

Handouts for "Building the First Chapter of Your Novel"

Note: Beginning chapter one assumes you have already plotted and determined a premise.

- Establish the type of novel through tone or style:
 - Sci-fi taking place in a high-tech world with an unadorned writing style.
 - Romance set in the Victorian age with a more flowery vocabulary.
- Introduce the narrator
 - Can be a character, such as Nick in *The Great Gatsby*
 - Can be the author. This is typical.
- Show the choice of viewpoint:
 - First or third person. *Madame Bovary* begins with a first-person narration and shifts to third person at the beginning of the second chapter.
 - Restricted or unrestricted. Should be maintained throughout the story. Not to be used as a means to hide information from the reader at the author's will.
- Catch the reader's interest by using one or more of the following "hooks": Present the major complication.
 - Present a minor complication related to the major complication.
 - Insert an interesting "plant."
 - Arouse interest in the protagonist's welfare.
- Start the chain of causally related events:
 - Introduce the event outside the character that begins the action. This is the event that triggers the plot's beginning:
 - Could be a murder in a mystery story.
 - Could be an alien space ship landing in a sci-fi.
 - Could be the major complication.
- Introduce the protagonist and/or one or more major characters:
 - Introduce one or more. For example, in a romance there are two major characters.
 - Indicate their exact or approximate ages, physical appearances, and personalities.
 - Show the quest, desire, drive, or whatever the character is striving for.
- Introduce the setting:
 - Use setting as character.
 - Use setting to show the protagonist's conflict. For example, a prison setting could show a prisoner's frustration and wish to escape.
 - Shift to other settings to set the scene or scenes for following actions or complications.

- Introduce story background:
 - Use exposition.
 - Use description.
 - Use narration.

- Be selective:
 - The reader doesn't need to know about the protagonist's first day in kindergarten, unless it is crucial to the story.
 - Fit the amount and depth of background to the *type* of story. For example, a family gothic would probably require more background than a murder mystery.

- Give a clue to the time period:
 - Definite, such as "in 1945."
 - Round-about, such as "Mary was born well into the 20th century."

- Write one or more big scenes:
 - Should contain conflict.
 - Should satisfy reader's need for immediate action.
 - Should reveal something about the protagonist's character and, therefore, help characterize.

- Write one small scene:
 - Should help characterize.
 - Should convey background information reader must know to understand and believe that portion of the story.

"Writing Chapter One of Your Novel"
Example: *All the Pretty Horses* by Cormac McCarthy

- Establish the type of novel through tone or style.
Literary Style, not genre.
- Introduce the narrator.
"He" shows the narrator is the author.
- Show the choice of viewpoint.
"He" rather than "I" shows the POV is third person. Don't know yet if limited or unlimited. Need to meet more characters before that can be proven. P. 8 mentions Fort Sumner and Denver, so is in or has close proximity to US. Mostly unlimited with POV errors?
- Catch the reader's interest by using a "hook."
"Conventional wisdom" says the "hook" should be the first line or paragraph of chapter one.
- Present the major complication.
P. 7. Family name "Grady" died out as male heirs were not replaced. P. 10. Protagonist given Grady as a middle name. P. 13. Romantic troubles. [P. 13. Gave up looking for a "major" complication.]
- Start the chain of causally related events.
At his grandfather's funeral. Sees his father there.
- Introduce the protagonist and/or one or more major characters.
In his black suit he stood... [The protagonist is male.] P. 7. Meet the father.
- Introduce the setting.
P. 4. Speaking Spanish, mentioning "the prairie." Is it in Mexico? P. 5. Describes Indians and an old war trail. Is this Texas bordering Mexico? P. 8 mentions Fort Sumner and Denver, so is in or has close proximity to US.
- Introduce story background.
Ranch has been handed down through the family. His father is still alive.
- Be selective.
Lots of background; maybe too much? Or too wordy?
- Give a clue to the time period.
The house was built in eighteen seventy-two. Seventy-seven years later, his grandfather was the first man to die in it. [1872 + 77 = 1949]

- Write one or more big scenes.
First chapter is 75 pages so this requirement is met.
- Write one small scene.
Ditto.