

Be A Novelist

WRITER S WORKSHOP

DON T DILLY DALLY AT THE STARTING GATE –
HOW TO START YOUR NOVEL WITH A BANG



by

Norma Jean Lutz

Be a Novelist Workshop

**Don't Dilly Dally at the Starting Gate –
How to Start Your Novel with a Bang**

Shoot Out of that Gate

This workshop about starting your novel, assumes that you have already completed the plotting (using the plotting method that works best for you), the character development, and the mental processes that push you through the mind-obstacles.

So here we are, ready for page one. Now that's really scary. Hopefully, this workshop will start the creative juices flowing, give you scads of fresh vibrant ideas, and make you *want* to jump in and get started.

When the horse is at the starting gate at the racetrack, no one is wondering if he had the right feed that morning. Or if he was exercised correctly, or warmed up properly. It's not the time or the place for any of that.

The same applies to your situation. You are now at the starting gate of your novel, and no dilly-dallying is permissible. Shoot out of that gate with:

- Speed

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- Intensity
- Impact
- Quick drama
- Conflict
- And a critical situation

I'm going to mix my metaphors here (please excuse me), and switch to driving a car. Remember back to when you first learned to drive a car. There were SO many things to think of at once. So many things to remember. How many times did it take before you were jumping into that car and heading down the street without ever consciously thinking of what you did?

What was required for that to happen? *Practice* and *repetition*. The same will be true with starting each of your novels. (You do have more than one novel simmering inside of you, don't you?) As you read through this workshop material, it may seem at first as though there are SO many things to think of at once. And there are. But that shouldn't stop you. In fact, it should excite you that you're on the right learning track.

Let's Begin

Let's begin. But not, as the *Sound of Music* song says, at the very beginning. Because that's NOT a good place to start. The beginning of your story will have already happened before you step into the plot. What do I mean by that?

The opening of a novel should be the moment of change. The moment that changes a static situation into a critical situation. I call it, “*the day that made a difference.*”

More than ever in this day and time, readers are easily distracted—plus the fact that there are more distractions than ever going on all around us. This is why it's crucial to grab your reader and to engage that reader as quickly as possible.

Design the opening to dump the character in trouble from the beginning. For instance, the first line from my novel [Tulsa Tempest](#) sets the scene:

*Tessa was upset at Papa for ruining the last day of her Christmas holiday.
Christmas should be a time for joy, not despair.*

At the outset the reader wonders: how did Papa ruin the day? And the use of the powerful word “despair” packs even more punch into this opening line.

Another key to notice in this opening is that the reader is almost instantly involved with the central character. *Involvement* holds reader attention.

Another example comes from my teen novel [Brought To You By The Color Drab](#):

*The moment Race heard the gunshots explode, he knew it was Vince.
Somehow he just knew.*

*Throwing the remote across the room, he leaped over the back of the ratty
couch and flew down the dimly-lit stairs out into the hot August night.*

In a moment of time, Race's world is turned upside down as his older brother, his hero and tight homie, Vince, has been murdered in a drive-by shooting. It all begins with the gunshot; it all begins with the opening scene.

The Trap that Snares

A trap that snares many beginning novelists is feeling the need to *gear up*. To prepare the reader. To give pages of explanation. The earlier you recognize and avoid that trap the better novelist you will become.

The opening of your novel is no place for

- long expositions
- descriptions
- or philosophizing

...tempting though it may be to use these.

One technique is to actually do all of the above as a *writing exercise*. In there somewhere, as you're writing, you may discover the *day that made a difference*, or the defining conflict that your main character will face.

If you get into the action with things happening—right out of the chute—you can weave in the information and extraneous details along the way.

No Ho-Hum Allowed

If you begin your novel with going-nowhere narrative, it may be fascinating to you, but it's boring to the reader. Ho-hum to the nth degree.

Let me tell a story on myself in this case.

The very first novel I ever had published was ***Blossom Into Love*** published by *First Love from Silhouette*. (This novel has since been re-released as [Flower in the Hills](#).) The story is about a teenage girl, Latina Harmen, who took for granted that her family would always take their summer vacation at Periwinkle Cove on the East Coast. Periwinkle Cove was where all her friends went—and the special boy she'd met the previous summer. But her history-professor father announces they are to spend the summer in the heart of the Ozark Mountains in an old farmhouse. He plans to do research there.

My first draft of the story was entered into a writing contest through OWFI (Oklahoma Writers Federation, Inc.) under the category of YA (young adult) Fiction. My book idea won first place in its category. However, the judge (whom I later met personally), said it was a good plot but I really needed to get rid of the first two chapters!

Two whole chapters? Yikes!

Well, I could see her point. I began the story at Latina's school in the last days before summer break. I thought surely my readers needed to know all about her school, her friends, her hobbies, where her room looked like... whatever. Mostly narrative by the way. Ho-hum!

I got rid of the first two chapters and re-wrote the beginning.

When my editor at Silhouette got her hands on my manuscript, she said Silhouette wanted it (yea!), but her first suggestion was—can you guess? Get rid of the first two chapters.

Two whole chapters? Another yikes! Two plus two equals four—at least the last time I checked. How could my wonderful story stand this much cutting? It would surely bleed to death.

On the contrary, it was more like *healthy pruning*. Would you believe that those *next* two chapters that I was told to chop out were made up mostly of *undirected* narrative?

At that time in my writing career, I had no one to teach me to begin with the *day that made a difference*.

When the published book came out here's how the opening read:

Latina Harmen knew she was going to hate Missouri. "There's nothing in Missouri!" she had told her father when he announced they were to spend the summer there. And now she knew she had been one hundred and ten percent right.

Hopefully my hard lesson, along with this detailed workshop, will prevent you from making the same time-consuming mistakes.

Prepare Reader for Techniques

The opening of your novel prepares your reader for the techniques that will be utilized throughout the remainder of the novel.

At the outset, the reader will know if the novel

- will be written in first person or third person
- will be in present tense or past tense

- will be in single viewpoint or multiple viewpoints
- will be tongue-in-cheek humorous, or deadly serious

And so on—you get the picture.

It's important that once these techniques are established, that they are not inadvertently changed later in the novel. I've encountered manuscripts where the novelist began with the bold attempt to write it all in present tense. (That can be a real challenge. It has a wonderful sense of immediacy, but is extremely difficult to maintain.) A few chapters in, slips into past tense begin to show up. Oops! Not fair to the reader.

As you can see, there are a number of techniques to choose from. But the basic tenet still remains: your novel must begin with a dramatic and compelling opening, no matter what techniques are used.

A Few Ways to Really Screw Up Your Novel's Opening

Now that we've covered what *should be* included in your story's opening, it's time to dig a little deeper. What are some of the ways to *really* screw up your novel's opening and lose the reader altogether? Let's look at a few.

Beginning the Story with a Dream

The novel opens with high drama, excitement, action, maybe even a little suspense—and then, *ta da*, the main character wakes up. The novice novelist who does this usually rationalizes that the dream sequence was a foreshadowing. Sorry, but that won't cut it.

Dream sequences are tricky no matter when or where they appear in the novel; but at the opening it's ruinous. First of all, the reader is not yet *connected* with the one who is dreaming. No engaging has taken place.

Equally as important, the reader may misunderstand (actually, they probably *will* misunderstand), and assume that this is *reality* in the story. The shock of it being a dream is confusing. Keep in mind: a confused reader is an annoyed reader. That's the last thing that you, as the novelist, would ever want.

The key is to always open with the *immediacy* of the story. If a dream sequence is absolutely necessary to the fulfilling of the plot's progress and conclusion, devise a way to place it further into the book.

Beginning the Story with a Flashback

As with the dream sequence, flashbacks take skill to handle well. Placed close to the opening of a novel, a flashback retards the forward motion that's required to hook the reader and pull him into the story.

Marcy stared down into the casket where her husband's lifeless body lay pale and still. It seemed like only yesterday when she first saw him staring across the room at her in the university library. She knew from that moment that there was something special about him.

It's quite apparent that the writer who commits this little *faux pas* is not fully aware of all the functions of flashback—why they are needed, how they are devised, and what they add to the plotline.

The biggest dilemma here is that at some point the writer must *come back out* of the flashback. But since no story line has been established—what is there to *come back to*? Remember this: you cannot create forward motion by going backward! It's impossible.

Beginning the Story with Too Many Characters

Introducing characters as the story opens is part of the art of writing the lead paragraphs. If too many appear at once, the reader is forced to keep turning back the pages trying to remember who is who.

If your novel is in single viewpoint with one main character, try your very best to open the story with that single character. Any deviation of this would have to have a very good, very strong reason. I would have to also add, it would be a very advanced level of novel writing to achieve it in a believable fashion.

If your novel is in multiple viewpoints, the key will be to open with a couple of characters in one scene, introduce others in subsequent scenes—letting out the line steadily and expertly like an experienced fisherman. (There I go mixing metaphors again! Well, it fits!)

Remember my previous admonition: *a confused reader is an annoyed reader*. I don't think your goal as a novelist is to intentionally annoy the one whose attention you want to capture and hold!

Beginning the Story with a Static Situation

This is the counterpart of the former technique—begin with the *day that made a difference*. Years ago, in a former era, novels began very slowly and methodically. Nothing much happened until about page three. (Sometimes *chapter* three.) Those days are over. Readers expect to be grabbed up and held captive from the outset. (At the starting gate, remember?)

Your full intent, as *god* of your novel, is to turn static situations into critical situations. This is the day in the life of your character(s) that the *status quo* ceases to be.

- New neighbors moved in next door
- The factory closed; the job is lost
- The spouse walked out
- Someone broke into the house
- The new boss arrived
- The phone call brings catastrophic news
- The boss's son gets the corner office (and the preferred parking spot)

The list is endless. The point is, something should be *happening* to the main character. Right away. At the outset.

There you go... this list gives just a few ways that could cause you to stumble at the starting gate, and in the process, lose your reader. If you're aware of these, you'll be way ahead of the game. (Or ahead in the race.)

Do You Need a Prologue?

I have to admit I like prologues; but I confess, I've never used one in my own novels. Do you need one? You may.

If you are writing an epic novel that will cover a long expanse of time, a prologue may help to set the historical scene. What exactly is happening in that geographical area, or in that time era, that will help the reader to be prepared for what's to come?

A prologue can foreshadow what the novel will be about. It can also become a source of reference from which the writer will draw upon later in the progression of the plot. And it can also supply continuity between the past and the present.

There's no right or wrong about whether or not to include a prologue in your novel's opening. If it enhances your novel and gives your reader a needed handle, or reference point, by all means use it.

No Such Thing as a Perfect First Chapter

Oh no! After all this, now I'm telling you there's no perfect opening to be achieved? No fair.

Look at it this way, there *is* the just-right (perhaps not perfect) first chapter for your novel—for your story. It's in there somewhere. But you may not find it in the first draft. Or even in the second.

The point is, very few novelists *start off* writing the *perfect* first chapter. The lovely thing about all of this process and progression, is that as your story grows, the

more clearly you will see (or hear, as the case may be) your opening paragraphs and your opening chapter.

Can I tell you that this is *so much fun!!!* Sorry, couldn't help myself there. But I confess, I pretty much get *drunk* on the novel-writing process—the process of discovery! It is pure joy to me!

I hope you love it as much as I do. And that this workshop took you a step closer to seeing your novel completed and out there before the public eye.

Conclusion

We've covered a number of techniques and strategies to help you not to dilly dally at the starting gate.

You are now equipped more than ever to saddle up and ride. (Ah back to the original metaphor.) Use these tips and techniques, but don't spend hours stewing over them.

If it's true that you may not start off writing the perfect first chapter (and it *is* true), then the best advice I can give you is to *start writing*. Today. Now. Right where you are with your novel idea. Don't wait to discover the perfect opening.

Just start writing!

Check Out These Powerful, In-Depth, Detailed Writing Workshops

Writing riveting, page-turning, can't-put-the-book-down, novels is a learned skill. A skill that requires study and practice. The workshops listed here are gleaned from my many years serving as a writing instructor and writing coach.

Some have to do with writing techniques; others apply to your writing life (such as the workshop on *Journaling*.)

Check them out and grab the one that applies to an area in which you're struggling. CLICK the TITLE to whisk you right over to Amazon!

[#1 Basic Fiction Plotting.](#) This *Be A Novelist Workshop* covers the basic components of a plot. Concepts included here are basic – rather like an overview. A great workshop for beginners.

[#2. Journaling – the Gentle Mental Jogging.](#) This *Be A Novelist Workshop* gives the whys and wherefores of journaling. Everyone benefits by keeping a journal. However, it's imperative for a writer. This workshop will answer your questions, and remove all the roadblocks that have previously prevented you from keeping a journal.

[#3. Conflict in Fiction.](#) This *Be A Novelist Workshop* is an in-depth study of how conflict is created, built, and sustained in your work of fiction. The rule is true: *no conflict; no story*. Order this workshop to understand why.

[#4. Show Don't Tell.](#) This *Be A Novelist Workshop* clarifies the difference between telling your story, and showing your reader the action. This one little technique, once you master it, will infuse a new vibrancy into your prose. This information is a must for any serious fiction writer.

[#5. Fuzzy Words; Focus Words.](#) Good writing is simply clear thinking on paper. If the writing is not clear, the reader is not following. This *Be A Novelist Workshop* is a guide in how to make every word work for you.

[#6. Learning to Write in Viewpoint Part I.](#) One vital decision that must be made early on in the plotting process is to answer the question: *Whose story is it?* This *Be A Novelist Workshop* gives a clear understanding of this important facet of fiction writing.

[#7. Learning to Write in Viewpoint Part II.](#) And yet more instruction on viewpoint! Is there really that much to learn about this subject? You bet. And I've just scratched the surface! Both of these *Be A Novelist Workshops* are essential to excellence in fiction writing.

[#8. Characters – Cardboard Or Fully Fleshed Out?](#) I've often said that creating characters is the *funnest* part of fiction writing. This ***Be A Novelist Workshop*** will give you great insight into the dos and don'ts of character development.

[#9. Dialogue – Not Just People Talking.](#) Dialogue is the mouth, voice, and soul of your characters. In good dialogue, the author vanishes and characters spring to life. Learning to write dialogue well is a skill you definitely want to hone. And this ***Be A Novelist Workshop*** will help you do just that!

[#10. Tag Lines – He Said; She Said.](#) Poorly written tag lines will be a sure sign of an amateur writer. It's like the "tell-all" to a savvy editor. If your tag lines are heavier than the dialogue, you have a problem. This ***Be A Novelist Workshop*** will help you nip that problem in the bud – quickly!

[#11. Character-Driven or Action-Driven Plot?](#) The decision of whether your plot will be character-driven or action-driven must be settled before writing begins! How will you know the difference? What determines the choice? You'll learn all of this and more in this ***Be A Novelist Workshop***.

[#12. Weather in Fiction.](#) Had it ever occurred to you that weather can help you with the twists and turns of your fiction plot? Use of weather in plotting a story can have a three-fold effect. Learn exactly what they are and how to use them in this ***Be A Novelist Workshop***.

[#13. Transitions.](#) Creating a work of fiction is a series of dilemmas of how to get your character(s) from one place to another, and from one time to another. This is achieved through the artful use of transitions. If this concept has been an enigma to you, you'll need this ***Be A Novelist Workshop***.

[#14. The Nature of Narrative.](#) Fiction is made up of two parts: dialogue and narrative. That's it. That's all you have. When do you use which? And how much of each? And how will you know the balance? Let this ***Be A Novelist Workshop*** help enhance your expertise in this area of fiction writing.

[#15. Concepts of Love – Loathe.](#) In this ***Be A Novelist Workshop*** you will come to appreciate how you can feel what your characters feel – even if it is opposite of what you feel personally. This is a skill every serious fiction writer must achieve in order to make the story (and the characters) believable.

Are You Ready for a Book-Writing Coach?

Tired of the struggle writing your book? Need a helping hand? [*Norma Jean's Coaching Services*](#) may be the answer you're looking for. Fill out the questionnaire on the page and let's see if we're a right fit.

A FREE consultation gets the ball rolling. (Or the pen writing!)

[**Click HERE for All Details!**](#)

Norma Jean Lutz Bio



Norma Jean Lutz's writing career began professionally in 1977 when she enrolled in a writing correspondence course. Since then, she has had over 250 short stories and articles published in both secular and Christian publications. The full-time writer is also the author of over 50 published books under her own name and many ghostwritten books. Her books have been favorably reviewed in *Affair de Coeur*, *Coffee Time Romance*, *Romance Reader at Heart*, and *The Romance Studio* magazines, and her short fiction has garnered a number of first prizes in local writing contests.

Norma Jean is the founder of the Professionalism In Writing School, which was held annually in Tulsa for fourteen years. This writers' conference, which closed its doors in 1996, gave many writers their start in the publishing world.

A gifted teacher, Norma Jean has taught a variety of writing courses at local colleges and community schools, and is a frequent speaker at writers' seminars around the country. For eight years, she taught on staff for the Institute of Children's Literature. She has served as artist-in-residence at grade schools, and for two years taught a staff development workshop for language arts teachers in schools in Northeastern Oklahoma.

As co-host for the Tulsa KNYD Road Show, she shared the microphone with Kim Spence to present the Road Show Book Club, a feature presented by the station for more than a year. She has also appeared in numerous interviews on KDOR-TV.

If you're a newbie author and need help. Look no further. Helpful information can be found on the Be A Novelist blog site:

www.beanovelist.com/be-a-novelist-blog

Why struggle out there all alone when you can benefit from Norma Jean's many decades of experience in the writing/publishing industry?

Contact Norma Jean: normajean@beanovelist.com

As a writer who loves writing for teens, and hanging out with teens, Norma Jean has launched the **Clean Teen Reads** website and blog. Lots of fun stuff for teens! Check it out here:

www.CleanTeenReads.net

The Site for Teens Who Love Books and Stories

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