

The S Theory of Storytelling: How to Compel Readers to Turn the Page

“The beginning is the most important part of the work.” –Plato

“The first page sells the book. The last page sells the next book.”
–Mystery writer Mickey Spillane

“For fiction consumers, the most influential factors are in-store display, word of mouth, and page one.” –Literary agent Donald Maass

“The author-editor [and agent] relationship begins on the first page. The first sentence. The first paragraph.” –Literary agent Betsy Lerner in *What Editors Do*

“A novel begins when I can’t put it down.” –Literary agent Elizabeth Pomada

Carrie Fisher said that the trouble with instant gratification is that it takes too long.

Writers have told me that they go into a bookstore, pick up a novel, and read the first line. If it doesn’t excite them, they put it back. If you’re writing to entertain, start on page one.

Agents, editors, and book buyers only read far enough to make a decision. If your primary goal is to entertain, start as late as possible in the scene and the story, establish the time and place, introduce the protagonist, and rivet readers with the inciting incident that drives the story and forces them to keep reading. Create enough tension, conflict, and curiosity on the first page, and your readers will keep reading.

The S Theory of Storytelling

Style (or Voice)

Story

Setting

Someone

Something

Something said

or

Something else

on the first page of a novel or memoir must compel readers turn the page.

Every word you write is an audition for the next word.

Every line you write must convince your readers to read the next line.

Every page you write must compel readers to keep reading.

The first page of a chapter sells the chapter; the last page sells the next chapter,

and must make readers eager to review your book

and tell everyone they know that they must read your book.