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How To Write the Beginning of a Story That's Not Boring

One of my biggest pet peeves as a writer, and as a reader, is a beginning that does absolutely nothing for me. I've read beginnings that have me feeling like I'm standing around waiting for something to happen instead being immersed in a story as it's happening.

Before I go any further, I will say right here and now I don't believe you should start off with backstory. I believe you can integrate that into your story as you go along when it's relevant to your plot or character development. I say this because many years ago I read an interview with an editor who said if she read the first four chapters of a book and realized she could cut the first three, she wouldn't read any further and reject the manuscript outright. Backstory and information are meant to be woven throughout a story, not dumped onto the reader as soon as they start reading.

I think the key to a great beginning is to make it intriguing to a reader. The most important thing to do at the beginning is set the scene without a ton of verbiage, then get inside your character's head and let the reader hear their thoughts and feel their feelings.

Let's start with an action-packed beginning. This is from a short story I wrote called 'Two In the Woods':

"Fall back! Fall back!"

Where to, Jim thought as he ran like hell through the woods. He remembered the day just two months before this nightmare of a fire-fight when tanks had rolled from the Russian East then the Allied West rolled theirs. And now he was right in the middle of World War Three without nukes in a cold and wet German forest.

Shots rang out through the trees and he slid down into the undergrowth. He put his back against a tree and checked his ammo clip before putting it back in his rifle. Even as the gunfire sounded like it was moving off, he decided he needed better shelter so he looked around... and found something a little more substantial.

He ran across the forest floor to a huge tree that had fallen down. The base of it looked like it would provide enough shelter to keep the rain from soaking him.

He slid back against the dirt and muck of the fallen tree-base just as a huge crack of thunder rocked the sky, and just as someone else slid into the shelter of the

tree close to him.

He raised his rifle just as the other person did the same but neither fired as the wind blew hard and the rain poured down.

Here I wrote a lot of action but I was also able to get in a very brief bit about the setting and the reason behind the action at the end of the first paragraph. My goal with this beginning was to put my reader right into the scene with all the action until I was able to slow it down with the first ‘hook’ as I call it when the two soldiers face off in a very tight spot.

Now this next beginning is from a short story I wrote, “Her Sexy Chef”, which is a contemporary romance so no slam-bang action or war going on here.

Kate Turner walked along the beach and savored the warmth of the sun on her skin and the fine-grain sand beneath her feet. She loved Miami Beach despite the crowds and trendiness, and because she didn’t feel so self-conscious and invisible at the same time.

She lifted her camera to the water and focused on getting both the water and the beautiful blue sky in her pictures. Sunlight danced upon the small waves and she took a couple of photos, then her finger froze on the shutter-button as a man emerged from the water like a god of sea. He threw his head back to the sun and with both hands slicked his dark hair off his face, a move she found incredibly sexy.

She lifted her finger off the button and lowered her camera as she watched the mystery man walk out of the water. His modest black swim trunks were plastered to his lower body, and Kate felt her cheeks grow warm as she looked up from his mid-section. The dark hair on his chest and belly was wet and arrowed down... so she looked up from his six-pack abs and admired his strong shoulders and arms.

As he left the water behind completely, she shifted slightly in the sand then jumped as she felt something against the side of her foot. She looked down and saw a towel, and as she looked up he was now close enough for her to recognize him.

He was Miguel Sandoval, the man she was here to write about.

In this opening, I wanted to introduce Kate and the setting of the story in the first paragraphs then she sees Miguel for the first time without knowing who he is. So the scene here is lush, hot, and mesmerizing until we get to the end of the excerpt as she realizes who he is, and the story’s conflict of her being a writer on assignment and not on vacation.

The best mindset I can recommend for a story’s beginning is to make a reader want

to know what happens next. Keep the opening moving with action and dialogue, and keep it in the character's point of view at all times. Grab your reader's attention and don't let go. Because if you hold their attention, they sure won't be bored. And a reader that is intrigued and wants to know more, they will read your stories from start to finish, and hopefully the next ones you write, too.