

11. Starting From The Middle

Try not to start your story at the beginning. Instead, aim to start in the middle. In fact, Kurt Vonnegut said you should start as close to the end as you can – on both a macro and a micro level. Starting at the beginning is an elementary error.

Let me explain what I mean. You're writing a scene, but you're not sure how to get your characters into the room. How do you get them from left to right? How do you get them started? The answer is: start in the middle. Start with the most important part of the dialogue and see what happens.

The first line of *No Second Chance* reads: *'When the first bullet hit my chest, I thought of my daughter.'* I didn't start with the protagonist upstairs; I didn't have him enjoying a sandwich. Boom, he's already shot. We're already in the middle of the action and the challenge now is to maintain the pace. One of my favourite examples of this kind of beginning is from *Star Wars*. There's a brief prologue, then you're thrown straight into the scene. Darth Vader, Princess Leia, R2-D2: you don't know who anyone is, yet still you are glued to the screen. This is a great technique to try.

Do you want to do this all the time? Probably not, but I do it a lot. Don't give me four pages of sunrise to kick things off. Don't have the guy walking into his house. Have him already in his house. Start in the middle, or as close to the end as you dare.

Let me give you a couple more examples:

The first line of *The Innocent* is: *'You never meant to kill him.'* As the book opens,

Matt is caught up in a fight at college. (I got this idea from my own experience, when I once intervened during a fight. I was grabbing this guy and kept thinking to myself: 'What happens if I throw him? What happens if he hits his head and dies? What happens if I end up in prison?') I don't have my characters grabbing some drinks and settling in. The reader doesn't even know who the speaker is. We're getting straight into the action.

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I'm not saying cut out what matters. I'm not saying I don't want the heart and the soul. I'm simply saying, give me that stuff a little later. Get me started at the most important part of the story. Interrupt the life of your character at its most exciting point.

Batman's story begins at the moment his parents are killed. Sure he had a life before that. We may go into it later, but for the origin story, you need to start there. Start as far along as you can. The reader can figure out context more than we think. I'm not saying give the reader no context. The problem is too much context.

The problem is thinking that the reader needs the whole backstory, including what this guy’s favourite alcoholic drink is and if he prefers blondes or brunettes.

What the reader needs is to get into the story.

This is one of the challenges of television. I can be interior in a book. I can get right into the guy’s thought process. In *The Innocent*, knowing how Matt Hunter feels during the fight means I don’t really have to give you the context of how he got there, or how the fight started. We’re inside his head. For television, I may need to set the scene a little more. You might think it would be the opposite, but with a visual medium it’s actually harder to jump into the middle.

Even in *Star Wars* they cheated a bit, with those words coming up on screen to tell you about the Death Star. In a way, they’re both showing and telling. Which reminds me: don’t pay any attention to that ‘show, don’t tell’ rule. We don’t always want to show. Sometimes it’s fine to tell. Showing can slow the story down.

Starting in the middle means starting fast and creating something right away.

Here are the opening paragraphs of *Gone For Good*:

‘Three days before her death, my mother told me – these weren’t her last words, but they were pretty close – that my brother was still alive.

That was all she said. She didn’t elaborate. She said it only once. And she wasn’t doing very well. Morphine had already applied its endgame heart squeeze.

Her skin was in that cusp between jaundice and fading summer tan. Her eyes had sunken deep into her skull. She slept most of the time. She would, in fact, have only one more lucid moment – if indeed this had been a lucid moment, which I very much doubted – and that would be a chance for me to tell her that she’d been a wonderful mother, that I loved her very much, and good-bye.’

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What have I done there? I’ve created several mysteries. The big one is: why would she say his brother is still alive? Why is that a surprise to him? What happened to the brother? I’ve also created emotion: emotion for this dying mother, and for the brother that our lead character must have thought was already dead. We’re starting in the middle, not only in terms of action, but of feeling too. And I’m using what I felt in the moment of my own mother’s death, which means the emotion is real and authentic.

Think about it. I haven't skipped twenty or thirty pages of *Gone For Good* to find you a dramatic part of the story. This is the very first page, a page that I hope any potential buyer is going to read when they pick up the book in the bookstore. And as a writer you are competing with movies and television and streaming services, with computers and the internet and social media – even with DVDs. So you can't afford to mess about. You have to get straight into the story.

These are the opening lines of *Tell No One*:

'There should have been a dark whisper in the wind. Or maybe a deep chill in the bone. Something. An ethereal song only Elizabeth or I could hear. A tightness in the air. Some textbook premonition. There are misfortunes we almost expect in life – what happened to my parents, for example – and then there are other dark moments, moments of sudden violence, that alter everything. There was my life before the tragedy. There is my life now. The two have painfully little in common.'

Then we're going to have that violent incident. I'm not going to wait forty pages. I'm not going to tell you how the sun is rising or falling. We're going to get to the action as soon as we can.

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TAKEAWAYS

- **Start the book as late as you can in the story. But don't lose the emotional richness.**
- **Starting in the middle means we hit the accelerator right away.**
- **Give the reader story on the very first line.**

EXERCISE

Take a story idea and experiment with different starting points. How close to the end can you get and still pull off the story? Which starting point do you think works best, and why?
