

# The Four Firsts and Chapter Hooks in Mystery Writing

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*In fiction, suspense and foreshadowing create mood, tension and the desire for a reader to read more. You can do this, by using the Four Firsts rule and by using chapter hooks.*

## **The Four Firsts: First sentence, First paragraph, First page and First chapter**

**First sentence:** Make your first sentence count for something. Don't start off describing the sky or field unless you can include something that will truly grip a reader.

A million stars twinkled in the sky and the moon hung full and white amidst them.

Does this sentence really grab you, make you want to know more, or tell you anything about the story? No. It's a weak first sentence...boring.

On the night that Mary-Jane hung herself from the oak tree in her back yard, a million stars twinkled in the sky and the moon hung full and white amidst them.

How about now? Do you want to know why she hung herself? Who is Mary-Jane? Why did she hang herself outside? Maybe she didn't. Maybe she was murdered. See how many thoughts come from that one sentence?

A study done a few years ago showed that most successful classic novels began with an interesting sentence containing a pronoun such as 'he', 'she' or 'they'.

On the night that she hung herself from the oak tree in her back yard, a million stars twinkled in the sky and the moon hung full and white amidst them.

Now we REALLY want to know who she is. And we want to know why she hung herself.

**A first sentence needs to grip your reader like a pit bull and not let go.**

**First paragraph:** The first paragraph needs to reveal something, a hint of the plot. It might only be revealed in that first sentence, with something else added. You want to keep the reader there, in that moment. Be careful you don't switch them out of the mood.

On the night that she hung herself from the oak tree in her back yard, a million stars twinkled in the sky and the moon hung full and white amidst them. The fields glistened from the evening rain. A storm had raged through and left everything soaked. The barn doors flapped in the restless wind.

While the description is engaging, it takes the reader away from Mary-Jane. What you want to do is find a way to bring her back into the story so that the reader will want to know more. To know more, they have to keep reading.

On the night that she hung herself from the oak tree in her back yard, a million stars twinkled in the sky and the moon hung full and white amidst them. The fields glistened from the evening rain, as if

Mary-Jane had wept a river of tears before slipping the rope around her neck. To the left of her limp body, the barn doors flapped in the restless wind.

Again, the reader is drawn into Mary-Jane's life and there is a hint of torment and a visual that is vivid and emotional. You can almost see her body hanging from the tree.

If your first sentence is dialogue, make it gripping. The first paragraph rule then defaults to that line of dialogue plus the next paragraph or line of dialogue. Make them count!

**A first paragraph will draw you into the story and make you want to know more.**

**First page:** The first page is the page that the average reader will read, even in the bookstore, and judge your work on. Some readers will read it to determine if this is the next book they'll read or if they'll grab another one from the pile.

In fiction your first page must have enough action, characterization, dialogue, humor, mystery, adventure or suspense to make the reader turn the next page. That is your goal. You will need to find your balance between narrative and dialogue and introduce a character by giving us some insight into him, her or it, or give us a glimpse of the plot—by foreshadowing or exposing the murder, love interest, humorous incident, adventure to come, etc.

Remember, this is the beginning of your story. You will be introducing characters and then as the story progresses, you'll develop these characters—their physical descriptions, voice, moods, back stories, relationships to other characters and motives (good or bad) for all their actions. Don't do a description dump (full body/clothing description) as soon as you introduce a character. Tell us only what we need to know at that time.

**First chapter:** Make the first chapter count by having enough action and dialogue to keep readers engaged and end with a "chapter hook".

## **Chapter Hooks**

A chapter hook is simply a method of ending a chapter on a "cliffhanger". Most readers are tempted to dog-ear or bookmark and put down a book when they've finished a chapter. You don't want them to do this. You want them to feel compelled to turn the page and start reading the next chapter. One of the easiest ways is to use a chapter hook. You basically end the chapter with a line of text that foreshadows an event.

She upended the envelope and a small box dropped into her hand. She grinned at the delivery man.  
"It's my birthday."

"The box says Bella Jewelers," the man said. "Happy birthday."

She closed the door, her heart skipping a beat as she stared at the small box in her hand. Had Roger sent her the bracelet she'd told him about?

She giggled, then opened the box. When she peeled off a square of cotton, she let out a startled gasp. Then, staring at the gift, she did something she didn't expect.

She screamed.

When the author leaves the chapter with this hook, we just have to find out what's in that box. So we turn the page and read the next chapter.

The box sat on the table, a pool of blood oozing from one corner.

“This can’t be happening,” she whispered.

She peeked again, this time holding her breath. And there it was. A bloody finger. A small, bloody finger.

Many of the current bestselling authors use this technique in their work. Some use it at the end of nearly every chapter. The key is to vary the hooks. Make sure that some are action sequences, some are dialogue, some are narrative.

Think of one-liner hooks—sentences you could use at the end of a chapter.

My mother sat down at the table and calmly told me how my sister died.

“Don’t open that!” Frank snapped.

When Justin turned the corner, he came face-to-face with the last person he expected to see.

Dr. Morgan frowned and pointed to the x-ray. “What the heck is that?”

There were secrets in my family. And one of them has haunted me for years.

Books ARE judged by the cover, and also by the Four Firsts. Using chapter hooks will make your book more interesting to the reader. And more importantly, it will keep them reading.

Cheryl Kaye Tardif is a bestselling author who lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Her novels feature varying elements of suspense, from light mystery in *Whale Song* to her gripping techno-thriller *The River* to her paranormal thriller *Divine Intervention*. Her latest releases are *Skeletons in the Closet & Other Creepy Stories* and her award winning novelette *Remote Control*. Cheryl has also branched out into romance, under the pen name Cherish D'Angelo, and Cherish's debut romantic suspense *Lancelot's Lady* will be releasing on September 27th, 2010. <http://www.cherylktardif.com> and <http://www.cherishdangelo.com>