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Hi everyone - Alexa Donne here and today I am talking all about starting your novel in the right place.

Now this is kind of a buzzy phrase that you may have heard, especially if anyone has ever told you, if you've heard people tell other writers 'hmm I think you're starting your book in the wrong place'.

You hear this because it's really critical to start your book in the right place. Ideally you want to start with a scene that illustrates character, conflict, world and ideally also stakes. Now this is a tall order. There's a lot to accomplish in whatever your opening scene or chapter is.

Essentially, what people mean when they say that you're starting in the wrong place is your pacing is off. If you start too early, your pacing is going to drag. It's going to feel slow, and if you start too late, your pacing is going to feel too fast.

You're throwing people into a situation, usually an action scene, where they don't know what's going on. They don't know who people are and they don't have a reason to care, so you kind of have to strike that balance between boring people to tears and confusing the heck out of them.

How To Start Writing A Novel Beginners - A Few Tips

There's that kind of middle ground. My best advice is to think about starting your novel the day that it all changes, or alternately 15 minutes before it all changes. Not necessarily literally by the way, you want to think of it kind of abstractly, as what is the thing that happens right before the big change happens?

The big change being your inciting incident. Very often the answer to this question will tell you where you might want to start your novel. In many cases this is going to be a slice of life of kind of, who your characters are and kind of what their life is about before everything changes.

But that said, you want to be careful not to make it boring a play-by-play of everything that your character does in their life. Their normal life is going to be frankly boring. You have to think more dynamic than that.

Whatever scene you choose, as I mentioned, is gonna have to perform all of those functions - introducing character, the world, the conflict and the stakes. Often, part of this is introducing multiple characters, how they relate to each other and how they tie into the conflict and the stakes.

You want this scene to be interesting and specific. Whatever you choose should say something about your character and your world. That said, this shouldn't be like a massive info-dump. Now I've said it before and I will say it again - don't all start your books this way but one of my favorite ways to accomplish this is through party scenes.

Party scenes tell you a lot about the character, the world they live in, how they interact with people and you can throw a lot of conflict into a party scene. This by the way, it might not be the literal start to your book but a party scene or something similar to it.

You want to think of other dynamic, social situations that are kind of similar to what a party is. Having that kind of in that first part of your book before the inciting incident can be really really useful. I have indeed started two books like right in the middle of a party scene and I rather like them. It can work really really well.

You also want to remember the adage of entering late and leaving early. You don't need to have a prolonged set-up of, whatever it is, of like again, the play-by-play of everything that a character is doing. You want to throw people into the scene when things are basically kind of already happening.

Then you want to leave before they peter out and get boring. I mean this is the rule of thumb for any scene but especially your opening scene. If you don't start, if you start too early essentially and it's not dynamic, and it's boring people won't read past the first page.

Now I want to talk a bit about prologues. You've also probably heard that you shouldn't start your book with a prologue and I'm gonna reinforce that advice. I say 98% of the time do not have a prologue. The reason for this is that very, very typically especially in things like fantasy and sci-fi the prologue is from a different point of view or a different perspective or takes place in a different time.

It's often not the main thrust of your story and your main character, and so prologues can be really

off-putting. They can be confusing and they don't accurately give the reader an idea of what your book is actually about.

This is especially prudent for querying because you really only get that one chance for agents to read your first page but even when it comes to readers picking up your book in a bookstore, a prologue could potentially put them off the story.

Of course, there are always exceptions to the rules. There are prologues that definitely work. If you have a favorite book and it has a really effective prologue, take a look at it. I will say typically they're pretty short. They are in line with the tone and the themes of the book, and they typically aren't from a completely different perspective or point of view from the main character.

How To Begin Writing A Novel - It's The Beginning That Counts!

Prologues just kind of slow down the pacing cuz beginnings really are all about pacing. Now I want to give you some concrete examples of openings to great books that I think work really really well. It's tricky to kind of talk in the abstract about, well, how you should start your novel.

I mean, I just did it - I gave you some of these parameters for what you should and shouldn't do but I find most useful is looking at novels that start really really well. You can like start to pick them apart and see why they work. So I'm gonna start with my perennial and favorite example which is the Hunger Games.

We open with Katniss and it's actually fairly domestic. It's essentially that slice of life, that day in the life. It is also the day that everything changes for her, so by showing us Katniss interacting with and taking care of family The Hunger Games tells you a lot about the character of Katniss and the characters that she interacts with, and a lot about the world it gradually starts to reveal.

Kind of who this character is, the world that they live in. From home she goes hunting and hunting and interacting with Gale. The conversation that they have about the reaping and taking care of their families and your name goes in the bowl more than once if you break the rules, etc.

It tells you a lot about the oppressive world that they're living in, and also literally you know, is barreling you towards that inciting incident. It's dynamic, it's interesting. As you're reading you're like 'oh well this is weird. what's going on?'

I think it's incredibly effective, so obviously this isn't a single scene. This is a series of dynamic character and world specific scenes that drive you neatly to the reaping. By the time you get there, you know who Katniss is, you know where she lives you know who she cares about, most importantly.

So when everything happens with the reaping and prim you have an emotional reaction. You are furiously turning the pages to find out what happens next. Another favorite of mine is actually a bit prologue too, but it works really really well and that is *Across the Universe* by Beth Revis.

The first chapter of *Across the Universe* takes place hundreds of years before the main thrust of the action of *Across the Universe* but it is an essential glimpse into the past and setup because it sets up the entire novel.

You're with Amy or in her perspective. She's with her parents. She's made the decision to be cryogenically frozen and go on the speech. You're with her as she's going through this process and she's giving you the context of where she is, which fills in the back story and also sets up again the conflict and the stakes.

We get the chance to meet her parents and get a a sense of who Amy is and what she cares about, where she's going and so following chapters, when it's a couple hundred years later, she wakes up and you know the plot kicks off.

It's a very tightly paced novel and you're already emotionally invested in a very very good opening. A good specific choice for where we start with our character leading up to the inciting incident. I don't think it would have been quite as effective if it had started on the spaceship with Amy waking up.

I think having that glimpse into the past is really essential in the case of this novel for setting up the plot and the characters. Then there is *Frost Blood*, which is actually another good example of a prologue that is not a prologue. See if you know how these things work. You can cheat and basically do the same function because the first chapter of *Frost blood* is essentially kind of like a flashback.

It isn't but it is. It takes place a year before everything else in the novel, like the main plot, takes place. It is the set up of who Ruby is, the world that she lives in. We become familiar with the characters that she

cares about and then it nails you right at the end of the first chapter with the conflict and stakes.

Her mother is murdered in front of her, because of her, so you get her guilt and her feelings and of course why she would have a drive for revenge, which is what fuels the rest of the plot. Now wasn't a spoiler because it is basically on the jacket flap that Ruby's mom dies but that is it's a very exciting setup, because it starts showing her secretly using her powers.

You know immediately that they're forbidden, that she shouldn't be doing this, that she lives with her mother and her mother is all she has. Then the soldiers come to town and you know immediately it's like 'oh god' - conflict, stakes - what's gonna happen?

So that's another example that I really really like. Talking a bit about some of the choices I have made in my books and how I have started off my novels. I actually tend to favor that slice of life day-in-the-life approach. I like to settle into the characters in their world and who they are before ice them in the face with the inciting incident, so in brightly burning.

It's really mundane, relatively speaking, the way that I start the book. I hope it's not boring - it's mundane in the sense that it is kind of normal everyday life stuff but in the case of you know Where Stella Lives normal everyday life stuff is a bit chaotic.

The book starts with a gravity failure and she has to go to engineering to basically fix the ship. So you know that Stella lives on a ship that has problems. She is an engineer so she's responsible for fixing those problems. I clue you in really quick to the fact that she hates her job and is trying to escape.

She wants to become a governess, a teacher on another ship and you know in that you know first couple of chapters leading up to the inciting incident, which happens in chapter three or four, which is later than a lot of inciting incidents.

You don't always have to stick to chapter one or chapter two. Your inciting incident, it's all a buildup of where she lives, the things that she's facing, the things that she wants and we know why she can't have them.

Then Oh inciting incident - she gets what she wants and she goes off on her adventure. Then in my new book So Space Sucks (this would be my NaNoWriMo project) I start with a party. I really love parties so I just go right into it um you know, there's a party.

I introduce the whole cast of characters and kind of how they interact with their world. This start is very very different to Brightly Burning. Brightly Burning starts immediately, telegraphing to you this is a ship that is falling apart. Things are not going great.

Whereas in my new book in space, it's set on a very different ship and in a different time in the fleet for my world build and so I'll just tell you like from a class perspective it's a very different experience.

It's a fancy party. I talk about the food and the drinks and the way people are dressed. There's less dress porn and kind of who is interacting with whom and why it matters. In this case I did stick that inciting incident right at the end of the first chapter, so you have to kind of go with your gut for what beginning and what pacing is going to work for your novel projects.

Also in the case of Space Dunks I do the case of enter late and leave early. I start kind of smack-dab in the middle of the party. It's almost reached its peak. My character is kind of totally over it. I have her interact with a bunch of people and then she leaves before the party ends, to go deal with stuff.

It would have been boring if I'd started it 'oh well she's at her closet and she's picking out a dress and she puts on her shoes'. What's the party sound like and what does the party look like. It would have dragged, whereas I started right in the like the the meat of it. so that I could move the plot along.

So those are my main tips first starting your novel in the right place. Think about slice-of-life, think about right before the inciting incident. Think dynamic scenes that show off character, world, conflict and stakes. Who is in your character's life? Why are they important to them?

What's in their way? Think about scenes that are gonna illustrate this without having massive info dumps, you know people just talking at each other. These need to be scenes where things happen and people interact with each other and there are micro conflicts within the scene.

Katniss interacting with her mom and her sister - in very different ways those are micro conflicts. Katniss hunting and running into Gale. There are micro conflicts in those scenes and there are conversations that people have but they're not info dumping.

They're having these conversations for an organic reason, so think about some of those examples in terms of how you are starting your novel. I hope this helped, though definitely drop some comments down below. This is how I approach starting novels but I'm sure there are things that I haven't thought of. If you have specific questions hit me up with them - I will answer them in the comments.

If they spark a new idea I will make another video. Thank you so much for watching everyone. If you liked this one I'd love thumbs up. It lets me know that you like the video so I can make more of them. Good luck starting those novels or revising those novels. if you think you're starting in the wrong place, and as always everyone 'happy writing'.