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In Medias Res

The Latin term *in medias res* literally means ‘in the midst of things’ and describes a story that starts with events already underway.

When starting a story, you essentially have two structural choices. You can begin at the beginning, and move forward using a linear narrative, or you can begin *in medias res* – ‘in the middle of things’.

The term was first coined by the Roman lyric poet Horace who said that an epic poem should not begin ‘from the egg’ but should ‘snatch’ the listener ‘into the middle of things’. Homer does exactly this in *The Iliad*, which begins with an argument. Novels that start this way are non-linear.

Almost every crime story starts this way and of course every Sherlock Holmes mystery. On the other hand the traditional fairy tale with its ‘Once Upon a Time’ opening is a classic example of a linear narrative, a story that begins right at the start.

A story that opens in the middle of events however, has the advantage of cutting out any preamble. The reader is launched into a pivotal event such as a historic battle before telling the story of how things came to this point.

There's one important consideration when choosing where to start a story. Think of the launching point as a dividing line: That moment in the story's timeline—whenever it occurs in the chronology of events—determines the status of every event you write from that point on. All the things that happened before the tale begins are the backstory. Everything that happens after is, for lack of a better term, the frontstory.

Here's a simple rule that will help keep everything clear for the reader: Frontstory is told in chronological order, from the launching point on. But backstory can be told in any order you choose. This gives the writer wonderful flexibility in how the narrative is assembled. You can use flashbacks or memories or allusions to arrange backstory in any order that works. Backstory can be shuffled like a deck of cards and it will still be clear to the reader—as long as we return to the next event in the frontstory.

Here are 6 tips that will help you create a strong *in medias res* story opening :

1: Choose a pivotal, emotional scene for your *in medias res* opening

When you start a story *in medias res*, take advantage of not having to begin with a slow-building chain of cause and effect. Begin with a scene that has a strong emotional core. For example, you could show:

- Your central character in a dilemma (such as a life-or-death situation or tough choice)
- Your main character doing something unusual that elicits curiosity (e.g. hurriedly digging a deep pit in the woods in the dead of night)

When you start a story in the middle of events, the reader has less of a guide to understand what's going on. Because of this, it's crucial to make your opening interesting and charged with emotion and significance. Scenes that are beguiling make waiting for explanation exciting rather than frustrating.

2: Plan how you will reveal backstory preceding your story's beginning

Because there is no exposition you will need to catch the reader up with the origins of your characters' situation another way. There are several ways to do this. You can reveal prior events through dialogue, flashbacks or switches in narration between past and present. Whether you choose one approach or a combination, plan how the missing pieces will slot into place.

A ‘frame narrative’ or story within a story is one option for using dialogue or direct speech to draw the reader in after your exposition-free opening.

3: Make the opening event or action crucial to your plot

This is crucial advice for any opening. Too little relevance to your core story and your opening will likely feel ‘tacked on’ and insignificant. When you begin *in medias res*, make sure that the action or event you throw the reader into is pivotal to your plot as a whole.

4: Make readers want to know how events built to this point

A story that starts *in medias res* should pique the reader’s curiosity. The intrigue created by delayed exposition is why *in medias res* is a popular type of story opening with mystery authors. It allows questions to pile up.

To get the reader interested in not only what is going on now but *why* events are unfolding a certain way, craft your opening so that the reader asks questions. Questions such as ‘Who?’, ‘Where?’ and ‘When?’

If, for example, you open your novel with a character mid-phone call, making urgent arrangements to meet a mysterious other at a specific place and time, the reader will have multiple questions. Who is the person on the end of the line? Why is their meeting so urgent? What is the significance of their meeting place? What situation has made their meeting so important?

Propelling your story forwards this way gives readers narrative events to look forward to so that explanatory exposition is replaced by the suggestion that there will be clarification further on.

5: Check that you aren’t info-dumping

A danger of opening a story *in medias res* is that you might be tempted to use big lumps of clunky exposition (‘info-dumping’) to catch the reader up. To avoid info-dumping, make sure characters don’t discuss events solely for the reader’s benefit. For example:

“As you remember, Tom, we had to get to the rendezvous spot – that abandoned beach hut at 10:00 p.m. because Jake’s guys were delivering the goods.”

“Yeah, I know. You’ll remember we missed the appointment because we were stuck behind that damn Learner driver all the way up the Seafront.”

If your characters are reminding each other of events they both participated in, you’re likely mid-info-dump.

6: Write an intriguing first line

When you start a story in the mid-action, it's especially important to write a compelling first line. In the absence of exposition, the introduction to your primary character(s) and your opening setting should be strong. Engrossing enough to carry the reader along until you fill in more blank spaces. For example the opening lines of Sarah Perry's first novel, *After Me Comes The Flood*:

I'm writing this in a stranger's room on a broken chair at an old school desk. The chair creaks if I move, and so I must keep very still.

That's an opening packed with trouble and familiarity, its also hard to resist reading on. The game as Holmes says in *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange* is 'afoot'.

And of course Dante, from the opening of *The Divine Comedy*:

In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it recreates the fear. It is scarcely less bitter than death: but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there.