

Notes from a Children's Book Author – September/October 2008

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Welcome back to school!

In response to one of my newsletter mailings last year, I received an email from an elementary school principal. She wrote:

Any thoughts on teaching "engaging beginnings"? I think the one word with an exclamation point or the question that begins, "Have you ever...?" is being overused by my young authors.

I emailed back with a few ideas, which I thought I'd share here, as my first newsletter for the 2008-2009 school year; the start of a new school year seems like the perfect time to talk about engaging beginnings!

When teaching engaging beginnings, it's a challenge to move beyond pat approaches, along the lines of the one-word-with-exclamation-point and rhetorical question; however, experimenting with a variety of these approaches can help young authors find their voice and their own way to use a "standard" lead-in with some freshness.

Here are some approaches you might ask your students to try:

1. Start with a brief line of dialogue from a character (usually the main character). The dialogue should immediately place the reader in the scene, introduce the main character, and perhaps even hint at or introduce the conflict of the story. For example:

"Leave me alone!" Sally shrieked at her mother as she stormed up the stairs to her bedroom.

Here, the conflict is immediately apparent: Sally and her mother have hit a bump in the mother-daughter road. But what exactly is Sally so angry about? What exactly is her mother doing that is so infuriating? We hope the reader is engaged enough to read on and find out!

2. Start with a sentence that introduces a clear action, often one that suggests strong emotion, but also one that leaves the reader with some questions about motivation. As with the line-of-dialogue approach, the goal of this approach is to drop the reader right in the middle of the action, and encourage the reader to turn the page to find out more. For example:

Sally yanked her chair out from under her desk, sat down with a thump, and began to scribble furiously.

Here, we hope the reader feels Sally's sense of urgency, as she "yanks" her chair, "thumps" into her seat, and "scribbles furiously." But why is Sally feeling this urgency? Is she excited about something? Is she angry? Why is she feeling this emotion? What has happened? What is she writing about? Again, we hope the reader is engaged enough to want to learn the answers to these questions!

3. Start with a sentence that sets the scene with an initial clause, then gives an action in the present or past progressive tense. Once again, this approach places the reader in the scene, and makes the action of the story very immediate. Here I'll take an example from one of my books:

On a pale grey night with a bright full moon, Witch was dressing for a bash.

Action tends to be compelling—especially for the age group for which I write. Using the past progressive tense make the action immediate; my hope is the reader will be swept right into the action of the story, and will want to turn the page to see the action continue.

4. A final approach to engaging beginnings is a bit more sophisticated. With this approach, the idea is to pare away the less-engaging beginning that a writer might come up with in a first draft, and get to the "true" beginning of the story. In journalism, this is referred to as "not burying your lead." In other words, the story should jump in right where the reader is interested, rather than hemming and hawing its way to the interesting stuff.

Of course, a first draft often includes a lot of hemming and hawing; with a first draft, we just want to get words on paper, and those words are not all gems. So, we revise!

For example, take the following as the first few sentences of a first draft:

Sally didn't like being told what to do. She especially didn't like it when her mother told her what to do. So when Sally's mother told Sally to change her clothes before going to a friend's birthday party, Sally was furious. "Leave me alone!" Sally shrieked at her mother as she stormed up the stairs to her bedroom.

Here, the edit would be to delete the first three sentences. These sentences do a lot of "telling." Instead, let's "show," by jumping in at "Leave me alone," which is a much more engaging beginning. (Please see my December 2007/January 2008 newsletter for more about showing vs. telling.)

Often, in this approach, the edits aren't quite so straightforward; for the purpose of illustration, I've created a fairly simple example. In reality, we might need to cut the first few sentences, plus make some edits to a sentence further along, to reveal a story's true beginning point.

As a result, this is an approach that takes some guidance, but for that very reason, can make for a good lesson. For example, after giving students a writing assignment, choose the completed work of a few of the students. Take their existing beginnings, and have students work as a class or in small groups to figure out where the "true" beginning is. Ask students to make the edits they think are needed to start the story at an engaging beginning point. Discuss the edits, and how they help create a more engaging beginning.

This lesson not only helps students identify and craft an engaging beginning, but also emphasizes the importance of revising!

Before I close for the month, I'll remind you that my illustration contest is up and running again, after a summer break. The September/October contest is posted on my website (www.lynneberry.com/contest.htm), with an entry deadline of October 15th.

Have a wonderful 2008-2009 year!