Tricks to Make Your Fiction Irresistible
Amy Deardon
amydeardon@gmail.com
www.amydeardon.blog

Write His Answer Conference
Wednesday July 30, 2025

If your fiction keeps getting rejecting -- or worse, ignored -- it may be how you're telling your story. In this fast-paced, practical session, we'll unpack some common craft problems that quietly kill a reader's interest and show you how to fix them. With tools for great beginnings, building tension, deepening point of view, tightening prose, and writing with impact, you'll leave knowing exactly how to make your writing irresistible to agents, editors, and readers. Bring the first few pages of your manuscript if you like for some hands-on makeovers.

Outline

High-Concept Premise

The High-Concept Premise makes your story stand out. If you can elevate your story premise to make it a High-Concept Premise, your story will punch with wider audience appeal. You will have a better chance of selling your story to an agent, an editor, and readers.

What is this? A HIgh-Concept Premise is a story idea that can be summed up in a single, compelling sentence, built around a unique hook that can be easily imagined. It grabs attention instantly by posing a bold "what if?" scenario with broad appeal and clear stakes that immediately suggest conflict, drama, and tension.

Some examples are:

The Martian: a stranded astronaut must use his ingenuity and skills to survive on Mars while awaiting rescue.

The Handmaid's Tale : when the United States becomes a totalitarian government amidst a fertility crisis, the women are forced into sexual servitude.

Jaws: A shark terrorizes a beach town during tourist season.

Groundhog Day. A man relives the same day over and over again.

Air Force One: The airplane carrying the president of the United States is hijacked.

Harry Potter: A teenager discovers he's a wizard and is invited to a secret magic school.

The High-Concept Premise can be either character-driven or plot-driven. It can come from any genre, although some genres might seem easier eg thrillers or sci-fi.

How to Create a High Concept Premise

Ask "What if..." and twist it.

What if people stopped aging after 25—but died at 26 unless they could buy more time? (*In TIme*).

What if you could clone dinosaurs? (*Jurassic Park*).

Pair two unrelated ideas.

A cowboy western in space (*Star Wars*).

Die Hard + kindergarten classroom (*Kindergarten Cop*).

Do the Unexpected

Take something familiar or a fairy tale and reverse expectations.

What if the monster was the hero? (*Monsters Inc.*).

What if the villain is the good guy? (*Despicable Me*).

Exaggerate something normal

You're stuck in traffic... forever.

A health app that predicts exactly when you'll die.

Put it Together

What's the "what if" question behind your story?

Can your idea be explained in one sentence?

Does it have an inherent conflict or twist?

Does it feel fresh or unexpected?

Rubric for a High-Concept Premise

Can someone quickly understand your premise in one sentence?

Does your premise have a fresh twist or bold idea at its core?

Does your premise suggest strong conflict or high stakes with built-in tension, drama, and urgency?

Does your premise appeal to a wide audience?

Does your premise spark immediate curiosity or emotion?

Plot

The story is comprised of three fundamental elements:

Story Goal

The story goal is the task that your protagonist wants to accomplish during the course of your story. At the end of the story it will be very clear, yes or no, whether the goal has been accomplished.

Stakes

Stakes describe WHY this goal is so important to your protagonist so that he will fight through 300 pages of misery to accomplish it. Often stakes grow more personal and more intense as the story unfolds. Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dangers will affect others as well as the protagonist.

Obstacles

If your protagonist can simply go and achieve the story goal, there is no story. All stories need multiple obstacles, both internal and external, holding the protagonist back from getting what he wants. An important rule for writing is to never make it easy on your protagonist.

Often the story has an antagonist who spearheads the campaign of preventing the protagonist from reaching his story goal. The antagonist is better than the protagonist—richer, more accomplished, more powerful, whatever—and beating him seems impossible. It is only through the protagonist's clever thinking that he is able to win.

Story Structure

There are a plethora of story structure methods that we don't have time to go into today. Some good ones (from less to more intense) are:

Debra Dixon: *GMC: Goal, Motivation, and Conflict* at https://tinyurl.com/bddsm5rx (book)

Dan Wells: *Seven Point Story System* at https://tinyurl.com/mtvdpsw2 (free website)

Randy Ingermanson: *Snowflake* at https://tinyurl.com/mrx5p2ks (free website)

Jessica Brody: *Save the Cat Writes a Novel* at https://tinyurl.com/bdrhzyf5 (book)

Amy Deardon: *The Story Template* at https://tinyurl.com/mryf3bfw (book)

Free diagram of Story Template at https://amydeardon.blog/free-downloads

For today's talk, in your plot it's helpful to identify Snowflake's "three disasters and an ending" (step 2). Your plot should experience MAJOR changes in direction at roughly the 25% mark (Door into Act 2), the 50% mark (midpoint), and the 75% mark (slide into Act 3).

Reverse Outline

A first draft can be unwieldy. Reverse outlining is a great way to get a sense of your overall story structure, balance your pacing and subplots, check your character development, and find places where you need to either add a scene or take one away.

To reverse outline, just start at the beginning of your ms to write down each scene, who is in it, and what it accomplishes. If you want to get fancy you can create a spreadsheet on Google Sheets or Excel, then color-code things to keep track of different characters, different subplots, and so forth.

Pacing

The reverse outline is a fabulous tool to check pacing.

Pacing in a story refers to how "fast" or "slow" a story feels. It's important to find a speed that neither drags nor rushes.

A story with a good pace balances action and reflection, along with a steady rise in tension and jeopardy that doesn't let up until the end.

Rubric for Pacing

Generally there are a few factors that you can use to objectively assess pacing:

Opening Hook — is conflict and/or intrigue introduced right away?

Scene Variety — is there a good mix of fast scenes and slower reflection that balance intensity with internal character development?

Rising Tension — are the story stakes continuing to multiply and get more severe?

Story Shape — Do plot points fall where they should?

Resolution — does the story wrap things up quickly, with a resolution that isn't too long? (Think Peter Jackson's movie of Tolkien's *The Return of the King*).

Each Scene is a Story

You don't want any "dead wood" in your story. Each word needs to be pulling its own weight.

As you can see from the reverse outline and pacing above, every single scene needs to have a purpose. It's easiest if you can write each scene as a mini-story that links into your story's overall goal.

This is a big topic that we won't have time to go into depth with. That being said, I have a great trick that is guaranteed to raise your story tension by making each scene like a little story with a goal, stakes, and conflict.

I have a free article on my website called Scene-and-Sequel Magic Trick that you can download. My website is www.amydeardon.blog/free-downloads.

This technique is amazing. Briefly, you write each scene to answer a story question but also raise another story question that hooks into the next scene, so that you have a string of scenes like beads on a chain.

Take a look. You will be amazed at how simple this technique is, and how well it works.

Character Arc

There is more to a rounded character than a character arc, but for today's talk that's what we're staying with.

A character arc is basically the emotional journey your protagonist takes to become a better person.

Your protagonist starts out with a character flaw such as fear to love someone or prioritizing money over people. This flaw hurts others as well as the protagonist. During the story journey your protagonist is forced to repeatedly confront his flaw and eventually solves it to become happier and stronger.

To build a good character arc, start by figuring out what your protagonist's big flaw is that he needs to overcome by the end.

The character arc is often solved with the Hidden Need Triplet (HNT) occurring soon after the midpoint. In the HNT there are three very short scenes in which the protagonist's flaw is demonstrated, the flaw is solved, and the flaw is shown to be solved. I explain this important sequence in more depth in my book The Story Template (https://tinyurl.com/mryf3bfw).

Great Beginnings

The first one to ten pages are make-or-break to determine if your reader is going to stay with your story.

Here are some tips for Great Beginnings:

Give Context and Emotional Connection

A compelling opening is something the reader can immediately understand and be moved by. Don't start by just describing something — explain why it matters to a character as well, or else the reader won't care.

Weak Opening:

The bomb went off at precisely 6:03 am, ripping through the quiet street and sending a fireball into the sky. Sarah jolted awake in her bed three blocks away, heart pounding. She stumbled to the window, the sky already glowing orange. Somewhere, sirens began to wail.

Strong Opening:

At 6:03 am, the letter slid under Sarah's door. No signature, no return address -- just five words in stark black ink: I know what you did. Sarah read it five times, her heart lodged in her throat as dark spots crowded her vision. Downstairs, a door thudded shut. The messenger had vanished without a trace, but someone knew. And they wanted Sarah to KNOW they knew.

Don't Open in a Void

Imagine you are blindfolded and dropped into a place that could be literally anywhere. This is your reader. He needs to understand what he's looking at and what's going on to start understanding your story.

While you don't want to overload description up front (or anywhere else, for that matter), you do need to fill in a few details so the reader isn't disoriented.

Weak Opening:

She thought about running. About the way the air felt when she moved fast, like freedom wrapped in wind. The world was heavy, pressing in from all sides, and she couldn't breathe. Everything was too loud. Or maybe too quiet. She didn't know anymore.

Strong Opening:

The bitter smell of smoke lingered in the air as Charles stepped under the yellow tape. Police lights pulsed against the brick walls, turning the alley into a stuttering wash of red and blue. He kept his hands in his coat pockets, eyes on the scorched doorway. It didn't look like an accident. And if he was right, then someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make it LOOK like an accident.

Anchor Your Dialogue

While dialogue is punchy and immediate, if it's confusing the reader isn't going to be intrigued — he's going to be frustrated and close your book. Just like setting, give a few clues in your dialogue so the reader can figure out what's going on.

Weak Opening:

"You're really going to do it?"

"I don't have a choice."

"You always have a choice."

"Not this time."

"What if they find out?"

"They won't."

"But if they do--"

"They just won't, OK? Trust me."

Strong Opening:

"You're bleeding," Marilyn said, reaching for his arm.

Joe pulled away, wiping his hand on his jacket. "It's not mine."

They stood in the stairwell, one flight above the chaos -- sirens blaring outside, footsteps thundering below. Smoke curled under the exit door.

Marilyn stared at him. "What did you do?"

He didn't answer.

Don't Withhold Too Much Information

Some writers want to intrigue their reader by being mysterious. Without context, however, the reader is not going to be intrigued but confused, and he will close your book.

<u>Weak Opening</u>:

They said the stars would whisper when it was time.

Tonight they screamed.

She moved through the shadows, bare feet silent against the stone. The blade was where she left it -- ice cold and waiting for her.

Everything was ending. Or maybe beginning.

It didn't matter anymore.

She was ready.

<u>Strong Opening</u>:

Lila pressed her hand to the temple door, praying it would open before the moon slipped behind the clouds. If it closed, she'd be locked out for another cycle -- and the blade would be gone by morning. The Emperor's guards were already on the ridge. She could see the torchlight flickering through the mist.

One minute. Maybe less.

She glanced over her shoulder, heart hammering. If they caught her trespassing -- after her brother's arrest -- they wouldn't exile her. They'd execute her.

Limit Backstory and World-Building

Until your reader cares about your characters and story, he isn't going to be even a little interested in background stuff.

<u>Weak Opening</u>:

In the time before the Sundering, when the twin moons still rose as one, the kingdoms of Alenvar and Drosai had not yet fractured beneath the weight of the Great Accord. The Magelords of the Eastern Reach still held dominion over the skyways, and the elemental rites had not been outlawed by the Ninth Emperor's decree. But when the Godveil cracked -- splitting the Realmroot into seven planes -- chaos swept through the Veiled Lands and cast the Chosen into exile. Only then did the Star Saviors rise.

Strong Opening:

The guards at the border checkpoint didn't bother to look up as Ro slipped her forged travel slip onto the table. Good. That meant the charm was still working. She kept her head low, hood drawn, the scent of burnt copper clinging to her robes from the forge she'd passed on her way through the Alchemy District.

Just five more steps and she'd be across the threshold into Imperial territory -- where magic was banned, and where the name *Ro Takara* was still splashed across wanted posters.

Don't Try to Sound Literary

Again, don't put irrelevant stuff in your story, especially at the front. The reader doesn't care if you're smart — he wants a good story.

Weak Opening:

The sun spilled its molten gold across the emerald hills, each blade of grass trembling with dew-laced reverence beneath the kiss of dawn. A gossamer breeze meandered through the heather, rustling secrets older than time itself. The sky blushed a pale coral, as if the heavens themselves were shy of waking. In the distance, the river sang its eternal lullaby to the slumbering earth.

Strong Opening:

I was twenty-nine minutes late to my ex-boyfriend's wedding, which, in hindsight, was the most punctual I'd been to any of his events. I sat in the back pew, clutching a gift bag with a bottle of mid-shelf champagne and a card that said, Congrats on your next bad decision.

Technically, I wasn't bitter.

I just hadn't planned on showing up without a date.

Put it Together

Why does your opening matter to your character?

Is your opening located somewhere physical?

Does your dialogue have a context?

Are you disclosing enough information that the reader isn't lost?

Have you avoided backstory and world-building except through your character's eyes?

Are you avoiding writing descriptions in an omniscient tone?

Rubric for a Strong Story Opening

Does the opening immediately capture the reader's attention? Is it intriguing, provocative, or emotionally compelling?

Does the opening establish a strong sense of time, place, and mood? Is the setting immersive or intriguing?

Are the characters introduced in a way that is intriguing, relatable, or memorable? Do we get a sense of their personality or goals?

Is the author's voice distinctive and does it make the reader want to keep reading?

Is there an indication of conflict or a problem to be solved, whether internal or external? Do the stakes feel relevant or interesting?

Is the reader immediately engaged without feeling lost or overwhelmed by too much information?