



### Great Beginnings

Few things make a writer more anxious than facing a blank page. One approach to overcoming this obstacle is to remember what the opening of a story is supposed to do, i.e., draw readers in and capture their curiosity.

Great beginnings, like our story, need three things - character, conflict, and narrative arc. These three characteristics are interrelated: Interesting characters are conflicted; characters with conflict have come from somewhere and are going somewhere. Successful beginnings call for choosing the moment when conflict drives the character to act and then presenting it so that the reader wants to know what follows.

The beginning should also suggest something significant about the story-the main characters, the tone, or the setting. Even if you know the story you want to tell, how do you decide what the first paragraph or sentence should be?

One way to sneak up on the start is to break the question "How shall I begin?" into three separate questions: the artistic question, the logistical question, and the psychological question.

- The artistic question: What is this story about? What's the idea you want to explore? You may have an entire plot worked out in your head already, or you may have only a character or a situation in mind. Whatever it is, something has motivated you to write.
- The logistical question: relates to a number of basic technical decisions you have to make at the start even if you don't yet know everything about your story; these include: Who's telling the story? What verb tense will you use? What voice is the story in? These choices will have consequences later on.
- The psychological question: relates to how you prepare emotionally-to begin. Even seasoned writers become anxious about starting something new. Trying to leap that psychological hurdle involves being able to answer the first two questions, at least in part. That, successively, increases anxiety, because there's so much you could worry about in advance that it's a wonder anyone ever starts at all.

### THE FIVE W's

An effective way to start a work of fiction or nonfiction is to use the old-fashioned five W's of journalism: who, what, where, when, and why. If you have a rough idea of what you want to write about, try to give a brief answer to each of the following questions relative to your story.

**WHO:** Who are your characters, and how are they related to each other? The who question also encompasses the choice of point of view, i.e., Who is your protagonist, and who is your narrator? Sometimes these two are the same person, but that's not always the case. Often, the story is told by a third-person narrator, who can vary from the godlike, seeing into each character's thoughts, to one who is more like a surveillance camera, relating what the characters do without revealing their inner lives.

**WHAT:** The answer to the who question determines, in large part, how you answer the next question: What happens in the story? Another interpretation of this question is: What is your story about? Do you have some larger theme you want to get across, or are you just telling a good tale? Even if it's the latter, you still have to think about another version of the what question: What effect do you want the story to have on the reader?

**WHERE:** The where question seems relatively simple at first glance: Where is the story set? But this question leads to a more complex one: How important is the setting of the story to the story itself? In answering the where question, you decide whether your story is tied to a specific geographical and historical context and whether it is, in part, about that place and time or whether it is timeless.

**WHEN:** The question of when the story takes place is also more complex than it seems at first. It can identify the historical time of the story or the time it takes place in the lives of the characters. It also asks: When is the story being told in relation to when it happened? Is it being narrated in the present tense or in the past tense by a present-day narrator? If you tell a story in the past tense, you gain the benefit of hindsight, but if you tell it in the present tense, what you lose in hindsight you may gain in immediacy and suspense.

Other aspects of the when question include: At what point in the story does the plot begin, and how do you order the events of the plot? Do you tell the story chronologically, backward, or moving backward and forward in time?

Answering the when question is at the heart of learning how to construct the plot, because you come to realize that the same series of chronological events can be told in many different ways. By deciding what to reveal and when, you're choosing the most important moments in the plot.

**WHY:** Finally, the why question asks: Why do the characters do what they do? What do the characters want, and why are they in the situation of the story? Is it a situation of their own making, or is it a situation that has been thrust upon them? Of course, asking why the characters do what they do is both the hardest and the most essential question you must answer. For many writers, trying to answer this question is the reason they write in the first place.

Even if you've decided on the answers to the five W's, you still have to think of the first words of the story. Do you open with a description that sets the scene, an exchange of dialogue, an interior monologue, some action, or a combination of these?

**We will explore a conclusion with group discussion at the meeting.**