

Beginnings...Essential Qualities of a Good First Chapter

The beginnings and endings of novels are notoriously the most difficult and trouble-plagued regions of a book. Often they require the most revision. Perhaps this is because the demands put upon beginnings and endings are large and many, even while the central difficulty comes down to something quite simple.

At the beginning of a novel the reader knows too little: this means that the writer must find a way to portion out the first few morsels of information / description in a manner that seems alluring and essential. Or, put another way, the writer must somehow make all the things that the reader *doesn't* yet know seem deeply interesting, mysterious.

At the end of a novel the reader knows too much: this makes it all too easy for the writer to dwell on notions that the novel has already implied or made clear. In addition, the reader has gotten to know the characters quite well over the course of several hundred pages, and sometimes, given the heightened drama that arises at the end of a novel, the writer pushes the characters to do things that are too extreme or otherwise contrary to their personalities. They don't behave like themselves.

First Chapters

As stated above, the best first chapters find a way to make all the things the reader *doesn't* yet know (about the characters, setting, impending action) feel evocative, deeply interesting, mysterious.

And yet at the same time a first chapter must also impart a wealth of practical, even mundane, information.

- a character's age, sex, appearance
- the time of day, the time of year (often a weather description)
- place must be established by means of a few well-chosen setting details
- the chapter or novel's point-of-view strategy must be introduced

A first chapter (or first few chapters) should also achieve several more difficult and elusive tasks.

- It should present the reader with an intrinsically interesting situation: an event of true dramatic weight or genuine strangeness. Even if we've encountered similar events elsewhere—in fiction or in life—there's a sense, a promise, that it will be shown to us in a new way.
- The novel's tone must be established: think of tone as the sound and attitude conveyed by the writer's words. It's the personality of the writing. This tone must be presented and meticulously controlled throughout the novel. (note: tone, style, voice are all terms used to describe the personal and unmistakable way the writer uses language.)
- At least one moment that allows the reader into the inner life of the main character(s): the writer finds the right event and the right language to pry beneath the outward appearance of a character and render a moment of insight, compassion, identification. The reader is struck or otherwise moved by this moment of quiet recognition. So begins a connection between reader and character that (hopefully) will last throughout the novel.
- The novel's central theme should be presented or hinted at: of course theme is many-faceted and requires an entire novel's worth of events to fully develop. And yet good first chapters find a way to subtly reveal ideas that will gradually grow more prominent in later chapters until they become the novel's primary theme.