

## The First Two Pages, by Jane Gorman

Opening lines are tough. The first line of my first book – well, that was a killer. I was rewriting my first two pages after the book had been through a string of editors. After it was formatted. After I got the proof, read through it one more time – and changed the beginning yet again. Not major changes, really. Just changes that (I hope) gave my readers a better sense of who the main character is. What the promise of the story is.

For that's how I see the first two pages: a promise. Readers get the premise from the blurb on the back of the book or on the retail website. Readers get an idea of the characters and plot from reviews about the book. But those first two pages are a promise, from me to my readers, giving them a sense, a feeling of what they'll experience if they read the book.

*“Łukasz Kaminski collapsed against the rough stone wall ...”*

The very first word presented the first difficult choice I had to make: the character's name. I've had many opportunities to regret this choice as I've struggled with the formatting of his name on websites or in excerpts (the Polish letter that looks like an L but is pronounced like a W). I'm not really sure how it will show up on your computer screen as you read this. But as I developed the character in my mind, got to know him, his likes, dislikes, fears and dreams, his name came with it. The name grew organically from the character, and stuck.

Another decision I struggled with in that first sentence was not starting the book with Adam Kaminski, the hero of my series. Previous first chapters (and there were several versions!) started in Philadelphia, where the reader got to meet Detective Adam Kaminski on his home turf, before he was sent to Warsaw. Or with Adam arriving in Warsaw, before we met Łukasz. But with each of those chapters, I found I was starting too soon, before the story really began. I had to wait and start at the beginning, not before.

So in the final version, we meet Łukasz Kaminski. In this scene, he's just regaining consciousness after a violent attack. In the first version of this scene, he “woke up.” Those were the words I used. In later versions, he “tried to move.” This was an improvement – it gave him agency, he was taking action – but even though he, as a man, found himself struggling to get out of a difficult situation, to the reader it still sounded passive. So instead, finally, he collapsed.

*“ŁUKASZ KAMINSKI collapsed against the rough stone wall as a wave of pain passed through him. He curled into himself, his lean body pressed against the hard stone, no longer caring why or how he got here.”* Here I add some elements of his situation, though not all. He's in pain. He has a serious lack of concern despite his obvious trouble.

*“A few minutes or a few hours later, he couldn't be sure, he opened his eyes and forced himself to move. He moaned, the shock of cold air painful against his face and hands. He sat up, leaned forward, and retched. The sound of his spasms filled the narrow street, echoing off the yellow stone buildings.”*

*With a final cough, he rolled away from the steaming mess on the ground and stood, wiping his face with the back of his sleeve. Leaning against the wall, he shivered and hunched his shoulders, tucking his bare hands under his armpits. A freezing mist shrouded the cobblestones around him. Tiny particles of ice covered every surface, catching the dim yellow light escaping from old-fashioned gazowy lamps that sprouted at uneven intervals.”*

Time has passed. In fact, he passed out. But once again, I’m trying to avoid a passive description. Clearly, he’s still not doing so great – the first thing he does on regaining consciousness is throw up. Besides explaining Łukasz’s predicament, this is also where I introduce the setting. I don’t say where it is, but instead give a taste of what type of place it is: dark, old fashioned, cobblestoned. And I throw in the Polish word for gas lamp just to give a hint of where the action is taking place.

*“‘Która godzina jest?’ He heard a female voice complaining. ‘Szybciej, szybciej.’*

*The couple glanced at him as they drew closer then looked away, their faces registering their disgust at the stink of the vomit. Łukasz opened his mouth to speak, but turned his eyes down when he saw their expressions. The clicking of their boots on the cobblestones faded as they turned the bend in the road. He stood for a minute, considering his options, and limped in the same direction. “*

In these paragraphs, Łukasz has to make a decision. It’s his first decision since we met him, so it’s an action that will define him for the reader. In that decision, he accepts that no one is going to stop and help him. Even more than that, he doesn’t ask for help. He’s not that kind of man. But enough mystery at this point, I realized. The description of the predicament in which Łukasz finds himself originally went on much longer. I cut this drastically in order to get to the meat of the mystery sooner – without giving too much away too fast, of course.

*“Walking reduced some of the pain in his legs and back, but his sides felt bruised, and after only a few steps he paused to catch his breath. He shoved his hands in his pockets, then stiffened as his fingers wrapped around the phone. Basia’s phone, dead beyond repair since its immersion in the frozen river. Completely dead.*

*“Grief flooded through him, threatening to overwhelm him. In an effort to maintain control, he focused on trying to remember what had happened to him. He remembered leaving his apartment, following yet another lead from the investigation that now dominated his life. But whoever had attacked him had succeeded in erasing the memory of what that lead was and where it had taken him. He let the phone drop in his pocket, wrapped his arms around his injured body, and kept moving forward.”*

Now we know a little bit more about who Łukasz is, what trouble he’s faced, and, perhaps most importantly in our genre, that someone is dead. For someone must always die. I’ve read gorgeous mysteries in which the murder takes place well into the book, after I’ve had a chance to meet and get to know each of the characters. But I chose not to structure this book that way. The reader does get to know Basia, the dead girl. In fact, one

of my early readers suggested that Basia was her favorite character. But she dies before the story begins.

At this point, Łukasz takes control again. Asserting his strength, his determination, his ability to fight through the pain and the grief and pursue his goal. But what waits ahead?

*“His path dead-ended at a large town square. A handful of couples and some groups of youth still lingered in the area despite the cold. Nearest him, outdoor cafes were dark and shuttered, tables packed away for the night, shops deserted by their keepers. Across the expanse of the cobblestone and brick paved square, Warsaw’s Royal Castle loomed out of the darkness. Lights placed low on the ground shone up at its facade, setting fire to the red brick and yellow stone of its walls. He walked toward the castle, hoping for solace and warmth in its lights.*

*A group of young men, the oldest no more than seventeen, turned to watch him. One of the boys, his head shaved almost bald, his skinny form draped in a worn black leather jacket and thin metal chains, stood.”*

I give my readers yet more description of the setting. Often cited as a no-no, I know. I went back and forth with myself on how much of the setting to include this early on. I wrote out more, then I deleted most of it, then I added new descriptions, then moved them around. In the end, I accepted that my settings are important characters in my books. Just as it’s important for the reader to meet and get a sense of Łukasz and his goals, the reader has to get a sense of the setting. Of Warsaw. For this story could take place nowhere else.

Łukasz has moved forward, through his own determination and grit. He has faced his grief, he has started on a path to find the answers he needs. But he’s not facing an easy road. At the bend in the road, he was ignored by strangers. At the end of the road, he’s confronted by a rough looking teenager – and in Poland, that could easily mean neo-Nazi. I leave the reader at the end of the first two pages with a sense not only of the troubles that have befallen Łukasz but with the knowledge he’s got a lot more trouble coming his way.

I hope it worked, and that these two pages evoke a sensation that holds throughout the book. I’ve won some praise for this opening. I was a semi-finalist in the East Texas Writers Guild competition specifically on the first two pages, which was a nice recognition. My positive review from Kirkus Reviews suggests that I carried that promise successfully throughout the book. But the ultimate judge is the reader. I invite you to see for yourself.



Jane Gorman is the author of the Adam Kaminski mystery series. Having worked as an anthropologist, a diplomat and a park ranger, Gorman turned to mysteries as yet another way to visit new worlds and meet new people. Gorman's books are informed by her

international experiences, both as an anthropologist and through her work with the U.S. State Department. Her books are each set in a different city or town around the world, building on her eye for detailed settings, appreciation of complex characters, and love of place-based mystery. Visit Jane's website at <http://janegorman.com>.