of them, Luke sets off the hologram of Princess Leia calling for help. This is something different, something strange. It piques interest.

In The Wizard of Oz, the opening disturbance comes in the very first shot. Dorothy is running home to the farm with Toto close behind. She is frightened. We learn immediately that it's because Miss Gulch just threatened to have Toto taken away.

A few minutes later, the disturbance intensifies as Miss Gulch rides to the farm and gets custody of the dog.

So very early in your novel you need to have this challenge to the status quo. Some examples I listed in Plot & Structure:

- The Lead gets a phone call in the middle of the night.
- The Lead gets a letter with some intriguing news.
- The boss calls the Lead into his office.
- A child is taken to the hospital.
- A car breaks down in a desert town.
- The Lead wins the lottery.
- The Lead witnesses an accident. Or a murder.
- The Lead's wife (or husband) has left, leaving a note.

The Use and Abuse of Prologues

One of the most popular TV shows of the late 1950s and early 1960s was Peter Gunn. The series, starring Craig Stevens as a cool, jazz-loving private eye, didn't start with credits. It jumped right in with a shocking incident, usually somebody getting murdered. It lasted about two minutes.

Then the famous Henry Mancini opening theme burst on, with the credits. The rest of the show was about Gunn's getting to the bottom of what happened. This was the proper use of a grabber prologue, because (1) it was short and dramatic in and of itself, and (2) it had something to do with the main plot.

Dean Koontz's Midnight begins with a prologue (even though he calls it chapter one). It works for the following reasons.

The opening line:

Janice Capshaw liked to run at night.

Koontz begins many of his books this way, with a named character, in motion, and something intriguing. Running at night presages mystery.

As Janice runs, Koontz also gives us some details about Janice and the setting. Using mood details like light and fog, an ominous scene unfolds.

As she ran down the sloping main street, through pools of amber light, through layered night shadows caused by wind-sculpted cypresses and pines, she saw no movement other than her own—and the sluggish, serpentine advance of the thin fog through the windless air.

Koontz also drops in backstory elements: a short paragraph about Janice's childhood, how darkness soothed her, and another about her late husband and how much she misses him.

With these small bits of backstory in place, the reader's sympathy is with Janice as she jogs in the dark. Koontz spends the remainder of the chapter building the suspense of a horrific chase and, eventually, the stunning death of Janice Capshaw. The death has more impact because the background details bonded us, even briefly, to the character.

A prologue can be used to set up the story to come by giving us some essential history mixed with a tone of anticipation. The rather long prologue to Pat Conroy's The Prince of Tides is like that. It gives the family background of the narrator, Tom Wingo, and his twin sister, Savannah, who has twice attempted suicide. The prologue goes:

The truth is this: Things happened to me and my family, and I love my family, and I know families who live out their entire lives without anything of interest happening to them. I have never seen them. And you think the Wingo family was a family that was filled with all sorts of strengths and virtues and great people and great deeds. Think about it. The Wingoos were a family that fate tested and defeated and dismembered and disowned and disgraced. The Wingo family did not possess some strengths into the fray, and these strengths did not survive the descent of the Farleys. Unless you believe her claim that no Wingo family survived.

I will tell you my story.

Nothing is missing.

I promise you.

To write a prologue like that, style is important and the mood created is what gives this prologue.

Backstory

Backstory is any account of events that take place before the main narrative. This element of fiction must be handled with great care. Use too much of it in the beginning, and the story may bog down. But use none of it and essential character bonding won't take place.
Try for a good balance by starting with action. My rule is: Act first, explain later. In fact, it’s best to withhold as much information as possible in your opening chapter. Later, you drop in only what is essential.

Quite often I’ll read the opening chapter of a young writer’s manuscript and it will go something like this:

Victoria stepped off the stagecoach onto the dusty street of Tumbleweed, New Mexico. The smell of dust assaulted her nostrils. She heard the tinkling of a piano coming from somewhere, then saw the huge sign Saloon hovering over her.

All right, we’ve got a character in action, arriving in town. Good. But shortly after this, maybe halfway down page one, comes the following:

She thought wistfully of her home in Boston. She missed it already. She had been happy there.

Her father had warned her not to go West. When she was sixteen ...

And then comes page after page of backstory. The true opening has stopped and we are given what I call backdumping. Many times the young writer will spend most of that first chapter on backdrops, returning to the present only near chapter’s end.

It’s an understandable fault. The writer thinks readers must know all about who the Lead character is and how she got here before the story can take off. It’s an attempt to bond readers to the character, get them to care, then start up the action.

Understandable, but doomed to failure. The problem is it puts on the brakes. The actual story stalls while we get all the background information.

Readers will wait a long time for full explanations if you give them interesting or troubling circumstances up front. But you can drop in some backstory elements to increase the reader’s interest in the characters.

Backdrops can be done with skillful dialogue, as Colleen Coble demonstrates in chapter one of Alaska Twilight:

Augusta cupped Haley’s face in her hands and looked deep into her eyes.

“I’m so proud of you. You’re brave enough to face it now.”

She was in her Doris Day encouragement mode. Haley was in no mood for it. “I’m not being brave,” she said. “I want my movies, my friends, the malls, and especially my powdered donuts. This is not my idea of a good time. I’m only here because my shrink said this would help bring closure, so I’m going to see it through. If I reconnect with Chloe, maybe the nightmares will stop.”

If the writing is good enough it can make backstory a pleasure to read. In Phil Callaway’s wistful novel The Edge of the World, the narrator begins chapter two with: On August 4, 1976, the Rapture of the Church took place. I was sleeping at the time. But before I tell you about it, allow me a little more background.

Having captured our attention with the first lines, Callaway gives us some family information, but not in plain vanilla language.

I am the youngest. The cabooses, my brothers call me. A mistake, my third-grade teacher once said. I sometimes wonder if they’d miss me at all if I packed my bags and hopped a boat bound for my grandparent’s homeland of Scotland. But I’m quite sure they would. I may be the caboose, but they seem to like knowing I’m back here.

Both Koontz and Stephen King have used more extensive backstory in the early pages of some of their most successful books.

In The Dead Zone, one of King’s best, he introduces three characters—Johnny, Greg, and Sarah. Each character starts off in action. Then each is given extensive backstory. On page 9, for example, there’s a section on Greg, referring back to his father’s rages. This deepens our interest in and sympathy for Greg.

Pages 17 through 21 are dedicated to Sarah’s backstory.

The reason these sections work is twofold. First, King starts off with action, then drops back. That’s the way it should always be.

Second, the backstory is essential detail, contributing to the reader’s sense of why the character is involved in the action.

Dean Koontz’s first bestseller was Whispers, and he actually attributes this success to his conscious decision to deepen his characters. Up to that time, he’d done a lot of action, good action, but felt it was surface level. With Whispers, he created deep backgrounds.

Whispers has one of the most famous, chilling action scenes in suspense fiction—the attempted rape of Hilary Thomas by Bruno Frye. He attacks and chases her in her own house, from pages 24 to 41!

But what precedes it? The backstory of Hilary Thomas from pages 7 through 11. Why is this so important? Because it sets us up to care intensely for her in the attempted rape scene. Without it, we’d be watching the action but not be as engaged.
We learn in those pages of her bad upbringing, resulting in an inferiority complex, which she now fights against (a rooting interest is thus established). Koontz takes us back to her dingy Chicago upbringing and how she used her imagination to escape (explaining why she's a writer now).

The backstory ends with a scene where she has reached her dream, a big movie contract. But she can't entirely enjoy it, fearing it won't last, just like everything else in her life to this point. Now we really understand her.

By the time she gets home, on page 24, we are in love with this character. So when she finds Bruno Frye waiting for her, we can't stop reading.

The longer backstory works because the writing of Koontz and King is focused and sharp. So until your own skills are finely honed, err toward shorter backstory.

I advised her to be ruthless in leaving out any information that didn't absolutely have to be there.

In the student manuscript, chapter two (which became chapter one) opened like this:

As the credits rolled and Tammy slept, Fancy wished life was really like the chick flick they had just watched. *But happy endings only happen in the movies.*

Fancy sighed as she shook Tammy.

"Tammy. Time to go get in bed. Come on, it's late."

"I hear you. I'm awake. What time is it?"

"It's after eleven o'clock." Fancy started turning off lights and reached across Tammy to pick up the popcorn bowl.

This is so much better. Something is happening.

**MIDDLES**

Most of your novel is going to be the middle portion, or Act II. It is the record of the confrontation between the Lead and various forces against her. Middles, of course, are open to infinite possibilities. So just how do you choose what to write?

It depends.

**NOP vs. OP**

In *Plot & Structure* I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of two approaches. NOP stands for "No Outline People." OP stands for "Outline People."

Some writers like to move along daily, without knowing what's going to happen a few scenes ahead. They reason that if the writer doesn't know what's going to happen, surely the reader won't.

This is a tad misleading, as decisions have to be made sometime, and if they're deferred until the actual writing of the scene, that doesn't mean it still won't be predictable.

And the danger is that it will be so off the track that it leads to "rabbit trails," and there will be a whole lot of rewriting to do.

However, if you are of the NOP persuasion, if you can't stand the idea of mapping out a story, don't despair. I would advise you to try to do at least a little mapping, as it will help your structure skills.

But at the very least know your LOCK elements! (See chapter three.)