

A FIRST-PAGE CHECKLIST

Caveat: these are guidelines for creating a compelling first page, not rules—recently a writer “broke” half of them and I turned the page because of voice and a great job on item number one. Don’t feel like you need to force every element into the page, especially in a first-person narration. On the other hand, testing pages with the checklist no matter where they are in the story can help identify where a narrative lags and why it does.

- It begins *connecting the reader with the protagonist*
- Something is happening.* On a first page, this does NOT include a character musing about whatever.
- What happens is dramatized* in an immediate scene with action and description plus, if it works, dialogue.
- What happens *moves the story forward.*
- What happens *has consequences* for the protagonist.
- The protagonist *desires something.*
- The protagonist *does something.*
- There’s enough of a setting* to orient the reader as to where things are happening.
- It *happens in the NOW* of the story.
- Backstory? What backstory?* We’re in the NOW of the story.
- Set-up? What set-up?* We’re in the NOW of the story.
- What happens *raises a story question*—what happens next? or why did that happen?



“This book captures in one place so much great stuff to take your writing from ‘meh’ to powerful.”