

First Draft vs. Second Draft: Fixing My Novel's Opening Chapter

1837 First Draft

No one could remember the name of the city. Aggie's father stubbornly refused to call it anything but York because God forbid his life be altered by anything William Lyon Mackenzie ordered. Aggie's mother flitted between calling it York and Toronto, depending on how tired she was and whether their father was in earshot. Only Greer went about proclaiming their city 'Toronto' with confident pride. With the advent of the new year, everything was worse. When Aggie went to pen a letter to her cousin Maud in Kingston, she wrote both 1836 instead of 1837 and York instead of Toronto and the page turned into a mess of ink blots and scratches.

"I started my letter to Maud this morning," Aggie announced to the breakfast table, after Branna had cleared the dishes. "I told her all about our Christmas, and yesterday's New Year's service." She tried to keep her voice from sounding too eager as she made eye contact with Mother across the table. "It'll be ready to post just as soon as I add a few lines about my dress for the Winter Ball."

Father glanced up from his newspaper. "And what dress is this? Did you not just have a new one?"

Aggie sent a cautious glance to Greer beside her, hoping for support. Greer simply twiddled with the lace edges of the white tablecloth and did not see her.

"Well," Aggie said in her most patient, reasonable tone. "That was for the Christmas Ball, you see. I'm fourteen now and I've finished school and I really don't think it's appropriate for me to wear the same dress twice in a row."

I don't think this is particularly bad writing. I was thinking in the style of 1984 ("the clocks were striking thirteen") in an 'this is the setting and things are slightly off' kind of way. I do think there are a few problems with this: I've introduced six characters in the first paragraph, which is a lot of characters. I would worry I'm overwhelming the reader with a lot of proper names and things to remember. You get some characterization coming through (I think) but it's not where I want it.

Ultimately, after having written the whole book, what I introduce here isn't *that* important. Toronto is new, it was incorporated in 1834 after being called Muddy Little York for years. But this is sort of quirky, and ultimately the name of the city never matters except to be a quirky opening.

Branna = character number 7!

Branna, their housemaid, bustled through the door between the dining room and the kitchen, bearing a tray of tea and coffee. A tendril of red hair peaked out from underneath her brown cap. Beside Aggie, Greer sat up and waved at Branna to bring the tray towards her. Perhaps a cup of tea would raise her from her silence. Setting down the cups, Branna poured the steamy drink and a rich, husky smell filled the room.

“Well then, go on with it, Agatha.” Father shrugged and disappeared behind his newspaper.

Mother received her cup with a thoughtful expression on her face. “Greer, I do think you might consider having a new dress made as well.”

“I will not be going to the ball.” Greer spoke flatly, and then turned her attention to the steaming coffee in front of her, her unruly brown hair hiding her face from view.

Aggie swallowed her first sip in a hurry, ignoring the burning as the hot liquid slid down her throat. “Why ever not?”

Greer’s head snapped up and she shot Aggie a look that made Aggie’s heart drop. There was no friendliness or sisterly care in her gaze. It was as if Aggie were a bug, crawling under Greer’s skirt, and the only way to deal with her was to squish her. “You know I do not like to dance.”

This, Aggie was absolutely certain, was a lie. As little girls, they’d spent their hours dancing about their bedroom, dancing in the parlour, dancing outside in the snow. In the two years they’d shared at finishing school, Greer had never once complained about her dance class and she performed as well as any girl there, smiling as she coupled with another young lady and twirled about the dance floor.

This dialogue is too freaking boring for a first scene. It’s not that they’re talking about dresses and balls, it’s that we’re 400 words in and the conflict isn’t clear here...or at the very least, it’s not compelling. We have a young girl who wants a new dress and no one seems very interested in it. Not that engaging.

Okay, that line of conflict (potential conflict?) is now gone. No one cares.

Some conflict! Greer doesn’t want to go to the ball! We have some characterization happening (we think?)

Okay, we have some sisterly animosity.

Mother opened her mouth to respond, but then Father cursed, closed his newspaper, and slammed it against the table. "Rebel claptrap!"

Aggie froze. Greer froze. Even Branna, still holding the serving tray on Greer's other side, froze.

Mother calmly lowered her cup. "Robert, whatever is the matter?"

"That *Toronto Patriot* staff is a group dim-witted ninny-heads. I intend to find that editor and talk to sense to him right this morning."

"What did they do, Father?" Aggie asked.

Father's eyes, chaperoned by wrinkles in their corners, flashed behind his spectacles. "They reprinted an editorial that cantankerous and quarrelsome little cad published in his bloody farce of a newspaper."

Aggie knew the cad in question was William Mackenzie, former mayor of Toronto and current printer of some sort of reformer newspaper that never ceased to make Father mutter darkly.

Okay, this is the moment the scene goes from boring to bad. This whole time, we've been (sort of) focusing on these family dynamics, the relationship between these sisters, this ball. We kind of started to get somewhere interesting (Greer lying about not liking dancing) and then we completely switch focuses in the middle of the scene and abandon that thread. So everything earlier was just filler until we got to this moment to introduce a concept that is very important to the story. But it's introduced super sloppily. Like bad bad. We're all freezing now, apparently.

Dim-witted-ninny heads.

"Cantankerous and quarrelsome little cad" is a direct quote from a historical document.

And the scene went on...Father left and then some rebels threw a rock through the window...conveniently five minutes after the newspaper article was introduced (for no apparent reason).

1837 Second Draft

For hours, Agatha Kent sat on a settee in the parlour. Her embroidery lay on her lap, but she didn't make so much as one stitch. Even as a little girl, she had been praised for her ability to sit still, one of the few children never scolded for squirming or fidgeting in church. She sat, her face arranged into a carefully blank expression, her eyes latched to the clock above the mantle, its hands ticking forward at a terrifyingly quick rate. No sooner had her family gathered in the parlour at eight-thirty, did the clock strike ten. Then eleven. And still, though Cook had spent every day after Christmas baking innumerable pies, tarts, preserves, and cakes, though the food barrels were stuffed to the brim, though Aggie was wearing her most fetching gown, no one came.

Next to her on the settee, her sister Greer sat with horrific posture, reading a book with the intensity of a general at battle. It seemed terribly unfair that Greer, the cause of Aggie's present anguish, could be so oblivious to it. Aggie would've reached over and pinched her, had Father not been seated on the armchair across from them. Without moving her head, Aggie saw that, while the newspaper was open in front of him, Father, too, was watching the clock.

Finally, luncheon arrived, and Mother, Father, Greer and Aggie settled in the bright dining room, while the house maid brought platter after platter from the kitchen.

"This has been an unexpectedly quiet morning," Aggie said. She eyed Greer, who sliced into Cook's meat pie, her eyes never leaving her lap.

Mother was buttering her scone with their best jam, the one they'd saved all of autumn for this day. "There's still time yet."

"Oh, I certainly doubt that." Aggie's plate was empty. She surveyed the dishes in front of her,

In rewriting this scene the first time, I decided to focus in on character and the first "information"-style plot of the story. You'll notice a lot of the same elements are here: family at the table, discussion of the ball, but I tried to create an underpinning of tension: this idea that something has happened, and there's a new conflict in the family and some sense of consequence to their conversation. More than anything, I'm trying to get the readers to ask questions.

Is this a perfect opening? NO! It's a second draft. I already have a better version! But I thought it would be fun to go through it.

The paragraph above is a bit dense but I like it a lot better than the opening paragraph in version one. This is why: it better establishes Aggie's character and makes her stand out a bit, rather than a list of names (only child not scolded for squirming, carefully arranged face). It also sets up the main problem here, which this initial scene will really focus in on: the Kents are being snubbed

Again, it's a slower opening and a bit clunky in places. In terms of purpose, though, we learn the following: 1) Greer is the reason no one is at their house and she is oddly oblivious to it, 2) the father is also upset

but found none appealing. It was all a reminder of their family's terrible, monumental failure. "Father, how many visitors did we have on New Year's Day last year?"

"Nearly three dozen." He, too, looked over at Greer. His face had been unusually pale all day, and Aggie was quite sure the absence of their usual visitors had been a shock.

Father was not one to worry about friends snubbing him, or one to think that a thing so small as a rumour could upset his life. He was a man, and one of Strachan's boys at that, which should have meant he was set for life, everything poised to move forwards in a way that benefitted him. Women, of course, never had the luxury of assuming anything.

"I feel so sorry for Cook." Aggie said, still eyeing her sister. "Food for three dozen and not a person to eat it."

Mother raised a finger, signalling their house maid. "Branna, we'll bring the extra food down to the immigrant sheds after lunch, how's that?"

"Martha, no." Father's forehead wrinkled above his brow. "What about the governor's ball? You'll hardly have time to ready yourself if you spend all afternoon at the immigrant sheds."

"Are we still invited to the ball?" Aggie asked.

"Of course we are," Father's usually even voice had a degree of alarm to it. "The ball is for all of the government men and their families. And I am a member of the Legislative Assembly, am I not?"

Again, Aggie looked at her sister. How could she approach this delicately? "Yes, of course. However..."

I like this because no one is coming right out and saying what's going on, and I feel like we're getting a better sense of the characters.

I've narrowed the focus of this scene to look at the family and their positions. I like how I introduce 'Strachan's boys' here, which is a tiny hint at some of the politics in this city.

Not sure how I feel about the above three lines...they read a bit clunky to me. However, I needed a transition to get us talking about the ball so...that can be fixed in editing

Some of the above is repetitive, giving the same information twice (Father is upset here, too! Do we need the first description of him? Maybe not).

More on the family's position...exposition could be a bit more subtle. I like the uncertainty in their position, even as the Father's position as a political official is being introduced.

“Nothing that my daughters may have done changes my position.” Father’s tone was calm, still, but Aggie wondered if he was truly as sure as he sounded. Not receiving visitors on New Year’s Day was a greater snub than even she had predicted.

They would have to move forward with exceptional care. Perhaps attending the Governor’s Ball was a good decision. It wouldn’t do to cower at home in shame. Then again, Aggie had to do everything possible to distance herself from her older sister. “Greer isn’t going to the ball, though. Surely.”

Again, Aggie looked at Greer, who was still not paying any attention. As Aggie watched, Branna walked behind Greer, setting a cup down at her place.

With a jump as if she’d been pinched, Greer looked up at the table. “Where? Going where?”

“The governor’s ball.” Aggie sighed. “Father, it wouldn’t be quite proper, would it?”

Father hesitated, glancing back and forth between them.

Greer cheerfully raised her teacup in a toast. “Absolutely, not proper at all. I’ll stay home then, shall I?”

And Greer focused back down at her lap, shoving a scone into her mouth as she did so.

We get Aggie’s direct thoughts here, giving us some conflict between the sisters. Though they aren’t flat-out lying to each other or even speaking yet, there’s some substance, some hint of the dynamics behind the relationship: Greer did something, the whole family is paying for it. Aggie is worried and frustrated that Greer doesn’t seem to care about what she’s done.

The questions I want the reader to be asking are:

What happened? What did Greer do?

Why is Greer totally unphased by all of this?

What’s the deal with the father and the government stuff?

Is Aggie being malicious here, or is she justified?

In this version, ball plans go on for another hundred words or so, the father leaves, and the tension between Greer & Aggie explodes...in miniature. As the scene progresses, we gain a pretty clear picture of what happened. Then, at the end of this sequence, the final line (hopefully) changes everything the audience thought and assumed about the incident. But I can’t show you that because spoilers. Fun!!