A First-page Checklist

- It begins to engage the reader with the character
- Something is wrong/goes wrong or challenges the character
- The character desires something.
- The character takes action. Can be internal or external action: thoughts, deeds, emotions. This does NOT include a character musing about whatever.
- There’s enough of a setting to orient the reader as to where things are happening.
- It happens in the NOW of the story. Readers are not interested in the THEN of a 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.
- One thing it must do: raise a story question.

Caveat: a first page can succeed without including all of these possibilities. They are simply tools you can use. In particular, a strong first-person voice with the right content can raise powerful story questions and create a page turn without doing all of the above.

On the other hand, testing pages with the checklist no matter where they are in a story can help identify where a narrative lags and why it does.