

I just got through teaching a class for beginning writers. One thing I spent a lot of time on was the first chapter with a big emphasis on the first page. To demonstrate how good books hook the reader on page one, I read aloud the opening pages from a variety of books.

I know when I go into a bookstore, if I don't already have a specific book I'm looking for, I browse the shelves. First, I notice the cover and the title. Of course I'm already in the section of the store that suits my interest. Then, if I like what I see, I read the back cover copy or inside flap on a hardback. Now I know from experience that this isn't usually written by the author. I was lucky and had input on my cover copy. But most authors don't. The editor, who knows a lot more about marketing than an author does, writes that copy so it will appeal to the average buyer. So it may not be in the author's voice. Voice is important to me. If I don't like an author's voice, I don't want to buy that book. So I open the book to the first page and start reading. The author has about two pages, max, to grab me. Then it's either back to the shelf or off to the cash register. If the book is self-published, the first few pages are what a potential buyer can get for free as a preview to help decide whether to pay for and download the book. So they'd better be good.

An editor has so many manuscripts to consider on her desk that she really can't afford to give each one much time. If your work comes in and lands in an enormous stack, how many pages do you think she's going to read before she tosses it aside or says, "Yeah, this one has potential."? I wouldn't count on more than two, three pages max. The number of submissions an editor gets is staggering. You have to stand out from the get-go. Don't save your good stuff for later. Put it up front. How?

Maybe it's a dynamite prologue. Warning: It had better connect immediately with the rest of the story. I've judged contest entries with good prologues that didn't fit what I read in chapter one at all. That left me scratching my head. It certainly wouldn't make me buy the book.

It's better to just jump in with chapter one. Think about your genre. Are you writing a romantic suspense? Make the opening thrilling or terrifying. Show someone in danger, murdered or kidnapped, whatever it takes. Is it erotica? Then there should be physical awareness between your two main characters (who are both on scene) immediately. Set up that sizzle. Maybe it's a contemporary love story. Show us the conflict in an exciting way with action up front. She doesn't want a relationship? Then show her being tossed out of the house in her underwear on page one by her worthless ex-. Now we understand why she mistrusts the hero's kindness, her ex- was that way, at first. Or start with him and he's finally home from the war only to walk in on the wedding of his best friend and his own fiancé. Trust issues anyone? Show us that scene. We are now invested in this guy and want to see him happy.

Whatever your genre, we want to recognize it on page one. With the right kind of hook. This is especially important with a paranormal romance. Readers need to see something happening on page one that can't happen in the real world. A vampire drinking blood or at least some fang, a werewolf changing, a ghost vanishing in front of the scared tourist. Do whatever it takes to show the kind of book that lies ahead.

And if it's a funny book? That opening line or lines had better make the reader laugh out loud. Oh, yes. And you'd better believe those of us who try to write comedy slave over that issue. It takes me longer to write my first chapter than it takes me to write the rest of a one hundred thousand word book. Yes, you read that right. It's that important.

If your book is dark, then the atmosphere had better be dark or threatening on that first page. But please spare us the *ad nauseum* description of the setting. Yes, setting is important. But James Michener doesn't live here anymore. His kind of book with chapters that describe the rising of the volcano to become Hawaii doesn't sell now. Readers want action, fast pacing and to get to the characters right away. Why? Because our world has changed. With video games, TV

and instant gratification, we want everything fast and easy—that's why the microwave is such a great invention.

You can trickle in the way the clouds affect the moonlight, the rooms in the castle look and the color of the drapes. Even the description of the characters can be brushed in a little at a time. And spare us the cliché of having your heroine looking in the mirror. That's so 1980s. She can hate the way her naturally curly hair frizzes in the Houston humidity. Or we can be in his point of view and he can get lost in her dark eyes and think her eyes were the black of the charcoal in his barbeque grill. You get my drift.

Finally, you must decide in the beginning who should best tell your story. Will it be in first person? Third? If it's in third, will the hero or heroine start the tale? Which would give you an emotional hook as well as an exciting or more interesting one?

Overwhelmed? I hope not. It's this kind of challenge that makes writing such a fun and demanding career. Do it right and the rewards can be fantastic. My first line for my Real Vampires series was: Vampires are everywhere. Yep, that's it. Glory is telling the story in first person. That line became both my theme and the ongoing issue for a ten book series. I'm working on book eleven now. It intrigued the editor and got me my first agent. It also set up my main character, Gloriana St. Clair, living under the radar and passing herself off as human whenever she could.

Anyway, you never know where that first page will lead you, maybe straight to a bestseller list. You won't be sorry if you put in the effort to make it great.

Gerry Bartlett is the author of the nationally bestselling Real Vampires series. You can read more of her first lines in her books listed at gerrybartlett.com or follow her on Facebook or twitter.