

ANTONY LISHAK'S GUIDE TO BETTER STORY WRITING

As Educating Together's author-in-residence I will be writing a series of articles that will look at ways in which you can help your children improve their story writing skills. Each month I will be focusing on a specific area of writing with the aim of both improving your children's writing technique and unleashing the hundreds of stories that are lurking in their heads just waiting to be told...

ATTENTION GRABBING BEGINNINGS

Imagine you're telling someone a story and after 10 seconds their eyes glaze over, they glance at their watch and start to yawn. Or even worse, they just turn and walk away. How soul-destroying would that be? But, upsetting though it might be, at least you would know that you'd lost your audience. With writing it's less certain whether you're being listened to. Your reader may be gripped by every word, turning the pages without even realising it – or they could have given up half way down page one and thrown your book in the bin. As an author, you never can be sure exactly how your reader will react, but it's your duty to do everything you can to grab their attention and make them want to read on.

The first thing to do is remember that YOU aren't writing the story for YOU. (If you were the only one who was going to read it, you may as well just tell it to yourself – it'll save time, paper and ink...). And, you're not just filling up a blank sheet of paper with scribbles and squiggles – you're **SPEAKING THROUGH YOUR PEN** and creating **WORLDS OF WORDS** and it's your job to entice someone to enter that world by making them read what

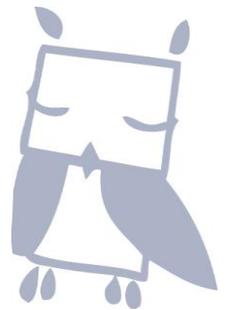
you've written. And just as great films force you to sit up and pay attention in the opening scene, a gripping opening to a story captures the reader's imagination right away. As a teacher once said to me – “grab your reader by the throat on line one, drag them through the book and don't dare let go till the final full stop!”

The beginning of your story has to hook the reader with some enticing bait – otherwise they'll swim away forever.

Here are a few dos and don'ts that will help to make your story openings irresistibly intriguing...

DO'S...

1. ...be deliberately intriguing – Get your reader asking themselves questions about what might be going on and what might happen next. Be willing to use the “it” word... It could be hairy, smelly or slimy. For example - “Although it was the most hideous sight I'd ever seen, I just could not take my eyes off it...”
2. ...start with a question – It's a really simple way of involving your reader because, whether they like it or not, they have to answer. For example – “Have you ever been so scared that you thought you might die?” That'll get them thinking...
3. paint a short vivid description – Writing an introduction can be like holding up a picture for your reader to see. For example – “The midday sun broke through the dense forest, reflecting off the red tiled roof of the cottage, making it stand out like a beacon...”
4. ...use dialogue – A powerful way of introducing your reader to the main character is by allowing them to be heard on the very first line. For example – “If you want to scare me, then you'll have to try harder than that!” snapped Henry.'



DON'TS

5. ...use the worn-out easy options – You know what I'm talking about... "one day...", "once upon a time...", "I went to the park..."
Aaargh! It's a sure fire way of turning your reader off right away!
6. ... blurt out the whole story in the first few lines – if you cram all the action into the very beginning, how are you going to make the rest of your story interesting? For example – "Fiona left the bath tap on and went to watch television and the water went through the floor boards and flooded the kitchen. Her mum was so angry so was grounded for weeks."
7. ...introduce a long list of characters – it only confuses (and bores...) the reader. For example – "Mary, went shopping with her sister Charlotte and her best friends Amy, Rochelle, Michelle and Fatima, who insisted on bring her brother, Sanjay, who brought his mates Billy, Brian, Bobby and Blah, Blah BLAH..." If a list of names was really that interesting then everyone would be engrossed by the class register!
8. ...spend ages introducing yourself – remember, you're telling your reader a story, not asking them out for a date! For example "Hi, I'm Chloe and I'm ten and a quarter years old and I have long dark hair and I go to St Mary's School in Mrs Blackburn's class..."



A QUICK WORD ABOUT TITLES....

Don't worry too much about them... it's usually the last part of the book to be written! Most authors might start with a "working title" but replace it with something much more suitable once the story has been completed. So don't waste your energy trying to think of the perfect eye-catching-ear-pricking title before you've started to write the story. But when you DO get to that stage remember the first "do" rule and the second "don't" rule. Try to intrigue the reader and don't say too much too early! For example, instead of "The day my brother overfed the goldfish and cooked it on the barbecue", you might want to choose "Farewell Goldie" or maybe even "Cooked".

Finally...

Of course, once you've written a truly enthralling opening, you've got to make sure the rest of your story lives up to it... but that's for another time!

