

Saving the First for Last:
How to Write a Strong Start for Your Novel

By Kathleen Ernst

I revised my Civil War novel *Hearts of Stone* many times before selling it to Dutton Children's Books. My editor only had one major suggestion: Consider a new beginning.

If you're revising a novel, considering the first scene should be one of your last steps. It's hard to know how best to begin until you're sure how the story ends. And although everyone needs to revise in a manner that works for them, writers who perfect every sentence along the way can fall in love with sentences or scenes that ultimately don't best serve the story.

Skilled novelists convey character, conflict, setting, and voice in the first page, paragraph, even sentence. It's a tall order! But here are eight strategies that command readers'—and editors'—interest.

1. Grab readers' attention.

Katherine Paterson begins *Lyddie*, one of my favorite children's novels, this way: "The bear had been their undoing, though at the time they had all laughed." Or how about this, from Richard Peck's *A Long Way from Chicago*: "You wouldn't think we'd have to leave Chicago to see a dead body." Who wouldn't want to keep reading?

2. Begin with Action.

Here's Walter Dean Myers powerful opening of *Monster*: "The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help." Action can also be quiet, as in Beverly Cleary's *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*: "Keith, the boy in the rumpled shorts and shirt, did not know he was being watched as he entered room 215 of Mountain View Inn."

3. Arrive mid-conversation.

E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* begins like this: "Where's Papa going with that axe?" Lisi Harrison uses dialogue to start *The Clique*: "'Massie, wipe that confused look off your face,' Massie's mom, Kendra, said. 'It's really very simple—you're not going.'" Both opening lines convey conflict.

4. Begin with an omniscient passage.

Occasionally, skilled authors begin high above their protagonist before zooming in and continuing with a more intimate point of view. *Swallowing Stones*, by Joyce McDonald, is about the repercussions a teen faces after he discharges a rifle and accidentally kills a schoolmate's father. In the book's beginning, readers travel with the fatal bullet: "There is no stopping it; the bullet rips through the hot summer haze, missing trees, houses, unsuspecting birds, coming to roost, finally, like an old homing pigeon...." The stage has been set.

5. Begin by mirroring the ending.

An Na does this beautifully in *A Step from Heaven*. In the opening chapter, the young protagonist describes how being in her father's arms at the seashore makes her feel safe: "I am a sea bubble floating, floating in a dream. Bhop." Her father ultimately leaves his family, and yet in the end readers feel hopeful when they read the same words used to describe her sense of security. Laurie Halse Anderson employs a similar technique in the opening and closing of *Fever, 1793*. The main character experiences daybreak quite differently in the first and last chapters, which reveals how she has matured.

6. State the problem.

Simply stating the problem in the first sentence immediately takes readers to the story's emotional heart. "He did not want to be a wringer," Jerry Spinelli writes in *Wringer*, about a boy destined to wring pigeons' necks in a local event. Many authors use this technique: "All I've ever wanted is for Juli Baker to leave me alone." (*Flipped*, Wendelin Van Draanen.) "I am Mary. I am a witch." (*Witch Child*, Celia Rees.)

“Chapter One: Summer 1849 – In which I come to California, fall down a hill, and vow to be miserable here. (*The Ballad of Lucy Whipple*, Karen Cushman.)

7. Let your character reflect.

Julie Johnston begins *Hero of Lesser Causes* with this reflective moment: “It started out as a peaceful, plodding kind of summer, the summer of 1946. We didn’t know that our lives would charge wildly out of control.” For another example, see Jennifer Donnelly’s lovely *Northern Light*.

8. Provide a prologue.

Some writers hate prologues, but I say if it works for your story, use it. A prologue can help readers feel how desperately a protagonist does *not* want something to happen, as Jerry Spinelli does in *Wringer*. It can help readers understand what a character is about to lose, as Pam Munoz Ryan does beautifully in *Esperanza Rising*. And it can set a tone, as Gary Paulsen does in the marvelous prologue to *The Winter Room*.

Ultimately, I decided to write a prologue for *Hearts of Stone*. The novel originally began in the summer of 1863. Fifteen-year-old Hannah’s father had already left their home on Cumberland Mountain in East Tennessee to fight for the Union Army. Hannah is estranged from her friend Ben because his father had joined the Confederate Army. Soon orphaned, Hannah shepherds her younger siblings on the long trip to a Nashville refugee camp, all the while longing to get back home.

The problem? Too many crucial events were lost in back story. My new prologue is set in 1861, when Hannah’s father announces that he’s joining the army, and it allows readers to meet Ben while his relationship with Hannah is still good.

Finally, I worked on a first sentence that could reveal both Hannah’s conflict with her father and her strong sense of place. The book now begins this way: “Pa ripped our family apart just as spring began whispering sweet promises up on Cumberland Mountain.”

Hearts of Stone’s review in *Kirkus* concluded with a prediction that “Readers will be hooked from the start.” I’m glad my editor asked for a new beginning. Sometimes it really does make sense to save the first for last.

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Kathleen Ernst is a writer, social historian, and educator. Her fiction for children and young adults include six historical mysteries, five novels set during the American Civil War, and a contemporary novel. She has also written a nonfiction book about the impact of the Civil War on Maryland civilians. Kathleen invites readers to visit www.kathleenernst.com for more writing tips, information about her books, teacher guides, schedule of appearances, and much more.

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