Start Your Story Right:

The Very First Paragraph

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More Than Clever Lines:

The Scene's First Paragraphs

There's been a trend that calls for opening each scene "in media res"— with some kind of clever line (the "hook"), or sudden action or a line of dialogue.

This can be effective in drawing the readers in, but keeping them in requires more than clever lines. It requires a paragraph or two that anchors the scene in some specific place, time, and situation.

The readers need that to make any sense of your clever hook. This is especially true when you start with a line of dialogue:

"The beheadings are almost identical," said Joe Watson, placing his memo on the walnut expanse of Arthur Mahoney's worktable. Watson resisted the impulse to retrieve the memo on beheadings from the senior partner's elbow and check it again for typos.

Brainstorm, by Richard Dooling

There's the magnetic dialogue line (who can resist a good beheading?), but then immediately it's followed by who said it (Joe) and in what context (a memo to a senior partner—must be a law firm).

So yes, draw the reader in. But set up the scene too, in an opening that is both intriguing and illuminating.

This is probably difficult to do well in the initial draft of the scene, because you won't know entirely what it is you're setting up. But once you finish writing a scene, or the whole story draft, go back and examine your scene openings. Here is where you establish the initial POV for the scene, and use it as a filter to impart the scene's tone, setting, and approach.

Let's start right with some steps to unique and intriguing scene openings:

START YOUR STORY RIGHT

Step #1: Avoid Sameness.

Make sure that scene openings aren't going to get repetitive.

To verify this, read over just the first paragraph of each chapter in rapid succession. When I did this for one book, I found that I'd started four chapters with "The next morning…." It was a boring way to start—as if the time was always the most important factor—and the repetition was dulling. The opening should open this chapter or scene, and so should be unique.

Consider: What's different about this scene? Where is it placed in the book? The first few chapters, you might need to be a bit more explanatory (like use the character's full name), but later in the book, you can count on the reader knowing more of the facts and details.

Chapter One

No one knew Soho like Rico Martin did. He even gave walking tours of the neighborhood for tourists when he wasn't in work.

(later in the book, the reader will know his name, that he does tours, and that he's in Soho, so you wouldn't have to re-mention those. You can instead give more/different information.)

Chapter Twelve

He was leading the Beatles tour this week, so a group of aging flower children were waiting for him on the Frith Street side of the square.

When you get later into the book, you'll probably be having an event at the end of one scene and the repercussions or reaction in the next scene.Think about what just happened before. Is it after some big event? Then you might start with a reference (however subtle) back to that event, like:

No one had heard the fight. Eloise was sure of it, as sure as she could be.

His ears were still ringing when he woke up the next morning.

They drove all night with the windows down, and by dawn, she could no longer smell smoke on her jacket.

Step #2: Guide The Reader.

Start guiding the reader in the right direction:

- Readers are going to get confused by a complicated first paragraph, so simplify the syntax—the word choice and sentence structure.
- Experiment with shorter paragraphs, just because they feel more comprehensible.
- Be very careful about sending signals you don't want to send, or conflicting signals, as the reader has no context at this point to sort the contradictions out (like talking about sunlight when it turns out they're indoors).
- Don't throw more than a couple names at them early, and the first name mentioned should be that of the POV character—it's a signal to the reader whose head we're in.
- Start as close to the action of the scene as you can. If it's about the night of Joan's re-election, start in that day or night, not the earlier candidate's debate. Scenes should be unified in time and place, so if you are starting a chapter, say, with some kind of background, a line break (four or five blank lines) will signal that only after that are you starting the actual scene.
- Start with a tone that you're going to keep. If the first paragraph is funny, and the rest of the scene is serious, the reader might sue for false advertising!
- Begin as you mean to go on.
- Don't waste the valuable real estate of the first paragraph. Find a way to answer at least some of the reader's automatic questions:
    - Where are we?
    - When are we?
    - Who are we?
    - What's the problem?
    - Why are we here?

You probably can't answer all those questions in the opening. But give the reader the information and the insight he'll need to understand the scene as it develops. Read over the scene and decide which of those questions are most imperative, especially considering your POV approach.

Step #3: Consider Omniscient POV (just to start) if it's hard to anchor the action.

The point of an omniscient opening is to quickly establish time, place, and situation, so that you can get launched into the action of the scene. One way to start such an opening is with a tagline, or dateline, as reporters call it—the quick line at the top of the scene that identifies the time and date. Sometimes this line is in italics.

This is so conventional the reader absorbs it without much fuss, and it is especially useful for historical novels, where it's hard to work in that essential information. The tagline leads equally well into omniscient or personal POV, but you'll see it most often with an omniscient opening. Here's an example-

Medicine Creek, Kansas. Early August. Sunset.

The great sea of yellow corn stretches from horizon to horizon under an angry sky. When the wind rises the corn stirs and rustles as if alive, and when the wind dies down again the corn falls silent. The heat wave is now in its third week, and dead air hovers over the corn in shimmering curtains.

–*Still Life With Crows*, by Lincoln Child, Douglas Preston

Here, with the tagline establishing the where and when, the omniscient narration can get right into establishing the ominous tone of the scene with words like "angry" and "rustles" and "dies" and "dead", and the immediacy of the scene conflict (the heat wave) with the present tense.

This scene is about a place and a time and a problem— a rural area during a summer heat wave—and not about a person, and that's set up in the very first paragraph.

Alicia Rasley- The Story Journey website- lots of articles about writing!

Step #4: If You Start in Personal POV, Make Sure You Sneak in Essential Information

But in a more personal scene, don't leave the reader adrift in the existential void too long. Who are we? is the most essential question in a scene that begins in a personal POV.

So even if the scene is going into multiple POV, start in a character and stick with that viewpoint for a page at least. This is the time you establish not only the character but the world, so give one perspective on it to keep it coherent.

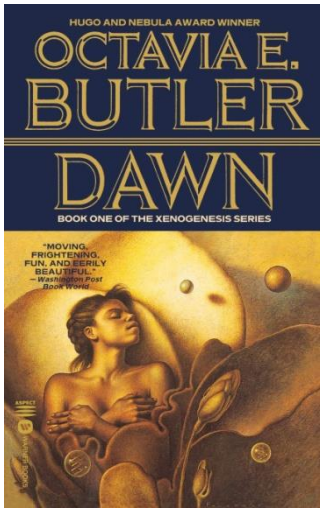
It helps, especially if this is the first time we've encountered this character, to use the name early. That doesn't just identify the character, but also the POV approach as personal. Consider using some thought or feeling verb early on to establish that we're inside a particular person, as in this passage where Yossarian falls madly in love.

> *It was love at first sight.*
> *The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him.*
> *Yossarian was in the hospital with a pain in his liver that fell just short of being jaundice. The doctors were puzzled by the fact that it wasn't quite jaundice. If it became jaundice they could treat it. If it didn't become jaundice and went away they could discharge him. But this just being short of jaundice all the time confused them.*
> –*Catch-22*, by Joseph Heller

Look for places to insert essential information in a subtle way. For example, Heller identifies the setting as "the hospital" in the third line. But if you wanted to establish that setting quickly and then go into his love at first sight, you might just insert the word "hospital" in front of chaplain: The first time Yossarian saw the hospital chaplain he fell madly in love with him.

Step #5: Enjoy and Employ Trouble

If the POV character is in some kind of trouble, logically that'll be on her mind. So at least hint at the problem early and draw the reader into sympathy:



Alive!
Still alive.
Alive...again.
Awakening was hard, as always. The ultimate disappointment. It was a struggle to take in enough air to drive off nightmare sensations of asphyxiation. Lilith Iyapo lay gasping, shaking with the force of her effort. Her heart beat too fast, too loud. She curled around it, fetal, helpless. Circulation began to return to her arms and legs in flurries of minute, exquisite pains.

Dawn, by Octavia E. Butler

Notice the power of individual words, particularly modifiers (adjectives and adverbs), in defining the inside experience of the POV character. Butler uses extreme words like "ultimate" and "nightmare" and "exquisite," as well as the motif of birth (fetal) to portray the pain of waking.

This passage also creates a question in the reader's mind: Why is waking alive so painful to her? This enhances the interactive reading experience, as the reader will start speculating about the answer even before the scene provides it.

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Step #6: Sight and Senses

Part of the interactive experience for the reader is visualizing the scene.

This is especially important, I think, with our readers, who have grown up "seeing" fiction on TV. So it helps to jot down exactly what the scene looks like as you start revising, and look for adjectives and adverbs that unobtrusively convey something about the character's surroundings.

Perhaps the most important setting detail is the light, as that can tell us if this is day or night, inside or outside, sunny or overcast, bright noon or just after dawn. Establish light quickly, as that "illuminates" the scene and is going to make all the difference to how the reader visualizes here. So see if you can put in a "light" word within the first two sentences. I know that sounds mechanical, but the reader needs that to build the picture. For example, "the sun was setting as he jammed his spurs…" or "Bill squinted through the dim bedroom light at…." or "the moonlit plateau spread out in front of me…."

Expand the vision into the other senses by getting into your POV character's body and perceiving in her individual way. If you can insert emotion or action in with the setting-establishment lines, all the better:

--

Jane had to shout to be heard over drone of the airplane engines. But that was okay. She felt like shouting anyway.

There was the smell of something rotting in the air, and his heart sank. He was too late.

Along with the fear, he could taste the metallic tang of his own blood, and he struck out blindly with both fists.

--

Let the viewpoint character live in the setting, interact with it in minor ways. The first few paragraphs is where the reader gets anchored in the narration, so don't leave her flailing around in open sea, trying to find that anchor. After those first paragraphs, the reader can visualize the setting and is firmly parked in the proper POV, and won't need so much context-setting. Then you can get started on the action.

Quick scene-opening checklist:

1. Is it clear in the first few paragraphs where we are?
That is, are we outside in the parking lot, or inside the executive dining room? Just a few words ("Out in the empty parking lot") might be enough to anchor the scene in the setting.

2. Will the reader know what time of day is it?
You can state this right out: "It was 3 am before Tom tracked his brother down in a rickety bar perched on the end of the city pier." Or you can use physical details to clue the reader in: "She shielded her eyes against the afternoon light."

3. Is it clear whose POV are we in?
If you start in an omniscient viewpoint, when do you descend into a personal viewpoint? How do you establish this POV character's goal/agenda for the scene, or state of mind or emotional condition?

4. Remember, the scene is a unit of change– something changes during the course of the scene.
Do you have some "before" situation established, or are we at the beginning or in the middle of some event of change?
For example, is the heroine about ready to go into a job interview or visit her mother in jail, or is she halfway through her truckdriver's exam when a tire blows out? We need some glimpse of what the situation was like before in order to put the change-to-come into context.

5. And don't forget this opening sets up the beginning point of the emotional arc. Where does the POV character start out emotionally? How do you establish it?

6. Hardest question– is this the best place to start?
I tend to write around until I find the real scene opening, which might be where the action starts, or just before some big change, or when two people meet, or whatever. That's fine– however we find our way is okay. But my problem is– I'm not good at cutting all that intro material that isn't really needed! So I'm trying to start the scene as late as possible, and putting all the transitional/positioning stuff (time, place, situation) in a paragraph or so as the action starts.

Spending a couple minutes thinking about what the real opening should be saves me far more in writing time.

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Alicia Rasley is an award-winning fiction-writer, and nationally known writing coach. She received her MA in Literature at Butler University, and has taught there and at state universities. Currently she tutors writing students at the University of Maryland University College, edits stories, and coaches writers.

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