Hook, Line, and Sinker:

How to reel 'em in with your first chapter

By Taryn Skipper

www.SkipperBooks.com   TarynDoingItAllWrong.substack.com

Grab yer poles...

01

What's a dern first chapter good for, anyway?

02

Stanky Bait
Frequent feedback on first chapters, common mistakes and cliches

03

Now, that's a beaut!
What makes a great first chapter? Essentials and optional ingredients

04

How in tarnation?
Tips for implementing what you know, self-editing guides

01

What's the goal of your first chapter?

The beginning of your novel should introduce the story in a way that hooks the reader and makes them excited to read the rest.
(Same as for an agent)

02 Stanky Bait

The following are a few common mistakes found in first chapters as noted by a random sampling of agents, editors, and contest judges.

🐟 Slow Start

None of the following ingredients are bad, and all of them are probably necessary in your story. But be wary of including **too much** of the following in your first chapter:

- 🐟 Backstory
  - Sprinkle in relevant and necessary details when they can come up naturally. You need to know everything. The reader needs to know just enough for the scene to make sense.
- 🐟 Description
  - Scene and character descriptions can help ground a reader in the story, but too much will bog down the pace. Ground them, don't bury them. Select details that not only describe what's there, but can add to the mood, tone, worldbuilding or character building
- 🐟 Explanation
  - This ties in with description and backstory. We do not need to know exactly why your character is taking every single action, and we don't need to know the details of how everything in your world (magic system, ecosystem, politics, gravity, social hierarchies, technology, etc.) works right up front. Just enough to make sense
- 🐟 Before picture
  - This is similar to backstory, but has more to do with where you start the book. Readers need to understand the norms for your character's current situation, but it does not have to be a normal day. We don't need to see their entire routine. Give us a snapshot of the world and how they interact with it, and then let them get moving on their chapter goal.

🐟 POV issues

🐠 Switching between points of view
- First person POV: "I was going about my day, when…"
- Third person POV: "She was going about her day, when…"
- Second person POV (rare and weird): "You were going about your day when…"

🐠 Head hopping
- In a limited or close perspective (most contemporary novels), the reader can only see/know what the point-of-view character sees/knows. We read through that character's lens, so be sure not to give them x-ray vision or clairvoyance, unless that's actually their thing.
- If you'd like to switch to another character's perspective, do so at a scene or chapter break to make it easier to follow.
- But what about the omniscient POV, you ask? Yes, this is a thing, albeit somewhat unpopular at present. And there are still rules! You still can't head-hop!
  - There are many ways to do it poorly. However, this POV can be and has been done well to great effect. Here's a great video describing pros and pitfalls of 3rd-person omniscient https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksQQ3KbaEZk

🐟 Too Much Telling

Telling is not inherently evil! Sometimes it's the best choice for pacing, etc. Too much telling, however, can stank up your bait. The reader wants to be pulled into the story, not told *about* the story. We don't want to have everything explained to us. Put us in the moment and let us come to our own conclusions. A few things "show, don't tell" can mean:

🐠 Don't name every emotion. Describe how they manifest in character

🐠 Use dialog to give insights into character, thought processes, motivations, world, and plot (but don't have characters explaining things to people who already know them just for the reader's benefit. Look up, "As you know, Bob…").

🐠 Don't simply describe everything in a room/setting. Show us how the characters interact with the setting.

Can't Connect with Characters

(These aren't the only potential issues, just a few common ones)

If a reader can't connect with your character, you may have too many:

- Characters/Names
  - Too many names (especially unfamiliar names or names that are similar to one another) right away make it difficult for a reader to keep track of who is who or form any attachments.
- Character insights
  - The reader wants to know a few distinguishing insights about your chapter's main character in order to form a picture or concept of who they are, but too much insight into too many people right away makes it unclear who we should follow, focus on, or root for (aka become invested in and want to read more about).
- Cliched character flaws or quirks
  - Fine, your character can be a clumsy milkmaid with violet eyes who thinks she's plain and practices illegal magic with her brooding blacksmith's apprentice best friend with a mysterious scar on his cheek who thinks she's gorgeous. But you could swap overused traits with details more specific to your world/story and more effective for your storytelling. Maybe she's a milkmaid who's come up with a clever way to milk one-handed because she's inventive and her other hand is hindered in some way. Maybe he's brooding, but weirdly excited or superstitious about shapes he sees in the blacksmith's fire. Give us something that tells us more about who they are at their core.

OR not enough:

- Relatability/reason to empathize with or hope for them
  - Your character doesn't have to be likeable, but they need to be relatable.
  - Characters can have serious flaws or be huge jerks, but the reader should get a glimpse of their potential to change or do better, or their desire to do so. Show them trying to do something good, or the reasoning/a hint of regret behind doing something bad, even if it fails. Give us a reason to root for them.
- Voice/personality
  - Make their phrasing, word choice, sense of humor, values, reactions, internal debates, decisions, etc. (the way they interact with the world) specific to them. If a reader couldn't tell who is speaking without a dialog tag after two or three sentences, you may need to dig deeper into your character and bring out more of their personality and manner of being.

🐟 No Reason to Read On

Reasons an agent or judge might not feel the need to keep reading after a beautifully written first chapter:

- 🐟 Chapter goal is accomplished without complication or consequence
- 🐟 Chapter conflict/tension is resolved or there is an easy/obvious solution
- 🐟 Too many questions before the reader cares about the answers, or too much mystery before the reader feels grounded in the story
- 🐟 No decisions made, no course plotted, no disaster, no sense of unease, unsettling worry, or unfinished business to deal with
  - Give the reader at least a *hint* of trouble or complications to come. Maybe the character is sure everything will work out, but the reader spots a reason it might not. Maybe the problem they solved creates another one. Maybe they make a decision that will lead to plot-furthering or character-arcing action we'll want to read about in the next chapter.
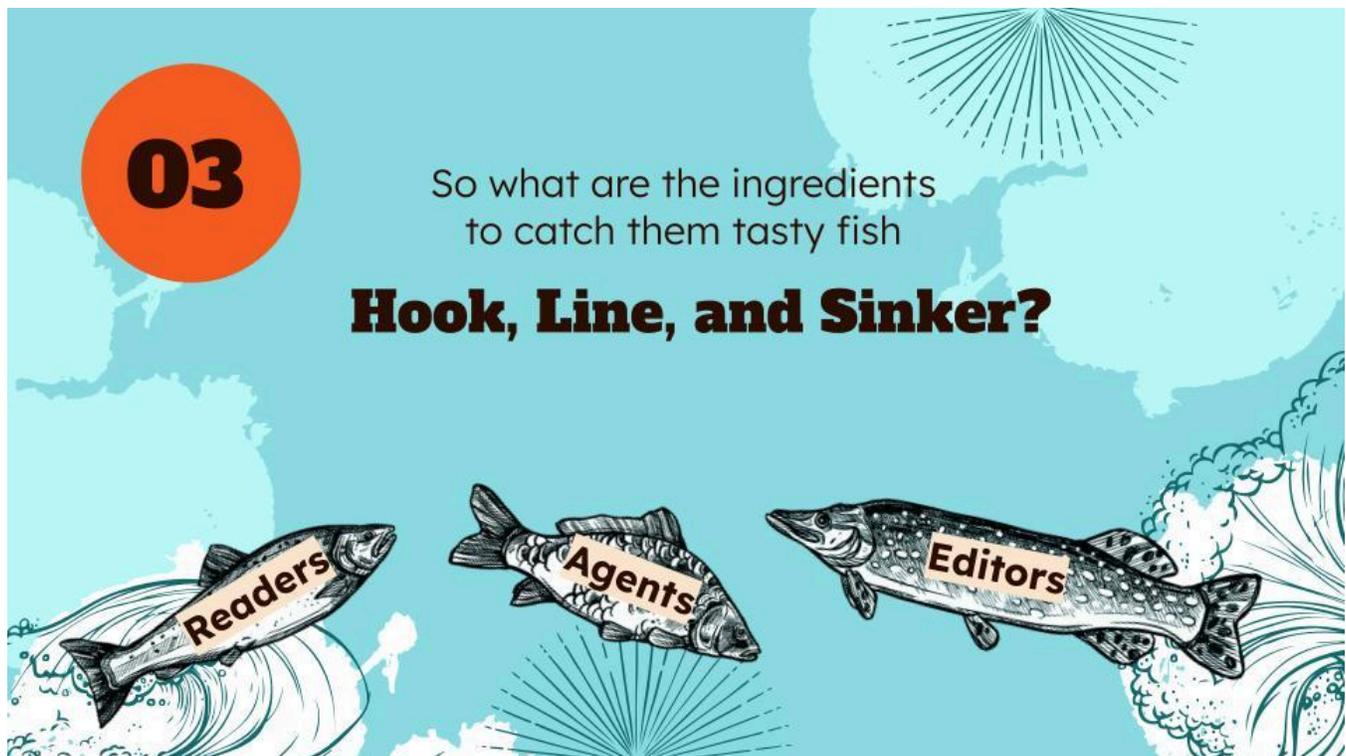
Tastes vary, and different fish prefer different bait, but there are three basic steps to a great first chapter. We'll map those to the hook, line, and sinker.

Hook 'em good!

Snag your reader with a compelling start. Check out your favorite novels and think about what they're using for a hook. It could be:

- 🐟 Style/Author Voice/Narrator Voice
- 🐟 Character (and character Voice)
- 🐟 Setting
    - ○ intriguing time, room, world, situation, subject
- 🐟 Premise
    - ○ Intriguing predicament, argument, emergency, battle, or scenario
- 🐟 **Main Character's GOAL**
    - ○ **What do they want out of this chapter, at least, if not the story?**

Keep that Line Taut!

Stuff has to happen (quiet or loud/internal or external or both) that keeps the story moving. If the pace slows too much, that line has too much slack and your fish is outta there. Beware that too much tension at the very beginning can be off-putting, and the line could break (as always, there are exceptions to this, like some high-action thrillers).

- 🐟 Tension
- 🐟 Conflict
- 🐟 Suspense
- 🐟 Crisis, emergency, disaster, disagreement, unsettling sense, juxtaposition
- 🐟 **Main Character's OBSTACLE**
    - ○ **What's in their way?**

Sinker: Bring it home!

Reel that sucker right in. Don't let the line slacken. Slay, cook, and eat, chat.

- 🐟 Conflict builds to a disaster
- 🐟 Debate builds to a decision
- 🐟 Conflict is "resolved" (with a dicey caveat, unforeseen consequences, or a disconcerting glitch)
- 🐟 **Main Character's STAKES**
    - ○ **What happens if they don't get what they want?**
    - ○ This can lead to revealing the sacrifice the character is willing to make to achieve their goal=promise of a story. But sometimes this isn't discovered until the catalyst or inciting incident

04 How in tarnation?

Awesome... But how do I put all this in my first chapter?

Good news: You don't have to put all the ingredients we talked about into your first chapter. If it hooks the reader, keeps them on the line, and reels them through to the next chapter, you've got everything you need.

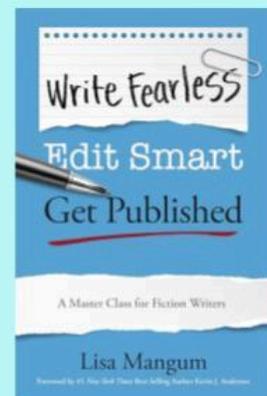Below are some bonus tips and a worksheet to help.

Bonus Tips:

Starting points to avoid Starting points that are so overused an agent might not read past them so proceed with caution and a deliberate, unique approach:

- **Waking up (includes in a strange place, hungover, From coma or after a long time)**
- **Looking in a mirror**
- **A dream sequence**
- **A weather report**
- **In transit, thinking**
- **Amnesia**
- **Info dump/too much**
- **"Prologue" of ancient prophecy or war**
- **A funeral**
- **A move**
- **First day of _____/Late to _____**
- **Talking/thinking about how "normal" life used to be**
- **The villain's POV doing something evil**
- **The protagonist narrating their boredom, or internal monologue-all voice, no action**
- **Dialogue**
- **"Let me tell you a story..." breaking the fourth wall**
- **Gun-to-the-head or car chase: "in media res" with no context**

Starting points that can work well:
(Lisa Mangum)

- Action
- Threat
- Character
- Strong Voice
- An event
- Setting - time
- Setting - place
- Emotion
- Humor
- Mystery
- A question
- In media res

Write Fearless
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A Master Class for Fiction Writers

Lisa Mangum

Hook, Line, and Sinker
First Chapter Developmental Worksheet

1. Hook

Examine your first paragraphs. Are you using one or more of the following hooks to engage your reader and draw them into the story?
- ☐ Style/Author Voice/Narrator Voice
- ☐ Character (and character Voice)
- ☐ Setting (intriguing time, room, world, situation, subject)
- ☐ Premise (intriguing predicament, argument, or scenario)
- ☐ **Main Character's GOAL**

    What do they want out of this chapter or story?

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2. Line

Does your chapter include ingredients that keep the story moving at an appropriate pace and building toward the next chapter?

- ☐ Tension (these are all sources of tension)
- ☐ Suspense, impending doom, coming storm
- ☐ Crisis, emergency, disaster
- ☐ Disagreement, argument, conflict, fight, battle
- ☐ Creeped out, something's wrong, wishful thinking, willful ignorance
- ☐ Juxtaposition (events/mood, character/situation, past/future, etc.)
- ☐ Goals or tasks beyond current means or skill
- ☐ **Main Character's OBSTACLE**
  What's in their way?

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First drafts typically include a lot of information the writer needs to understand, but that isn't crucial for the reader to know right away. Is there any of the following that can be trimmed and added back in as needed?

- ☐ Backstory doesn't kill the momentum
- ☐ Descriptions give character and worldbuilding insight
- ☐ Explanation is only present when necessary
- ☐ Before picture/regular routine doesn't postpone the story action too long

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POV issues

Are you using the best point of view for your story, and point-of-view character through which to tell it?

- ☐ No switching between 1st, 2nd, or 3rd-person POV
- ☐ No switching between limited and omniscient POV
- ☐ No unnecessary POV switches (perspectives easily seen from an existing POV)
- ☐ No head hopping
    - ☐ Characters aren't revealing motives, intents, or thoughts of others
    - ☐ Characters aren't describing how they look from an outside perspective
    - ☐ No switching POV outside of scene or chapter breaks

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Show vs. Tell

- ☐ Not too many named emotions, feelings or states (these are not items to completely eliminate, but if you spot several, take the opportunity to deepen your writing)
    - ☐ Checked for Instances of he/she/they felt/wanted/wished/hoped/wondered__
- ☐ Used dialog to give insights into character, thought processes, motivations, world, and plot (but don't have characters explaining things to people who already know them just for the reader's benefit).
- ☐ Setting descriptions carefully selected to reveal world and character insights, are brief, and seen from the character's lens

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Connect with Characters

- ☐ Only the most important characters to the scene are named
- ☐ Names are not too similar
- ☐ Unfamiliar names are introduced slowly
- ☐ Character traits are specific and help to understand and build the character/world
- ☐ Characters are relatable
    - ☐ Reader can have hope or empathy for characters
    - ☐ Characters have a redeeming aspect or motivation readers can understand
    - ☐ Characters have distinct voice or personality

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3. Sinker

- ☐ Conflict builds to a disaster
- ☐ OR Debate builds to a decision
- ☐ OR Conflict is "resolved" (with a dicey caveat, unforeseen consequences, or a disconcerting glitch)
- ☐ **Main Character's STAKES**
    What happens if they don't get what they want?

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Reasons to Read On

- ☐ Chapter goal is difficult yet attainable, or there is hope, but it's not complete
- ☐ OR Chapter conflict/tension is not resolved
- ☐ OR goal is complete but with caveat or consequences that lead to action
- ☐ Character is somewhat established before questions or danger arises
- ☐ A decision is made, course plotted, disaster begun
- ☐ OR there's a sense of unease, unsettling worry, unfinished business, hint of trouble or complications to come

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Thanks for attending my class or subscribing to my newsletter. I hope this is useful!

I offer affordable first chapter critiques when time allows and access to query critiques by Kara Reynolds, inbox manager for a very highly queried agent. See SkipperBooks.com/services for details.

Taryn Skipper