

Start with Action / In Medias Res

The Source

Horace's *Ars Poetica* (circa 19 BC) advised poets to plunge into the middle of things (*in medias res*) rather than beginning "from the egg" - meaning don't start with the creation of the world when you're telling the Trojan War story.

Homer provided the model: *The Iliad* opens in the ninth year of the war, not with Paris's judgment or Helen's abduction. *The Odyssey* begins with Odysseus trapped on Calypso's island, not leaving Troy.

The principle was sound for epic poetry: **start at a dramatically interesting moment rather than the chronological beginning.**

In modern fiction writing pedagogy, this morphed through Raymond Chandler's famous advice and Elmore Leonard's rules. Leonard said: "Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip" - which included "thick paragraphs of prose" that establish setting and context.

The Morphing

The workshop circuit corrupted this into increasingly rigid forms:

1. **First stage:** "Start with something happening" - reasonable enough
2. **Second stage:** "Start with conflict/action" - narrowing what "something happening" means

3. **Third stage:** "Never establish context first" - banning setup entirely
4. **Fourth stage:** "Drop readers into confusion" - mistaking disorientation for dramatic tension
5. **Final stage:** "First sentence must have action verb" - mechanical rule-following

The rule became: **Open with someone running, fighting, or in immediate danger.** Anything else is "throat-clearing" or "warming up" that should be cut.

Literary agent blogs and query advice amplified this: "You have one page to hook us." Then it became one paragraph. Then one sentence. The supposed short attention span of modern readers justified eliminating any scene-setting.

Students learned that openings like "It was a bright cold day in April" (Orwell) or "In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice" (Fitzgerald) would be rejected immediately by modern agents.

The Reality

Some of the most celebrated opening lines in literature directly violate this rule:

Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*): "When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday..." Pure exposition. Pages of Hobbit party details before anything plot-relevant happens.

Gabriel García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*): "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to

discover ice." This IS *in medias res* (firing squad) but then immediately backs up to memory and exposition.

Frank Herbert (*Dune*): Opens with Princess Irulan's historical text, then moves to Duke Leto's political concerns - pages of context-setting before Paul's story truly begins.

Ursula K. Le Guin (*The Left Hand of Darkness*): "I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination." Narratorial throat-clearing - and it's perfect.

Toni Morrison (*Beloved*): "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom." Cryptic, yes, but action? No. This is atmospheric establishment.

Jonathan Franzen (*The Corrections*): Opens with description of a chair in autumn light - nearly a full page before any character appears.

When Action Openings Work

Starting with immediate action succeeds when:

1. **The action establishes character through behavior:** "The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed" (Stephen King, *The Dark Tower*) - we learn everything about both characters from this action
2. **The genre demands it:** Thrillers and action-oriented genre fiction benefit from immediate momentum
3. **The action is genuinely interesting:** Not generic running/fighting but specific, character-revealing activity
4. **Context can be woven in naturally:** Information emerges through action rather than requiring setup

When Action Openings Fail

Opening with action fails when:

1. **Readers don't care yet:** We need to care about characters before their jeopardy matters. "She ran from the explosion" means nothing if we don't know who she is
2. **The action is generic:** Chase scenes, fight scenes, or waking from nightmares - these are interchangeable without character establishment
3. **Context is necessary:** Complex worlds (science fiction, fantasy, historical) sometimes need orientation before action makes sense
4. **The false urgency:** Starting with action then immediately backtracking with flashback/exposition - the action becomes a gimmick
5. **Wrong tone:** Literary fiction that opens with thriller-pace action when the actual novel is contemplative creates tonal whiplash

The Irony

The "start with action" rule became rigid precisely when literary fiction was moving toward more contemplative, essayistic openings. Books like *Gilead* (Marilynne Robinson) or *My Brilliant Friend* (Elena Ferrante) open with reflection and context - and became bestsellers.

Meanwhile, genre fiction - where action openings make most sense - was already using them. The rule was teaching people what they already knew while making literary writers self-conscious about legitimate choices.

The Actual Principle

The real craft principle isn't "start with action" - it's:

Start with something that creates immediate interest and establishes your narrative voice. That 'something' might be action, or atmosphere, or voice, or mystery, or a compelling statement - whatever makes readers want the next sentence.

Different genres and styles require different openings:

- **Thrillers:** Often benefit from immediate action
- **Literary fiction:** Often benefits from voice establishment
- **Fantasy/SF:** Often requires world orientation
- **Mystery:** Often benefits from discovery or intrigue
- **Historical:** Often requires temporal grounding

The corrupted rule assumes all fiction serves the same purpose and addresses the same audience. It doesn't.

Why This Corruption Matters

This rule corruption is damaging because:

1. **It homogenizes fiction:** All books start to sound the same - confusion, action, then backtracking
2. **It devalues atmosphere:** Mood and tone-setting become suspect
3. **It privileges plot over character:** Assumes readers only care about what happens, not who it happens to
4. **It creates false formulas:** Writers open with action because they "should," even when their actual story is contemplative

5. **It mistakes urgency for interest:** Assumes readers need immediate adrenaline rather than engagement

Most destructively, it teaches writers that **readers are impatient idiots** who need to be grabbed immediately or they'll wander off - rather than intelligent readers who engage with good writing regardless of when the explosions start.

The actual challenge is starting with something **interesting**, and interesting takes many forms.