

Never Use Prologues

The Source

This prohibition seems to have emerged from literary agent blogs and query advice in the 2000s. Multiple agents claimed "readers skip prologues" and "prologues are info-dumping" or "if it's important, put it in Chapter 1."

The sentiment gained traction through agent Twitter and Queryshark-style query critiques. It spread through writing forums where aspiring authors passed along received wisdom.

The underlying concern was valid: Many amateur prologues are info dumps that delay the actual story.

The Morphing

The corruption followed this path:

1. **Observation:** "Many weak manuscripts have info-dump prologues"
2. **First corruption:** "Prologues are usually weak"
3. **Second corruption:** "Agents skip prologues"
4. **Third corruption:** "Readers skip prologues"
5. **Final form:** "Never write prologues - call it Chapter 1 instead"

The rule became: **Delete your prologue, or if you must have one, trick readers by calling it Chapter 1.**

This led to absurd advice: "Just rename your prologue 'Chapter 1' and your Chapter 1 becomes 'Chapter 2.'" As if the label matters more than the content.

The Reality

Prologues appear throughout successful fiction, especially in genres:

Fantasy: Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series - prologues establish scope, tone, and world. George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* opens with a prologue showing the White Walkers - essential for establishing supernatural threat.

Thrillers: Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* could be said to have a prologue structure in the alternating diary entries. Many thrillers open with future event or victim's POV.

Science Fiction: Frank Herbert's *Dune* opens with Princess Irulan's historical text - clearly prologue material that establishes the legendary status of the story to come.

Literary Fiction: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* opens with "124 was spiteful" - a prologue-like establishment of the haunted house before moving into narrative proper. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* opens with a prologue-esque section establishing the twins and the tragedy.

Mystery: Agatha Christie frequently used prologues to show the murder from unexpected POV or establish the victim's world.

When Prologues Work

Prologues succeed when they:

1. **Establish tone/scope:** Show readers what kind of story this is
2. **Present essential context:** Information that couldn't emerge naturally in the main narrative
3. **Create mystery:** Raise questions that drive readers into Chapter 1
4. **Show future event:** Flash forward that creates dramatic irony
5. **Provide different POV:** One-time perspective that illuminates main story
6. **Are dramatically interesting:** Compelling in themselves, not just setup

Effective prologue example from *The Name of the Wind* (Patrick Rothfuss): Establishes the legendary hero now in hiding, creates questions about his past, sets tone - then Chapter 1 jumps to present with those questions driving the narrative.

When Prologues Fail

Prologues fail when they:

1. **Info-dump:** Pure worldbuilding or history with no dramatic interest
2. **Could be Chapter 1:** Nothing makes this structurally different from the opening chapter
3. **Delay the story:** Readers have to get through prologue to reach the actual narrative
4. **Confuse rather than intrigue:** Random scene that won't make sense until much later
5. **Show what could be told:** Historical background that could emerge through dialogue or reference

Example of weak prologue:

The Kingdom of Xerxia was founded in 1247 by King Theron the Bold. Over the centuries, the kingdom expanded through conquest and alliance. The current king, Aldric III, faces challenges from neighboring realms and internal dissent. Magic in this world operates through...

This is just exposition. Start the story.

The Actual Principle

The real craft principle isn't "never use prologues" - it's:

Begin your story at the right place. If context is needed that can't emerge naturally in the main narrative, and that context is dramatically interesting in itself, a prologue might serve. If your 'prologue' is just delayed Chapter 1, start there instead.

Or more simply: **Use a prologue when temporal, spatial, or tonal separation from the main narrative serves dramatic purpose.**

Questions to ask:

- Is this dramatically interesting in itself?
- Does this create questions that pull readers forward?
- Would this information emerge naturally in the main narrative?
- Does this establish tone/scope in ways the opening chapter can't?
- Am I calling this "prologue" just to dump information before the story?

The Irony

The anti-prologue sentiment peaked when fantasy (which uses prologues extensively) was dominating bestseller lists. *A Game of Thrones* with its White Walker prologue spawned a television phenomenon. Readers clearly didn't skip it.

Young adult fiction also used prologues successfully - *The Hunger Games* starts with the reaping (could be seen as prologue to the Games), *Divergent* establishes the faction system.

Why This Corruption Matters

This rule damages fiction by:

1. **Privileging label over content:** As if calling something "Chapter 1" instead of "Prologue" makes it better
2. **Limiting structural options:** Some stories genuinely benefit from separated opening material
3. **Creating false rules:** The problem is info-dumping, not the label "prologue"
4. **Genre prejudice:** Fantasy and SF often require more upfront worldbuilding
5. **Assuming reader stupidity:** As if readers can't handle a few pages of context

Most absurdly, it teaches writers that **readers are so impatient they won't read a section labeled "Prologue"** but will happily read identical content labeled "Chapter 1" - as if readers are illiterate idiots rather than people who can judge content quality regardless of labels.

The actual challenge is making openings compelling, not avoiding particular terminology.