



# **Jump-start Your Novel with Kitty-cats in Action**

And keep pages turning  
with coaching from *Flogging the Quill*

**Ray Rhamey**



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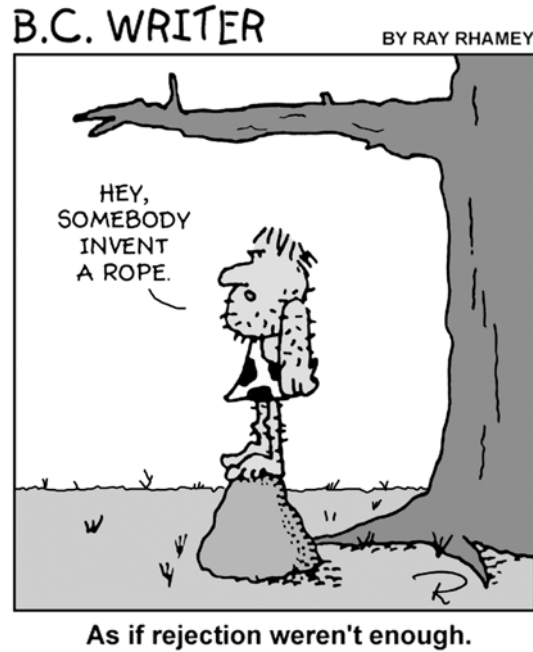
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"A masterpiece of *showing* how to fix prose, not merely *telling*."

Chris, writer



This book is dedicated to writers who are climbing the steep and never-ending learning curve for writing novels, seeking and striving to learn and improve.

And to the “litblogosphere,” the writer/editor/agent bloggers who inform us and teach us, and to those who once did but have faded away (we miss you, Mad Max Perkins and Fresh Eyes and Miss Snark).

It’s a thank-you to agents such as Donald Maass and editors such as Dave King and Rennie Browne who write books to share insights that help us become more successful and better writers.

It’s a thank-you to the writers I’ve worked with in critique groups who have helped me with my own writing and in learning how to coach writers over their story’s weak spots.

And the biggest thank-you goes to my wife, Sarah, who has been a patient listener for, well, all the important times, and some not so consequential—the companion of my life.





## Do you really need to jump-start your novel?

**Why shouldn't you** peel your story like a 1950s teeny-bopper removing her layers of petticoats, subtly revealing character and plot bit by delicious bit? There are plenty of famous novels and current bestsellers by top authors that take their time for the story to surface, right?

Well, famous works and established authors face a different reality than do unpublished writers. Reputation or a history with readers can buy their stories the time to ease into things.

But if you're unpublished and trying to land a literary agent, your reality is the hundreds of submissions an agent receives and the chore it becomes to crawl through them, looking for reasons to reject while at the same time hoping for a story worth reading.

"No [bookstore] browser went beyond page three. . ."

Sol Stein, publisher

### **You only have seconds**

On her blog, *Agent in the Middle*, 20-year veteran agent Lori Perkins said this:

Your novel has to grab me by the first page, which is why we can reject you on one page.



The odds are excellent that an agent will see all the reasons she needs for passing—or for reading more—on your first manuscript page. Just like agents and editors who see rivers of submissions, as a result of seeing scores

“I know most of what I need to know about a writer’s chops in about a line and half. In the end it’s all about the writing.”

Dan Conaway, literary agent,  
formerly executive editor at  
Penguin Putnam

of opening pages for novels, I can tell you that the first page typically foreshadows what’s to come, story-wise and writing-wise. One quick skim usually provides all the reason I need to decide whether I will turn the page or decline the opportunity.

Often I see competent writing that fails to connect because the writer doesn’t get what the novel’s opening *must* do to hook a reader. Frequently I find a gripping opening pages later—too late. Most often a bog of ex-

position or backstory—what one writer calls “throat-clearing”—drags the story to a halt.

### **You still only have seconds on an editor’s desk**

Let’s say you do land an agent, and the agent sends your story to an acquisitions editor. The same grim reality opens its maws—an audience of one with sharp, particular tastes who has an agenda that your story may or may not fit, who wants a great story but has a pile of submissions to go through, and for whom quickly finding a reason to pass is a good thing. One slip, and chomp, you’re gone.

### **You still only have seconds in the bookstore**

Okay, so your talent and work and luck pay off and your novel is published. Now it faces the cold, pragmatic reality of the bookstore. Sol Stein, a remarkable publisher/editor/author/playwright, writes in *Stein on Writing* of his observations in a bookstore.

In the fiction section, the most common pattern was for the browser to read the front flap of the book’s jacket and then go to page one. No browser went beyond page three before either taking the book to the cashier or putting it down and picking up another to sample.

What did those readers see in the novels they chose to purchase, and what did they fail to see in the rejects?

You know.





Ask yourself what readers buy novels for. Is it. . .

- Lush descriptions?
- Great dialogue?
- Fascinating characters?
- Deep themes?

Nope. Just one thing.

### Story

Those bookstore browsers either saw signs of a story they wanted to read, or they did not. They either felt compelled to keep reading, or not. That quickly. You do it too, don't you?

It's not like when you ask a family member, or a friend, or even a critique group to read your new novel—they sorta have to read your stuff.

No, in the real world, you have a page or two. And if it's that difficult with a bookstore browser who is on the hunt for a story to read, how tough do you think it is with a jaded, weary agent or a jaded, way-too-swamped acquisitions editor?

To move your book toward the cash register. . .or generate a request by an agent for the full manuscript. . .or make it to an editorial meeting by an acquisitions editor. . .you need to jump-start your story, sentence by sentence, on your opening pages.

"You can usually tell after a paragraph—a page, certainly—whether or not you're going to get hooked."

Chuck Adams, Executive Editor  
Algonquin Books

### And then you have to keep pages turning

Beyond openings, this book tackles the art and craft that you need in order to focus every facet of your talent on compelling a reader to turn pages.

#### 1: Storytelling

Coaching on the art of storytelling—motivating characters, creating tension, gripping your readers so they want to keep reading, and reading, and reading—so you get a feel for what your narrative must do to capture readers and to make the story live in their minds. Then come craft tools you'll utilize to make your story happen on the page.

#### 2: Description

One of the most powerful, yet underutilized (or, sadly, sometimes over-utilized) tools for a novelist is description. I'll show you how to create de-



scription that not only describes, but characterizes. You'll write description that does far more than produce a simple snapshot of a scene or an action.

### 3: Dialogue

The other key tool for injecting life into your story is dialogue. You'll see how to craft dialogue that delivers the experience of a scene smoothly, clearly, and powerfully.

"To hold our attention, a novel's action needs to compel us to read every word."

Donald Maass, agent and author  
*Writing the Breakout Novel*

### 4: Technique

I'll illustrate a toolbox of craft techniques that include the all-important show/tell dichotomy and its impact on your story. I'll cover point of view, head-hopping, and flashbacks.

### 5: Words

How well you create a story experience in a reader's mind depends on the words you use—and don't use. Are adverbs truly *verboten*, or can they be your friend? What are the weak words that sap power from your narrative?

### 6: Workouts

Finally, you go to work applying the techniques and insights you've gained to real novel openings created by writers like you.

If this book does no more than guide you to focus on and to see the true effect and impact of your writing, it will have boosted you several rungs up the ladder to creating a publishable novel.

Last, but not least, I suggest you consider posting the definition below somewhere within sight at your place of writing.

#### **com•pel**

*verb*

**a:** to force

**b:** to urge irresistibly

When should the compelling begin? The moment your story starts.



“I found your kitty-cats in action hilarious as well as instructional, and I plan to share it with my critique group. Thanks so, so much for providing your insight.”

Elaine Sims, *Unearthing Passions*

## Start with kitty-cats in action

**Opening your story *in medias res***, in the midst of something happening (versus placidly setting the scene), is key to engaging a reader. For example:

Hairball raced across the clover, leaping honeybees, never taking his gaze from Barfie, praying that her grip would hold.

This opening raises immediate story questions that a reader will want to know the answers to—why is Hairball racing? Who is Barfie? *What* is Barfie? What do they have to do with each other? What’s Barfie’s scary-sounding problem?

Add unusual circumstances to action and you intensify interest. You’ve heard of “fish out of water” stories...how about “cat in water?”



Up to his dewclaws in the cold wetness of the stream, Hairball wanted to yowl his discomfort, but he had to choke back all sound and focus on his prey.



Next, opening with action that confronts a character with a significant challenge will keep a reader moving down the page, too.

Hairball eyed the tree's towering height. It was an impossible climb. He was too small, too weak. But if he didn't climb, Barfie would fall to her death.

Plenty of story questions raised there. Now let's open with action combined with *jeopardy* for increased tension.

Barfie dug her claws into the branch, struggling to keep her balance. She dared not look down; her last glance at the dizzying height had almost sent her tumbling. Her ears caught a cracking sound...the branch was tearing away from the trunk.



Yeeks! Now to create greater tension by adding *conflict* to action and jeopardy.



Hairball arched his back and hissed at the beast. It was three times his size, an alien species that crouched, poised to spring. There was no place to run. He extended his claws. . .

Not all openings have to begin with physical action...but they **MUST** begin to raise story questions immediately. Remember that thoughts are action, too. Next we open with a character facing a different sort of jeopardy.

Hairball wondered if Barfie's spirit now rested on one of the puffy pillows in the sky, freed from her broken body. How would he face her mother after he'd sworn she would be safe?



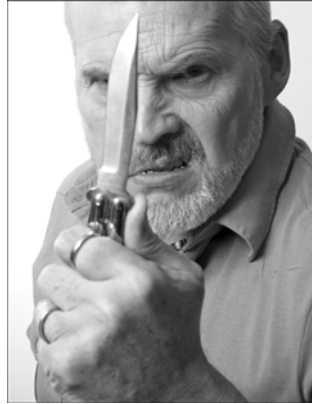
Approaches you can use to jump-start your novel include:

- Start with something happening.
- Start with action in unusual circumstances.
- Open with action that challenges the character.
- Combine action with jeopardy for the character.
- Add conflict to action and jeopardy.

## Jump-start Your Novel with Kitty-cats in Action



The point of all this is that your opening page narrative has to first be vivid enough to catch the reader's thoughts, and then compel reading further by raising story questions. I'll tell you something else—I think that for a new novelist to break in, the opening page of *every* chapter ought to do the same thing.



## Writing for effect

**Here's the effect I want** your writing to have on me—I want it to trigger in me the sights and sounds and smells of what's happening. I don't want approximations, I want that *reality*. I want to experience the story, not just learn about what happens. And I want it to be effortless—I should be able to react without having to stop and think about the stimuli you put on a piece of paper. (That is not to say that good writing doesn't give you something to think about.)

*Writing for effect* is the core principle underlying my approach to creating an irresistible fiction narrative that immerses a reader in the experience of the story.

It's the lens through which I critique narrative in an edit and strive to view my own writing.

It's the objective that informs the coaching on storytelling, dialogue, description, and technique in this book.

It's knowing how to show and when to tell. It's why adverbs are often weak writing—and sometimes not.

It is the guiding light that can show you the way to a stronger story, and the searchlight that can illuminate shortcomings in your manuscript.

Failure to write for effect is why too many writers, especially beginning novelists, do little more than put information on the page and end up with little more than a report with a plot.



In storytelling, you're not writing to inform the reader—you deliver information, of course, but that's not the purpose—you're writing to *affect* the reader. To craft narrative that creates an *effect* in the reader's mind—the experience of the story.

### Stimulus/response

Maybe it's the psychology major in me, but I can't help but think of the stimulus/response paradigm. Pavlov taught dogs to expect food when he rang a bell, and thereafter the dogs salivated at the sound of that bell.

You, the writer, produce a stimulus. The reader provides the response, imagining a scene or an action or an emotion. Actually, there's a reader element involved that a writer can't address—the reader's personal filters and baggage. A dog not trained to associate feeding with a bell won't salivate at the sound of one. For readers, as an elementary example, the word “cat” has a different effect on a cat lover than it does on a cat hater. You can't control that, but you can still load your narrative gun with the best possible ammo.

In practice, the workings of stimulus/response aren't simple, but they are the keys to writing for effect, and understanding that can open the door to successful storytelling.

You begin a story with a single stimulus—a word. Here's one now:

Vladimir's

Most words can't do much by themselves, so you string more words into a sentence that forms a different stimulus.

Vladimir's blade cut Johnson's throat, and Vladimir smiled.

Change one or two words, and the effect is different.

Vladimir's blade sliced open Johnson's throat, and Vladimir smiled.

To my mind, *sliced open* is far more evocative than *cut*.

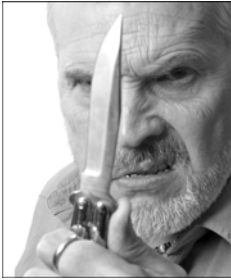
Another part of the effect here is to characterize Vladimir—for some reason, he enjoyed slicing open a man's throat. And this sentence raises story questions: Why did he slice the throat, and why did he smile? All that from just one sentence of nine words.

Although we're writing for effect, and the accumulating stimuli produce a dramatic portrayal of what's happening, it doesn't yet reach the level of deli-



vering the experience of the story. The experience comes through the character.

Vladimir is the point-of-view character, but this narrative is objective so far, a camera's view. Novels provide a unique way to create an experience—*showing* what's happening in a character's mind.



Vladimir's blade sliced open Johnson's throat. The child-killer toppled, hands clutching his neck. Vladimir watched him writhe, and then become still. The bittersweet taste of vengeance filled Vladimir, and he smiled.

Your sentences accrue and, done well, coalesce into a greater stimulus—the story. The final result, the effect on your reader, begins with the word choices you make and how you put them together.

How you arrange words to affect your reader demands professional techniques aimed at maximizing the power of your narrative to create an experience for your reader. We'll dig into techniques that help you do just that.