

# Write <sup>a</sup> *Brilliant* Hook



Best-selling, award-winning novelist  
and writing coach

Susan May Warren



**5 easy steps to  
Writing your Scene & Story Hook!**

# HOW TO WRITE A BRILLIANT HOOK

How to start your first scene (and every scene after that!)

*Susan May Warren*

**How to Write a Brilliant HOOK.** Copyright © 2015 by Susan May Warren.

Manufactured in the United States of America. All rights reserved. No part of this book be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including storage and retrieval systems without permission in writing from the Reviewers may quote brief passages to be printed in a magazine or newspaper. Published by My Book Therapy, a division of Susan May Warren Fiction, LLC, 20 Wild Plum Grand Marais, MN 55604. (218)387-2853. First Edition.

## INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive book market, a writer needs to capture their reader in the first paragraph, if not the first line. A good hook sets the tone for a book, it gives voice to the character and immediately draws the reader into the story. I've long been a proponent of building a powerful HOOK on not only the first line of your story, but for every scene you create. The truth is, a great hook keeps your reader engaged throughout the entire story, from the first line to the last.

A great hook isn't just the first line however – it's the first paragraph and even the first scene. As we talk through how to build a great HOOK, we'll start with the elements of a powerful scene, then learn how to craft a compelling first paragraph, and finally we'll end with creating that powerful first sentence hook that will catch your reader and not let go.

### HOOK Overview:

"One of the most difficult things is the first paragraph. In the first paragraph, you solve most of the problems with your book. The theme is defined, the style, the tone. At least in my case, the paragraph is a kind of sample of what the rest of the book is going to be. Gabriel Garcia Marquez. who won the 1992 Nobel Prize for Literature (100 years of solitude). It sold over 10 million copies.

### Why is a hook important?

What do you do when you pick up a book? You may read the back cover blurb, and then open to the first page. Then, in approximately ten seconds, based on the first sentence, you decide if the voice captures you, and if you want to keep reading.

In short, an author has one-two sentences to capture your reader. A reader is looking for creative writing, a question that piques their interest, someone they can relate to, a setting that interests them and a story that can match the value of their time. That's a lot to put into the first sentence, or even the first paragraph!

But it can be done.

Let's take a look at some examples of good hooks from modern literature.

Following is a list of the 100 best first lines from novels, as decided by the American Book Review, a nonprofit journal published at the Unit for Contemporary Literature at Illinois State University:

Call me Ishmael. -- *Herman Melville, Moby-Dick (1851)*

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. — *Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice (1813)*

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. — *Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina (1877; trans. Constance Garnett)*

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. — *George Orwell, 1984 (1949)*

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. — *Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities (1859)*

I am an invisible man. — *Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (1952)*

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. — *Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885)*

Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested. — *Franz Kafka, The Trial (1925; trans. Breon Mitchell)*

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. — *Charles Dickens, David Copperfield (1850)*

It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. — *Paul Auster, City of Glass (1985)*

Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting. — *William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (1929)*

There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it. — *C. S. Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (1952)*

When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonoma, California, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon. — *James Crumley, The Last Good Kiss (1978)*

What do these hooks have in common with each other that makes them compelling?

They're all: SHARP:

What do I mean by SHARP? All these stellar examples contain the five elements that will hook your reader into continuing the story:

- Stakes
- Hero/Heroine identification
- Anchoring
- Start On The Run
- Problem (Story Question)

Again, when I talk about hooks, I'm referring to the first sentence, the first paragraph, and the first scene. . . and each of these needs to contain the 5 elements of a great hook.

### **Gathering up all the elements**

Before you can start writing a scene, a paragraph or a first line, you need to put together the elements. This starts with an overall understanding of what your scene, paragraph and first line is about.

In other words, this starts with understanding what is at Stake in the scene.

## STAKES

Why does this book matter? This is the question every reader is going to ask themselves, if not verbally, then underneath it all, as they're reading. Why, indeed, should I spend my time reading this book?

The answer is found in the Stakes of the story.

Stakes are the elements at risk, the disaster that looms over the novel. Stakes don't have to be as epic as *The Hunt for Red October* (saving the world from a cold war weapon), or *Independence Day* (saving the world from an alien invasion), or even a cultural level like *Erin Brockovich* (saving a town from toxic water). They can be on a more intimate personal level. (i.e., *Sommersby* – honor versus self-preservation). Regardless, a book without Stakes is a book without a compelling element. No consequences equals apathy.

In short, Stakes are what is going to drive your reader through the story, whether they are public or private, and hinting at them in the beginning, in the Hook chapter, paragraph and sentence will give your reader "something to fight for."

## Public Stakes vs. Private Stakes

### Private Stakes

Public stakes have much to do with public values. For example, during World War 2 the public values were very much about protecting our country and banding together to fight the wars. So, stories about espionage, and battle were popular stakes in books and movies. However, as time has changed, so have our values.

Today, personal freedom, and family have taken over as the chief collective stakes of today. We still have issues of national security, but they touch us on a more personal level. When stakes involve our freedoms and safety as Americans, or members of a family, it makes for a compelling story. One example is *Saving Private Ryan*. Compare this movie with *Casablanca*, which came out during the 1940's. *Saving Private Ryan* is about the power of family against the great backdrop of the war. *Casablanca* is about the power of a cause and how it is secondary to love. Although a classic, most Americans might not see the essential value of surrendering your heart to fight a cause, as Rick does for Ilsa. Conversely, *Saving Private Ryan* might not have resonated with the audience of the 1940s, many of whom paid dearly for the war effort.

Ask yourself. . . is the issue in the story pertinent to the public values? Does it touch the heart of all of us? Does it threaten the American Dream?

Another question to ask is: What's the worst thing you could think of happening to you? What you fear, others fear also. And that's where you find your Public Stakes.

But what if my story is about a prairie girl who wants to win a horse race? There's no Public Stakes there. . .

### Private Stakes

Private Stakes are about finding those values inside us that make us who we are and threatening them. The best private stakes are those that cause an inner conflict.

One of my favorite episodes of *Little House on the Prairie* was the story of Laura Ingalls Wilder where she rides her horse Bunny in a race against evil Nellie. Why does this story matter? It's a classic example of Private stakes.

Evil Nellie hates that Laura has a horse, and persuades her mother to buy her a fancy horse from Mankato. She challenges Laura and her horse Bunny to a race, and it's clear that Laura doesn't have a chance. What's worse, Mrs. Olsen, Nellie's mother mocks Caroline, Laura's mother, for being poor, and refuses to buy her eggs. Because of this, Caroline is unable to buy shoes for her family. If Laura wins the race, she'll receive a prize that she can use to pay for the shoes.

Laura works hard to train Bunny and is ready for the big race when . . . Willie, Nellie's brother gets sick. No one is around to fetch the doctor, who is inconveniently in the next town, so Laura has to make a choice. . . ride Bunny to fetch Doc Baker and risk the horse being too tired to run the race (and thus lose the shoes), or let Willie die. What will she do?

This story is compelling because the conflict centers around two competing values: Family honor and compassion, both with Laura has big doses of. The question is. . . which value will win? This is what we call Private Stakes.

Private stakes can be found in the root of our values. The things that drive us, or the things we long for. Laura longed to show up Nellie, and to help her parents. She also knows that to be true to who she was, she has to be compassionate. When we pit values against each other in a story, it not only makes for great conflict, but it touches the heart of your reader in a way that makes the story stick.

Thankfully, it also makes for a triumphant ending when we get the happy ending.

I'll never forget the day I saw *Sommersby*. I sat in the theater and sobbed (And I'm talking big, sweeping, my-husband-was-embarrassed-sobs.) I just couldn't resign myself to the ending. . . why? Because my values were assaulted.

In *Sommersby*, two men in the civil war meet in prison, and the key is, they look alike. The evil one of the pair dies, but before he dies, he tells the other of his plantation in the south. The other man, wanting to start a new life, heads to the plantation, impersonating the first man. He doesn't expect to find a wife, and to fall in love with her, to have a family with her, and to invest himself into the lives of the town. He gives away a great portion of his land to the emancipated slaves, and seemingly all is good. . . until seven years later, a posse shows up, hunting the deceased man for crimes he committed. Suddenly, our hero is imprisoned and is going to hang for the crimes of the previous, evil man. Does he tell the truth? If he does, then he will have committed adultery, his child is illegitimate, and most importantly, the land he's given away will no longer belong to the freed slaves. But, if he lies and says he is the man, keeping his family's honor, then he dies.

It's a horrible dilemma, and I was a mess. . . and it was at that moment that I realized that my value of honor was not as strong as my value of happily ever after. I didn't care that the world he created would be destroyed. I just wanted them to be together. It's a powerful story. Why? Not because of any global issue, but because it touched the heart of my own values.

When dealing with Private Stakes, ask yourself. . . what matters to me? If it matters to you, then it matters to others.

How do you find those values of your character that you can use to create Private Stakes? I talk a lot about finding the identity of your character and following that down to his values. . . but here are some simple questions.

- What matters most to him in life?
- What would he avoid at all costs, and why?
- What defining incident in his past has molded him to the person he is today?
- What are his goals, and why?

Find two different values, and then ask yourself: In what situation will these values be pitted against each other? That's how you find your Private Stakes.

Stakes: Make them big, scary and intimate

As you build your story, whether your stakes are Public or Private, the key to making them compelling is to add three components:

**Big:** The stakes in your story have to be big enough to matter; something that could alter a person or communities life. I recently saw *The Vow*. The movie centers around a husband and wife who survive a terrible motor vehicle accident. The wife, however, loses her memory of the years right before and during her marriage. Her husband is desperate for her to remember him; she just wants to return home to the life she remembers with her family. For her, since she doesn't remember her husband, the stakes are small – she can simply start over again. However, for the hero, the stakes are much larger. His parents are deceased and his wife is all he has. She is his everything and to lose her is to lose himself.

With stakes, the author must ask; how will my character's life be changed if he or she doesn't meet their goal? Is the change or loss large enough to make us care and root for him or her in their quest? In the case of the heroine in *The Vow*, her stakes are small, as she doesn't know what she's losing. In the case of the hero, his stakes are massive.

**Scary:** The Stakes of the story must also have negative consequences. If the character doesn't meet his or her goal, the outcome must not only be impactful, but be horrible to contemplate and horrible to live through. It must be negative enough for us to agree that yes, they must do something about this situation because to ignore it would be tragic.

We struggle with making stakes scary most often when we have Public Stakes. Sure, we're afraid of a terrorist attack, but within those big stakes, it's the personal life behind the war against terror that captures people. Think of shows like *Army Wives*. When stakes involve our freedoms and safety as Americans, or members of a family, it makes for a compelling story.

One example is the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. Even the main character, Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks, realizes the power of family against the great backdrop of the war as he fights to bring home Private Ryan to his devastated mother.

Ask yourself: What about these stakes has a terrifying, tragic or horrifying element? Is it something we'd avoid at all costs? How is it personally terrifying? If it is "scary" to you, then it will be scary to the characters, and the readers. Adding in these "personal" stake to the Public Stakes makes them more compelling and terrifying.

**Intimate:** The stakes also must be personal, or intimate to the character, something that could affect them on an emotional level.

One stellar example of this is in the movie *Dante's Peak*. The heroine is the mayor of a small town in the path of a volcano preparing to erupt. The stakes, of course, are the destruction of her town.



Complicating the situation is the mayor's mother who lives on the volcano (cleverly disguised as a mountain) and refuses to leave. Her stubbornness isn't a big stake (as the mother and daughter are estranged) until, when the volcano erupts, the heroine/mayor's children decide to rescue their grandmother. They drive up to the mountain and become trapped with her in her house as lava flows around it. Now, our heroine not only has to save the town but also her children by driving up into the lava drenched mountain.

If you have Public Stakes, make them intimate by involving a loved one into the plot. If you have Private Stakes, make sure they are intimate enough to get at the core values of the character.

Returning to the story about Laura Ingalls, her stakes are intimate because the story involves the survival of her family.

Big. Scary. Intimate. These three elements will ensure that your stakes are compelling enough to hook your reader.

## HERO/HEROINE IDENTIFICATION

We're only going to read a book about someone we can, at least remotely, relate to. Someone we at least a little understand. Maybe they don't live in the same culture we do, or they lived two hundred years ago, or maybe they're from another planet, but if they care about the same things we care about, or if they find themselves in a situation we might find ourselves in, then we can identify with them. Creating that piece of identification at the start will give your reader enough of a connection to continue on to let them into their lives.

This means creating empathy for your character.

How do find that empathetic element?

Creating Empathy for your character is created two ways--through sympathetic situations, and sympathetic emotions.

**Empathetic Situations:** An empathetic situation occurs when you put your character in a situation that feel culturally common. Breaking up with a boyfriend, losing a loved one, first day on a job, even being trapped in an elevator. We've all been in those places, and when we see our character in them, we instantly relate to the feelings they might have.

I'm going to use an example from my own collection of books: *Flee the Night*.

My heroine is an ex-CIA agent, on the run from a crime she is accused of committing years ago. Not many of us have been accused of crimes, and are on the run from an international assassin . . . however, many of us have had a secret we don't want to come out, and it was this collective sympathy that I used when crafting the first line:

The past had picked the worst time to find her.

I go on in the paragraph to insert another element of empathy, or identification with the reader – the fact her daughter is traveling with her, and that if she is killed, her daughter is also in jeopardy.

Immediately the reader identifies with my character because she's not only a mother, but a mother whose daughter is in danger, and a person whose secret is about to be revealed.

To find the Empathetic Situation, ask yourself: What do I have in common with my character? What need, or dream, or situation, or fear, or past experience do we share?

What about that can I extrapolate that fits into my story?

**Empathetic Emotions:** Perhaps your character isn't in a situation readily accessible by others. Perhaps they are winning an Oscar, or climbing onto a spaceship to go to the moon, or encountering an alien reptile, or even having to suddenly fly a commercial airliner. Most people haven't encountered these situations. However, we can still build in the element of sympathy by tapping into collective emotions. Imagine that your character is forced to land an airplane or help a woman deliver a baby in a car. Stop for a moment and think about the emotions your character might be feeling. Terror? Helplessness?

Now, think into your past and find a time when you, as the author, have experienced these same emotions. Describe the physical way you felt. What did you think about, rational or irrational? What did you do or say? How did you show the emotions of terror or helplessness?

Now, take those insights and put them into your character. If your character is a Navy Seal, and can fly a commercial airliner, then he might not be feeling terror as he helms the commercial liner. You as the author might, but you're not at the helm--your character is. So, it's important to pinpoint the emotions your character would feel, and then find a time when you've felt those emotions.

However, let's say your Navy Seal is helming the cockpit, and he has done this before. Perhaps his emotion is frustration as he tries to remember his training. Ask yourself, when have I felt frustration? Tap into those feelings and you'll bring your Navy Seal to life on the page in a relatable way.

For example, in one of my novels, I had to write a scene about a woman who was agoraphobic and afraid to leave her home. I've never been that afraid—but I did remember a time when I had four small children at home, no car and no phone (we lived in a foreign country.) I felt trapped and overwhelmed. Then, to get further into the skin of the character, I pulled out a memory of our cupboards being nearly bare, and journaled the panic and personal frustration I felt at having to bundle up four children and hike out to the store to buy groceries. Suddenly I could relate to the character and bring honest emotions to the page.

To find an Empathetic Emotion, ask: What emotion is my character feeling right now? When have I felt this emotion? What kind of elements from my own experience can I use to bring to the page to make my reader identify with my character?

## ANCHORING

The concept of Anchoring your reader onto the scene is the third element of the hook.

Anchoring is really about helping your reader understand where they are in the story in a way that orients them and adds drama and emotion to the story. Anchoring is completed in two steps.

### **The Fact's, please.**

So many books start out with dialogue or action, and they leave out the where, and when, and even to some extent, the who. You want your reader to know where they stand in a book, what the world is, who the players are, and to some extent, why they're there. And you want to do it in a way that helps your reader capture the mood and framework of the book. This is where your journalism training comes in. By the end of the first paragraph, and for sure the first scene, you should have anchored your character into the scene by using the five W's. Who, What, Where, When and Why?

Let's go back to that scene on the train:

*The past couldn't have picked a worse time to find her.*

Trapped in seat 15A on an Amtrak Texas Eagle chugging through the Ozarks at 4:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning, Lacey . . . Galloway . . . Montgomery—what was her current last name?—tightened her leg lock around the computer bag at her feet.

We know where she is, when it is (4am Sunday morning), Who--Lacey, who has fictitious last names, which raises the element of mystery. We can also suppose that a person who has this ailment might be on the run, what is guarding her computer bag for some reason.

These are 4 of the 5 W's.

Let's continue:

She dug her fingers through the cotton knit of her daughter's sweater as she watched the newest passenger to their compartment find his seat. Lanky, with olive skin and dark eyes framed in wire-rimmed glasses, it had to be Syrian assassin Ishmael Shavik, who sat down, fidgeted with his leather jacket, then impaled her with a dark glance.

The 5<sup>th</sup> W – Why, is addressed here – she's afraid because she sees an assassin who knows her.

Now, in Step Two, I'm going to employ the use of Power Verbs and Nouns to add a sense of emotion. Thinking back to the emotion I am trying to create in the scene, I'll pick specific words to add in the nuance of mood to the scene.

Consider the words I use to create fear:

*Trapped. Chugging (can you smell smoke?), Locked, dug, impaled.* These words give a sense of doom and set the mood of the paragraph.

Every word in your story should do work to bring emotion to the page. Specific nouns add visual mood to your story, much like the lighting does in a movie. Active verbs add physical mood, almost subtly as we absorb them and move around the scene.

Used together, the 5 W's combined with emotion-charged nouns and verbs can give us a feeling of happiness, or tension, even doom in the scene.

The challenge many authors face is that they step outside the character's perspective as they try to layer description into a scene. The key is to stay in POV (Point of View) and describe the scene as they characters sees is . . . not only in their perspective but their tone of voice.

Consider two people walking into a hospital. One is walking in to greet their newborn grandson. The other is coming to visit their dying spouse. How might they describe the scene differently? One might notice the bright colors, hear the crying babies, feel as if the corridors are too long. The other might smell the antiseptic, see the grief in the faces of people in the waiting room, feel the sense of doom as they walk—arriving at the room way too soon.

Anchoring is all in the eye of the POV, and helps establish the mood of the scene.

**To create powerful Anchoring, try this.**

First, ask: What are the FACTS of the scene? The Who, What, Why, Where and When?

Then ask: What is the mood you'd like to establish in this first sentence, paragraph, scene?

Using the five 5's, what words can you find for each category that conveys this mood? Use these in the crafting of your first paragraph.

## START ON THE RUN

Our 4<sup>th</sup> component to a great hook is: Starting our scene on the Run.

### Starting in the middle

Dwight Swain, in “Techniques of the selling writing: says that “a good story being in the middle, retrieves the past and continues to the end.” Your first sentence hook should be something that begins in the middle of an action.

What do I mean by that? A good hook already has your character in the middle of the scene with something at stake and some kind of movement in the story. Think of walking into a movie ten seconds late. The action has already started, and you are tripping over the stairs trying to find your seat while your attention is hooked to the screen.

That’s what you want for your story. You may start in home world, with the inciting incident looming in chapter two, but you still start in the middle of action, something happening in your story. It’s helpful, if you are starting in home world, however, that you foreshadow the inciting incident. If you choose to start inside the Inciting Incident, find the blip in time in the middle of that incident that zeros in on the character and gives us a glimpse at his life and why this situation is important.

For example: In the previous example, Lacey is already on the train, and the assassin has already walked on board when we open the story. If we started it ten minutes earlier, we’d have to wade through backstory, setting, and seeing her on the train in a calm mode, and then ramp up the tension. Although that might work, starting it two steps into the Inciting Incident, we have a heightened tension and are drawn into the scene.

Let’s start with an example of starting with what we call, “too much pipe”—or too long of an introduction into a scene.

This is the beginning of a deleted first scene of my book, *Mission: Out of Control*. In this version, my hero is taking his kid sister to a concert. It’s a long windup to the Inciting Incident which involves the hero rescuing the heroine (the pop star) after she body surfs into the crowd.

I don’t need all this windup—I later cut this and started the scene just before the heroine flings herself into the audience.

See what you think:

Brody must have lost his mind. Momentarily left it on the turnpike from Dulles out to Sterling. Or maybe he’d discarded it while he stood in his mother’s ranch-house kitchen, watching his twin teenage sisters emerge from their bedrooms, unrecognizable in their black and purple scoop neck tee-shirts, enough silver costume jewelry to sink a small ship, and skin tight animal print jeans they had to paint on.

“We’ll take a taxi home from the concert,” Lucy said, and right then, his brain clicked off.

“Oh no you won’t,” he said, in an almost out of body experience. And then, to heap on more crazy to the already out-of-character demand, he added, “Because I’m going with you.”

That had earned a smile from his mother, who clearly remembered his days trying to talk her into letting him get his own rides to a Journey concert. But she hadn't the help of a multi-decorated former Special Forces operator to drive the point home. What was a big brother for, after all? And, he had flown all the way over the pond to reconnect with his family, remind himself that he still had a few people who cared if he went missing off the planet.

Well, until he opened his big mouth.

It's entertaining, but a slow start to a story. It's a long way from the stakes, the inciting incident, and frankly has way too much narrative.

Instead, let's take a look at another story: *Reclaiming Nick*

In this scene, I get right into the stakes of the story, as well as the character and action of the scene.

When the lanky form of Saul Lovell walked into the Watering Hole Café, dragging with him the remnants of the late April chill, Nick Noble knew that his last hope of redemption had died.

This is not a high-action scene, but the lawyer is already in the café, and we know that Nick had redemption at stake before he walked in. The scene is already unfolding as we join Nick. Notice we also have Who, Where, When, as well as some precise words that convey a sense of dismay: dragging, chill, died.

The paragraph continues with a glimpse at what Nick is up to:

Nick didn't have time to deal with the arrival of his father's lawyer. Not with one fist wrapped in the collar of Stinky Jim's duster and a forearm pinning his cohort Rusty to the wall.

"We were simply offering to buy her lunch," Rusty snarled.

This first paragraph tells us that Nick has some sort of "protector" element about him, (creating sympathy and a touch of heroism) whether he's a bouncer, or a cop, we don't know. And we know that something has happened to his father to have his lawyer arrive.

How do you start in the middle? It's SO easy to give into the temptation, to start at the beginning. We want people to know and love our character, to understand them, to understand *why* this situation so rocks their world.

Trust me, it's much more fun for the reader to figure it out on the run than to front load that information. One of my favorite shows was *LOST*. They totally won me when they opened their first season with a shot of a plane down and people wandering the beach. I didn't have to know their backgrounds to understand that they were shocked and scared, and to feel instantly sorry for them. The fun of the series was figuring out who they were and how they fit together.

*Here's a tip:* If you have to, write the story from the beginning -- for your own rough draft purposes. Then, about a paragraph after the Inciting Incident, search for your first sentence, it's in there, I promise.

Then, copy and paste, and start your first chapter there.

If you don't want to do all that, here's another technique that I often use. I stop the action about 2-5 minutes into my brain and I interview my character. "How are you feeling now? Are you surprised? What is at stake? Give me one sentence to explain your current situation to an onlooker."

From these answers, you can find the most important place or element to start your scene with.

Later, I'll show you how to take these answers and use them to form that first sentence, as well as the first paragraph.

The key is: Start with the story already in motion, with something at stake so your reader can begin rooting for your character right away.



## PROBLEM: STORY QUESTION

Probably the most important element in creating a hook is addressing the Problem of the story (and of each subsequent scene.)

Every story is driven by a problem. Will Richard Kimball ever find out who killed his wife? Will Frodo be able to destroy the ring? This question permeates all the decisions of the hero and/or heroine throughout the story, and needs to be hinted at in the first sentence, in the first paragraph, and in the first scene.

Let's take a look at those first lines:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. — *Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice (1813)*

Is it true? Does a single man with a fortune need a wife? We'll find out that yes, it is. But this story question drives the entire story.

There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it. — *C. S. Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader (1952)*

Is Eustace as bad as his name indicates? Is he a scoundrel? Does he deserve it? This story is one of my favorite redemption stories, and the fact that Lewis makes us wonder if he deserves redemption in this first sentence permeates our entire attitude about Eustace, and ultimately, our feelings about grace.

This is the beginning paragraphs of my Christy-award winner, *You Don't Know Me*. The story is about a woman in the WitSec program who struggles with the lies she is keeping. The question she asking is both, does she deserve this life and should she keep secrets from the ones she loves. See if that comes through:

Days like today, Annalise Decker's happily ever after almost seemed unbreakable. With the perfect blue sky suggesting the golden days of autumn, the hill overlooking the town of Deep Haven a cascade of jewels—gold oaks, crimson maples, lush green pine—the hint of wood smoke filling that air, she could stop, breathe in, and believe that she belonged here.

Believe that she deserved this life.

"Mom! Watch this!" Henry's voice caught her attention back to the soccer practice—twenty youngsters outfitted in wool hats, fleece jackets under their club T-shirts, and sweatpants under their shin guards. Henry needed a haircut, his own hat discarded on the sideline bench, the wind parting his hair as he chased the ball. She wanted to yell at him to put the hat on, but that might only encourage his sudden propensity to shy away from her good-bye kisses.

She would do anything to keep her eleven-year-old in her embrace, before he was yanked into the world of cell phones, dating, and drama. Perhaps she held him with a tighter grip than her older children, but motherhood turned out to be rife with too many small sorrows for her liking.

Once he was gone, she wasn't sure what she'd have left.

When we are referring to the overall problem of the book, we call this the Story Question.

It's normal to discover your problem, or Story Question you go along in your story, so don't feel married to it in the beginning. In most of my books, I go back and change the first line and paragraph after I've finished the story because I know it so much better and can get at the root of the matter. However, in some of my beginnings that I've rewritten I've also thrown out and reverted to something I've written in the early stages when the story was most vivid and alive to me.

The biggest question to ask is: Is the problem presented at the beginning of the story enough to move and motivate me--and my reader--to continue reading.

### **How do you find your problem/story question?**

Ask: What is the lesson my character will learn at the end of the book? Now, turn that over and ask: What question are they asking at the beginning of the book?

Let's continue the scene from *Flee the Night*:

She couldn't stifle the shiver that rattled clear to her toes. Why hadn't she listened to divine wisdom fifteen years ago and stayed at home instead of running after adventure? Lacey forced breath through her constricting chest. She hadn't hoped to outrun her mistakes forever, but why today with Emily watching?

Lacey pried her fingers out of her daughter's sweater and laced her hands together in her lap, cringing at her weakness. She'd been taught not to give away emotions, liabilities, secrets. But she'd die before she'd let them harm a hair on Em's head.

So, the question is--what is Lacey willing to do for her daughter, and will her past cost her daughter's life?

The Story Question is the foundation for your entire novel, and weaving it into the beginning scene is essential to helping your reader answer the question: why should I read this book?

## SUSIE MAY'S SUPER SECRET HOOKS TECHNIQUE

Now that you've analyzed all the elements to begin your story, I'm going to offer you a technique I've used that assists me in finding my first line HOOK for every scene. We'll work through it and allow you a turn to answer the questions and find a powerful hook.

Let's start with a scene you're working on. Perhaps your first scene? Maybe a middle scene? Pull it out and let's analyze it, recapping each element, and applying the right questions:

### **Define the Stakes!**

What is at risk? What happens if they don't meet their goal?

Ask: What can/will go wrong in this story and what will happen if they don't save the day?

Hint: You don't want to give us a chunk of narrative, but rather layer in the hint of the threat so the reader knows there is something at stake.

### **Hero/Heroine ID: Creating Empathy**

What situation, as the scene begins, is most compelling, most sympathetic? Will your readers empathize with the character? What can you do to add sympathy?

Create an empathetic emotion. Ask: What is your character feeling right now, and how are you embedding it onto the page? And how will we show that in a compelling way in the first scene?

Hint: You are trying to get your reader to relate to your hero/heroine, and putting them in a situation that readers can relate to emotionally is paramount.

- ✓ How can you add in a sympathetic situation?
- ✓ What emotion is your character feeling right now?
- ✓ When have you felt this emotion?
- ✓ What realistic emotional response can you add to the scene to create an empathetic emotion?

### **Anchor your reader into the scene:**

Create Storyworld, including the 5 W's – Who, What, Where, What, and Why.

First, start with the basics – the 5 W's. Who, What, Where, Why, When.

- ✓ Who – Who are the players in the scene? (And how do they feel about being there?)
- ✓ Where – What details stands out to the character? Why is this significant to the character?
- ✓ When is it – what is the time of year, and how do we know that (we're again looking for details here).
- ✓ What – What other activities are going on in the scene? What is your pov character doing?
- ✓ Why – why is she/he in this place?

Now add: **5 senses:** To really draw your storyworld you need to use the 5 senses to engage our emotions. Sight, Smell, Sound, Touch Taste

First, look at the mood of your scene? What storyworld location can you use to create the mood you are looking for? I wanted to start one of my recent books with a sense of danger/suspense, so I used a coffee shop in my book *The Shadow of Your Smile*, but I conjured up a blizzard outside and then put a strange car with two scary men in the abandoned parking lot.

Now, look around your scene with all five senses.

- ✓ What do you see? (again, what details stand out to the POV character?)
- ✓ What do you hear?
- ✓ What do you smell?
- ✓ Is there anything your character will touch that might stand out?
- ✓ Can you add taste into the scene, either literally or figuratively?

**RUN:** Remember, a great story starts *On the Run* – meaning, the story already in action, as if you’ve simply thrown back the curtain to see the story in progress.

- How is your story already in motion when the story/scene opens?
- Can you move the scene to five minutes later and start the scene there?

**Problem/Story Question:** This is the inner question that will drive your reader/character through the story.

- What is the overall Story Question in your novel?
- What is the question your character is asking in this scene (subtly)?

**Now, here is my trick:**

Armed with the SHARP elements, close your eyes and step into your character’s skin. Be the character.

What do they fear (Stakes)?

What do they feel? (Hero/Heroine ID).

What do they see, hear, touch, taste and smell? (Anchoring).

What are they doing? (Run).

What are they wondering (Story Question).

And finally. . . **What are they thinking?** Not what are they thinking about, *but their very words*. What are those words?

Write the thought/words down. Could you use them for the first line? Or, can you tweak or strengthen them to create the first line? You will get your reader right into the POV of your character – and off you go on your scene.

## SHARP EXAMPLES

Now that we have our SHARP elements, how do we put them together?

Let's take a look at my own Hook experiments.

The following are my experiment with HOOKS for a book called *Where There's Smoke*, one of my current WIPs. Not every hook works, and I have no doubt that each hook might appeal to different readers. However, you can watch the transformation and decide which hook you like best, and most importantly, how to apply the elements to build your own hook.

*Where There's Smoke* HOOKs experiment

When Wildland Photographer Kacie Billings moves home to Ember, Montana, all she wants is to earn redemption for her part in the accidental death of five firefighters. But redemption doesn't come easy when she runs right into Hotshot Boss Jed Ransom, the man who saved her life, while his crew died. Jed isn't interested in payback—he just wants to forget that day on the mountain and start again. But memories and blame aren't easily extinguished, and it seems as though someone is after Kacie. In a season of forest fires, Jed and Kacie are about to discover that where's there's smoke. . . there's death.

What you need to know: Kacie's father died in a firestorm years ago, and the arsonist was never caught.

Stakes: Public – a repeat of the previous loss. . . firefighters killed

Personal – Kacie – saving firefighters versus finding her father's killer

Heroine Identity: facing what her father faced – knowing that part of him

Anchoring: windy, out of control, heat, dirt, a feeling of looming danger --

Run: At the point either right when the flames are consuming her, or just before it, as they are running toward her.

Problem: Will she ever escape the grip fire – and grief - has on her life?

Example #1: Anchoring, Problem, Run, Stakes

It was a cool August day, on the south slope of the Klondike ravine that Kacie Billings first caught her glimpse of hell. She framed it in her viewfinder, a wall of orange clawing toward the group of raccoon-eyed, hotshots, all grinning up at her under their grimy red helmets, their flag-yellow Nomex shirts, as if they might be the world's definition of heroes.

In her book, they always would be.

Example #2: Stakes, Heroine Identity

Kacie Billings had waited half her life to get a glimpse of hell. To feel the heat blast from its core, taste the dry air parch her throat, hear the crackle as it chewed up the fuel behind the fire line. She'd grown up with pictures from her Catholic Bible embedded in her head, with stories from her Uncle Shep, and the other firefighters churning in her thoughts. Fire fascinated her, hypnotized her, taunted her with its cunning.

Hence, she stood without fear on the bluff overlooking the Klondike Ravine framing in her viewfinder the five hotshots, with their green fire-retardant pants, and yellow Nomex shirts, their red helmets, faces gritty and black in reverse raccoon eyes. She didn't think twice about the way the wind reached down and nipped her neck, a surprisingly cool bite after the scorching afternoon.

#### Example #3: Anchoring, Identity, Run

Her father always said that one should never get too close to a sleeping dragon. But she had the perfect photo op, didn't she? Right here, on top of the Klondike Ravine, overlooking the scorched moonscape of the Lake Clark preserve, a 2.6 million acre swath of once lush hills, vibrant with color—green spruce, and purple lupine, red crowberries and white dwarf dogwoods—now charred gray, skeletal trees stripped and fallen, the fallout of an late summer wildfire.

And in front of it all, five hearty hotshots, their faces gritty, red helmets layered in ash, grinned up at her, leaning on their pulaskis.

“One more picture, guys!” She centered them in the viewfinder, ignoring the whip of wind that ran through her jacket.

It was then, the dragon awakened.

#### Example #4: Run, Stakes

The last snapshot Kacie Billings ever took was of Jeb Ransom, face sooty, eyes reddened with smoke, his blue handkerchief over his noses and mouth, his yellow shirt whipping into the wind as he deployed his fire shelter. Over her.

While fire crested down on them in a tsunami of scorching death.

#### Example #5: Identity, Problem

Kacie Billings didn't fear fire. She figured that perhaps once had been enough to satiate its ethereal hunger, and that she possessed an immunity born from loss and grief, from the sacrifices of the generation before her. Fate, and fire, wouldn't want her.

Which was why, on the south side of the Klondike Ravine, as the wall of fire rolled toward her, she stood frozen.

Her Nikon dangling from her neck.

Watching.

#### And finally, Example #6: Anchoring, Problem, Run, Stakes, Heroine Identity

On a cool August day, on the south slope of the Klondike ravine in southern Alaska, Kacie Billings finally got her glimpse of hell.

“One more picture, guys!” She centered in her viewfinder the five raccoon-eyed, hotshots, all grinning up at her under their grimy red helmets, their flag-yellow Nomex shirts, leaning on their pulaskis as if they might be the world's definition of heroes.

In her book, they were. Behind them, the scorched moonscape of the Lake Clark preserve, a 2.6 million acre swath of once lush hills, vibrant with color—green spruce, and purple lupine, red crowberries and white dwarf dogwoods—now charred gray, skeletal trees stripped and fallen, the fallout of a late summer wildfire.

Perfect. Even, award-winning. See, with a little patience . . .

She took the shot, ignoring the whip of wind that ran through her jacket.

That's when she heard the growl.

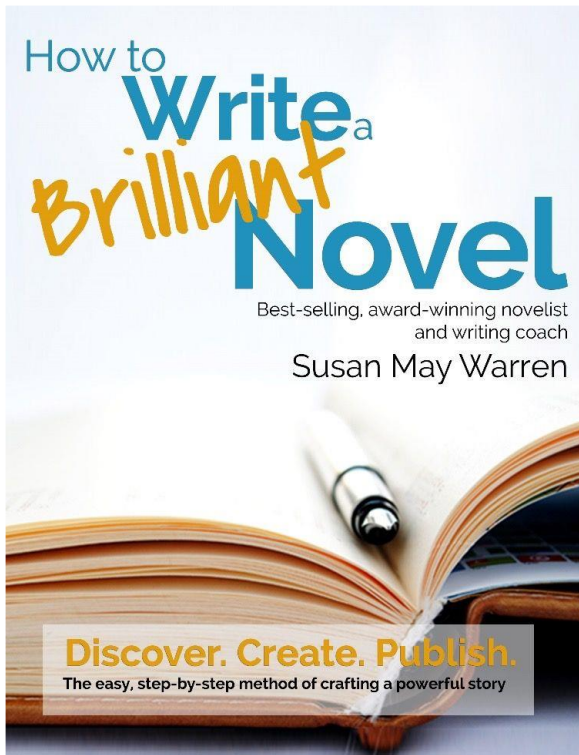
And right behind it, the scream of fire boss Jed Ransom from along the ridge.

*Run.*

Creating a Hook for your story, from the first page to the first paragraph, to every scene after that is essential to keeping your reader turning pages. Before you write even one word of your story or scene, sit down and think through each one of the SHARP elements, and then start to experiment. It's worth the work to find the right hook when a reader writes and says, "I couldn't put it down!"

Go! Write Something Brilliant!

*Susie May*



## How to Write a Brilliant Novel

(<http://learnhowtowriteanovel.com/product/from-the-inside-out-discover-create-and-publish-the-novel-in-you/>)

The easy, step-by-step method of crafting a powerful story

What does it take to write a brilliant novel? Susan May Warren knows exactly how--and you're about to find out. She's coached hundreds of writers into publication, onto best-seller lists, and onto the awards platforms. (And she lives what she teaches. Susan is the bestselling author of over 50 novels, has won the Rita, the Christy, and the Carol awards multiple times.) Now, for the first time, she's revealing her step-by-step story crafting secrets that will show you how to discover, create, and publish the brilliant novel inside you.

**Susan's techniques are proven methods that will show you:**

Exactly how bestselling novels are designed

How to create compelling characters

How to construct tension-filled scenes. . . that keep readers devouring pages

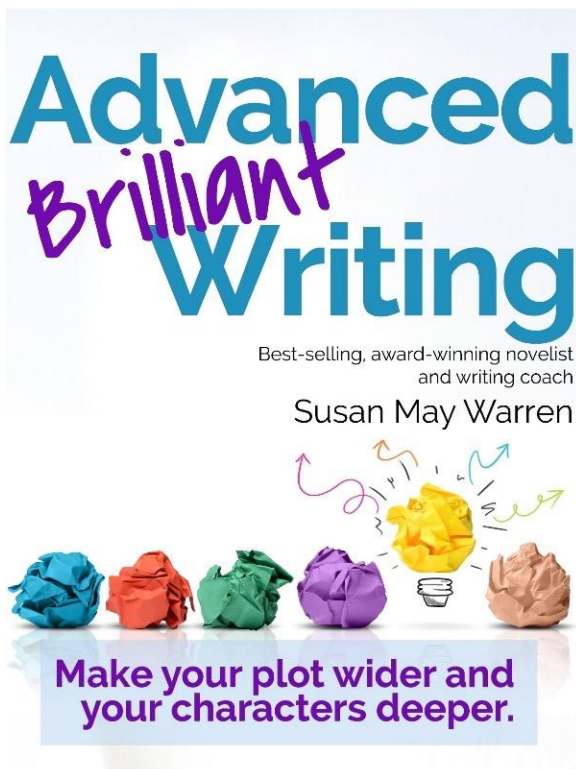
How to build sizzling dialogue

How to develop riveting plots that keep readers guessing And once you're finished, how to sell your novel

**You CAN Write a Brilliant Novel!**

"A quirky, fun, practical guide from a writer who knows what she's doing." -- James Scott Bell, bestselling author of *Write Great Fiction: Plot & Structure*.





Advanced Brilliant Writing (<http://learn-howtowriteanovel.com/product/deep-and-wide-advanced-fiction-techniques-worktext/>)

An amazing novel has two elements – deep characterization of a sympathetic hero, and a compelling, wide, breathtaking plot. But how do you create deep characters and wide plots and then apply them to your story? It's time to learn Advanced (Brilliant!) Writing. The follow-up to *How to Write a Brilliant Novel*, *Advanced Brilliant Writing* utilizes RITA and Christy award-winning, best-selling novelist Susan May Warren's easy to apply explanations, exercises and intuitive methods to teach you advanced fiction writing techniques that will turn any novel from boring to . . . brilliant.

**You'll learn:**

- How to plot a profound character change journey
- An easy technique to reveal backstory to your readers
- How to weave emotion into your scene for the most impact

How to keep tension high through the use of stakes and motivations

A unique plotting trick to widen your plot

Techniques on how to make your hero. . . heroic

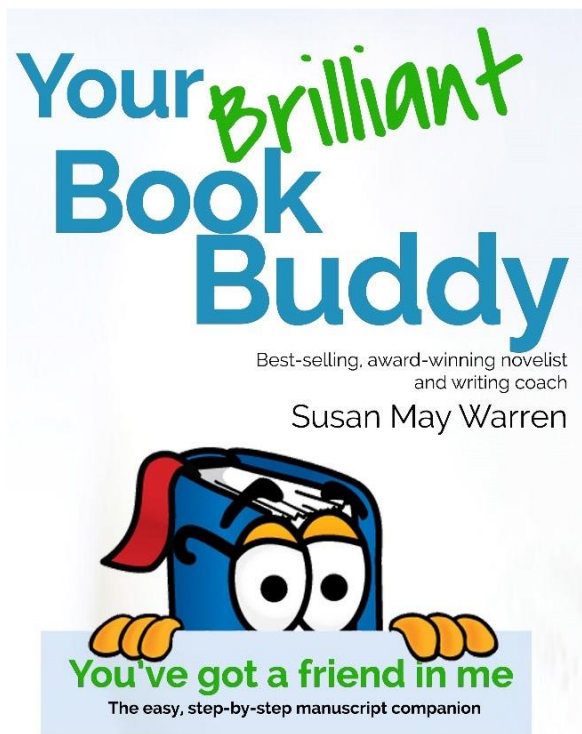
The difference between subplots and layers

A powerful use for Secondary characters

How the perfect Villain can help you plot your story

**. . . and much more, including the scene that every book MUST have!**

"If you're intending to write a best-selling novel, I can think of no better place to start than with Susan May Warren's *Deep and Wide*. This is a book for those who need to dig into the techniques of writing -- not just hear the happy-talk, big-picture stuff that is so often heard at conferences. If you really want to get into the nuts and bolts of writing strong fiction, then this is for you. Clear, practical advice from an award-winning novelist." *Chip MacGregor, Literary Agent, MacGregor Literary*

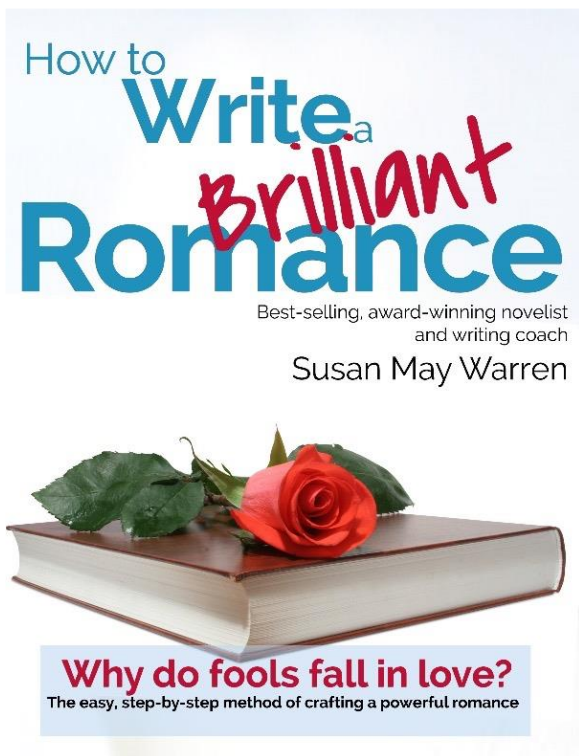


Your Brilliant Book Buddy (<http://learn-howtowriteanovel.com/product/the-book-buddy-pdf-2/>)

The writing journey can be long and lonely. It's easy to get lost in the weeds of your story, not sure where you are headed . . . or why. Wouldn't it be nice to have a guide along the way? Someone to point you in the right direction, and keep you motivated.

A manuscript companion to the foundational writer's workbook *How to Write a Brilliant Novel*, and advanced writer's guide, *Advanced Brilliant Writing*, *Your Brilliant Book Buddy* puts feet to all the steps needed to create a powerful book, guiding you through character creation, plotting the inner and outer journey, creating essential scenes, and word-painting. With step-by-step instruction, it helps you craft the perfect black moment, and pushes you on all the way to the climatic ending.

"The Book Buddy is my new best friend! It takes all of the helpful tools, charts and tips from *Inside Out* and *Deep and Wide* and puts them in one place. It's like having Susan May Warren in the room helping you craft your story! I can't recommend it highly enough! *Melissa Tagg, multi-published romance author*



How to Write a Brilliant Romance  
(<http://learnhowtowriteanovel.com/product/kiss-and-tell-how-to-write-a-roma-pdfnce/>)

The easy, step-by-step method of crafting a powerful romance

What does it take to write a brilliant romance? Susan May Warren knows exactly how--and you're about to find out.

Now, for the first time, she's revealing her step-by-step romance writing secrets that will show you how to craft an award-winning romance.

**Secrets like:**

How do I structure my romance?

How do I create likeable heroes and heroines?

How should my hero and heroine meet?

How do I make two characters fall in love?

How do I write a sizzling kiss?

How do I create believable conflict?

How do I keep the tension high in the middle of my story?

How do I put romance on every page?

What is the breakup and why do I need it?

Most importantly, how do I create a unique romance that touches the heart of my reader?

**Find the answers to all these questions as well as a few secrets to creating award-winning romances.**

With ten ingredients and step by step instructions you'll learn how to plot and write a powerful, layered romance designed to win readers. Susan May Warren has coached hundreds of writers into publication, onto best-seller lists, and onto the awards platforms. (And she lives what she teaches. Susan is the bestselling author of over 50 novels, has won the Rita, the Christy, and the Carol awards multiple times.)

*Did you like this book? Thank you for reading!*

I love to help authors with their craft, encouraging them and equipping them with tools to get published and stay published. If you're interested in more resources on writing craft, or even growing your career as a novelist, check out our website: [www.mybooktherapy.com](http://www.mybooktherapy.com). Sign up to receive the daily dose of writing craft, and check out our programs and/or events. We have something for everyone!

**Go – write something brilliant!**

Copyright © 2015 by Susan May Warren

All Rights Reserved