

The First Two Pages: *City of Woe*

By Christopher Ryan

When are your first two pages not your first two pages? That's what I'm here to discuss today.

The sages of sentences say we must be willing to sacrifice our favorite bits of writing in service of story, and here's a tale of how to employ that adage in service of your story.

The first two pages of any novel need to accomplish much. It must hook readers, introduce at least one character we will want to know more about, and make sure the story hits the ground running.

On the surface, my debut novel, *City of Woe*, is written as a straight-up police procedural-style thriller. This is a pretty familiar recipe: start with a hook, get the cops chasing the bad guys, add an intriguing puzzle to solve, throw in escalating danger, season with humor, and cook on high heat to boil away anything that slows the pace. Serve with an eye-catching cover and a side order of praising blurbs.

Delicious, right?

Yes, if there's something to chew on once readers take a bite.

The crucial ingredient is subtext, and my first attempt saw our heroes, Mallory and Gunner, moving through this popular genre format while also serving

as a modern-day Dante and Virgil travelling through an updated *Inferno* with New York City serving as Hell. (I know, some of you are thinking, “Oh so it’s nonfiction?”)

The key is to never let the subtext show. Let’s hope we agree that it doesn’t.

Hook:

The corpse came with footnotes.

Relatable hero:

That’s what the Lieu said to get Detective Frank Mallory to drag his ass in on his day off, leaving his family and the promise of his mother-in-law’s legendary homemade lasagna.

The crime:

Approaching the crime scene now against his wishes, Mallory pushed his usually swift pace even faster, weaving his way efficiently through gawking civilians, old school aviator shades hiding the frustration blazing in his eyes. Let the rest of Manhattan’s Major Case Squad study the vic, reportedly a white male, 19, found bludgeoned. They can figure out why a Brooklyn kid would be way up on 215th Street and 10th Avenue. Mallory would rather have that lasagna.

So, we’ve got a hook, a protagonist, a puzzle, and, underneath it all, the protagonist’s want. What’s missing? We want to see the hero doing something good for others that will not benefit him, we could use bit of humor, and, in this case, we’ll need a partner/guide. We also want to set time so it serves our subtext.

Here we go:

Hustling across 215th, Mallory noticed a well-dressed couple carrying fresh palms from Sunday mass ambling toward the crime scene, casually curious. He gently waved them off. “You folks don’t want to ruin your beautiful morning,” he said. “Today’s for family, not this.”

Smiling their little embarrassed smiles, they changed direction obediently.

Mallory's partner, Detective Alberto "Gunner" Gennaro, waited for him at the corner, nodding along with the sway of the well-dressed woman's curvaceous butt as she sashayed away. "I love the girls in their summer dresses ..." he sang, kind of. The bigger, sloppier man fell in step alongside Mallory, his immense bulk matching his partner's pace effortlessly. "What's the plan?"

"Get in, consult, get out quick. Gina's parents made lasagna."

"So I'm coming home with you?"

"Might as well. Gina's gonna put a plate aside for you anyway."

"I love that woman. You ever get killed in the line of duty, I'm marrying her."

"It comes to that I'm shooting you before I die."

That was the original opening of the novel. We had a hook (what's the deal with footnotes for corpse?), a hopefully likable protagonist, a puzzle (two really: the murder, and why did they need Mallory to look at it on his day off?), and a partner/guide/source of humor (Gunner is definitely less respectable than Mallory, and their banter provides both character development and humor, or so I am told).

But it still wasn't ready.

My problem was that my antagonist, Paul Farrington, would be on his own journey through the underworld, but we wouldn't clearly see his descent if we never saw him in his ordinary world.

Thus a new first chapter was needed, and it had to meet all the requirements of a first chapter. I needed a new hook, a new engaging character (whom the readers would hopefully root for... until they realized who he really was), and a world we can both identify with and be excited by. Tall order, and a narrative risk,

but we must always, always, always serve the story, even if it means coming up with a second set of first pages to shove in front of the original first pages that we worked so hard to get right.

Here we go again:

Paul Farrington was a face-to-face guy. Want to talk business? Set up a meet. He didn't mess with texting, conference calls, or e-mails. Nothing traceable.

Except when it came to family. Madge, his source of marital bliss for 23 years, and Isabella, his precious jewel, liked to talk on the cell before bed when they weren't all home together, so here he was driving with a Bluetooth jammed into his ear.

"Hon, I get the picture, lots of rich people on and off campus. Still, she'll fit in."

Two blocks from their home, the GPS screen mounted on his beloved Caddie's dashboard blinked red three times. The modifications Brisbane had made were paying off; alerting him that someone had tripped the perimeter monitors on his property.

Farrington cut the headlights, spun the wheel sharply right, and plunged the car off the street and onto Mrs. Ferguson's driveway. Sweet old gal would be sleeping for hours by now, no worries about borrowing her space. "Bottom line: did she like Yale?"

"With reservations, yes. Izzie wants to see the other campuses before making any decisions."

He popped the modified GPS off its dashboard perch and secured it right over his watch face. "That's my girl," he smiled, tapping a button that caused the blinking light to be replaced with a directional indicator that pointed northeast and read *.25 mi*.

"And, hey, we need to start calling her Isabella; what kind a name is Izzie for an Ivy Leaguer?"

Hopefully, we get the idea here. The goal was to see Paul Farrington as a capable spy type and have him behave as a family man at the same time. The chaos to come on page three would hopefully intrigue us further, and then when we

switch to our actual protagonists in what is now chapter two, we get a new hook, etc. and hopefully be completely on board for the journey.

So when are our first two pages not our first two pages? When we need to serve the needs of our story.

Happy New Year all, and here's to writing well.

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Christopher Ryan has been a journalist and a teacher, as well as a screenwriter, actor, director, and producer. He was nominated for Best Supporting Actor by at Worldfest Houston for his role in the independent crime thriller *Clandestine*. He's written for small papers in The Bronx and Manhattan, *Wizard Magazine*, and a YA detective novel for a pair of hardy and adventurous boys, as well as independent comics, film, and fiction. Honors include a best columnist nod from the New York Press Association, a few honorable mentions from *Writer's Digest*, and Rutgers University's *English Department Award for Highest Distinction in Literary Studies* for an early draft of his debut novel, *City of Woe*, which went on to win the Independent Book Publisher's Association gold award as *Best New Voice, Fiction*. He has paneled at writer's conferences in the New York area, is an associate member of Mystery Writer's of America, and has recorded and released 65 episodes of the podcast *Tell The Damn Story*, which he does with Inkpot winning creator Alex Simmons.