

Get Noticed! Eight Tips on Catching an Editor's Eye

Dara Girard

The first five pages of a novel are critical.

Editors make quick judgments. They don't like to admit it, but they do. Somewhere an editor is sitting in an airless room staring at a pile of manuscripts hoping to strike gold, but doubtful. She wants to get through the toppling pile as quickly as possible. Therefore she is going to look at your manuscript and search for one thing: A reason to say 'no'.

Your goal is not to give her that reason. There are many factors you can't control (whether an editor has had a bad day, or has already accepted a manuscript similar to yours) but there are a few things that may get an editor or agent to stop and read your work. Please understand that these are merely guidelines, don't substitute my judgment for your own. Writing is an art after all.

1. Get the action started. Start your story on the day when something is different. The beginning of your manuscript is not the place for back story. You don't need to explain how the protagonist came to be where he is. You can pepper that information in later on. You only have a few seconds to capture the reader's interest. Routines are boring; change is exciting.

Think about it. If your next-door neighbor always picked up the paper at 7:30 AM, wouldn't you be curious if you still found the paper lying there at 10:30 AM? Or if your boss was always grumpy in the morning then one day came in whistling, wouldn't you want to know why? Your goal is to put a story question in the reader's mind. Intrigue them. How do you do this? Consider these beginnings from different genres:

(Fantasy) "What in the name of cold hells is this?" Sun Wolf held the scrap of unfolded paper between stubby fingers that were still slightly stained with blood. –**The Ladies of Mandrigyn by Barbara Hambly**

(Young Adult) The paperweight should have been clear, but it was not. –**Gallows Hill by Lois Duncan**

(Women's Fiction) Jaine Bright woke up in a bad mood. –**Mr. Perfect by Linda Howard**

(General Fiction) Something was wrong with Paul and Elizabeth's cat, Charlotte. –**Publish and Perish by James Hynes**

Check your bookshelves for more examples. Get into the habit of seeing what other successful writers do. Learn the tricks of how they draw you into a story.

2. Have tension. If you succeed with number one, you'll probably have tension. Tension doesn't have to be heart-pounding suspense. It could simply be a missed phone call, a strange voice message, a lunch date that should have arrived but didn't. Tension draws a reader deeper into a story. Try to have plenty of it in your first few pages (literary agent Donald Maass suggests you have it on every page, but I'm only focusing on the first five here). Make the reader wonder what will happen next.

3. Grab the reader with your characters. When a reader is sucked into a new world they want to have an idea of whom they will be traveling with. They want someone to root for or somebody to hate. Give the reader a quick sketch of who these people are.

4. Show what is at stake. In your first five pages you have to answer a vital question properly or your manuscript will be shipped back to you. The question is: 'Who cares?' The reader needs to reply 'I do' or your story has failed. Make the stakes high for your protagonist. You get bonus points if you make the stakes high on both a private and public level. For example, if a man wants to get a promotion to make more money, that's nice. We all want to make more money, but I don't really care. If that same man needs the promotion so that he can pay off a rogue hit man he'd hired to kill his wife who he's come to love again...well now that's interesting. Make the reader care by making the stakes count specifically for your protagonist.

5. Describe setting. It doesn't have to be a long, lush description. Many readers don't have the patience for that; however, try to immerse your reader into the world you've created for them. Give them clues as to where the story is set. Whether it is in a London tube station, a marketplace in Kansas or an office in a city you've invented.

6. Foreshadow what is to come. Most stories are circular, they have a beginning, middle and end that all tie together. Hint at how the character will change or won't change. It helps to give your story resonance.

7. Be conscious of pace. This depends on the genre. Lead the reader on the journey at the pace they're used to. A slow moving thriller will be a let down; a fast moving cozy mystery may be confusing. Stories are like music, a reader expects a certain beat depending on the style. Country music has a different rhythm than jazz.

You can mix genres (sci-fi detective or horror romance) but understand the rhythms of both genres so that when readers pick up your book they won't be disappointed. It's likely that one genre will be more prominent than the other. Meet their expectations or better yet exceed them.

8. Write with passion. If you don't care about the story or your characters, no one else will. Put your spirit into it. Make your language come alive on the page. Many editors and agents talk about 'voice'. Basically that means the way a writer tells a story. Stephen King's voice is different than Dean Koontz's; Jennifer Crusie doesn't sound like Jane Heller. Put your own unique spin on the story. That will make it stand out.

I know these guidelines seem like a lot to remember for the first five pages, but most successful authors include these elements. You don't have to get it right the first time, rewriting will help you polish your work. But if you want to be on someone's 'to-be-read' pile these guidelines could put you on the top of their list. Good luck!