

## First Chapter

By Jeanne Leach

**First chapter** - The best place to begin is at the beginning.

The first chapter sets the mood of the entire book and must contain certain elements of the story. Although the back cover will reveal the basics about the book, the first chapter must be written as if there would be no cover.

First, the book must open with a 'hook' that literally hooks the reader and keeps them reading the next sentence, and the next, and the next.

[Below are inserted example excerpts from *Cyndere's Midnight* and *The Wolf of Tebron*.]

Ex. 1 Cyndere walked down to the water to make her daily decision—turn and go back into House Bel Amica, or climb Stairway Rock and throw herself into the sea.

Ex. 2 A dark bird, no more than a shadow, circled overhead.

[Back to Jeanne.]

Hopefully, these hooks will make you want to keep reading to see what's going on. If the first page of the book is boring to you as an editor, it will be boring to the readers also. A good rule of thumb is to find the first exciting scene with lots of action and plunk the reader right down in the middle of it. I have often suggested the client eliminate as many as several pages of beginning story because after getting into the story I realized the opening wasn't where it needed to be.

Just as the opening line must hook the reader, the end of the chapter must also grab hold of them and force them to want to keep going, even if they really don't have the time. The writer must leave them with a 'cliffhanger.'

[Inserted examples.]

Ex. 1 When Emeriene's hands seized Cyndere's robes, the heiress of House Bel Amica fought to break free and dive into her father's embrace.

Ex. 2 But as he neared the village, her warning rattled around in his head like the stones in his dreams, tumbling in waves, rolling and colliding, leaving him no peace.

[Back to Jeanne.]

As you can see, I used two types of cliffhangers. The first one contained action.

In the second, it's not action, but rather an internal conflict. Another type of cliffhanger creates conflict "unawares." This is where the reader is inside the main character's head. The main conflict of the story has been laid out, and the character acts or reacts to this in the best way

they know how. The chapter ends with them thinking they are on the right track toward getting this resolved, but in reality, the reader knows this is not the best direction for them to take. It's like the old horror movie where you find yourself wanting to say, "Don't go in that room!" yet they go straight for the room with the scary factor inside it.

It is important to end ALL chapters with a cliffhanger. If the chapter ends on a flat note, the editor must help the writer to develop something that will catch the reader's interest and make them want to keep reading. Always leave the reader wanting more – now! We want them to be so enthralled with the book they will lose track of the time and read the story when they should be sleeping at night.

There are more elements of the story that the reader must discover in the first chapter. Now keep in mind that not all of these will necessarily be contained in the first chapter, so this is just a general guideline to keep in mind as you edit. Some stories just naturally preclude some of these from happening in chapter one, but if they aren't there, they certainly must be answered within the next chapter if possible.

1. What genre is this? Is it a mystery, suspense, romance, comedy, etc.?
2. In what time period is the story taking place: western, contemporary, regency, medieval, early Roman, etc.? This can be revealed by the way the character is dressed, or their speech, or perhaps through the setting. In fact, most of these will be used by the end of the first chapter.
3. Is this light reading or deep and thought provoking?
4. The main character(s) must be introduced in the first chapter. The first time each character is mentioned, their entire name must be revealed. It is best if the reader gets a physical description of the characters and their age. The reader must be able to picture the main characters in their minds as early as possible. That way, as the story unfolds, the reader can 'see' them going through each event. However, keep in mind not to give a whole paragraph at a time of description. Rather, drop tidbits into the story as it progresses. We'll talk about characterization in a later lesson.
5. The reader should know by the end of the first chapter what main conflicts the character(s) are facing, or a foreshadowing of what they are going to face. What is the main character(s)' primary desire in life and what is keeping them from attaining it?
6. What is the faith element? Is the main character(s) Christian? Are they a practicing, faithful, believing, trusting Christian, or are they having doubts? Had something happened along the way to zap their faith from them, and now they are struggling? Again, you can't have it all in a single paragraph of description, but rather drop in little tidbits organically through the way the character reacts to various stimuli in their lives.
7. Setting is another important key to the first chapter. The reader must have a sense of where the characters are at all times. Descriptions of rooms, sense of space and flow are important. Again, don't take up two paragraphs in a row to describe a room and its contents. Make sure the readers understand the "blueprints" to the house. I've read numerous manuscripts where a person is inside one room in the house. The next moment they are outside, and I had no idea how they got there.

How many other rooms did they have to walk through to get outside? Are they in the front of the house or in the back yard? These must be clearly written.

Note: Due to the nature of story-telling it is possible for an author to leave out one or two of these elements and still have a great first chapter. That's okay. You'll know by the end of the chapter if it is important to mention to the author that they need to add one of these elements. It is important to leave the reader with unanswered questions at the end of the chapter, but you don't want them to have to ask how old the character is or where this story is taking place.

### **Exercise (optional)**

Grab a fiction book that you are currently reading or one that you have read and enjoyed in the past, and answer the following questions about chapter one in the book. If you don't have a work of fiction available, either go to the library and check one out or please let me know and I'll send you a first chapter of one of my books. It's up to you whether you want to elaborate on your answers or just give 'yes' and 'no' answers. Answer these based solely on the first chapter, ignoring the book cover and back cover blurb. The main purpose for this exercise is for you to recognize the elements of fiction that must be present in the first chapter.

1. Title and author of the book
2. Does the book start out with a good opening hook?
3. Did it end with a cliffhanger that made you want to keep reading more?
4. Based on the first chapter, did you know the era in which the story took place?
5. Based on the first chapter, did you discover what genre this was written in?
6. Is this light reading or deep and thought provoking?
7. Did you learn who the main characters are in the book? The hero? The heroine?
8. Did you learn what the main characters looked like?
9. Did you learn the main conflict the characters are facing or will face during the duration of the story and/or what the main characters' primary desire in life is and what is keeping them from attaining it?
10. Was the setting vivid? Did you know where the story took place?
11. Is there a faith element? Is the main character(s) a Christian? Did you discover if they are a practicing, faithful, believing, trusting Christian, or if they are having doubts? Had something happened along the way to zap their faith from them, and now they are struggling?
12. Was there any back story or flashbacks in the first chapter? If so, were they unobtrusive or did they convey way too much information that you didn't need or care to read?
13. Did you notice overt research, or did the author do a good job of blending it into the story?

*In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.*