

The Opening Six-Pack

by James M. Jackson

I strive to write openings that resemble a hunk's rippling abdominal muscles: strong, taut, and without a layer of fat—your prototypical six-pack. Producing that effect does not come without great effort. To develop an opening six-pack, I incorporate six design elements.

- (1) **Hook the reader.** Line one's job is to make the reader engage with line two. The first paragraph's job is to encourage the reader to continue into the second paragraph. Page one has done its task if the reader turns the page and reads page two. Chapter one should *force* the reader to want to read chapter two.
- (2) **Establish a bond between the reader and at least one key character.** People read if they care what is about to happen. Most readers are interested in people more than events. To satisfy that need, they must establish a bond with characters.
- (3) **Set the scene.** Readers like to know where the action is taking place.
- (4) **Get the conflict going (internal, external, or both).** No conflict equals snoring.
- (5) **Describe the protagonist (or other main character) in some unique manner** so the reader can start to draw a mental picture.
- (6) **Surprise readers—maybe even startle them.** “Really?” our hooked reader says to herself. “I’ve *got to* find out more about that.” And she continues onto the next page.

Bad Policy was the first published book in the Seamus McCree series. An earlier draft won the Evan Marshall Fiction Makeover Contest. Part of the feedback I received from Evan suggested that the novel should start later in the story. Authors want readers to know how their characters came about, and as first in the series, I had fallen into that fatal trap. I eventually cut the first four chapters (in a series of painful-to-me operations) and then faced the problem of introducing snippets of the important information from those chapters back into the story in a timely manner.

Here are the first two pages of *Bad Policy*:

Driving up my street, a pillow calling my name, I spotted Cincinnati police vehicles collected near the top of the hill. My stomach clenched. An animated gathering of neighbors stood across the street from my house. With my Victorian's ancient wiring, I immediately thought of fire. Not that—no fire engines. I pulled to the curb behind a phalanx of cop cars blocking the street and approached an officer.

“What happened?” I asked, surprised either one of us could hear my words over the hammering of my heart.

“Other side of the street,” he snarled and pointed to the gawkers.

“But this is my house.”

“You live here? Hold on a sec. Hey, Sarge,” he yelled over his shoulder without taking his eyes off me. “Over here.”

The sergeant gave me the onceover as he strode across the lawn, thumbs tucked into his belt.

“This guy claims he lives here,” the patrolman said.

The sergeant held out his hand. “Got some ID?” To the patrolman he added, “Back to your post.”

I dug through my wallet and handed him my license. “What happened?” I asked again.

He compared the license to my face. “Seamus McCree.”

“It’s pronounced ‘Shay-mus,’ not ‘See-mus.’”

“Now you say it, the name rings a bell. Right address. We’ve got some questions for you. It would be better if we talked somewhere quiet. Any objections if we take a quick trip downtown? We’ll give you a ride back. Frankly, I’m not sure when the crime scene guys will release your house. You should be thinking about a place you can stay tonight.”

He gently took my arm and guided me to a cruiser, opened the back door, and ducked me in. We were moving by the time I realized he had neatly removed me from my home and temporarily focused my attention on where I could stay rather than what was going on.

“Now can you tell me what happened?” I asked through the grill separating us.

“Sorry, we need to confirm a few things with you first.”

My father had been a Boston police sergeant when he died. Even as tired as I was, I could interpret his answer: you’re a suspect; we’ll ask the questions.

[End of First Page]

The officer left me alone in an interrogation room smelling of burnt coffee and justified fear. I slipped off my suit coat and hung it over the back of the metal chair and loosened my tie. If the police had only wanted information, the questioning would have started immediately. Since I was cooling my heels in a

room decorated with a table bolted to the floor, three chairs, and what I knew to be a one-way mirror, I was clearly a suspect. Standard interrogation procedures included keeping the subject off-balance. One approach was to use a sterile room away from familiar surroundings. With minimal furnishings and putrid green walls, this place fit the bill. Then they would add pressure by keeping him waiting alone in the silence.

Silence would not work on me. A thinker by nature, I thrived on solitude. Despite that, corded muscles grabbed my neck and shoulders, adding to the headache I'd had all day from lack of sleep and too much caffeine. My tension came from not knowing what had happened at my house combined with the knowledge that this interrogation room belonged to the Homicide Unit.

[End of Second Page]

My thoughts as I finalized the opening two pages:

Line one set the city (Cincinnati) [Design Element #3], gave a whiff of a problem (collected police vehicles) and suggested the protagonist (whoever that might be) was tired. By the third line the reader knows the immediate location is the protag's Victorian house [DE #3 and #5] and it isn't fire. [The reader is asking, so what is it?—*nibbling at the bait for Design Element #1*]

In the next several lines, I intend for the readers to begin attaching their feelings to the protag's situation [DE#2]. Police are all over your house; they won't tell you what's happened. Your stomach would be tight; you'd have a headache from worry. Yes?

Then I introduce the protag's name. Seamus isn't common in the U.S., and many (most?) mispronounce it. I do not want the reader to feel as I did when I learned how Hermione Granger from the Harry Potter novels pronounces her first name. I solved the problem by having a cop mispronounce Seamus's name and Seamus corrects it. [DE#5]

The conflict ramps up as the cop not only refuses to answer Seamus's question about what happened, but suggests Seamus won't get in his house for a while. [DE #4] **The first page ends with the lines:** *My father had been a Boston police sergeant when he died. Even as tired as I was, I could interpret his answer: you're a suspect; we'll ask the questions.* These sentences provide snippets of backstory [DE #5] and continue to ratchet up the tension [DE #4].

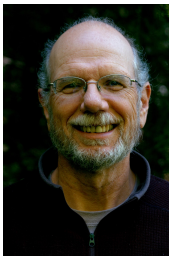
Would you turn the page to find out more? My plan was to make sure you did.

The next two paragraphs paint the introduction to the next scene [a new DE#3] and provide a bit more information about the protagonist [DEs #2 and #5]. **I close the section with . . . this interrogation room belonged to the Homicide Unit.**

With that major increase in the stakes (it's a homicide!) [DE #1] the chapter ends, and I hope the final surprise clinches the deal and the reader turns the page [DE #1]. **Or that was my plan. It didn't turn out that way.**

The publisher combined the first two chapters, in part because chapter one was so short. Thus the second page, as printed, actually continues for another half page. [Negative Design Element #1!] The reader learned more about Seamus: he's been in the room before, but last time it was on the other side of the one-way mirror. That fortunately leaves another question in the reader's mind, and (I hope) she'll turn the page.

In the end, it is not the author, but the reader, who decides whether the first two pages satisfy. What say you?



James M. Jackson authors the Seamus McCree novels. *Ant Farm* (Spring 2015), a prequel to *Bad Policy* (2013) and *Cabin Fever* (2014), recently won a Kindle Scout nomination. Ebook published by Kindle Press, print from Wolf's Echo Press. Find more information about Jim and his writing at <http://jamesmajackson.com>.