



WRITING A HOOK



What is a hook? A hook is a literary technique designed to catch or grab the reader's attention and give them clues about the type of story they are about to read. The hook can be an opening sentence, phrase, paragraph, quick story, or visual image that is new, unexpected, or breaks a pattern. The goal is to 'hook' the reader like a fish, so they dig in and continue reading.

- Hooks can take all forms. An opening sentence or paragraph, a joke, a declarative sentence, even a famous quote.
- Hooks should surprise or even startle the reader, but they can even shock the reader or make them laugh.
- They can ask a question. Introduce an idea. Make a bold statement.
- They can create suspense or intrigue about the a character, the setting, or even the time period.
- Try to focus on the one concept, benefit or piece of information that is central to your story.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF HOOKS (I'm using examples here from my own books or short stories because I have such easy access to them for copying purposes.)

A statement of simple fact.

Premonitions were taken seriously in the Norville family.

(Opening line: "Mass Murder") Creates a sense of unease and suspense.

A statement/paragraph that establishes mood.

It was early morning. An insidious breeze skimmed the lake as she stepped onto the porch of her million-dollar home on Mercer Island. The breeze came unchallenged and alone, bringing with it the smell of lake water and pine and just a pinch of foreboding. As the breeze slithered past the branches and rustled the leaves, it seemed to whisper her name.

Ellen Fairchild.

(Opening paragraph: “Inn Keeping with Murder”) In my opinion, when breezes slither past tree branches to come unchallenged and alone, something is wrong, and it instantly creates a feeling of danger or suspense.

Something unusual and unexpected.

The hawk rested quietly on the branch of an old oak, gazing imperiously down on the gravesite below. Fresh graves produced tender morsels of food. And the hawk, with its keen eyesight and superior reflexes, would wait patiently until dinner poked its head above ground.

(Opening paragraph: “Grave Doubts”) The fact the story opens through the eyes of the hawk is unusual and a little unsettling, which sets up the reader for what’s to come.

A visceral image.

A noise from somewhere in the bowels of the old house woke her.

(Opening line: “If I Should Die Before I Wake” short story) Reminds readers of all the moments when noises have frightened us.

Use of humor.

I’ve begun to think that murder follows me around. No, really.

(Opening line: “A History of Murder”) Gives us an instant window into the narrator’s personality.

A statement or paragraph that forms an emotional connection.

Her body was stuffed into a duffle bag and tossed carelessly into the old well as if it were nothing more than a bag of garbage.

(Opening line: “Murder in the Past Tense”) We immediately feel sorry for the girl/woman who has been treated like trash.

Dropped in the middle of action.

My uncle was dead before he hit the floor. Not in the literal sense. He would die a minute or so later. But I didn't know that at the time.

(Opening lines: “The Key to Murder”) These lines take you by surprise and quickly put you at the scene.

Start with a strong voice.

She sat in the bedroom with the baseball bat held firmly between her hands, staring at the closet door. While she waited, the adrenaline burned through her veins, putting every nerve on alert. The walls of her mouth were dry, but her hands were sweating and there was a low humming in her ears.

Could she pull this off?

(Opening paragraph: “The Other Side” short story) These are very straightforward, declarative sentences that don't leave any room for doubt. But they catch your attention.

Remember that the goal is to catch the readers' attention and then to hold it. So, don't pull your foot off the gas pedal once you've written the hook. In fact, I often write the hook after I've finished the entire first draft because things change.

And don't be afraid to try out different types of hooks. Think about your main character, your theme, the core conflict, the time-period the story is set in, the location, and more. Decide which of these (or something else) would be a natural lead into the story and then figure out how to do it in an unusual way. And there, you've got it!