to dilute their allegiances with multiple characters telling the story. And while we're on the subject, consider your antagonist. If your hero or she-roe is fully developed but the antagonist is stereotypical, readers can't believe their hero is worth rooting for. Take as much care with your adversary character as you do your protagonist. In trying to paint a believable foe, some writers try to make them "realistic"--that is, neither good nor bad. But beware: If the antagonist seems wishy-washy or doesn't have a deal-breaker flaw, readers may become confused--just before they tune out completely. Get your characters' drawn in those first ten pages so readers understand what they're after as the story goal.

PDQ Conflict

And what are they after? Either the same thing (but only one can win) or else the Antagonist must try to prevent the Protagonist from realizing the goal. Conflict (with a capital C) is the fastest, easiest and best way to illustrate a goal only one person can obtain. Sure, the novel's opening can build the character, introduce us to her world, maybe add in a few other characters. But most of all these ten pages must display the conflict that tussling over that goal creates. Why? If you spend too long on the "background" material, or the story's set-up, readers don't see what's at stake. Conflict is the reason that a story where a boy who wanted to play the french horn in the school band--and so he did--isn't really a story, unless conflict is featured early and often. If you start your story just before all heck breaks loose, your reader is propelled into conflict and will likely keep reading to see how this conflict resolves. This is the whole point of your novel--to create and then resolve conflict. The sooner you dive into that conflict--and keep your character there--the more you'll be apt to create curiosity in the reader. A curious reader reads to see what happens next. We all crave conflict in fiction, either to identify with the conflict through escape or through overcoming the obstacles.

High Stakes test

Finally, if the first ten pages of your novel have plenty of conflict but readers don't get or can't believe why the hero cares about it probably suffers from low stakes. If you dive right into the conflict in the first ten pages, you as author will be forced to identify why the protagonist's goal matters. This will tell you a lot about what your story is really about. Ask yourself: If protagonist doesn't reach the goal, SO

WHAT? The so what test sounds harsh but answering it can help you raise the stakes of the novel. What will be lost (to the character, the character's environment, the world) should your character fail to realize this goal? Goals that matter to a character, her environment and the world (in different ways) tend to throw the most impact behind the story outcome. The secret to finding high stakes is to go directly to the emotions and the short list of qualities all humans crave: love, belonging, acceptance, beauty, excitement. Give the character a passionate, desperate need to attain this goal. If you make the character passionate and it all seems silly, get back in touch with the emotions and raise the stakes again. Do all this in the first ten pages--note that I didn't say resolve it in ten pages--and your readers will thank you.

Your Turn: Do you have any tricks for getting character, conflict and stakes down in ten pages? What are they?