

STORY SCHOOL

WHAT MAKES
A STORY A HIT:
IMMEDIATE



Presented by  creators

SO WHAT MAKES A STORY A HIT?

While there is no magic formula for what makes a story successful, there are a few key elements we see time and time again in serialized stories that really make them click. The three elements are: Immediate, Engaging, and Commercial.

This guide will cover 'Immediate' 101, 201, and 301.

Look out in the future for the two subsequent guides—
Engaging and Commercial.

Let's get started.



IMMEDIATE 101: OPENING CHAPTER

Immediate means the story gets right to the point. We want the audience invested from the very first chapter. Your first chapter should give them a taste of the reading experience they're about to have. Whether that's the heart-stopping first meeting of fated mates or the shocking discovery of a gruesome murder in a sleepy town, your first chapter should make a promise to the reader about the story to come.

PUT THE HOOK IN THE FIRST CHAPTER

The hook is the first major event in your story that sets the tone, establishes the characters, and gives the reader something to invest in.

Examples of hook:

- A body is found gruesomely murdered
- The ignored fourth son suddenly becomes king after the rest of his family dies in a mysterious accident
- The main character witnesses aliens arriving on earth
- Getting trapped in an elevator with a cute stranger
- Finding out your new boyfriend is the son of a mafia don

NOT a hook:

- Waking up and getting ready to go to school or work
- Background information on the history of the kingdom
- Explanation of alien biology
- The protagonist's normal day in the life



CHOOSING AN OPENING: INCITING INCIDENTS

PICKING THE MOST EFFECTIVE, IMMEDIATE SPOT TO OPEN YOUR STORY

Think about the moment when everything changes for the protagonist, the first event that causes the protagonist's life to go in a different direction. In screenwriting, this is called the Inciting Incident. This is a great place to start your story, especially in terms of Immediacy. This is the event that kicks everything else off and sets the rest of the plot in motion.

In a rom-com, the inciting incident is almost always the moment where our protagonists meet, perhaps by colliding in a busy hallway and spilling coffee on one another. In a sci-fi story, this could be the moment of first contact with aliens. The inciting incident should match the tone and scope of your story and create the conditions for the rest of the plot to happen.

DETERMINE THE INCITING INCIDENT

If you're having trouble thinking of an inciting incident, here are some questions that might help:

- What is the moment where everything changes for the protagonist?
- What new problem does the protagonist need to solve?
- What new question does the protagonist need to answer?
- What event challenges the protagonist's assumptions about the world and/or themselves?



WRITING THE OPENING

Okay, you've chosen the best moment to open your story. How do you actually write it for maximum Immediacy? Here are some ways to think about writing the opening. These are great elements to focus on to get your reader hooked.

1. MEET THE CHARACTERS

Who are these people, and why should the reader care about them? Your opening chapter should ideally allow us to meet at least one of your main characters. This should not be a full description of the character and their entire backstory. **Think about it:** when you meet someone for the first time, you don't generally give your entire personal history. Rather, this is the first taste of who the protagonist is as a person.

2. FOCUS ON THE ACTION

What's happening in the scene? Keep the focus on the present action of the scene, not what has led up to it. Keep the exposition to a minimum—only what is necessary for the reader to understand what's happening.

3. AMP UP THE EMOTION

The event you've chosen should matter to your protagonist, and we need to see how and why it matters. If the event doesn't matter, or your protagonist is bored, that's a sign that you may not have chosen the best inciting incident. When you're writing, focus on the emotion by using descriptive language to create an emotional experience for your reader.



4. ESTABLISH THE CONFLICT

What's the problem the protagonist is faced with? If that problem originates in the world around them (evil warlord trying to take over the world, murderer on the loose) that's **an external conflict**. If the conflict is mostly about how the character feels (like they don't fit in, that they'll never love again), that's **an internal conflict**. Your story should ideally have a combination of external and internal conflicts, but it's normal for a story to tilt one way or the other. For example, a mystery can have an internal conflict about how the detective feels burnt out from the job, but the external conflict of solving the murder is more important and drives the plot.

5. HINT AT THE STAKES

A conflict does not have to be world-shatteringly big to matter (not every story is about the end of the world!), but it does need to matter intensely to the protagonists. The stakes are why the conflict matters to the characters, and thus why it matters to the readers.

6. KEEP IT RELEVANT

Relevance is also about emphasizing what's important. If something is very important, spend more time on it: describe it more in-depth, give the characters more of a reaction to it, or spend longer in the moment. What you focus on enlarges, so what do you want your reader to think about the most?



FOCUS ON

- Emotion
- Action
- Stakes
- Relevance

AVOID

- Backstory
- Exposition
- Lead-up
- Digression

IMMEDIATE 201: EXPANDING HOOKS, LOGLINES, DEEPENING THE FIRST CHAPTER.

In Immediate 101, we went over the basics of making your story Immediate using a hook, with a deep dive on Inciting Incidents. In this module, we'll go over other types of hooks you can use, how to write a logline, as well as strategies for incorporating intriguing detail into the opening chapter.



EXPANDING HOOKS

FLASH FORWARD

If there's a particularly juicy moment later in your story that you know readers are going to love, you can use your first chapter to give the reader a preview of that moment. Think of it like a movie teaser trailer, where the audience gets a hint of what's to come. The reader doesn't need to have all the answers right away, and creating some questions you'll answer later can be a powerful hook.

THREAT TEASER

This technique is similar to the Flash Forward, and is particularly common in genres like horror and mystery/thriller. It puts us in a high-tension moment from someone else's perspective, like the murder from the perspective of the killer, or the monster from the perspective of its first victim. This type of opening is best suited to high-tension stories and is usually used to build up our sense of the antagonist, to make them seem scary and dangerous so that we understand why the protagonist has to defeat them. This type of opening is not generally appropriate for romance-driven stories, because it pulls the reader's focus away from the romance and on to something else. But for stories with a lot of external conflict and a scary antagonist, this can be a great choice to create investment for the reader.



LOGLINES

A logline is an essential part of the pitching process, but it's also a helpful tool for thinking about your story. A logline is a one sentence description of your story designed to quickly grab a reader's attention. Thinking about a logline can help you clarify your story's hook and determine if your opening chapter is Immediate enough.

A LOGLINE WILL GENERALLY CONTAIN THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS

Protagonist + Inciting Incident + Protagonist's Goal + Central Conflict

- The protagonist is the main character of the story
- The inciting incident is the moment that kicks off the plot
- The protagonist's goal is the thing that the protagonist is trying to achieve
- The central conflict is the main problem or question that the protagonist is trying to solve

The first chapter should include at least 2/4 of these elements.

An Inciting Incident hook should introduce us to all these elements. A Flash Forward hook should make us aware of the Protagonist, the Goal, and the Central Conflict. A Threat Teaser hook should strongly emphasize the Central Conflict and implies the Goal. Go through your opening chapter and identify where you introduce each of these elements. If something is missing, that might be an indicator you need to revise your opening chapter to make it more dynamic and is usually an indicator you've focused too much on exposition or backstory, rather than the front story.

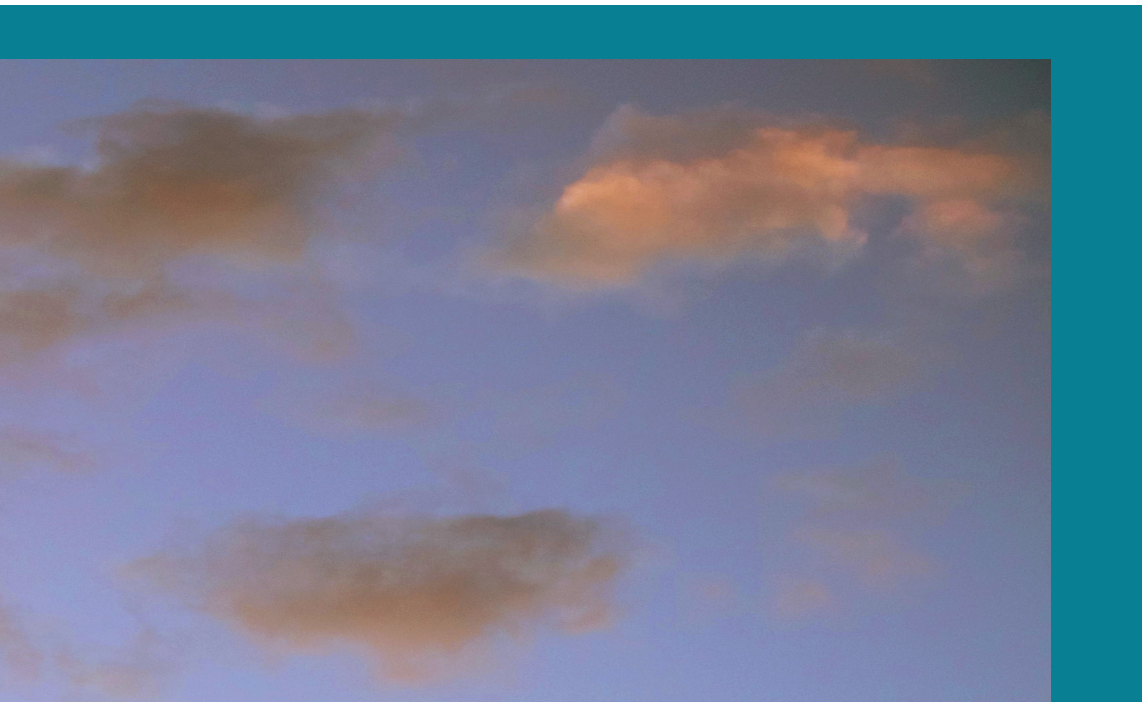


WRITING YOUR LOGLINE

The great news is now that you've gone through this exercise and identified your Protagonist and their Goal, the Inciting Incident, Goal, and Central Conflict, you have the basic structure of your logline ready to go.

Try this formula to get a feel for writing your logline:

When [Inciting Incident] happens, [Protagonist] must [action] in order to [Goal]



DEEPENING THE FIRST CHAPTER

1. HINTING AT CHARACTERIZATION

In the opening chapter of your story, we want to meet the characters and get to know them a bit. But this is more than just getting to know their plot motivations and personal goals. We want to get an idea of what makes them distinct and interesting and to hint at their backstory. Incorporating some Specific Details about your character will help the reader understand what makes them unique, and thus help the reader to connect to them.

2. HINTING AT WORLDBUILDING

The promise of a rich world can help to hook your reader, but the focus of the hook should be on the front story. How does this work?

Rather than giving the reader a crash course on the history of the world, use your opening chapters to give them little hints. If the reader gets the sense that there's a lot going on under the surface of the scene in front of them, they will want to hang around and find out more. Showing them the tip of the iceberg is more effective than describing the iceberg's dimensions.

EXERCISE

Write out the history of the place your opening scene takes place in. It can be as extensive or as brief as you like, as political or mundane as you want, but should have at least three events in it. Now, take those events and turn them into a Specific Detail in your scene. Maybe a historical battle becomes a statue or a place name. Or, if you're writing something in our contemporary world, maybe the protagonist's grandparents' wedding becomes an heirloom tea set, or a fight with their parents when they were a teenager becomes a bedroom door that doesn't shut right. Try going back through your scene and inserting these little details where you can. How does this change the way the scene feels?



IMMEDIATE 301:
LINE EDITING, CREATING
TENSION, EXPOSITION,
RELEVANCE, FILTERING,
TENSE, MAINTAINING
TENSION

LINE EDITING

Line editing is the process of going over your writing sentence by sentence to make sure your prose is polished and working well to keep your reader captivated. We'll go over some quick ways to make your prose feel more Immediate. These tips are useful for any chapter you're working on, not just the first, so be sure to come back to this in the future.

CREATING TENSION WITH DESCRIPTION

In Immediate 201,, we went over using Specific Detail to give hints about character and worldbuilding. You can also use descriptive detail to build narrative tension for your reader that will keep them engaged.

Let's compare two descriptions of a sunset:

Low red clouds hung like
bloody slashes across the
horizon, promising a swift
nightfall.

Vs.

The last rays of the
sunbathed the shore in a
final kiss of gold.

In the first example the word choice and comparison to "bloody slashes" sets the mood of the scene, and the "swift nightfall" feels ominous, almost deadly. In the second, the emphasis on the "kiss of gold" makes everything seem peaceful and beautiful, almost like the world is being tucked into bed. One sentence here is setting the mood for two very different stories and creating different feelings and expectations for the reader. You can use this to either set up reader expectations (for example, by using the bloody clouds to set the mood for a murder), or subvert them (for example, by introducing something shattering and violent into the peaceful scene)



EXPOSITION

- We covered this in Immediate 101, but just as a reminder: exposition slows down your prose and prevents it from feeling Immediate.
- Exposition is when you explain or summarize things for the reader. It's a necessary part of storytelling—without it, there would be way too much detail to sort through. However, exposition should be kept to a minimum, especially in the first chapter. Anything you want the reader to connect to, remember, or care about should be demonstrated through the narration using action and Specific Detail, and anything you want to skim over can be put in exposition.
- For instance, a step by step walkthrough of the main character's morning routine is not usually necessary information for the story, and we don't need every detail of it. If it's important for the reader to know that the protagonist ate breakfast, you can just say she did without bringing us through the whole process of pouring cereal and making coffee.

When line editing, look at the places where you explain things to the reader. Is this something you want them to hang on to? Is it important to the story? If yes, then consider putting it in the story in a more detailed and narrative way. If it's not important at all, consider taking it out. Extraneous information can really slow down your story, so keep it focused on bringing the reader into the most important information in the story through emotionally compelling action and illustrative specific details.



RELEVANCE

When you're line editing, make sure everything you're describing to the reader is relevant to the scene or moment at hand. Describing things is a way of directing the reader's attention, and Immediacy is about hooking that attention quickly and thoroughly.

Adding in information that isn't relevant to the scene at hand can really slow down your story, and it can create confusion for the reader, since they can get hung up on details or end up waiting for a payoff that never comes.

When you're line editing, ask yourself "Is it important that the reader learns this now?"



FILTERING

Filtering, or filter words, is the practice of narrating a character's perception. It uses words like "saw," "perceived," "heard," "felt," "noticed," to draw attention to the fact that the character is experiencing the action.

With Filtering	Without Filtering
She saw the car pull in to the driveway	The car pulled in to the driveway
He heard the floorboard creak	The floorboard creaked
She flinched when she saw the light turn on	She flinched when the light turned on

TENSE AND MAINTAINING TENSION

Most fiction writing in English uses past tense. This is a great choice for your story, because most readers are going to be familiar with it. It “disappears” and allows the reader to immerse themselves in the story.

Most notable of these is overreliance on what is called Present continuous tense, where the main verb is modified by a form of the verb “to be.”

Present Continuous	Simple Present
Jill is buttoning her coat.	Jill buttons her coat.
Andy is sprinting down the road.	Andy sprints down the road.
Evan is slamming the door.	Evan slams the door.

So far, we’ve been focusing on the first chapter, since that’s most important to hooking your reader. However, in order to keep them, you’ve got to maintain your tension. Don’t treat the first chapter in isolation. Having a super Immediate first chapter is great, but keeping the story momentum going in the early chapters is also very important to maintaining the sense of Immediacy.

IMMEDIATE. THERE YOU HAVE IT.

Now you have the foundational elements to understand
“Immediate” in Immediate, Engaging, Commercial.

Look out for material containing details on Engaging and
Commercial.

Now go on and hook some readers!



IDEAS

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