



## Checklist – Must Haves For A Great Chapter 1:

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The first chapter of any novel has a lot riding on it. It's got to introduce the main characters, set up the central conflict, and most of all, hook your reader. Chapter 1 is the first chapter most readers will see first. And for agents and publishers, it's the chapter that will determine whether they are interested in reading more of your manuscript.

So before you send it out into the world, take a moment and run through this checklist of key elements that make a great Chapter 1.

A rock-solid Chapter 1 ticks all the boxes. How does your novel stack up?

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### A Clear Triggering Event

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It's the oldest rule of storytelling—**start your story on the day that something changes.**

A triggering event is the situation or event that begins the story; it's what starts your main character on his or her journey and often creates the conflict they'll face.

It could be a life event, like a wedding, death or birth; something unexpected, like a discovery or an unpleasant encounter; an announcement or the arrival of some news; the start of an actual journey, or some other moment when things change.

**Agents and editors expect to see the triggering event within the first few pages—as early in the story as possible.**

If you can't find a triggering event, it might mean that you're starting your novel too far back from the main story, or that you don't have enough conflict early in the novel.



## An Interesting Main Character

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A great first chapter introduces us to the main character, but more importantly, helps us see a little about what makes that character special.

We know from the first few pages of *The Hunger Games* that Katniss Everdeen is just a teenager, but she's the one providing for her family, and that she's a bit of a rebel, too.

**Give us a reason right from the start to root for your main character.** This is one of the ways readers become hooked into a story, so it's critical to show us what makes your character special as soon as possible.

## Backstory Is Kept To A Minimum

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Backstory is background information—anything about the character or the story's circumstances that takes place before the main story begins.

That includes memories, flashbacks or summary about an earlier event, history, context, and so on.

A big pitfall many writers fall into in Chapter 1 is putting in too much backstory.

**Backstory slows down the pace of a story; and a slower pace risks losing your reader.**

Save the backstory for later in the novel, when your reader is more invested and will be more interested learning about the history of these characters and this situation. In Chapter 1, keep it to a minimum.

## The Pace Is Quick

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A good Chapter 1 is brisk; it keeps us moving, introducing the characters and the main conflict without bogging us down with backstory or unnecessary information.

There's generally more action and dialogue, less description and exposition.

Don't forget that **you can use AutoCrit's Pacing and Momentum tool to look for slower-paced sections of your novel, including in Chapter 1!**



## The Central Story Question Is Clear

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The central story question is the main question that drives the novel forward from start to finish.

How will Sherlock Holmes solve the mystery?

Will Bella choose to become a vampire or will she stay with Jacob and the werewolves?

Will Jason Bourne recover his memory?

Will Mark Watney survive on Mars long enough to make it back to Earth?

By the end of Chapter 1, the question you will answer with the rest of the book will clear to the reader.

## The Chapter Is Focused and Specific

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A great Chapter 1 doesn't throw too much at readers at once—the spotlight is on the main character or on a few characters.

This helps tell the reader where to focus and who to invest in.

**A weak Chapter 1 often tries to give readers too much—too much history, too many characters, too much context, too much action.** Keep your Chapter 1 focused on introducing the main characters, setting up the main conflict, and making sure that central story question is clear.

## Readers Have a Reason to Keep Reading

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By the end of Chapter 1, readers have a reason to keep reading. That means ending with something dramatic or suspenseful, or setting up the story so it's clear that something interesting is coming.

**Give your readers a reason to turn the page and want to read Chapter 2.**

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