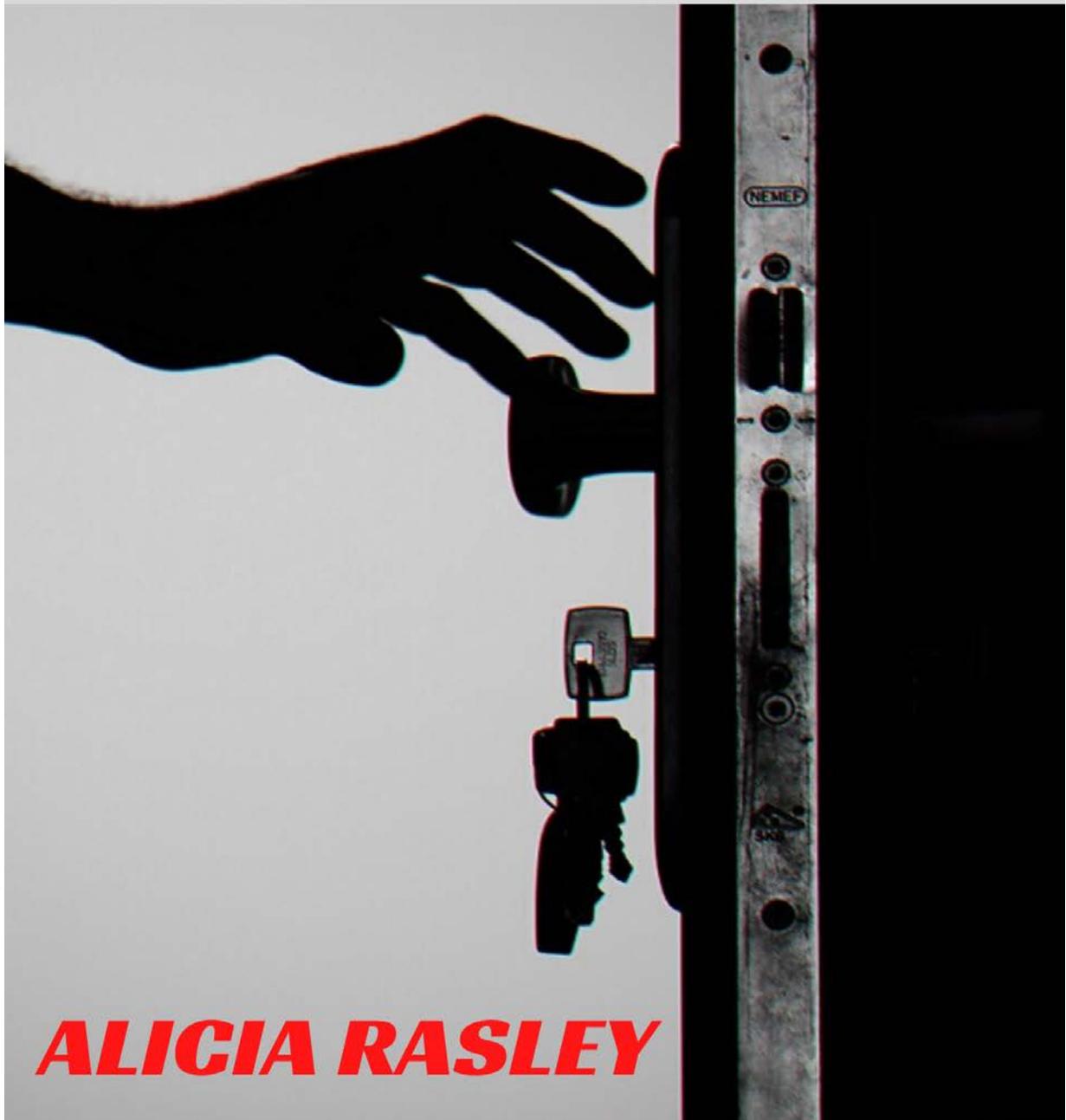


# **ON THE BRINK: TURBO-CHARGE YOUR STORY OPENING**



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# On The Brink– Turbocharge Your Opening

c. 2020 by Alicia Rasley

If the editors and agents and readers aren't grabbed by your first few chapters, they won't ask to see more. (They might not even finish reading!) So these chapters have to be terrific, first, and second, give the audience a good feel for what the entire book is about-- and, of course, hook them into wanting to read more.

To do this, you have to step back and be analytical about your book's opening. Some writers even leave writing this section till last, when they know what the entire book is about. But especially if you wrote that first chapter months, even years ago, you need to go back and read it over in light of what you've learned about writing and this story since.

I'll be blunt with you here-- most openings written a long time ago, before you got into the tone and theme of the book, aren't likely to fit the book anymore. I'm facing this now-- I crafted an opening suitable for a longer book than I now want this to be. The opening is funny and charming, but very leisurely. It's just not paced like the rest of the book, which has something important happening in every chapter. It's more the opening for a comedy than a mystery. (Mine's a meld of both, but more mystery than comedy.) So I'm going to be going back and sharpening the opening, keeping the basic events but cutting back on the extended comic riffs. I'm also going to do more to set up my internal protagonist theme of "a woman regaining control of her life after a trauma."

So I'm inviting you to do the same-- to put on your analytical hat and examine what your first three chapters need to be to appropriately open your book. This might well be not what your first three chapters ARE at the moment, so be prepared to rewrite. (I know how hard this is.)

Let's start then by thinking of what the editors and agents (and readers!) want out of the first three chapters (besides 15 misspellings on page 1 so that they can reject without reading anymore!).



# WHAT DO THEY WANT???

## **Prose:**

They want to know you can write a coherent sentence, paragraph, page, chapter-- that is, that your prose style isn't going to drive them crazy. They probably don't need wildly creative or achingly beautiful prose... but rather they'll look for the style that is best suited for this story, or at least doesn't get in the way.

## **Character:**

They want to get a sense of who the central characters are, especially what matters to them, what they care about, what their strengths are, and what problems those might bring. They want to get a sense-- but probably no more than a sense-- of what the characters' internal issues are. They want to have a good idea of what the characters' immediate motivation is for getting involved in this plot.

## **Situation:**

They want an opening situation that involves and intrigues the reader, whether that includes some Hollywood-style hook or just a couple of likeable characters in some believable jam.

## **Setting:**

They want to get an idea about where and when these people are and what relationship they have with that place (like in a small southern town in 1964-- she's a new resident; he's a civil rights worker from the north come to arrange a voting drive). If you can show that there's some issue in this place (like segregation) that will be explored during the book, the editors would like to see that set up here.

## **External Conflict:**

They want the book's external conflict to be initiated fairly soon, perhaps in chapter 2 if not earlier. It doesn't have to be the full-blown conflict (say, the voting-rights drive) but some sign of the emergence of conflict (the freedom-rider arrives in town). They probably want to see how everyone (especially the protagonist) responds to the conflict in the beginning (this response is likely to be less than the response needed to solve the conflict-- save that till the end. :)

## **Pacing:**

They're going to want to know that you can pace a chapter and a scene, that you have something essential happening in every scene, that you keep the story moving along, that you don't stop dead for pages of description, that your dialogue has a point beyond being charming and funny (that's my weakness-- charming, funny, nonessential dialogue... sigh).

## **Tone:**

They want to get a sense of what tone the book will have. If it's a comedy, these first chapters should be funny... but funny in the way the rest of the book is funny. If it's going to be a leisurely, anecdotal book, then these chapters should set that up. If it's going to rival Arnold Schwarzenegger for action, then they'll want to get on that roller coaster on page 1.

# CONSIDER THIS...

So....

Here are some things to consider as you revise your opening for greater power:

## Some Purposes of Opening Chapters:

1. Set up situation.
2. Show "old world"-- the environment before the events of the plot-- the "**opportunity for change.**"
3. Show **protagonist before the events** of the plot-- the "opportunity for change" and any goal.
4. Discover major characters-- give the readers a **first glimpse of them and their situation.**
5. Give a sense of how these people **perceive** the world and themselves.
6. Initiate action with an **event** which shows all of the above.
7. Bring on the **external** conflict.
8. Use **coherent contradiction** to hint at internal conflict-- maybe show it affecting the protagonist's actions.
9. Set up the **interpersonal dynamics**. How do these characters relate to each other? What are their issues?
10. Pose the major **story questions**.
11. Bring on the antagonist and his/her **initiating action.**
12. Start the protagonist's **action/reaction.**
13. Hint at **backstory** -- tell only what's necessary at this point, what is natural to tell.



## Let's delve deeper into those considerations-

### **Discover the Characters:**

Look at your opening scenes. What do they say about the main characters and what matters to them and how they might need to change? This is the first impression your reader will get, so present them in action, doing something that shows their values and issues. Do you give some sense of their central strength and how it affects their actions? Do you show some kind of contradiction that hints at some kind of internal conflict, that presents some kind of story question? (For instance, in **Lawrence of Arabia**, the opening sequence of interviews with disputing funeral-goers poses the questions, "Was Lawrence a great hero or a great publicist?")

### **Reveal the Issues:**

You don't have to spell it out— rather show the conflict in character action. What's the first scene where the booklength external conflict first arises? It should be early— chapter two or earlier— as that's when the story really gets engaged. But even before that you can show the issues involved with your glimpse of the "old world" and the "before-protagonist". How does the heroine respond to minor racism, before she's confronted with the major racism that is the external conflict? Remember to leave space for change here— if she responds with perfect heroism right away, she doesn't have a lot of growing room.

### **Invent Events:**

Scenes are units of action based around actual events. Don't wimp out with a flashback or a long scene of musing. Center the opening scenes on the characters' experiences and actions. Anchor the event in the setting. As Kate Moore puts it, "We're somewhere, and something is happening." **And make the event relevant to the plot!** If the heroine trips and falls and makes a fool of herself in the first scene, use that not just to show that she's clumsy but to motivate her to take up Tae Kwon Do or ballet— or when she's lying there on the ground, she sees the package left by the villain.

### **Beware of Backstory:**

Don't waste the first chapter on a retelling of all that has happened before. "Exposition is ammunition"— reveal it when it needs to be revealed, when the reader is asking for it. That is, don't tell the reader the answer before she's had reason to ask the question.

### **The Power of Point of View:**

In revising, be analytical about how your choice of point of view affects the discovery of the characters and the portrayal of the world and their perceptions. Can you show the heroine's blind spot or let the reader know the hero has a secret (but not what it is)? Can you show that she is especially curious, or that he sees life as a series of battles? Try to stay in one point of view long enough so that the reader can truly experience the world from this character's perspective— this might mean the entire scene is in one pov.

### **The Virgin Reader:**

When you've got the first chapters done, ask for a read by a "virgin reader" or two, who know nothing about the story. As they read, they should tell you what they're experiencing, what questions they have, what emotions they feel, where they're confused, where they're intrigued. At the end of each chapter, have them tell you what they know... and what they only suspect... and what they're asking. Does they know what you want her to know? Is they suspecting what you want her to suspect? (For example, "I don't think Brad's the hero, even though Sarah is in love with him.") Are they asking the questions you want them to ask? (For example, "Is Brad going to take advantage of her? Is Jake going to get mad at her?")

### **Revise and Reinvent:**

If the opening chapters don't get the response you want, reinvent them. Step back and analyze each scene. What is your purpose in the opening scene? What impression do you want the reader to have of the character? What do you want the readers to understand about the world and the issues of the book? You might have to rewrite the opening altogether to accomplish these purposes— but that's good. Imagine this is your only chance with the editors, agents, and readers. They won't give you the benefit of the doubt. This is it.

### **The Brink of Change:**

This opening act should show the world and the protagonist on the brink of significant change. Make sure the characters have reason to take on the plot, whether that motivation comes from the immediate goal ("I want to go to the homecoming dance with Brad") or is forced by the initial plot events ("I want to survive this kidnapping!").



# DONE? NOT YET. GO BACK AND CHECK-

**1. Check for Coherence:** Look for plot gaps, logic lapses, a missing link between cause and effect. A coherent plot depends on events having later consequences. Every action must have both a cause and an effect. Be especially wary of coincidence as a cause of any plot event.

- A. What has to happen as you've set up the situation? Secret outed, liar revealed, treasure located, family restored, what? Watch especially for dangling plot threads. If there's a gun in Act One, it ought to go off in Act Three, or the reader will be wondering at the misfire.
- B. Look especially for missing actions, revelations, discoveries by the protagonist, because the reader is likely to notice those. This is the protagonist's journey— never forget that the active protagonist is going to be involved in almost every plot event.
- C. It's a good idea to outline your subplots and make sure all of them have resolved somehow (though the resolution can be ambiguous and take place offstage).
- D. If you have an antagonist, and especially if you have a villain, it's a good exercise to outline his/her storyline too. What's his motivation, what's his goal, what's his conflict? How does she respond to the protagonist's actions? Don't have the villain just sitting around waiting to be defeated; make the villainy a continuing source of conflict for the protagonist.

**2. Scene Dynamics:** Pacing is a function of how many irrevocable events happen in a sequence. The best way to improve pacing is to put at least one irrevocable event in every scene. *Irrevocable* means having an effect on the course of the plot. This doesn't have to be a cataclysm— it can be a conversation that leads to an alliance, a revelation, a meeting. The significance doesn't have to be clear immediately.

- A. Make sure you know where your external plot turning points are. Those are the essential events, where the plot changes because of the actions or experiences of the protagonist. Often they come at the end of a sequence of three or four scenes of setup. Can you show the action building until the tension is so great that the plot must turn? (By the way, an outline of the scenes and their essential irrevocable events is a good way to start writing a synopsis or revising the plot.)
- B. If there is a love story in here, go over the romance turning points for coherence, cause-effect, and connection to the external plot. The two plots should be braided, not parallel, so that each romantic turning point has a major effect on the external plot. Remember the romantic purpose: These two people are on a journey to love, and they need to grow and change, so at the end they will have earned the love you have waiting for them.
- C. Strong plots depend on strong scenes, so outline the scenes you know you need and see how you can increase their drama. Start with the scene seed— what you know needs to happen in the scene (such as "heroine must find out that her new lover is an undercover FBI agent"). List three or four different ways this can happen, given the scope of the story and the protagonist's character. Which is most dramatic, and how can you use it plausibly?
- D. Can you add more action, especially more protagonist action? This doesn't have to be "plot-affecting action" but should have some dramatic purpose, such as to prepare the protagonist for some important event. Can you increase the vividness of events through setting? Think about Rocky— he could have punched a punching bag, but there's more drama and character in him punching away at a side of beef in a meat freezer.

**3. The Emotional Arc.** Make sure every event has some emotional consequences or some effect on the internal journey. This is especially important during the time of rising conflict. The emotional arc of the story depends on the link between cause (event) and effect (emotional change), but don't stop there. Make sure the emotional change leads to some action or decision that wouldn't otherwise occur that way— that is, make the emotional change the cause (in part) of some new event. That way the connection of cause to effect is through emotion.

- A. Keep it individual, however; the protagonist, with that particular backstory, goals, and needs, will respond **how** to this event? And how will that emotional change manifest in future actions?
- B. With a romance, the events in the external plot should have an effect on the relationship or interaction between the lovers-to-be: Does discovering he's FBI make her trust him less or more? Does it make him guilty or defiant or both?
- C. And don't forget the reverse is true too— the emotional changes inspired in the romance plot will also affect the external plot. After the first kiss, will they become allied in their quest for the treasure... or will they be even more intent on their rivalry?

**4. Power Up the Protagonist.** Once you chart most of the protagonist's journey, go back and see where you need to deepen motivation, add another jolt of conflict, clarify character, increase stakes, make it more internally coherent.

- A. Motivation: Are there actions the protagonist takes (or the antagonist, for that matter) where you feel you're stretching for motivation? Can you give more reason for the pro to take that action? Remember you have to keep the motivation strong enough that the protagonist keeps going on despite the threat to identity, life, health, job, etc.
- B. Conflict: At any point, does the energy flag because the conflict sags? Can you give another jolt of conflict by upping the antagonist's response to the protagonist's actions? Remember that conflict seldom remains static. It will change as the protagonist makes choices and takes actions to deal with it.
- C. Character: Is the protagonist overburdened with traits and overloaded with strengths? You can't make a believable protagonist if you just keep layering on new skills and problems. Find the center of this character— the central conflicts, the central strengths— and work out from there. If you find yourself thinking, "Well, I guess I better make him a mathematical genius too so he can figure out the lottery system and win a million so he can buy the house he needs..." think again. Go back to the central person and find how THAT PERSON would manage to buy a house if he needs one. Accept the reality of your protagonist, which includes the limitations, and use that to individualize the plot.

**5. Answer the Questions and Complete the Journey.** Go back over your story questions. These are not sacred-- you can change them, but the plot should add up to the questions and their answers. This is where you check if the opening sets up the ending of the story... which means now flip forward to the ending chapters to make sure.

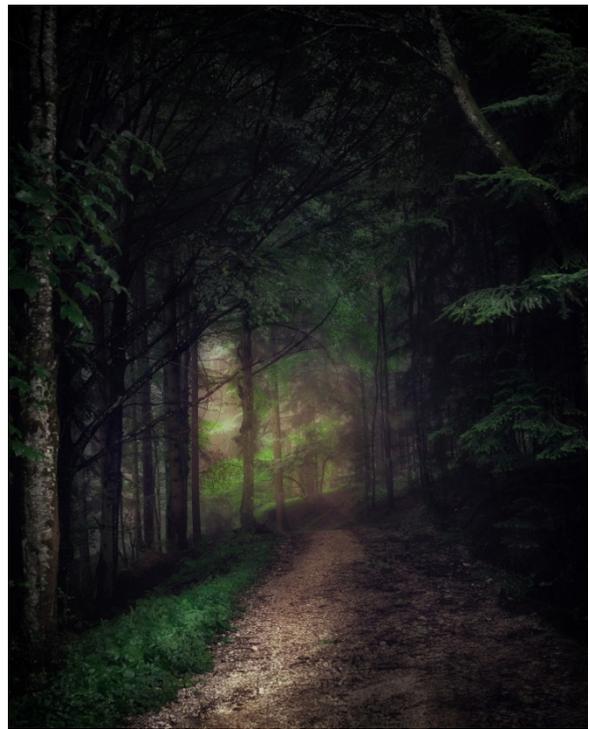
- A. In the end, is the external question answered? If question and answer don't match, which do you want to keep? Or how can you account for the disconnect?
- B. Read over for the emotional/psychological arc. Has the character completed the internal journey?
- C. In a romance, look to which partner has the longest journey to love. Has he/she really made that journey? Don't have one partner coming 90% of the way towards the other, who actually has the farthest to go. The rule of thumb is that the one who has the most difficulty committing should be the one who makes the final, and essential, commitment. (Be particularly careful with "dark and dangerous heroes"-- they above all must make a true commitment of giving love, and not just accept the love that's offered.)

**6. Back to the beginning:** Check to make sure you haven't foreshadowed or told TOO MUCH. It's a delicate balance to get 'just enough' done in the opening, which is why this should be handled more in revision. That way you have the clay already molded (the chapters drafted, I mean), and just need to chip and sculpt till it's perfect.

So make sure that you've withheld a bit, so that the reader has to participate. Bury your backstory, add subtext to dialogue, use point of view to make the reader guess at reality. It should all add up in the end, but the readers will thank you for letting them fit a few of the puzzle pieces in.

*In my beginning is my end. Now the light falls  
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane  
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon.*

TS Eliot, from "East Coker"



*Alicia Rasley is an award-winning novelist, and nationally known writing coach. She received her MA in Literature at Butler University, and has taught there and at state universities. Currently she tutors writing students at the University of Maryland Global Campus, edits stories, and coaches writers.*

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