

Starting Strong: First Lines and First Pages for the Nonfiction Writer

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- **What should the first lines accomplish?**

Hook the reader

- What type of things grab attention: strange circumstances, bizarre people, surprising statements, controversial positions.

Establish the tone and mood

- serious, lighthearted, academic. *Be aware of who your audience is.*

Inform the reader of the direction you are taking so they know what to expect

- Set the stage: agree or disagree on a position, educate on how to do or accomplish something
- Relate the story of a person, place or thing (such as historic event, groundbreaking technology,

Persuade the reader to keep reading

- Seal the deal! They need to be motivated to invest time for your idea/book.
- What are the benefits of finishing the book? *Without benefits, you can lose your readers at the very first paragraph.*

The Big Idea

Many non-fiction books that are based around one single idea – The Big Idea - rather than a comprehensive overview of an entire subject. Such as *The Seven Habits Of Highly Effective People*, *How To Win Friends And Influence People*, *Think And Grow Rich* and *The Secret*. These top selling self-help books take a narrow focus and only deals with particular aspects of a bigger field.

- **Can you condense your Big Idea down into a single sentence?**

As an exercise, write down the central concept of your book in one single sentence, or two at the most.

This makes you focus on what's important so you don't end up including stuff in your book that isn't needed.

This exercise will also help you define your audience which will help with marketing down the line. A working title should suggest itself to you as well.

Having a working title will help you focus while you write.

Max Lucado titles:

Grace Happens Here, You are Standing where Grace is Happening
God Forgives Me and I Forgive You (children's book)
You'll Get Through This, Hope and Help for Your Turbulent Times
God Will Carry You Through
God Will Use this for Good, Surviving the Mess of Life
Itsy Bitsy Christmas, You're Never Too Little for His Love (kid's book)
One God, One Plan, One Life, A 365 Devotional
Before Amen, The Power of a Simple Prayer

Strategies for First Lines

- **A first sentence that forces a response**

A **declaration** causes you to agree, disagree, be alarmed, laugh

- 46 million Americans currently receive food stamps
- When driving, 49% of all turns are right hand turns
- Randy Alcorn's *Heaven*: "The sense that we will live forever somewhere has shaped every civilization in human history."

A **question** results in an immediate response:

- Do you know how many Americans receive food stamps every month? 46,000,000.
- Have you ever wished that you were closer to the Lord?
- Are you looking for ways to be more productive?
- Do you desire to have more money at the end of the month?

Pose questions based on your audience's concerns about your topic. Most authors tell what they know, (you already said that) and it sounds flat and boring.

- **Forcing the reader to re-read the first**
 - *The Time of My Life*, Dennis Heasley "No comet blazed when I was born" (memoir)
 - *1984*, George Orwell "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen" (fiction)
 - *I Capture the Castle*, Dodie Smith "I write this sitting in the kitchen sink" (fiction)
- **A personal story. If it's relevant!**
 - "When I set up my first lemonade stand I had no idea that by the time I was 22 I would be making a million dollars a year." The response: "I want to be that person." "I wonder what it's like to make a million dollars a year?"
 - It's also more interesting than just saying "by the time I was 22 I was making a million dollars a year."
 1. gives the reader a bit of insight into who you are
 2. shows that the process had a beginning
 3. encourages the reader that small beginnings can lead to bigger things
 - "I was raised in a home where the Bible was not read." The response: "I was that person" or

“that’s very sad.”

- Max Lucado’s *Surviving the Mess of Life* *“She had a tremble to her, the inner tremble you could feel with just a hand on her shoulder.”*
- Max Lucado’s *Surviving the Mess of Life* *“I doze off when I pray. My thoughts zig, then zag, then zig again. Distractions swarm like gnats on a summer night. If attention deficit disorder applies to prayer, I am afflicted. When I pray, I think of a thousand things I need to do. I forget the one thing I set out to do: pray”*

- **Other things to consider:**

- Don’t just start with the climax. Begin a couple scenes before, then backtrack, then move forward. Don’t give it away all at once! Give the reader a reason to keep reading until the end.

See your Big Idea like a movie camera - make your writing cinematic. Zoom in. Pan the surroundings. Use your words to make pictures. Your reader is making their own pictures from your words.

What you don’t describe is just as important as what you do describe—omission invites the reader to fill in some of the details themselves – it becomes interactive!

- Don’t be so fast to write in first person (unless it’s your memoir or your story is closely tied to the Big Idea)
- Avoid insulting the reader: “Since you’re not making a million dollars a year you either have no talent or no ambition”
- Avoid long run sentences (unless you can pull it off)
Diane Ackerman’s [*An Alchemy of Mind*](#): *“Imagine the brain, that shiny mound of being, that mouse-gray parliament of cells, that dream factory, that petit tyrant inside a ball of bone, that huddle of neurons calling all the plays, that little everywhere, that fickle pleasuredrome, that wrinkled wardrobe of selves stuffed into the skull like too many clothes into a gym bag.”*