Section 11, Master Class: Your First Fifty Pages

For writers of literary/mainstream or genre fiction as indicated below

Write-by-the-Lake Writer’s Workshop & Retreat
June 13-17, 2016
9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. each day
Pyle Center, 702 Langdon St., Madison

UW-Madison Continuing Studies & UW-Madison Dept. of English

Instructor: Angela Rydell

Limit 8; first fifty pages critiqued (see details at end of syllabus). Fee: $495 includes class and critique. To apply for this Master Class, please see “How to Apply” (in red font) toward the end of the syllabus.

Master Class: Your First Fifty Pages

Today, more than ever, you must lure your reader with your opening or risk losing him forever. Page one is the first of many hooks. When agents and editors love your query or opening three pages, they often ask for more—the first fifty pages. Find out what must feature in those early chapters to inspire the words, “Send me the whole thing!”

This master class helps you pinpoint the best time to introduce a protagonist to root for, a problem to solve and a journey to begin. You’ll weave a web of characters that strengthen plot and theme, analyze the role of plot layers and subplots, and explore how strong starts propel page-turning momentum into the middle of your novel and help you write all the way to the end.

You and your instructor will read everyone’s first fifty pages prior to class. Each writers’ manuscript will be discussed via select scene critiques throughout the week. You’ll also receive daily revision exercises to apply directly to your novel, and submit for instructor critique. Whether you’re in the midst of a draft or ready to polish for publication, you’ll take away tips for optimizing an opening that keeps readers on the edge of their seat from first page to last.

Who is this section for? Can you apply if you’re still working on your first draft?

“Your First Fifty Pages” is for writers polishing openings for queries and publication, or writers who’ve written at least fifty pages and want to use their openings as a solid launching pad to help get their plot on track and propel their novel forward with page-
turning momentum. It’s also for those tired of rejections, looking to transform slow starts into memorable first impressions.

All writers are highly encouraged to read their peers’ 50-page manuscripts, and prepare to participate in daily in-class critiques of each other’s work. You'll not only receive feedback, but become part of a likeminded group of writers eager for peer critique and a supportive community.

Preferred genres. This section is designed for those writing mainstream/literary fiction, including women’s fiction, historical novels, crime fiction, literary suspense and humor. Also considered: middle grade, YA, and science fiction/fantasy genre novels. Writing in a different genre? Feel free to query, though the other genres may take precedence (see “How to Apply” towards the end of the syllabus).

Angela Rydell, MFA, has taught for the UW-Madison Division of Continuing Studies since 2006, including Writers’ Institute, Weekend with Your Novel, Write-by-the-Lake, School of the Arts, and online writing courses. Her ongoing novel critique group and “Powerful Plots” weekend workshops have helped dozens of novelists structure their novels over the years. Angela’s a novelist, short fiction writer, poet and critique coach. Her work has appeared in The Sun, Indiana Review, Prairie Schooner, Crab Orchard Review, Beloit Poetry Review, Alaska Quarterly Review and other journals. She is a recipient of Poets & Writers’ Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award, winner of the Portland Review’s inaugural Flash Fiction Friday contest, a Pushcart Prize nominee, a finalist in the American Short(er) Fiction Prize & Passage North’s Neutrino Short-Short Prize, and has received honorable mention in the New Millennium Writings Awards. She lives in Madison, WI, and is at work on True North, a novel about an unemployed Wisconsin weatherman trying to make life more predictable. She's on Facebook posting writerly tips here: https://www.facebook.com/AngelaRydellInstructorPage

Fee and what it includes. $495. Instructor will read your first fifty pages prior to class; all submissions (50 pages each, plus a one page synopsis) will be shared with the entire class via email attachment (.doc or .rtf). Instructor will provide a letter with suggestions on your complete submission as part of the course fee. Classroom discussion will address select scenes’ strengths and weaknesses, with an eye towards how they relate to the whole, and provide specific direction for revisions (a critique schedule will be circulated before the workshop begins).

Writers may also be asked to revise their work throughout the week. Please bring a printed copy of your first fifty pages to this workshop.

While a syllabus is provided, expect that each day’s content may change based on the needs of the group.

Please note: You’ll read everyone’s first fifty pages, but we won’t critique all 50 pages in class. We’ll zero in on key sections in each participant’s manuscript. So to help you
prepare for those selected critiques, and to lighten your overnight reading load during our retreat, everyone will receive “Critique Schedule” email by June 1 indicating what scenes we’ll critique on which days. Expect those scenes to focus on critical “first impression” elements, such as opening page, inciting incident, scene & setting development, and character intros. Your instructor will select pages to share for the critiques.

You are also asked to include a scene outline accompanying your first 50 pages. This will help facilitate the discussion of all 50 pages as we critique each other’s work. What is a scene outline? A short 1-3 sentence summary of each scene in each chapter.

Syllabus

Master Class: Your First Fifty Pages

Day 1: First Impressions.

Successful contemporary openings hook readers fast. They raise alluring questions, flaunt an inviting voice, instigate conflict, introduce a character to care about, make startling revelations, thwart expectations, evoke lyric intensity, and more.

Intrigue isn’t created by explaining what your story is about, or bombarding with boring backstory. Good contemporary writers exploit what’s at stake right now, and hold back juicy details from a character’s past that make for delicious reveals later.

Fortunately, great openings flaunt their secrets for all to see. We’ll discuss effective hooks and identify the characteristics that make a reader care. They’re different today than they were in the “dark and stormy” Victorian era. We’ll spend the day discussing what to reveal, what to hold back, and how to hook readers and keep them reading all the way to the end.

In class critique: Consult critique schedule. Each critique will include comments on how your opening pages launch your whole novel.

In class exercise: Hooks—first sentence, first paragraph, first scene.

Assignment: Optional inciting incident exercise for instructor feedback.

Day 2: Inciting Incident & Scene Building.

Since beginnings are so challenging, they’re often the last thing a writer perfects. Since your story isn’t about what happened before the present conflict, you don’t need to start
with a bunch of material that leads up to the current conflict. What do most of today's novelists start with? The inciting incident.

We'll discuss the value of presenting your inciting incident in the opening, so the reader experiences, directly and evocatively, the intense impact it has on your protagonist's life. “Your goal is to evoke an emotional response that hooks the reader, and telling absolutely won't get it. The reader must live through that opening scene right along with the protagonist. This is the only way the reader will really believe it and, more importantly, feel it.” (Les Edgerton, Hooked)

A good inciting incident does all of the following:

- Throws your protagonist's world out of balance.
- Introduces the protagonist's conscious goal, his or her external desire. What your protagonist passionately wants (or thinks he/she wants) and strives to achieve despite opposition. In other words, it starts the action of the main plotline.
- Hints at the underlying unconscious need/problem of your protagonist.
- Forecasts the ending.

Analyses of classic and contemporary novel openings will put the inciting incident in perspective, and inspire discussion: Which is more important, the event, or the protagonist's decision to take action? Which should you start with? What's right for the novel you're writing?

In class critique: Consult critique schedule. Each critique will include comments on how your opening pages launch your whole novel.

In class exercise: Inciting incident.

Assignment: Optional inciting incident exercise to hand in for instructor feedback.

Day 3: Characters & Conflicts.

Readers love conflicted characters they can empathize with. Conflict forces characters to make choices. The more difficult the choices, the greater the conflict, the better the payoff for the character—and your novel. A conflicted protagonist is essential, but what about conflict within your cast of characters?

You'll look at your novel's character web and identify key characters' quirks and scars, strengths and weaknesses. Who helps or hinders your protagonist? Are there superfluous characters that could be cut or consolidated?

Think of your characters as part of web in which each helps define the others. Don't develop your protagonist in isolation. Develop the characters by comparing and
contrasting them, so that each one is clearly distinct from all others, and each serves to help or hinder your protagonist in his journey, even deepen your novel's themes.

*In class critique:* Consult critique schedule. 4 writers. 10 more pages.

*In class exercise(s):* Weaving your character web.

*Assignment:* Optional exercise for instructor feedback.

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**Day 4: Plot Layers & Subplots.**

Building plot layers and subplots adds complications, solidifies connections, and adds meaning. Layers are multiple plot lines given to one character, often simultaneously. She’s got a rapist to catch, and at the same time her husband's dying of cancer. What small mysteries, dangling threads or nagging questions propel your story forward? We'll explore how to add threads without tangling storylines and losing momentum. When should they appear?

We'll also explore how subplots help you get more mileage out of your cast of characters. Subplots are different plot lines given to characters other than the protagonist. They develop your protagonist through comparison, contrasting how your hero and another character deal with a similar problem. Good subplots develop secondary characters without letting them steal the show. Analysis of established writers’ work will help you identify when storylines cross, and use thematic connections to strengthen structure.

On-the-spot exercises help you weave plot layers and subplots together so they don’t unravel. Adding complexity gives novels the rich texture of real life. It requires extra effort, but the reward is depth and resonance.

*In class critique:* Consult critique schedule. 4 writers. 10 more pages.

*In class exercise(s):* Deeping plot layers and strengthening subplots.

*Assignment:* Optional exercise for instructor feedback.

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**Day 5: Wrap Up & Revision.**

Today we'll finish our discussion on subplots and plot layers, and plan the next step.
We’ll wrap up by synthesizing all those important first impression elements of your novel’s opening. What is your novel’s sharpest and most dazzling hook? Premise, character, voice? What’s its biggest hindrance? Now that you’ve explored various approaches to strong openings, what do you want to add to your opening arsenal?

You’ll set out a plan for what’s next. Is it writing your way to the end? Polishing and marketing? You’ll take away tips for doing both, because good openings help writers market their novels at every stage of the game. What are some big “Don’ts” that you can easily avoid in your opening?

You’ll leave with strategies for strengthening an opening that’s marketable, hooks a reader’s attention, eliminates the muddle of the middle, and helps you write an ending that’s more meaningful and more true.

In class critique: Consult critique schedule.

In class exercise(s): Set out your plan for continued revisions.

Assignment: Optional exercise for post-workshop instructor feedback.

While a syllabus is provided, this will not be a one-fits-all workshop—daily lessons will be tweaked as needed and targeted to the needs of the group.

Writers may also be asked to revise their work throughout the week. Please bring a printed copy of your entire manuscript to this workshop.

Credit Option: Participants earn 1 credit by attending class and completing the assigned work for the week: daily reading, writing at least five pages of original work, and critiquing of own and others’ work. To earn 2 credits, participants submit an additional five pages of their work. Participants earning 3 credits complete all of the above requirements supplemented by another five pages of creative work or a short paper synthesizing how the material covered during the week applies to their own creative projects and/or teaching. The work must be handed in within two weeks of final class date.

How to apply

Please contact the instructor about possible workshop openings before sending material. Apply by April 1 if possible, but applications will be accepted after that for spaces that remain. To apply, please email a short bio, a one-page summary of your entire plot, plus the first 5 pages of your manuscript to Angela Rydell, ajrydell@wisc.edu. Please attached as .doc, .rtf or pdf. Manuscript pages must be double-spaced using 12-point Times New Roman and one-inch margins. Please paginate. If you’re converting, be sure each paragraph is indented before you hit send.
If you are accepted, the instructor will ask you to forward your one-page synopsis, "scene outline" (a short 1-3 sentence summary of each scene included in your opening first fifty pages) and first fifty pages for sharing with the class.

What previous students said:

I thought my novel was ready for publication until I spent a week in the Write-by-the-Lake "Your First Fifty Pages" Master Class. I left Madison amazed at how much better my manuscript could be. Using literary examples, instructor Angela Rydell showed us how to turn up tension, ramp up conflict, and create inciting incidents that are irresistible to agents, publishers and readers. But maybe the best part of the week was learning from other students in the class, and taking home their contagious zest for writing. Although I have an MFA and teach a college writing course, this Master Class taught me that we never stop learning how to write. ~ Lynn Kilb, Brookfield, WI

I signed up for this class because I had finished writing my novel, and after revising based on lots of feedback was ready to give the beginning a final test run. This class provided excellent instruction in craft plus the sheer time for me to think through and work through some of my writing dilemmas. This plus the face-to-face response time with the other writers in this class has made all the difference in my book. ~ Julie Martin, Wilmington, NC

I felt the class was fast paced and a lot of information was given. I gained a new confidence in my writing and in my internal critic, thanks to the positive and negative feedback in the class. ~ Winter Elise, Albuquerque NM

Angela Rydell's WBTL Master Class, Your First Fifty Pages, was constructed and designed to keep the writer writing. I found it motivating, pertinent to the craft, and a revelation. I return to the material as I continue to write. Angela is very good at managing group dynamics. ~ Anne Tigan, Madison, WI

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