

# MY BOOK THERAPY

## Online Storycrafter Program

The premier online fiction writing course that takes you from spark to story!

### Lesson 16: The Inciting Incident

Where do you start? Well, there your poor hero is . . . at home, chopping wood, lighting the home fires, and suddenly . . . what? What happens?

This is the *Inciting Incident* in your book! That moment when everything changes for your hero! The start of his journey. In today's novels, the Inciting Incident often occurs in the first scene, if not the first chapter. Even if the inciting incident is delayed, the inciting incident is *hinted* at in the first scene.

The Inciting Incident is the event, moment of truth, issue, problem, quandary—whatever—that sends your hero (or heroine) on the story journey and often sets up the overall Story Question that the protagonist seeks to answer.

I love the magic of a good Inciting Incident—that moment when everything goes haywire—or at least hints at going haywire—in our hero's journey. Sometimes it's an earthquake of epic proportions. Other times, it's just a 2.5 on the Richter scale. The first thing we need to ask is: What jumpstarts your character's journey?

The key here is that each POV has their own Inciting Incident, which is different depending on where their story starts.

What are some popular Inciting Incidents?

*Air Force One* – Easy, huh? When the bad guys take over the plane. Or maybe not. How about when the security detail is killed? Go further back. It's when their Russian leader is captured and sentenced to die. This is our story Inciting Incident. For our hero, however, President James Marshall, played by Harrison Ford, his Inciting Incident is when the bad guys take over Air Force One. And that's where the action really begins. Everything before that is Normal World or Life. Remember your Lindy Hop?

How about *The Fellowship of the Ring*? Is it when Frodo runs away with the ring? Nope. Both Frodo's and their story Inciting Incident begins when Bilbo puts the ring on and vanishes at his birthday party—and alerts the Nazgûl to his presence. This ignites the story and acts as Frodo's Inciting Incident.

How about *Return to Me*? Is it when Grace gets her new heart? Maybe for her, but Bob's Inciting Incident is when he meets her in the restaurant. Everything before that is his backstory.

Then, where do you insert this inciting incident?

The answer is found in the delicate balance of what is called Delicacy and Resonance.

### ***Delicacy and Resonance?***

*Delicacy* in the Inciting Incident doesn't mean a light touch. It means **treading lightly through backstory, digging up only that which is most pertinent**. It's so easy for an author to want to load in all the significant life events of the hero that have led up to this moment. Why, when he sees the red car parked in front of his mother's house, he realizes that his father has returned from years on the run. Or why, when our hero wakes up after being beaten up and left in an alley, he knows he wasn't just mugged. Yes, we as the reader need to know why these details matter, but *light touches* are the key when inserting backstory. It's the difference between backstory narrative and character history.

Character History is focused information – one or two lines of prose or dialogue that gives the reader a piece of information or history pertinent to the situation.

Before getting to specific examples of Delicacy, and more specifically, Character History, let's talk about Resonance for a moment.

*Resonance* is meaning, or significance. We want to know how this event fits into the Story Question, as well as the past. We also want to understand what the next step is for the character. However, we need to keep it free from melodrama. The reader wants to see the event, yet they don't know the character well enough for heavy interpretation.

So, how do we balance Delicacy and Resonance in our Inciting Incident? Answer: by keeping the backstory from stalling the action—and keeping the action at the forefront.

For example, in one of my romantic suspense novels, *Flee the Night*, I begin with the inciting incident - the appearance of an assassin on a train. My character has an extensive backstory, but if I were veer off into narrative backstory to explain everything, it would slow the scene down. So, I insert just enough Character History (Delicacy) to give his appearance meaning (Resonance.)

Excerpt:

***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. 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.*

*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?*

See how those two paragraphs gives us enough of an understanding of the situation to spark our interest without slowing the story?

I insert just a little more as the story progresses:

*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.*

*If only she’d possessed such an impulse seven years ago. Tightening her jaw, she stared out the window. The Amtrak hustled north in the murky dawn, the Missouri oak, red buckeye, and hickory trees flanking the tracks—gray, silent sentries to her ill fate.*

***Oh, please, not here. Not now. She and Emily were so close to finally finding peace. Now that the Wizard program had met National Security Agency (NSA) approval, the nightmare seemed to be over. After this little time out and escape with her daughter to Chicago, Lacey would fine-tune the encryption/decryption program, then hand it over with a sigh of relief and the sense that she'd finally found a way to atone for her mistakes. Never again would the field agents be without a way to secure their communications. No more ambushes due to intercepted messages. No more corrupted information.***

***Lives—and national secrets—safe.***

***And finally, too, a safe home for Emily. Please.***

By giving this internal thought – and I could have delivered it in dialogue, also, by simply putting a fellow agent in the seat next to her – I give the reader enough character history to understand what is at stake why this situation matters. In this scene, the Inciting Incident happens in the first paragraph.

You may also have the inciting incident happen off the page, before the story starts. Here's a scene from my book *Escape to Morning*. It's also a romantic suspense, so I wanted to start with action, but I didn't need the scene where my hero, Will, who is an undercover homeland security agent is abducted and beaten. It doesn't move the story along. Better was to start the story after this inciting incident – and thus, start the story with a bang.

However, the reader needs to understand the significance of the event – and thus, I needed to add in resonance. But I want to keep the character history light, delicate, so I can keep the action moving.

***Today, more than any other, reporter Will Masterson prayed his lies saved lives. Starting with his partner, Homeland Security Agent Simon Rouss, aka Hafiz Tarkan.***

***Please, God, be on my side today. Will raced down the two-lane rutted forest service road, cursing his stupidity as well as a few new souvenir bruises. He***

*smelled rain in the air as the wind shivered the trees with a late season breeze. His nose felt thick and caked with clots. He should have known his sympathetic commentaries in the Moose Bend Journal toward the recent immigrants flooding over the Canadian border would draw blood with the locals. Blood that would hopefully protect Simon while he embedded deeper in the terrorist cell in the hills.*

*Because Will knew the men who'd hijacked him and hauled him into the forest to beat the tar out of him over his recent op-ed piece weren't actually disgruntled rednecks, but rather international terrorists.*

*The lie that had just saved Will Masterson's hide, the lie perpetuated by the boys toting 30.06s and wearing work boots was the only thing keeping Simon from being brutally murdered.*

*Which would only be the first in a hundred, maybe a thousand murders by the Hayata terrorist cell hiding in the northern Minnesota woods.*

This is all his thoughts as he's running through the woods. From here, the story takes off into action, and we don't touch on any more character history until later in the scene. In the middle of the Inciting Incident, the last thing we want is a long, drawn-out history lesson. However, without some Resonance, we don't understand why he's running through the woods.

Think of backstory like a speed bump: It hiccups the reader's forward motion. However, Character History is simply the connection your character has to this moment through dialogue and inner thought.

So, you have understand Delicacy and Resonance, but how do you start the story?

### ***Start with a Big BANG!***

How do you determine how and when to start your story? Do you start it on a calm day, set the scene, and then hit him with a BANG? Or, do you start him in mid-run, as he's being chased down the street? Or, should you start after the Inciting Incident, when

he's trying to figure out what to do? And, do you start with something physical, or something emotional? Bad news or bad event?

You always want to start your story with something that will grab your reader's attention. It might not be bullets flying, or someone dying, but it still needs to start out with something powerful. I call it the Big BANG.

Here are the determinations that go into choosing my Inciting Incidents and starting with a BANG!

### **The Big BANG:**

**Believability** – Do you need to build sympathy for your character before the Inciting Incident so it will have an impact on the reader? How understandable will your Inciting Incident be without background?

Consider the movie *Jumper*. Because of the bizarre phenomenon that happens to the main character (his ability to jump through space), the viewer is given background to the story before he actually jumps, so we understand exactly what his skill is. Also, sympathy for the character is built before the actual Inciting Incident occurs so we understand why, when he jumps, he behaves so badly. These two elements—backstory and sympathy—are essential to our understanding of the hero.

Even longer is the wait for the Inciting Incident in Jodie Foster's vigilante movie, *The Brave One*. We need to care about her and her fiancé before the Inciting Incident has its intended impact, and result (to cause a normal person to become a vigilante).

However, the Inciting Incident in *Fool's Gold* takes place immediately: The main character's boat sinks while he's searching for treasure. We don't have to know his character to feel sympathy for a guy whose boat sinks.

How believable and universal your Inciting Incident is determines how much character sympathy you need to build before it impacts your reader.

**Action** – Generally, the higher the action, the closer it should be to the beginning of the book. If you have high action, but it takes a while for the story to build to it, then you are wasting precious pages. In my book *In Sheep's Clothing*, the actual Inciting Incident didn't start until chapter two! (Yes, I know!) So I solved that problem by clipping out that scene and putting it into the prologue, and then starting the story twenty-four hours earlier in chapter one.

Then, when I got to chapter two and that scene, I told it from a different POV, thus making it just as interesting. If, however, you have a slower, less active Inciting Incident, you may have to build in the impact (by focusing on characterization) of the Inciting Incident in order for it have Resonance.

**Need/Want** – All stories are, to some extent, about a character's emotional journey. The character starts out with a need or a want. What can you build into that Inciting Incident that reveals that need? For example, in my Inciting Incident for *Taming Rafe*, I develop his need/want to impress his family, and thus, the reason why he rides the bull even when he feels something is wrong. In *Get Cozy, Josey* (my third first-person, funny book about Russian missionary Josey and her adventures), Josey's need/want is for a house with a backyard for her children. To meet her need, she agrees to go camping with her husband so he'll move back to America. Discovering your hero's need/want will help you determine what kind of Inciting Incident to put into the story.

**Genre** – Certain genres demand different Inciting Incidents. First, keep in mind that every hero's journey starts in Life/Normal World. It starts with a glimpse of what his normal life is like, what his normal activities are, what his normal motivations and goals are. However, where you work that normalcy in differs by genre. For example, fantasy requires just a bit more setting (or Storyworld, which we'll get to soon, I promise!) set up, a little more normal life for a character. A suspense, however, often starts with some high-action example of what is at stake, and then flows into normal. A romance might start at a point where the heroine meets the hero, and then spiral back to her normal day, or might even have a mix of normalcy inside the Inciting Incident, so that we don't even realize that it's the blip (or bloke) that will change her world.

Stop for just a minute and consider other books in your chosen genre. Think of three specific titles. Better yet, go to your bookshelf (Or your Kindle/Nook) and look at three specific novels. Where does the Inciting Incident occur? Page one? Three? Five? Ten? This is a good guide to how you might structure your book.

Every Inciting Incident will be specific to your book and your character, but determining how and when to put it in the book takes careful consideration of your BANG.

## Exercise Lesson 16: The Whens, Whys and Hows of Your Inciting Incident

Time to brainstorm your Inciting Incident: What believable incident could occur in your hero's home world? How much sympathy do you need to build for your character to have the reader care that he's facing this incident?

What actions could he take, or have happen to him?

What is (are) your character's primary need(s)?

What genre are you writing in? Look at your pile of genre books and read the first chapter, or at least the first page of three of them. What happens? Does this churn up any ideas for your hero?

What backstory elements do you need to include in order to give the Inciting Incident both Delicacy and Resonance?

***Spark your Story: Brainstorm and Summarize your Inciting Incident.***