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Bridget's Guide to Your First 25 Pages (for Fiction and Memoir)

In the first 25 pages of your book, readers decide whether or not they're going to read it.

These readers include:

- Real live people who might buy your book in a bookstore one day. These folks often read the first couple of pages before committing to the purchase.
- Real live people who typically download a handful of pages on their e-reader before they decide whether or not to buy your book
- Agents who have extremely limited time to read manuscripts and need to get a strong sense of the book right away
- Publishers who have extremely limited time to read manuscripts and need to get a strong sense of the book right away

All of these people are gatekeepers!

If you want to get past their gates and have the opportunity to change their minds, change their lives, show them new worlds, or get them to give you a big fat book contract, your first 25 pages need to be as strong as possible.

I think there are 6 main objectives for your book's opening pages:

1. Make us care about the protagonist.

This one might sound obvious, but you'd be surprised by how many people don't do this right away. Most traditional fiction and memoir follows the path of one character: the protagonist. We should meet that protagonist on your first page, or maybe the second—but no later. We need to get invested in them right away. Typically, we do that by *seeing them in action*. We need to watch them do what it is that they do in the style they do it. I like to say that we should know at least 5 facts about that protagonist by the end of page 5 as well. Most critically, we need to learn what their major conflict is—more on that in a moment.

Occasionally, books have multiple protagonists. In this case, choose your most compelling one to start—the one that will start off your book with a bang and set up your themes early.

Remember, protagonists are not always human beings! If your book's main character is an evolutionary consciousness, a dolphin, a mushroom, or an alien, fantastic! We still need to learn about them, get attached to them, and find out their main conflict right away.

2. Set up the protagonist's main conflict.

Conflict is what drives story. If you are far enough through your book that you're revising your first 25 pages, you should know what your central conflict is. If you don't, STOP now and read my tip sheet about LOGLINES! Do not proceed with editing until you have a good logline that makes your conflict crystal clear.

What does your protagonist want? Let us see what their reality looks like in these first 25 pages in such a way that we know what they want and understand why they want it. We should be able to determine what they hope/fear/dread/dream of as well as what is standing in the way of their achieving it.

As with all good writing, this should be done through *showing, not telling*, so it's likely that you are doing a lot of this work "in scene." (Not sure what "scene work" means? STOP and read my tip sheet on SCENE WORK!)

3. Give us a sense of the overall plot

What will the storyline of the book be? If the protagonist and their conflict have been introduced, we should know WHO we are following and WHAT they want. But HOW are they going to get what they want? This is your plot. Where are we going to go, and what are we going to do along the way? There is no need to lay out the whole plot; that would give away the story. But you do want to get it rolling in your first 25 pages.

Some people talk about an "inciting incident." This is a scene that sparks the conflict (meaning, the protagonist can't let the issue simmer any longer) and propels them into the rest of the plot. An inciting incident is a fantastic way to get your plot moving.

4. Put us in a place and time

Where will this book take place, and in what time period? Will these setting details change regularly or stay constant?

Readers really like to know where they are in time and space. If you are choosing to withhold this information in order to intentionally create groundlessness and instability in your reader, great; you can leave this out. But if that's not your objective, ground us in place and time so

that we can use our brainpower to follow the story and connect to the characters rather than spinning our wheels trying to figure out what year it is or what country we're in.

If your book is science fiction or fantasy, you might have a little extra lifting to do in the setting department, as things might not work "normally" in your book's world. If this is the case, you'll need to do some "world building" in your first 25 pages—ideally, enough to help us get situated in and intrigued by the world but not so much that we know everything about it and have no reason to read onward.

5. Give us a sense of the book's main themes.

Is your book investigating ideas of gender fluidity? Issues of race and class in 18th century England and how they shed light on these issues in modern America? The dangers of AI? The risks of disobeying the law? The importance of unconditional love in family contexts?

You have many pages to explore your themes, and they are typically most visible later in your book. However, readers want to know right away what big picture ideas you are going to entertain and what questions your work asks. To communicate that, at least hint at your themes in your first 25 pages.

6. Let us know what "the rules" of your book are.

If you are writing a book in totally linear time that uses a third-person omniscient narrator to follow characters who speak traditional English and live in geographically-identifiable places, you might not have a lot of work to do in this department.

But, these days, a lot of us like to shake things up. We jump time. We jump place. We throw in italicized incomplete sentences to indicate interior thoughts. We use 5 different voices for our protagonist's 5 different moods. We include flashbacks and flash forwards. We include ghosts, fairies, and zombies in our cast of characters. We make animals, plants, rocks, and sand grains talk. We create unreliable narrators or switch narrators midstream.

ANYTHING you want to do is fair game...IF you let the reader know the rules of the game you are playing. Establish those rules in the first 25-40 pages and the reader will roll with whatever you set up.

With all of that said, here's the most commonly asked follow-up question:

But, I really like to take my time, ease into my conflict, and really set the scene before I make things happen...can't I do that for 50 or so pages and then really get going after that?

You absolutely can! You just may not be able to commercially publish your book.

Established authors whose names on covers guarantee thousands and thousands of dollars of sales can do whatever they want and still get published by Harper Collins. We mere mortals cannot. If your first 25 pages fly in the face of the guidelines above, you are likely to have a harder time finding representation for your book.

It goes without saying that there are many, many exceptions to the suggestions above. If you have a solid and conscious reason to disregard any of them, great! Do it.

But I'm a big fan of knowing the rules before you break them. If you break them, do so with intention and style.

*If you have any questions about any of this or want to run your ideas by me,
I'm always happy to help with this process!
Just reach out...*