

Clinching a Book Sale in the First Chapter

with Michael La Ronn



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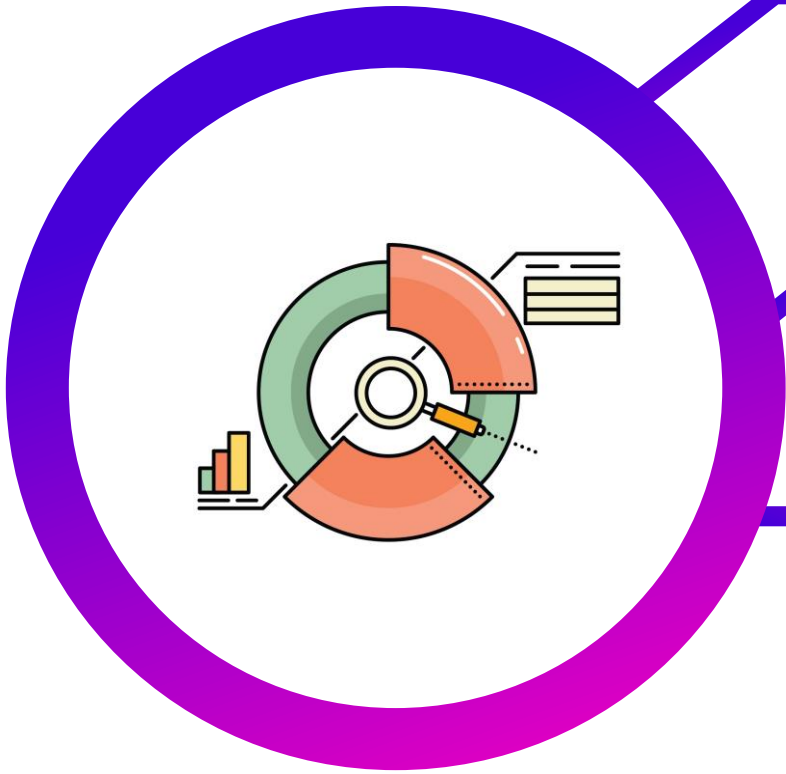
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NONFICTION: authorlevelup.com



Skills you'll acquire today



01 "X-ray vision"

02 How to write the 5 major chapter openings

03 How to analyze any chapter opening fast



Developing X-Ray Vision

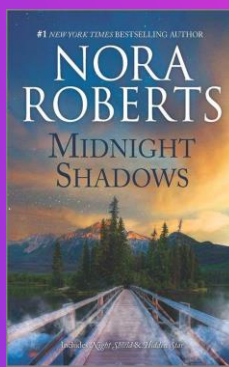
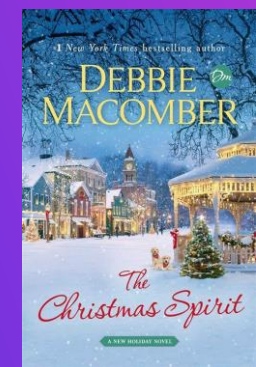
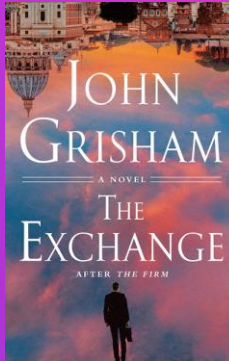
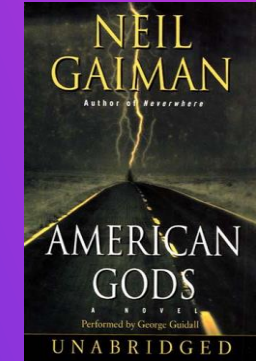
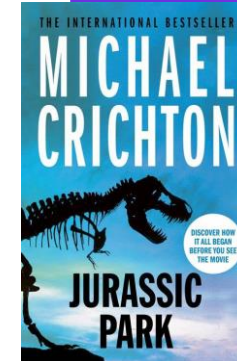
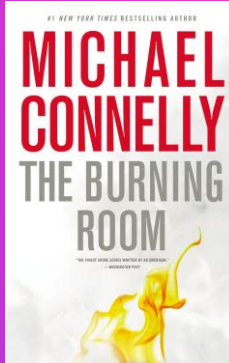
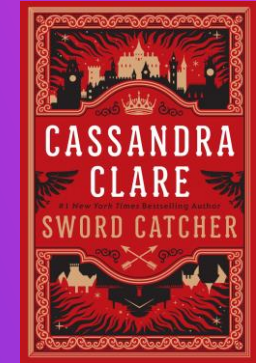
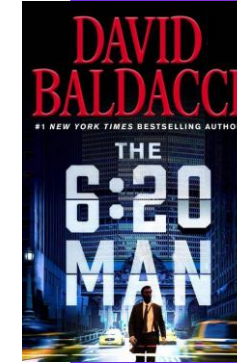
What is X-ray vision?

- X-ray vision is the ability to look at a page of fiction and instantly spot techniques the author used.
- Studying fiction is about **pattern recognition**.
- You can replicate patterns in your work, **using your own words**.

But first: read the 1%

Studying mega-bestsellers can help you acquire X-ray vision quickly.

Who You Should Look For	Why?
#1 NY Times Bestsellers (multiple times)	Millions of readers can't be wrong.
More than 5 books published	This means they are <u>practitioners</u> of the craft.
Contemporary (active between 1980-today)	They're writing using current writing techniques that will resonate with today's readers.





Why the 1%?

- The mega-bestsellers have mastered writing to the point that **they make it look simple.**
- We can study their **simplicity.**
- Everything they do is **intentional.**

Let's acquire X-ray vision...

This represents ~450 words of fiction (1st person POV).

CHAPTER 5

Part 1 (~150 words): Character is describing the current situation.

VOICE OPENING

Sensory Detail

Sensory Detail

Sensory Details

Sensory Details

Notice the plethora of sensory details throughout the page.

A transition sentence

Turn of Thought (Dotted Line)

STANDARD OPENING

Part 2 (~150 words): Character describing a new setting.

Part 3 (~150 words): Setting descriptions cont'd, with a final transition into the story.

Color Key

Narrative

Char. Voice

Sensory Details

Char. Details

Dialogue

Another example of x-ray vision

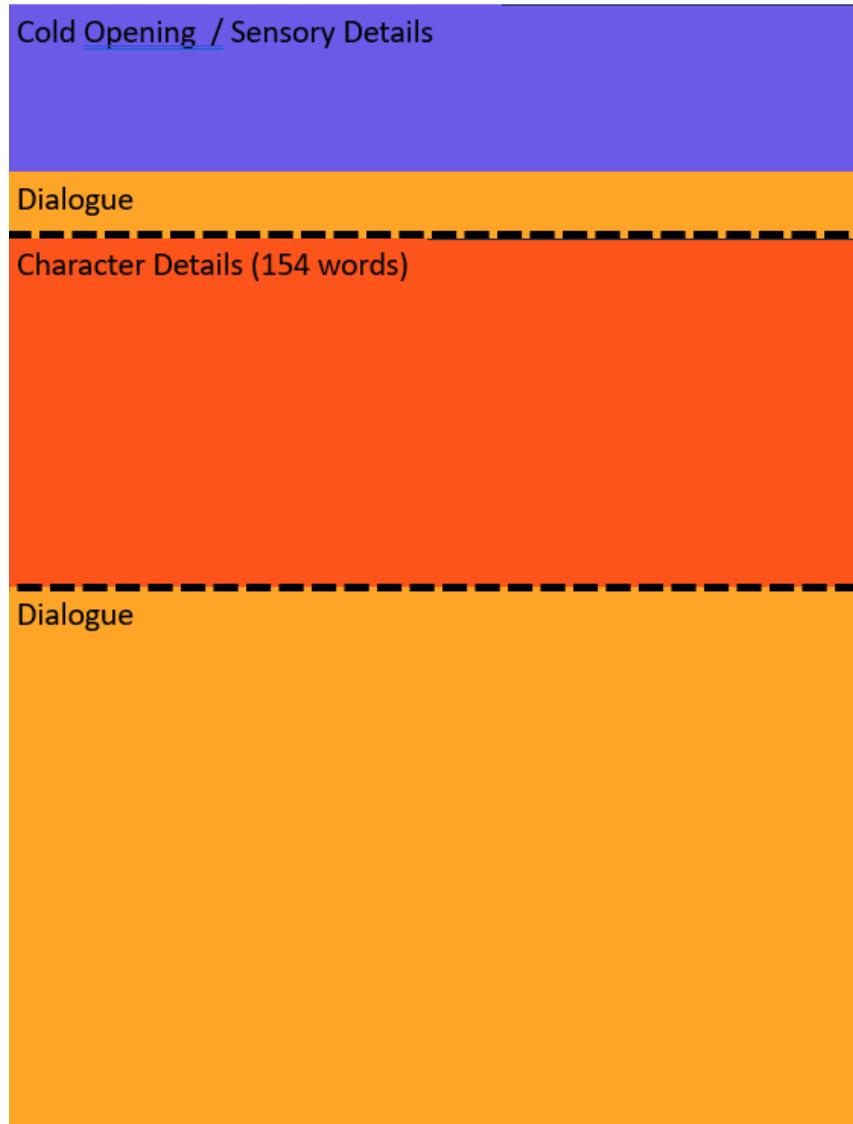
BETH (MICHAEL CRICHTON, SPHERE)

Part 1: A basic few details to ground the character in the scene. →

Transition: Someone speaks to the hero unexpectedly. →

Part 2: Description of a new character (an important supporting character). →

Part 3: Characters converse. →



Key Lessons:

- Rather than sensory detail, the character introduction is the star of this opening.
- The flavor of this opening is much different than the previous example.

Color Key

Narrative

Char. Voice

Sensory Details

Char. Details

Dialogue

Some caveats

- Use these patterns as **starting points** and season them to taste depending on the variables above.
- **Never** copy another author's words. Focus only on the pattern.
- The execution of these patterns is dependent on many variables:
 - Your genre
 - Your subject matter
 - What's happening in your story
 - Pacing
 - Where in your story you are
 - And more





Chapter Openings

(and How to X-Ray Them)



Why openings are important

- Chapter openings get your chapter started.
- If you can't hook a reader with your opening, you can't hook them at all.
- Mega bestseller chapter openings are easy to study; therefore, we can study them to learn how to master our openings.

The “Standard” Opening

A character in a setting, with a problem, with rich sensory details (~400–600 words).

- This is the most common type of opening, and it has endless variations.
- The sensory details are the “stars” in the Standard Opening. When done right, there are usually somewhere between 15–30 rich details.
- See Appendix for more information on sensory details.
- Each block in this image represents an element of the craft. Notice how the author layers the different elements together.

Character in their home; rich sensory details given in this section

Dialogue

Two quick sensory details

Character narrative; character reflecting on how they feel about the current situation

More sensory details

Color Key

Narrative

Char. Voice

Sensory Details

Char. Details

Dialogue

Standard Opening Example

Traversing the snowy knoll to the lake, Fiona wishes the starry night would keep her secrets.

The serpentine footpath slopes down to the west, and beyond the creek lies a dark forest and beyond the forest, she doesn't know. To the north is a jagged line of snow-cruled mountains that she is told eventually drop off into the cold, wintry-dark sea where the night ships skim the waters under the pale light of a waxing gibbous and hunt for fugitives trying to escape the continent.

This white plain lies cater-cornered between the mountains and the sea, her only safe haven. She had been here before, fifteen years earlier, when her parents were alive and vacationed here one winter. This was before the Haze, before the sky breathed the snow creatures out of the frigid air. Before they killed her parents and every adult in the village and buzz-swarmed the continent like confetti in a shaken snow globe.

There used to be a hot spring at the bottom of the valley where Dad rested after a long days' hike, covered by a picturesque wooden shack with slatted open-air windows. Father would emerge with a towel wrapped across his shoulder, the steam still rising off his shoulders and opening her sinuses. He'd take her by the hand and they'd walk home under the mackerel sky as the sun charged into the horizon and threw up a night threaded with sparkling stars. They'd giggle all the way back up the hill to the cabin.

Her dad had called this place Forever. Compared to her home village, it is as close to Forever as any other place she'd been. It hasn't changed, not even since the Haze. For a moment—just a moment, she dreams of living here. Maybe she could forget the Haze. Maybe it would forget her.

As the footpath wends toward the hot spring, she clammers over rocks and falls onto her knees. It's a good thing she does because she misses the sweep of a laser sight five yards away.

Black-clad soldiers with guns. Helmets clicking with blinking emerald lights. Jackboots crunching across the snow. Haze Scum. This wasn't her safe haven after all.

Clue #1: Hero in a setting, with a problem

Clue #2: An abundance of sensory details

Clue #3: Turn of thought that transitions into action/plot movement

Key factors to consider with Standard Openings

Has the character been in the setting before?

- If Yes, you can get away with fewer details.
- If No, you have a lot more work to do to help the character understand the setting.

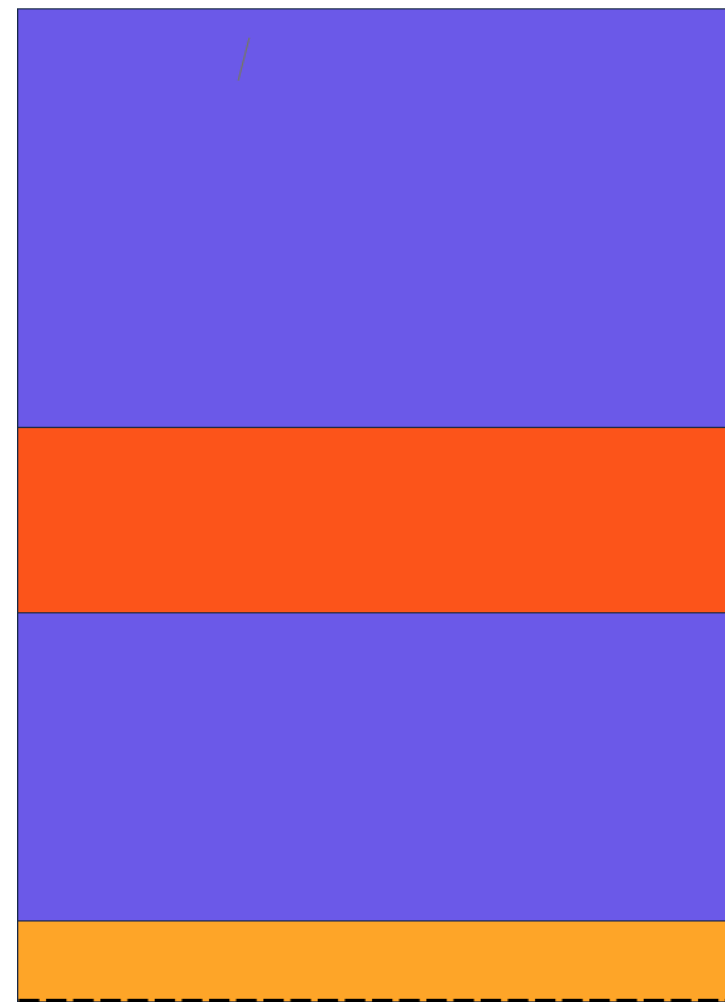
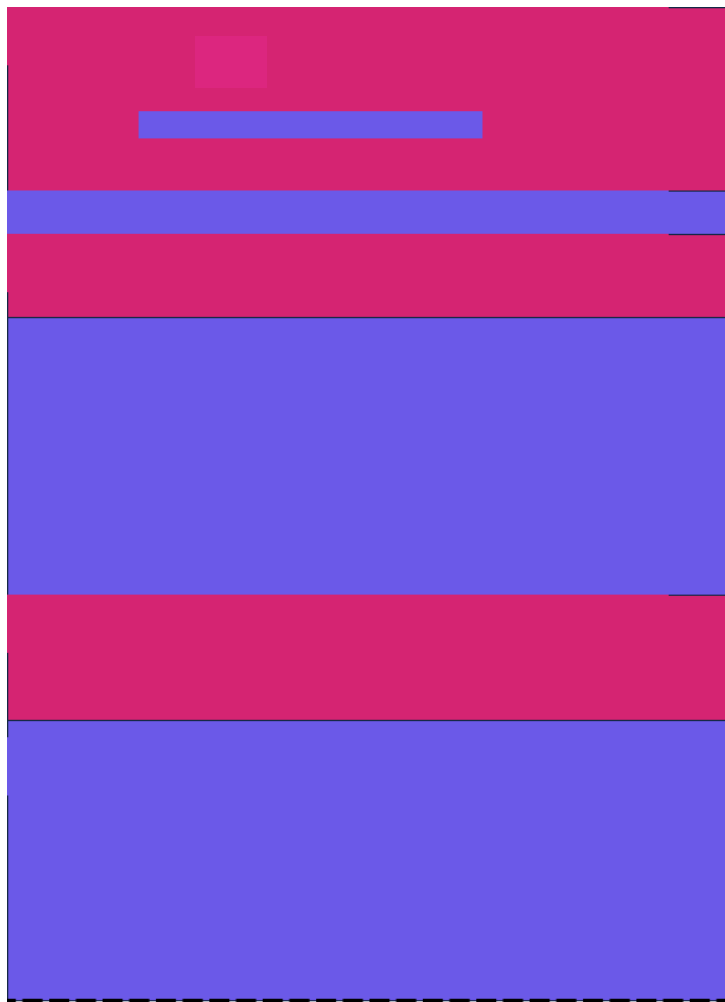
Has the reader been to the setting before?

- If Yes, you can get away with fewer details.
- If No, you have a lot more work to do to immerse the reader in the setting.

Where in the novel is the chapter located?

- If earlier, spend more time setting up your openings.
- If later, keep in mind other important variables like plot points, pacing, etc.

Standard Opening Variations



Color Key

Narrative

Char. Voice

Sensory Details

Char. Details

Dialogue

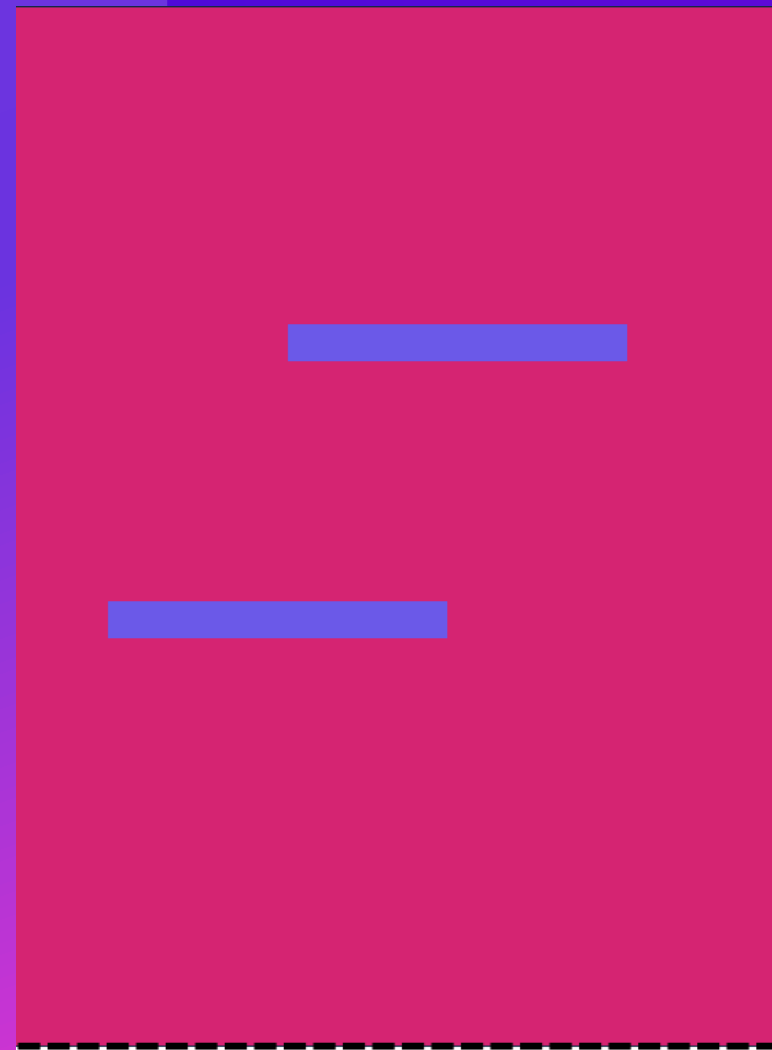
Standard Opening best practices

- Standard openings are ~400–600 words.
- Use rich sensory details in your openings, but...
- ...the mega-bestsellers “break up” sensory details with dialogue, character details, etc. to **avoid fatiguing the reader**.
- Let the sensory details happen organically.

The “Abstract” Opening

A chapter that begins with “abstract” narrative but gradually sharpens into a scene (~400–800 words).

- Abstract openings are almost always the narrator (or viewpoint character) “telling” the reader a **series of events or facts**.
- They **slow down** the story, but they are a fantastic time management device that should be in your toolbox.
- They (almost) always end with a transition into an actual scene (hero in a setting with a problem).
- Note the relative absence of sensory details, but the more you can weave in, the more engaging you can make it. This requires creativity.



Color Key

Narrative

Char. Voice

Sensory Details

Char. Details

Dialogue

Abstract Opening Example

After the dragon lord's fall, dragons around the world fought each other to seize power.

Like wild animals, they dueled amongst themselves, filling the skies with roaring and the rivers with blood.

But it didn't take long for a new dragon lord to emerge: Fenroot, the silver dragon who had served as Old Dark's commander. He won his way to the throne with a brutality that rivaled Old Dark's.

They called him Fenroot the Brute.

Fenroot had the support of elven villages. They were tired of the Dark family's strict control over the aquifer, and they helped him overthrow Old Dark in exchange for access to magic.

Those loyal to the Darks were killed or cowed into submission.

But Fenroot had problems to overcome: when the Darks' palace was destroyed, most of the family's gold and money were stolen. There was very little left, and Fenroot had to start his reign with limited funds.

But the new dragon lord cashed in on a new income stream: the aquifer.

Where Old Dark saw a threat to the aquifer, Fenroot saw an opportunity. He traded access to the aquifer for supreme power and riches.

Under Fenroot, elves could walk anywhere in the world without fear of harassment by dragons.


Clue #1: Begins with a long series of events or facts about the story or world

Clue #2: The details go on for about 400-800 words

Clue #3: Few sensory details, if any (but not always)



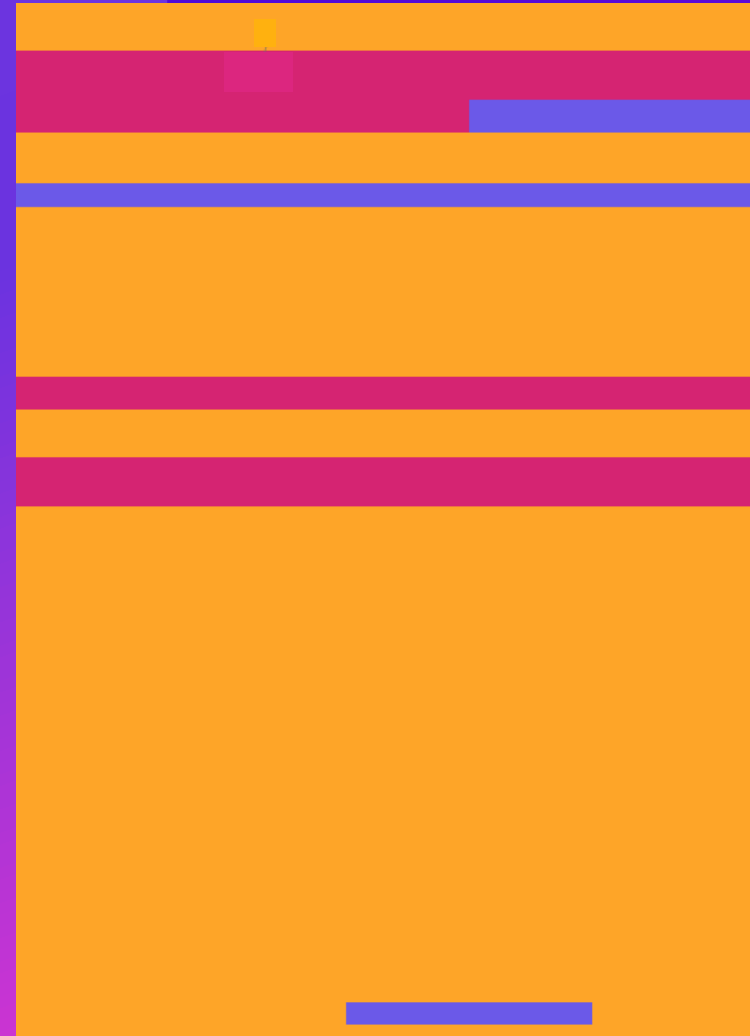
● Abstract Opening best practices ●

- 
- Abstract openings can range from 400–800 words, sometimes longer. The key is to be engaging.
 - Mega bestsellers often follow abstract openings with another opening type to keep the reader immersed.

The “Cold” Opening

A chapter that just begins with little to no explanation of setting or situation. It just starts/continues.

- Cold openings **often** begin with dialogue but can also begin with narrative or action.
- They often occur after a setting has already been established, so the reader is already immersed.
- Cold openings **speed up** the story.
- Don't forget sensory details; while you don't need as many, don't let the reader stop seeing the story.



Color Key

Narrative

Char. Voice

Sensory Details

Char. Details

Dialogue

Cold Opening Example

“What’s the plan?” Bo asked.

“Improvisation,” I said, trying to get a better look at my car. Lord knew what the jinn was going to do if I got in there.

“I learned the hard way that these jinn don’t like you to see them coming,” I said. “Do you know anything about them, Bo? Any knowledge from the other side I can use?”

“Negative,” Bo said. “I don’t even know what a jinn is, aside from a gin and tonic.”

I groaned. He truly was a fresh spirit. Hadn’t been in the spirit world long enough to know anything. That was the downside to enlisting a newly dead soul as a servant.

“Jinn are supernatural beings central to the Islamic faith,” I said. “They’re all over the Qur’an. An entire race of beings more diverse than humanity. Invisible to the naked eye, unless they want to be seen. Legend has it that they were carved from smokeless fire.”

“I see,” Bo said, reflective. “I got nothin’ for you.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I don’t believe in lucky breaks after last night.”

And then I spotted a nearby column with a fire extinguisher panel.

“Actually, I take that back,” I said.

I crept over to the panel and wrapped my sleeve around my fist for protection.

“Bo, keep a lookout for me,” I said.

With a punch, I broke the glass panel. I reached in and grabbed the extinguisher, cracking several triangular shards that fell to the floor. I pressed my back against the column. My ears rang from the glass breaking.

“The jinn stirred,” Bo said. “His eyes are open. He’s looking around. Oh crap. He’s...uh, never mind. He went back to sleep.”

I sighed with relief.

The extinguisher was cold, heavy, and full. This was probably the most action it would ever see. I patted it, laughing quietly.

Then my eyes wandered up to a security camera in the distance, pointed in my direction. I hoped to see a flash recording.

“I don’t get it,” Bo said.

“We’ll play their game,” I said, staring at the car. “You see, he’s expecting me to get in the car, unsuspecting. And then he’ll pounce. But I’m not gonna fall for that.”

Clue #1: Often begins with dialogue (but not always)

Clue #2: The story continues with very little lead-up unlike in a Standard Opening

The “Voice” Opening

A chapter that begins with the viewpoint character talking to the reader (~400–600 words).

- Voice openings are cornerstones of the 1st person POV. They’re often the character pausing to comment on the current situation.
- Voice openings are often followed by a Standard Opening or Cold Opening depending on if the setting has been established.
- Voice openings are great ways to infuse personality and connect with the reader.
- Sensory details are always a good idea when you can.



Color Key

Narrative

Char. Voice

Sensory Details

Char. Details

Dialogue

Chapter Openings Recap

Standard

Character, setting,
problem

Rich in sensory details
to immerse readers

Abstract

Summary of relevant
events or facts

Narrative evolves into
a scene

Cold

The events just start;
few sensory details

Often begins with
dialogue

Voice

Character talking to
the reader

Often done in the 1st
person POV

Character*

Slight variation on the
others

Contains a character
introduction

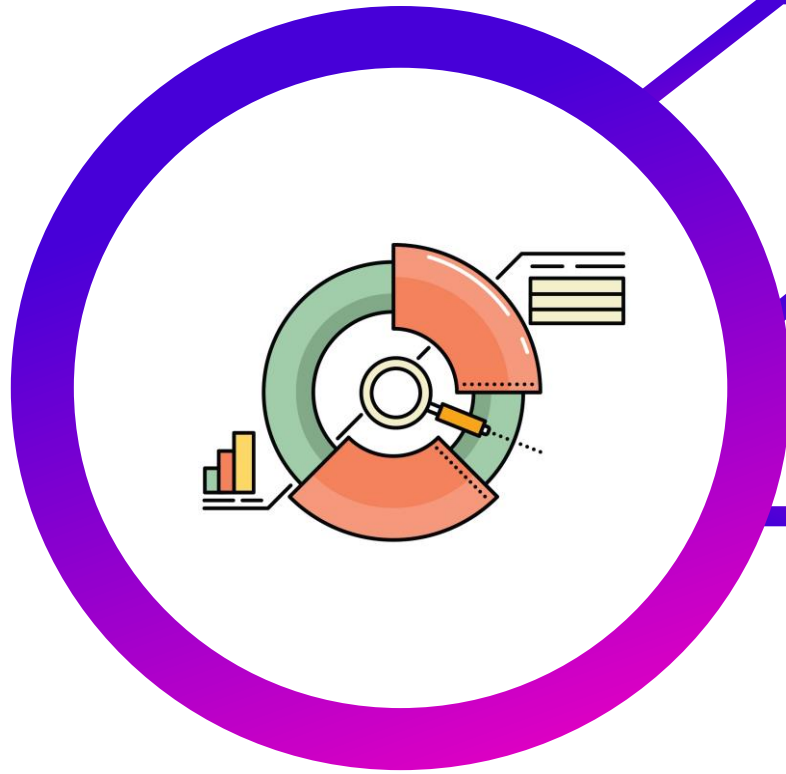
** See Appendix for details on this opening.*



Your next steps

- In your next writing session, pay attention to your next chapter opening.
- Use this presentation to improve your openings.
- Read mega-bestselling novels to reinforce what we've covered today. The goal is **subconscious mastery** of these opening types.

Skills you've acquired today



01 "X-ray vision"

02 How to write the 5 major chapter openings

03 How to analyze any chapter opening fast

Thank You

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Slides available at:
www.authorlevelup.com/inkersmini24



Appendix



Mega-bestseller sensory comparisons

Let's look at some early chapter comparisons of standard openings from the 1%. This table represents the number of details used and the percentage of each sense.

Sense	Grisham	Koontz	Roberts	Average
Sight	54%	71%	62%	62%
Sound	21%	10%	12%	15%
Touch/Texture	25%	19%	6%	15%
Smell	0%	0%	0%	0%
Taste	0%	0%	20%	8%

*Books used: A Time to Kill by John Grisham (Chapter 3), After Death by Dean Koontz (Chapter 1), Nightwork by Nora Roberts (Chapter 4). These were the **first** standard openings in each book. This table represents roughly the first 500 words of the chapter. Note that the absence of smell details is not typical; taste is also overrepresented.*

Mega-bestseller sensory comparisons (cont'd)

Raw numbers analysis. This table represents the approximate count of sensory details (not scientific).

Sense	Grisham	Koontz	Roberts	Average
Sight	13	15	21	16
Sound	5	2	4	4
Touch/Texture	6	4	2	4
Smell	0	0	0	0
Taste	0	0	7	2
Total	24	21	34	26

Practical Standard Opening Variations

The Standard Opening is one of your most versatile tools. Here are some practical variations on it that you can use that we didn't have time to go into in the workshop. These just rules of thumb, not prescriptive must-dos.

- **The Standard Opening**: ~400-600 words. Hero in a setting with a problem, with rich sensory details.
- **The Abbreviated Standard**: ~50-400 words. Hero in a familiar setting with a problem, with rich sensory details. Since the reader is already familiar with the setting, you can get away with fewer details, but make sure the details you use are solid.
- **The Extended Standard**: ~600-1200 words. Hero in multiple settings, with multiple problems. In an Extended Standard, the hero usually goes from one setting to another, usually from familiar to unfamiliar or vice versa. It's best to think about this opening as two Standard Openings stacked on top of each other. Then, at the end of the second Standard, pick up the story. The key is to use great sensory details, distinguish the two settings, and layer your sensory details to avoid reader fatigue. You could consider using two different forms entirely to keep things interesting. For a great example of this, read Chapter 5 of *Pacific Vortex!* by Clive Cussler.

The “Character” Opening

A chapter that serves to introduce a character (~400–600 words depending on the situation).

- Character openings are (often) just slight variations on everything that has come before.
- If a chapter opening contains an **introduction to a key character**, then it is a character opening. Examples:
 - Standard Opening with a Character Intro
 - Abstract Opening with a Character Intro
 - And so on.

Standard Opening / Sensory Details

Character Introduction

Narrative

Color Key

Narrative

Char. Voice

Sensory Details

Char. Details

Dialogue

The “Block” Char. Intro

In this character introduction, the author gives the reader a good detail of character details in a “block.”

- This translates somewhere around 15-30 details when done right, or around 150-300 words.
- If more than 15 details or 150 words are needed, then break it up with another element (narrative, dialogue, action) and then do another block.
- If you’re going over 300 words, think twice.
- “Block” does **not** mean long and boring! The laws of pacing and paragraphing still apply.

Sensory Details

He was wearing his leather duster with a ratty brown suit underneath, a mismatched grass-green polo that didn’t go with the jacket or trousers, and white basketball shoes. He would have rather been in a tank top and shorts, but that would have gone over slightly worse with the impeccably dressed Catholic crowd.

He was freshly showered and his hair was still dripping with cedarwood shampoo from where he forgot to rinse it out in the back; his mop of black hair desperately needed a comb. His face was unshaven and he’d forgotten face lotion again so he was dry on the cheeks and forehead. He carried a battered briefcase that had seen its prime back in the 50s. It was 2024. It was real leather that cracked around the edges from years of neglect. In it he carried breath mints and a can of Pepsi. He’d stopped drinking energy drinks after one nearly gave him a heart attack.

Now he drank soda.

His primary worship tool, instead of a Bible, was an incredible memory. The golden deckled pages of Job, Matthew, and John were in his head, word for word, organized and able to be recalled by verse and line. Why should a guy’s appearance matter if he knew his scripture? That’s what really mattered. Screw the people who gave him weird looks.

Narrative

Color Key

Narrative

Char. Voice

Sensory Details

Char. Details

Dialogue