**Directions:** *Read and annotate/highlight some great tips and ideas…*

**8 Ways to Write a 5-Star Chapter One**

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As an aspiring author, the prospect of writing Chapter One should not intimidate, but excite the hell out of you. Why? Because no other part of your book can provide you with the disproportionate payoff that an excellent first chapter can. Far more than a great query letter, a great Chapter One can attract the attention of an agent. It can keep a harried editor from yawning and hitting “delete.” It can make a bookstore browser keep turning pages during the slow walk to the cash registers.

Fiction, like food, is an art and a craft. Here’s how to blend inspiration with technique and serve up an irresistible Chapter One.

**#1: RESIST TERROR.**  
Let’s be honest: Agents and editors like to make you quiver and sweat as you approach Chapter One. All those warnings: “Grab me from the opening sentence! Don’t waste one word! If my attention flags, you’ve failed—you’re down the toilet! In fact, don’t even write Chapter One! Start your book at Chapter Four!

Here’s the truth: Agents and editors, all of them, are paper tigers. Every last one is a hungry kitten searching for something honest, original and brave to admire. Now is the time to gather your guts, smile and let it rip.

Honest, original and brave. That’s what they want.

Second, remember who you are and why you’re writing this book. What is your book about? What purpose(s) will it serve? Write your answers down and look at them from time to time as you write. (By the way, it’s OK to want to write a book simply to entertain people; the noblest art has sprung from just such a humble desire.)

And third, if you haven’t yet outlined, consider doing so. Even the roughest, most rustic framework will give you a sharper eye for your beginning and, again, will serve to unfetter your mind. Your outline could be a simple list of things-that-are-gonna-happen, or it could be a detailed chronological narrative of all your plot threads and how they relate. I find that knowing where I’m headed frees my mind from everything but the writing at hand. Being prepared makes you calm, and better equipped to tap into your unique voice—which is the most important ingredient in a good Chapter One.

**#2: DECIDE ON TENSE AND POINT OF VIEW.**  
Most readers are totally unconscious of tense and POV; all they care about is the story. Is it worth reading? Fun to read? But you must consider your tense and POV carefully, and Chapter One is go time for these decisions. It used to be simple.

But today, novels mix points of view and even tenses. In my Rita Farmer novels I shift viewpoints, but limit all POVs to the good guys. By contrast, John Grisham will shift out of the main character’s POV to the bad guy’s for a paragraph or two, then back again. It’s also worth noting that studies have shown that older readers tend to prefer past tense, while younger ones dig the present.

If you’re still unsure of your tense or POV choices, try these techniques: Go to your bookshelf and take a survey of some of your favorite novels. What POVs and tenses are selected, and why do you suppose the authors chose those approaches? Rehearse. Write a scene using first person, then third-person limited, then omniscient. What feels right?

**#3: CHOOSE A NATURAL STARTING POINT.**  
When you read a good novel, it all seems to unfold so naturally, starting from the first sentence. But when you set out to write your own, you realize your choices are limitless, and this can be paralyzing. Yet your novel must flow from the first scene you select.

Basically, write your way in.

Think about real life. Any significant episode in your own life did not spring whole from nothing; things happened beforehand that shaped it, and things happened afterward as a result of it. Think about your novel in this same way. The characters have pasts and futures (unless you plan to kill them); places, too, have pasts and futures. Therefore, every storyteller jumps into his story midstream. Knowing this can help you relax about picking a starting point. The Brothers Grimm did not begin by telling about the night Hansel and Gretel were conceived; they got going well into the lives of their little heroes, and they knew we wouldn’t care about anything but what they’re doing right now.

**#4: PRESENT A STRONG CHARACTER RIGHT AWAY.**  
This step might seem obvious, but too many first-time novelists try to lure the reader into a story by holding back the main character. Having a couple of subsidiary characters talking about the protagonist can be a terrific technique for character or plot development at some point, but not at the beginning of your novel.

When designing your Chapter One, establish your characters’ situation(s). What do they know at the beginning? What will they learn going forward? What does their world mean to them?

**#5: BE SPARING OF SETTING.**  
Another common error many aspiring novelists make is trying to set an opening scene in too much depth. You’ve got it all pictured in your head: the colors, sounds, flavors and feelings. You want everybody to be in the same place with the story you are. But you’re too close: A cursory—but poignant!—introduction is what’s needed. Readers will trust you to fill in all the necessary information later. They simply want to get a basic feel for the setting, whether it’s a lunar colony or a street in Kansas City.

Pack punch into a few details. Instead of giving the history of the place and how long the character has been there and what the weather’s like, consider something like this:

*He lived in a seedy neighborhood in Kansas City. When the night freight passed, the windows rattled in their frames and the dog in the flat below barked like a maniac.*

Later (if you want) you’ll tell all about the house, the street, the neighbors and maybe even the dog’s make and model, but for now a couple of sentences like that are all you need.

Another way to introduce a setting is to show how a character feels about it. In Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment, Raskolnikov seethes with resentment at the opulence around him in St. Petersburg, and this immediately puts us on the alert about him. The setting serves the character; it does not stand on its own.

**#6: USE CAREFULLY CHOSEN DETAIL TO CREATE IMMEDIACY.**  
Your Chapter One must move along smartly, but in being economical you cannot become vague. Difficult, you say? It’s all in the context.

If you’re an expert on something, go ahead and show that you know what you’re talking about. One of the reasons my novel Damn Straight, a story involving a professional golfer, won a Lambda Award is that I know golf, and let my years of (painful) experience inform the book. I felt I’d done a good job when reviewer after reviewer wrote, “I absolutely hate golf, but I love how Sims writes about it in this novel. …”

**#7: GIVE IT A MINI PLOT.**  
It’s no accident that many great novels have first chapters that were excerpted in magazines, where they essentially stood as short stories.

Every chapter should have its own plot, none more important than Chapter One. Use what you know about storytelling to:

Make trouble. I side with the writing gurus who advise you to put in a lot of conflict early. Pick your trouble and make it big. If it can’t be big at first, make it ominous.

Focus on action. Years ago I got a rejection that said, “Your characters are terrific and I love the setting, but not enough happens.” A simple and useful critique! Bring action forward in your story; get it going quick. This is why agents and editors tell you to start your story in the middle: They’ve seen too many Chapter Ones bogged down by backstory. Put your backstory in the back, not the front. Readers will stick with you if you give them something juicy right away. Be decisive. A good way to do that is to make a character take decisive action.

Don’t telegraph too much; let action develop through the chapter. It’s good to end Chapter One with some closure. Because it is Chapter One, your readers will trust that the closure will turn out to be deliciously false.

**#8: BE BOLD.**  
The most important thing to do when writing Chapter One is put your best material out there. Do not humbly introduce your story—present it with a flourish. Don’t hold back! Set your tone and own it. You’re going to write a whole book using great material; have confidence that you can generate terrific ideas for action and emotion whenever you want.

If you do your job creating a fabulous appetizer in Chapter One and follow it up well, your readers will not only stay through the whole meal, they’ll order dessert, coffee and maybe even a nightcap—and they won’t want to leave until you have to throw them out at closing time.

**Notes/Reactions:**