



MABEL FINALLY WRITES CHAPTER ONE

Article Series 5 of 10

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The first version began with the weather.

"The sun rose gently over Much Marrowby, gilding the church spire and warming the dew-soaked green."

It was a perfectly pleasant sentence. Mabel read it four times and felt nothing whatsoever, which seemed a poor return on a sunrise.

The second version began in 1952, with the founding of the Much Marrowby Summer Show. It contained a great deal of information about the first committee, including the name of the woman who had donated the trestle tables.

The third version began with Iris waking up, getting out of bed and looking at herself in the mirror while thinking about her age, her hair and the forty years she had spent at Penhallow's Petals.

The fourth began in italics, with a shadowy figure creeping towards a marquee under cover of darkness. Since the theft took place at lunchtime in front of half the village, this was not only mysterious but inaccurate.

By the middle of May, Mabel had four first chapters and no beginning.

What an opening has to do

Readers decide quickly whether to keep reading, and the first pages carry an unusual amount of weight. An opening isn't only the start of the story. It tells the reader what kind of book they are holding.

Within the first chapter, most readers want to know whose story this is, roughly where and when we are, and what kind of experience lies ahead: funny, frightening, romantic, puzzling. They also want a reason to turn the page.

That reason is usually called a hook. It doesn't need to be an explosion. It is a question the reader would like answered.

Why the four versions didn't work

Looking at her attempts side by side, Mabel could see what each was missing.

The weather opening had a setting and nobody in it. It raised no question except whether it might rain later.

The history opening was really a story bible entry. It told the reader things before they had any reason to care.

The mirror opening is a familiar one, and it tends to stall for a simple reason: a character alone, reflecting on their life, isn't doing anything. Backstory is usually more welcome once the reader is curious about the person it belongs to.

The italic prologue made a promise of menace the book had no intention of keeping. Prologues can work very well when they give the reader something the main story can't. This one mainly gave a false impression of the genre.

Start where something is already moving

Mabel's fifth version started on show morning.

Iris arrives at the marquee to drop off a jar of chutney she doesn't care about, and notices that the display of delphiniums by the entrance is drooping. She knows she shouldn't touch it. She touches it anyway. While she is half-hidden behind the flowers, retying the stems, she overhears an argument about the cake table, sees Constance set down her famous lemon drizzle with hands that won't quite keep still, and catches Dot Hargreaves glaring at it from the doorway.

In a few pages, the reader has met Iris and her flaw, seen the village gathering, met the most important suspects and been shown the cake. Nobody has explained anything. It is all happening in front of them.

The chapter ends a few hours later, when the marquee flap is untied for judging and the space where the lemon drizzle should be holds only a doily and a scattering of crumbs.

Make promises you intend to keep

An opening sets expectations, and readers notice when they aren't met.

The tone of the first chapter tells them how the rest of the book will feel. A cosy mystery that opens with something cheerful and slightly absurd, then introduces a problem, signals that the book will be gentle, puzzling and reassuringly free of gore. If chapter one is warm and chapter two is a brutal crime scene, the reader will feel misled, even if both chapters are well written.

Voice is part of the promise too. The way the first page sounds is the way the reader expects the rest of the book to sound.

Ground the reader, then raise the question

A useful balance to aim for: enough information to orient the reader, and not so much that it buries the question.

The reader of Mabel's fifth version doesn't need to know when the show was founded. They need to know there is a show, that winning matters to these people and that something valuable is about to go missing. The rest can arrive when it becomes interesting.

Expect to come back

Many writers find that the first chapter is best revised once the draft is finished. Only then do you know exactly what the book is promising, which clues need planting early and which characters deserve a first glimpse. A first chapter written in May is allowed to be a placeholder for a better one written later.

Mabel decided the book deserved a proper title before it went any further. After a long evening she settled on *A Crumb of Suspicion*, which fitted on the front of a notebook and made Doreen next door laugh, which seemed promising.

She texted the first line to her nephew Theo, who was studying illustration and read nothing but fantasy.

His reply came back within a minute.

"Good start. Where are the dragons?"

Mabel put the phone face down and wrote "Chapter Two."

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