

ten things you're doing

WRONG IN

YOUR FIRST

CHAPTER

an epic ebook for writers



WELCOME TO YOUR FIRST CHAPTER

an excellent first chapter is vital to a successful story

The first chapter is arguably the most difficult part of writing a novel. In just a few precious pages, you must set the foundation for your entire story.

The process of setting that foundation includes:

- hooking the reader
- establishing the setting
- introducing the main characters
- showcasing character personalities
- creating tension and instigating conflict
- settling the reader into the pace of the story

That can be exhausting to think about, I know! Plenty of writing blogs and craft books offer fantastic advice for creating thrilling first chapters, but every book is different.

The truth of the matter is that there is no secret formula for the first chapter. **As the author, only you know how best to introduce your story to the world.**

So instead of telling you what to do with your first chapter, allow me to tell you what *not* to do.

I've been through plenty of first chapters of my own (too many to count, really), so I've picked up a few tips and tricks along the way.

And having made every mistake in the book, I think I can help you cut a clear path to your own perfect first chapter.

But where are my manners? Before we get started, allow me to introduce myself...

Hey! I'm Kristen A. Kieffer, the girl behind the book. I'm a fantasy author and creative writing coach who loves helping other writers craft novels that will endear readers, excite publishers, and launch their writing careers.



You can find me on my website, [ShesNovel.com](https://shesnovel.com), and on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Google +](#), [Pinterest](#), and [Instagram](#).

let's get started, shall we?

HERE ARE TEN THINGS YOU'RE DOING WRONG IN YOUR FIRST CHAPTER

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TEN THINGS YOU'RE DOING WRONG

you start with setting

I'm thoroughly convinced there's no greater disappointment than cracking open a new novel to discover that the first line talks about the weather.

That may seem a bit silly or snobbish, but think about it.

The only time people talk about the weather in daily conversation is when they have absolutely nothing of interest to say or when the weather is truly remarkably.

The same should go for your first chapter. If the weather doesn't play an extraordinary role in your novel, you should avoid bringing it up with readers first thing.

Granted, setting the scene is important—but not nearly as important as introducing your main character and establishing conflict.

Save the setting for at least a few paragraphs in, making sure to keep your descriptions concise, and your readers will thank you for it!

you start with backstory

Has a new acquaintance ever related their entire life story to you only moments after you'd met? It's more than a bit awkward, right?

Beginning your novel with backstory is just the same. Before readers get to know who your characters *were*, they need to know who your characters *are*.

By taking the time to establish your characters' everyday normal before dishing on their backstory, you're far more likely to hook readers in for the long haul.

Though much of your backstory can actually be cut, here are a few appropriate ways to sneak in those pivotal pieces needed to clarify reader understanding:

1. Create a quick and gripping prologue to make backstory immediately known.
2. Sprinkle backstory throughout the exposition and rising action.

TEN THINGS YOU'RE DOING WRONG

you open with a dream

Readers enter into each story believing they can trust the author not to lie about its events. Opening with a dream is a surefire way to shatter that trust.

A dream is a form of trickery. Readers are lead to believe that the events in the dream are actually occurring when in reality they are a figment of your character's subconscious.

Can you see how quickly this can become dangerous?

Whether you're attempting to add drama to a lackluster plot or trying to showcase your character as emotionally unstable, know that neither option justifies the intentional deception of your readers.

Instead, begin your novel in the thick of the action or have readers infer your character's mental instability from their words and deeds.

Whatever you do, don't ever throw away your readers' valuable trust for the sake of shock value.

your hook sounds contrived

Your first chapter must immediately hook readers, but trying too hard to win their love and attention can lead your novel's opening lines to sound contrived.

And if there's any line in your novel that you want to read naturally, it's the first one. After all, you want to grip readers, not throttle them.

Here are some common clichés to avoid:

- shock phrases
- gore
- threats
- melodrama

Each of these items will ring false when read, and readers will recognize the line as forced. If they're highly disappointed, readers may even set your book aside, which is exactly what you're trying to avoid.

To truly hook readers, start with an interesting event and let your words flow naturally.

TEN THINGS YOU'RE DOING WRONG

you introduce the hero too late

Not every novel features a hero that also serves as the point-of-view character (just think of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*).

If your first chapter features an alternative point-of-view character, ensure that the focus still lies with your novel's hero.

After all, you don't want readers to believe your point-of-view character to be the hero. Readers are likely to be disappointed when they realize their mistake, which can leave them feeling deceived.

Instead, introduce your hero as early as possible to ensure that readers have a strong understanding of their character before the first chapter ends.

Try as they might, readers just can't fall in love with a main character they haven't even met.

you're too focused on appearance

Each of your readers will form their own understanding of your characters' appearances as they read, so fussing over every detail is simply a waste.

Keep your descriptions short instead, remarking only on important features—such as build and coloring—to help readers form their mental images. Anything more will only slow down the pace of your novel.

Also, make sure to avoid breaking the fourth wall by having your character relate their appearance while looking at their reflection. The obvious nature of this technique only serves to pull readers out of your story.

Instead, take a page out of author Sarah Dessen's book:

"I don't know. Just because someone's pretty doesn't mean she's decent. Or vice versa. I'm not into appearances. I like flaws, I think they make things interesting."

TEN THINGS YOU'RE DOING WRONG

you offer too much exposition

Exposition is the information your readers need to fully understand your story. It consists of elements like world-building, character relationships, and backstory.

Most plot structures relegate exposition to the beginning of the novel and follow it up with rising action, a climax, falling action, and the resolution.

But exposition and the remainder of your novel don't have to be mutually exclusive. In fact, thinking that you need to get all of the exposition out of the way first thing is a big mistake!

A first chapter needs to focus on introducing readers to the main character and hinting at conflict, all of which only leaves room for you to lay out the most pertinent pieces of exposition.

The rest you can scatter throughout the first half of your novel, allowing readers to discover each piece as they go.

your message is too obvious

Italo Calvino once said, "A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say."

Books with profound messages are great. They speak to the soul and foster deep thought and change. That's a fantastic thing!

And true to what Calvino said, those books are usually the ones that become classics, being read time and again because they continually move the hearts of readers.

But profound messages need time to sink in. Too many writers make the mistake of stating their message loud and clear in the first few pages, practically preaching at their readers.

Instead of blatantly stating your book's agenda in the first chapter, slowly wow your readers over the course of the novel. Anything else will simply make your readers turn and run.

TEN THINGS YOU'RE DOING WRONG

you begin too early

With most plot structures, the point of the first chapter is to establish your main character's everyday normal, then to challenge that normal with a bit of conflict or tension.

If you're struggling to get to that opening conflict or tension within the first chapter—and especially within the first five pages—you are probably starting your novel too early.

This can pose a problem since a lack of immediate interest via conflict or tension can lead readers to put down your book.

Thankfully, there's an easy fix for this issue. Simply rework your first chapter to begin later in the plot, as close to the first conflict or tension as possible.

Establish your main character, then snatch their everyday normal away. That is where your true hook lies.

you begin too late

Figuring out your first chapter's sweet spot is tricky business. Begin too early and you'll bore readers, but begin too late and you'll leave them feeling confused or overwhelmed.

The point of your novel's first conflict or tension is to put your main character in physical or emotional danger.

If your first chapter throws readers into the middle of that conflict or tension without ever introducing your main character, readers are bound to feel a little lost.

After all, it's hard to worry over someone you don't know!

To solve this issue, take your first chapter back just a few paces. What was happening in your main character's life immediately before they got themselves into trouble?

That is your money moment—the perfect place to begin your novel.

TEN THINGS YOU'RE DOING WRONG

bonus tip: you adhere too closely to the rules

Hey, friend! So I've thrown a lot of rules your way today, and I know that along the way I might have made you doubt some of the first chapters you've written over the years.

But know this: every novel is different, and only you know what is best for your own. So don't let my rules hold you back from creating your masterpiece.

To quote *Pirates of the Caribbean*, "Hang the rules! They're more like guidelines anyway." And that's exactly the case with the rules I've laid out today.

Each of these ten tips are guidelines that will benefit the majority of novels. They're most likely great tips for your own book, too, so don't knock 'em before you try 'em.

However, there is a chance that your novel is the unicorn—the one that stands out from the crowd. In other words, it may be the one to break the rules in a good way.

So if you disagreed with something I said in this ebook

or thought that one of the rules I laid out just wasn't right for your novel, that's a-okay.

After all, my job—both in this ebook and in everything I create for *She's Novel*—is not to teach you how to do your job as an author. It's to guide you, mentor you, and encourage you to achieve your writerly dreams.

So if you have a question or disagree with something I've said, don't hesitate to shoot me an email and share your views.

And if you need a little uplifting, know that I'll always be here to send a hug and killer pep talk your way!

Want to get in touch? Shoot me an email or give me a shoutout on social media. I can't wait to hear from you!

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Wishing you the best of luck, lovely author. Happy writing, and don't forget to stay amazing!

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