

Writing a Book?

10 Questions to Ask

Before You Begin

When the words won't flow, that may mean that you don't know enough about your story. Whether you're a plotter or a "panst-ster", figuring out the answers to these 10 questions can help you get your writing rolling!

#1. Who is your audience? Why will they read—and keep reading—your book? Paint a mental picture of your ideal reader. What will he or she look for in a book? What will they love about your story? Keep your answers in mind as you write.

#2. Who is the heart of your story? How can you bring them to life in a few swift brush strokes? What will "wow" your reader in the opening pages—enough that they're willing to stick with the character for the next 200 pages?

#3. What is your main character's flaw or weakness? Just as you want to hint at your main character's strengths in the opening pages, you also want to pave the way for his weaknesses—whether it's physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, or something else entirely. Brainstorm some ways to show off your character's major weakness in that opening scene:

#4. Who (or what) stands in the main character's way? Your story's antagonist doesn't have to be a person—it might be a situation, or an outside force like the weather. What's going to create conflict in your story? How?

#5. What does your main character need or desire? Think about how you can show what your main character needs or wants in the opening pages, which will hint at the conflict to come.

#6. What is the “inciting incident” in your main character’s Hero’s Journey—the event that sets your character on a new path?

Without this incident, you have no story. This is what starts the story rolling, and it’s generally a good idea to have it show up in the opening chapter.

#7. What information is absolutely essential to know in the opening paragraphs and pages? What information doesn’t need to be revealed until later in the story?

Sometimes backstory absolutely must make an appearance in the opening pages—but not nearly as often as we writers like to think! Pare background information down to the bare minimum so you can pull readers more quickly into the story action.

#8. Where is the story going? Author Julie Peters says she writes her book’s ending before writing the rest of the book. She’s not an avid outliner—but by having a clear destination in mind, she can keep her story on track..

#9. How will you surprise your reader? Plot twists and reversals keep readers reading, while predictable sequences of events can be the death of a story. Even if you don't map out every plot point before beginning to write, start thinking about how you will upend readers' expectations.

#10. What promise does your story make to your readers, and how will you keep that promise? Even in the opening scene, the author is presenting a particular story type to the reader, and each story type has an implied promise. What will your reader expect from your opening? Although you want to keep some surprises up your sleeve, you also want to remain true to the promises unfurled in the opening.
