

The First Five Hundred Words

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Q1: Why focus on the first 500 words?

1. 500 words are about all the words you'll have to hook a reader/editor/agent. While your first 500 words won't make the sale, they certainly can break the sale.
2. Notice how you buy a book by a new author. You read the opening. You're either hooked or you're not in two pages.
3. The first 500 words is where you show the reader enough about a great character or challenging problem or special world so they will want to know/read more.
4. Every mistake you make in the first 500 words is a promise to the buyer that those mistakes will continue throughout the manuscript.

Q2: What should the first 500 words achieve?

1. Hook the reader. Grab the reader's attention/interest. Intrigue the reader.
2. Orient the reader.
3. Make the story come alive.
4. Make the manuscript immediately stand out from all the others.
5. Induce the reader to continue reading.

Q3: How do you orient the reader in the first 500 words?

1. Introduce the protagonist (the person the story is about)
2. Set the scene
 - a. Who's playing the game
 - b. What the game is
 - c. Where
 - d. When

Q4: How do you grab the reader's interest?

1. Make the protagonist or antagonist compelling in the first 500 words. Give enough clues about at least one main character to make the reader care about them. Why would the reader want to spend money on a book about a character they don't care about? Make the character come alive.

Exercise: Think of the principal character in your opening scene

- a. Write down one thing that makes the character interesting
- b. Write down one thing that makes them unique
- c. Write down one thing that makes them heroic
- d. Write down one of their significant weaknesses
- e. Consider how to show these four aspects of your character in the first 500 words

2. Start your novel with change. Just before, just as, or just after the change occurs. Raise one immediate, compelling problem/situation that is significantly challenging to the protagonist and grabs the reader's interest. The problem must be substantial. Something important must be at stake. Significant, perhaps even intolerable, consequences should be apparent. Take an idea/premise and humanize it. Make the situation come alive. Put your character in an intolerable state of affairs.

Note: This is the way many authors start their novels

- a. Avoid cliché opening scenes (e. g. someone running)
 - b. Make sure the plot details don't overwhelm characterization in the first 500 words
3. Show the reader a strong antagonist who is significantly challenging to the protagonist.
 4. Introduce and draw the reader into the world of the book. Include lots of senses, not just visuals.
 5. Introduce something unfamiliar enough that the reader is intrigued.
 6. Introduce a challenging experience so common that the reader will identify with it and be curious how your character handles it.
 7. Use vivid nouns, active verbs, colorful phrases, intriguing details, and clever twists.

Q5: How do you induce the reader to continue reading beyond the first 500 pages?

1. Make the reader care about the principal character.
2. Make the story problem so immediate, so compelling the reader will want to turn pages to find the answer.
3. Make the story world so real and so interesting the reader doesn't want to leave it.

Q6: How do you make your manuscript stand out from all the others?

1. Style
2. Voice

In summary:

1. Reveal the setting.
2. Reveal the characters.
3. Reveal the plot.
4. Reveal your style.

It's all about the writing. And, for unpublished authors, it's usually just the first few pages that matter. Unless your first 500 words are well written and what you have on those two pages interests an editor/agent, the rest of your novel doesn't get read.

Your opening is the worm on the hook. Make every word count.

Bibliography:

“Techniques of the Selling Writer,” by Dwight Swain

“The First Five Pages,” by Noah Lukeman (an agent)

“The Screenwriter’s Workbook,” by Syd Fields

“Scene and Structure,” by Jack M. Bickham