The Big 10: The essential elements of a can’t-put-down First chapter

Hello, I’m Susan May Warren, the founder of My Book Therapy. This is advanced writer’s lesson!

Over the last year, we studied plotting and storycrafting elements. We learned how to make your story matter, and how to build in surprising but plausible twists and turns and how to create powerful turning point.

This year, we’re focusing on Scenes! A great book starts with a powerful first scene…and builds scene by scene from there. This year, we’re going to go deep on what makes a powerful scene, explore the elements and learn how to apply them.

In this lesson, we’re going to start with understanding the elements you need to communicate in the first chapter, something I call the Big 10. Or, the 10 Essentials of a can’t-put-down First Chapter

There are a lot of checklists for building a first chapter, and sometimes they can get overwhelming. MBT has an advanced checklist we use to help people build their Frasier Contest Scene (it’s the same checklist I use when building my first chapters!). However, I admit, it can get overwhelming.

So, we’re going start building that chapter one with 5 essential questions. In reality, this is step two in your process. See, sometimes it just helps the writing process to let your characters walk on the page and wander around a bit and ignite the story. We can hear them, talk to them, discover if we have profiled them correctly. No, these wanderings probably won’t be the final first chapter, but it gives you a chance to get some words on the page, and accomplishes 3 things:

- First – it gives you a chance to hear your character speak and see if he/she fit the profile you created for him/her.
- Second – it allows you into the story to get excited about writing and see your words on the page. Part of writing is just the success of building scenes and chapters and then believing you can do it all the way to the end.
- Thirdly – It helps you realize where your story really starts. Authors often think we have to lay out all the information about a character in the beginning. I wanted
you to get that out of your system so you could go back and rebuild the chapter with just the essentials.

So at some point in the story creation process, it is just helpful to let your character walk onto the page and let him start talking. Did I know you’d have to rewrite your chapter? Yes. But every author has to rewrite – it’s a part of the process.

So, after that initial jump into story, you need to go back and craft a foundational first chapter.

We’re going to start with the first 5 questions we need to answer, and then in the next lesson, add in advanced elements to jumpstart the writing process.

And, were going to start with the END in mind - the things our reader MUST know by the end of the first chapter, things you’ll communicate through the action and dialogue: Competence, Lie, Fear, Focus/Want, Ignition/Inciting Incident. I like to start with the deeper issues, and then build forward, sort of like a house – the bones first, then the pretty stuff.

I made it into a nice little acronym for you, because that helps me remember everything as I write, and because that’s how my brain works. You don’t have to use it. 😊

Think of your first scene like a CLIFF…and you are about to send your character off it. You want us to see him before he goes flying into the story."

**Competence**: Show that your character is good at something and can eventually win the day with these skills.

**Lie**: Where will your character start their inner journey (at MBT, we call it the lie they believe…which sets them up later for the “truth that sets them free.)

**Ignition**: Set up the Inciting Incident. Perhaps it’s just the hint of the II. Maybe it is the actual II. But hint that that something could be happening…even if you are setting up a perfect world situation, we will then suspect your character is about to fall, hard. 😊
Fear: We want to know what your character fears – maybe he sees something, eh says something, it’s usually very subtle, but something that we can look at later and say, yes, we saw what he didn’t want to have happen!

Focus: We want to see what your character wants, what his goals are. What is he about?

Because you know your character, you should be able to craft this scene. If not, start with a character interview.

Questions to ask you and your character to help build the first chapter

Competence: What are you good at? What are your super power skills that we can highlight now to show how you’ll save the day at the end?

Lie: What Lie do you believe and how do you show this in your everyday life?

Ignition: What will happen in this chapter, big or small, that will change the life of your character and ignite him on his journey? Inciting Incident!

Fear: What fear hangs over the book and how can you hint at it in this first chapter?

Focus/Want: How can you express your characters focus in this chapter? Show who they are and what they want?

It’s key to go through these questions step by step, so you understand your character and what you need to accomplish in this chapter.

Now that I have all the elements I want to end up with, I’m going to go back to the beginning and start forming my HOOK, those things that actually help me build the first line. I call them SHARP.

Stakes – What is at risk? What happens if they don’t meet their goal? If you’re writing a suspense, How can you weave in the danger of the suspense, or hint at the stakes of the story. Think: What can/will go wrong in this story and what will happen if they don’t save the day? You don’t want to give us a chunk of narrative, but rather layer in the hint of the threat so the reader knows there is something at stake.

Hero/Heroin ID - Emotion/Mood – What is your character feeling right now, and how are you embedding it onto the page? And how will we show that in a compelling way in the first scene? What situation, as the story begins, is most compelling, most sympathetic? You are trying to get your reader to relate to your hero/heroine, and putting them in a situation that readers can relate to emotionally is paramount.
Anchoring - Storyworld, including the 5 W’s – Who, What, Where, When, and Why. What storyworld location can you use to create a sense of danger/suspense? I used a coffee shop in my book the Shadow of your Smile, but I conjured up a blizzard outside and then put a strange car with two scary men in the abandoned parking lot.

RUN - remember to start your story On the Run – meaning, the story already in action, as if you’ve simply thrown back the curtain to see the story in progress.

Problem/Storyquestion – what is the inner question that will drive your reader/character through the story? AND, How can you end the scene with something worse, even the inciting incident that will propel your story quickly into the Noble Quest?

Now, pull out your first scene draft. What elements from this first scene reveal your character’s identity? Add that to the recipe.

We’re going to take a look at a quick first scene for a book I’ve been working on for a while: Limelight, a novel I wrote for MBT teaching purposes.

For your FYI, here is the Premise:

She’s a movie star with a cause – fighting to stop human trafficking. In fact, she’s gone far as to write, produce, fund and star in an independent film about the horrors of human trafficking. Except – someone doesn’t want it shown, and has bad-mouthed the movie onto Hollywood’s black list. Not only that, but she’s been publically dumped by her mega-star boyfriend, and her finances are in the red. She just wants to get away and figure out what to do next – take the action-flick, mega-bucks next role, or fight to get her indy film shown on the big screen. Is she actress, or activist?

He’s a park ranger who just wants to stay out of trouble. He’s seen enough of it, thanks, while serving as an Army Ranger in Afghanistan. More than that, his actions haunt him, and he just wishes he could break free of the memories of his own actions. He’s trying hard, from working with the youth at his church, to delivering meals on wheels to world war two veterans. He’s even agreed to keep an eye on his talent-manager brother’s high-faulting celebrity, although the last thing he needs is a high-maintenance movie star hiding out on park property, treating him as if he’s the butler. It would help if she actually believed the threats against her life…

When threat becomes attempt, can he find the hero he’s tried to forget? And can she stop playing a role, and decide just who she wants to be? It’ll take facing their

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mistakes, and holding onto truth to outwit a killer in this big screen story of secrets and revenge.

Let’s return to the first chapter starter questions and apply them to this story:

1. How can you weave in the danger of the suspense, or hint at the stakes of the story? What does she have to lose? (STAKES)

Because this is a romantic suspense, I needed to weave in the sense of danger – that someone is after her. I hinted that she was involved in a human trafficking documentary, and then of course, add in the decoy of the elephant which turns into a bomb at the end of the chapter. Someone is clearly gunning for her.

2. What situation, as the story begins, is most compelling, most sympathetic, and how can I show her competence? (H/H ID)

I want to portray Kenzie as a normal person – actresses can often feel so untouchable – so I put her in a place every person dreads – being the one on the dumped side of a breakup. And hers is very public. Also, I layered in the sense that she is just a down-home girl as she drives home and orders banana crème pie and licks the box with her fingers. Her competence is that she is a great actress, and knows how to blend in with the southerners that she is about to hang out with – she’s going to hide in East TN.

3. What storyworld (Anchoring) location can you use to create a sense of danger/suspense?

Her Hollywood home isn’t necessarily a dangerous place, so I used strong nouns and verbs to create a sense of danger:

- The lights sprayed down from the hovering palm
- The light pressed away the shadows of the main room, glaring
- dark bank of windows
- misshapen mass

By inserting verbs and nouns that conjure up a sense of chaos, I was able to turn this normally safe world into a sinister place.
4. How can you start already in motion – how about AFTER the award’s ceremony?

5. How can you end the scene with something worse, even the inciting incident that will propel your story quickly into the Noble Quest? And, what is the story question?

   This scene ends with a bomb exploding in her living room – and ignites the suspense plot. The bigger question is…is her life as an actress a waste, or is there a higher calling, even in Hollywood?

You’ll find in the chapter in the PDF Notes, so you can read how I did. Here’s a hint. Don’t write, just talk through the scene with a friend or craft partner. See if you have captured all the elements. If it doesn’t work, try a different scene. Now that you know what you’re looking for, you can build the scene verbally before you get it on the page (but remember to take notes of your conversation!)

Remember, you don’t have to get the scene right on the first pass…you’re still in rough draft mode. Just write. Then add the Foundation, and finally…the advanced elements to bring your scene to publication level.

But as you are thinking through your first chapter – and every chapter, I encourage you to think through the BIG 10.

As a review, here are your Big 10:

1. Have you created sympathy for your character so we love them?
2. Have you shown us your character’s home life, so we know where their journey begins?
3. Have you shown us your character’s competence, and their identity?
4. Have you given us a glimpse of your characters greatest dream?
5. Have you given us a hint of your character’s greatest fear?
6. Have you given us a hint at your character’s lie?
7. Have you delivered the story question that will drive us through the book?
8. Do you have crisp, interesting dialogue?
9. Have you honed your hook to include the Storyworld, including the Who, What, Why, When and Where’s of the story? Have you used the five senses?
10. Finally, have you ended the scene with a disaster, or something that makes the reader want to turn the page?

Start the first scene with your character on the edge of the CLIFF…ready to take off into the story. Build in the 5 elements: Competence, Lie, Ignition, Fear, Focus, then build the SHARP elements and you’ll have a powerful first chapter.

I hope this has been a help as you craft scenes. Our next lesson will cover the basic overview of different scenes to set up a foundation for all the advanced elements we’ll learn this year.

Go and write something brilliant!

Susie May
Here’s the Scene in Kenzie’s POV.

Chapter One

Just once, MacKenzie would like to take the Oscar walk down Hollywood Boulevard in a pair of holey jeans, a Blue Devil’s tee-shirt, and a pair of flip-flops.

She pulled the pulled her wrap tight around her shoulders, even as the February chill found the liberal gaps in her dress and raised gooseflesh. A thousand lights blinked down at her from the Kodak Theater, and exhaust mixed with the earthy smell from the palm trees lined up like sentries along Hollywood Boulevard watching the parade of limousine maneuvering to the end of the red carpet. She looked for her driver in the mass of shiny vehicles. Hurry up, Tony.

Sure, she liked her silver Christian Louboutin sling-backs, and the deep purple satin gown picked by her stylist from some new Australian designer, but MacKenzie could do without the ten pound emerald earrings pulling at her ears, and especially the fact that every flash, every pop of light, meant that some gossip rag had fresh ammunition to litter her shame across the newsstands of America.

No, not her shame. After all, she’d been half-way across the world, filming in the back alleys and dregs of Bangkok, trying to expose the underbelly of human trafficking while her husband – no, make that ex-husband as if two weeks ago -- exposed his heart to the leading lady in his, yes, Oscar-nominated film.

“MacKenzie Grace!” A red carpet host for Hollywood Tonight – what was her name, Twila? -- pushed a microphone in her face.


“And you should be the one earning an Oscar tonight for your magnanimous smile. How do you feel about your ex-husband being nominated for best actor?”

Twila’s question meant MacKenzie had managed to pull off a gracious smile tonight for the eternal three seconds the camera had panned to her and zoomed while Nils Bruno climbed to the stage. Still, it was long enough to drill a hole clean through her, leave her exhausted and raw as she watched Nils accept the award, nod to his new wife and cleanly excise from his life the woman who’d believed in him, the one who’d run lines with him, and who footed the bill for his shiny white teeth.

Now, she added a gracious tone. “The Academy clearly saw his talent.”

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Talent. Like emptying half her bank account, and totaling her Astin Martin. That took real talent. *Smile.*

“So, are you interested in co-starring again with him? Now that’s he’s an Oscar winner?

Translation: now that Nils Bruno, aka Robby Brunardo, former car-washing burger flopper from McDonalds had outshone her on the big screen?

“Nils is an amazing actor. Anyone would be privileged to work with him.”

If she smiled any harder, she might grind her molars to dust.

_He used to wear male shaping garments under his clothes for his publicity shots!_ She wanted to scream at the top of her lungs.

But a woman trying to charm Hollywood into backing her recent Indy film, the one she hoped would launch her from action-thriller babe to serious actress, shouldn’t publically disparage one of America’s ‘sexiest men alive’.

She still had his old ratty converse in a box at home. Maybe she could sell them on e-bay, earn some cash to promote her new film, maybe raise some discerning heads in the industry…

Oh, who was she kidding? She’d been Hayes O’Brien, 006, international action heroine for so long, directors probably forgot she’d earned a degree in drama at Duke University. Or that, for a very short run, she’d even been courted by Broadway.

Then again, maybe everyone had simply weeded through her airbrushed beauty to the truth. She couldn’t act her way out of a paper bag.

There went Tommy Nave’s nasally sixth grade voice in her head again. She shivered.

Greg Alexander wrapped his warm arm around her shoulders. “Tony will be here in a minute. He’s about five limos back.”

She wanted to lean into him, but she hated to encourage the press. They already had her dating at least three actors, two of whom she’d never even met. The last thing she needed was a scandal about dating her agent.

“You’re doing great, Mackenzie,” Greg said, lifting his hand to wave to – oh it didn’t matter. She looked away.

_You’re doing great._

She managed a wan smile as another flash went off.
He sounded like a doctor, *just another pinch*, and *yes, this will hurt a bit.* Yes, just a bit.
Watching Nils walk the red carpet – without her -- had filleted her insides. Drawing a deep breath actually hurt between her ribs.

Greg lifted his arm, and waved her driver to the curb. “Okay, sweetheart, you go home, get changed, and I’ll meet you at the Vanity Fair party.” He held out his hand to MacKenzie, as if to help her into the limo.

She ignored it, let the footman open the door for her, gathered her dress and slid into the seat. But before Greg could shut the door, she put her hand out to stop it. “I’m not going.”

He’d turned away, migrating toward his next client. “What?” Now, he looked as if she might have been speaking Bengali. “Did you say you weren’t going?”

MacKenzie began pulling off one of her shoes. “I’m tired. I have jet lag, and I’ll just be followed around all night with microphones and cameras, gossip magazines wondering if I’m pining after Nils.”

She waited for a response, but Greg just stared at her, as if still trying to comprehend her words.

“I just want to go home, soak in a bath, maybe eat some pizza.” Or pie. Yes, a creamy – maybe coconut cream, or...yes, banana cream! pie. The closest thing she was going to get to banana puddin' this side of the Mississippi.

Greg finally stirred to life – probably at the thought of her reckless consumption of calories. “Kenzie, hon, you need to schmooze, get some face time with the right people if you hope to get backers for your film. Tonight is the perfect night to generate some buzz. You’ve been laying low for --”

“I’ll call you later.” She pulled the door closed and leaned back, thankful for the silence embedded in the plush seats. Tony, his dark hair slicked back and a silver earring in his left ear glanced up at her in the rear view mirror.

“Home, Miss Grace?”

“Please.”

She watched the crowd wave as her limousine pulled away.

*Home.* Home was a tidy double-wide with brown shag carpeting, a weather-bare pink velour sofa, and an irritable tabby named Boss probably running its claws down her mother’s orange polyester drapes. There’d be a bowl of cold grits in the fridge, and possibly a container of store-
bought animal crackers on the counter with the lions missing, of course. And her father slumped asleep in his ripped vinyl recliner waiting for mama to get off her shift at the rayon factory.

Longing curled through her they passed the luminous red pagoda of Mann’s Chinese theater, lit up for the Academy Awards, and across the street, Hollywood’s Roosevelt Hotel, its neon red sign an icon of the silver screen.

Places her parents had never seen.

Never would, thanks to the fact that Mama couldn’t figure out how those “tin cans stay in the air.”

MacKenzie eased off her other shoe, and brought her foot up to rub the stress from her cramped toes. “Could we stop by Patrick’s Roadhouse, maybe pick up a banana cream pie?”

Tony flashed her a smile, again in the mirror and it was the first genuine thing she’d seen all day.

She closed her eyes, forcing herself not to see Nils with Isobel.

“A whole pie, or just a piece, ma’am?” Tony said, pulling up to the Roadhouse. The place teemed with people, some eating out on the patio, and hers wasn’t the only limo in the parking lot.

“Just a piece would be perfect.”

It wasn’t her mama’s banana puddin’, but then again, the roadhouse didn’t have her mama’s secret ingredient, the taste of love, in stove-top cooked cream, stirred with a wooden spoon, her mama’s hand cradling hers.

Oh brother, she was turning into a country-song right before her eyes. Next thing, she’d dissolve into a y’all while she was fixin’ to dive into her paeh.

Tony returned with the pie in a Styrofoam container and she didn’t bother to wait until she’d changed out of her dress to dive in. She did manage to restrain herself from licking the cream from the container with her tongue. She used her finger, instead, just for Mama.

They pulled into her winding, Cypress-tree bordered drive and stopped at her front portico.

The lights sprayed down from the hovering palms as she stepped out onto her terracotta-tiled porch, and handed Tony the empty container and her fork in a bag. Then she scooped up her shoes, dangling them from her fingers and tiptoed up the walk.

The front door opened without pause – Tony must have unlocked it remotely -- and she dropped her shoes onto a padded rattan bench, flicked on a light. “Marissa?”
No response from her housekeeper. Tony walked in behind her, carrying her purse. “Everything okay, Miss Grace?”

She glanced at him, and something about the way he looked past her, to her open living room made her pulse turn to slurry. “What is it?”

The light pressed away the shadows of the main room, glaring on the white leather sofa, the mahogany side tables, a shiny bookcase filled with souvenirs from Paris, Monaco, South Africa. Overhead, the fan stirred the smells of the freshly potted gardenias, brought in for her arrival home yesterday. Beyond that, the dark bank of windows led to the pool area, but her gaze fixed on the center of the room, at the white, misshapen mass atop the glass coffee table.

“Did you have that shipped? Because it wasn’t in your luggage.” Tony touched his hand on her arm ever so briefly, then moved past her, toward the object.

“No…I’ve never—“

He reached it, and yanked the cover off.

MacKenzie fought the swirl of delight. Nils hadn’t forgotten. No, he’d remembered their joke, her first red-carpet appearance when she’d nearly ended up on her face in front of Meryl Streep. MacKenzie the Elephant.

So, he’d given her an elephant for the Oscars every year since.

An elephant in bronze on her coffee table. A china elephant in her kitchen. An impressionist print of an elephant over her fireplace.

And this year, a nearly life-sized stuffed baby elephant, wrapped in a magnificent yellow bow.

_Oh, Nils._

So, maybe she’d forgive him for not mentioning her tonight in his litany of thank-yous. He clearly remembered what they’d had together, knew what she’d meant to him. “I can’t believe –“

But Tony had finished reading the card, and when he turned, his expression stopped her cold. Chilled her to the bone.

_No – not again --_

And that’s when she heard the ticking.
Tony had slapped his arm around her waist and was already tackling her to the floor when the bomb exploded.

The next scene – Luke’s (the hero) first scene is posted at www.mybooktherapy.ning.com – Read it and then, for practice, answer the questions to analyze and apply them to your own stories.