

# Scott Editorial

## Opening 10 Pages Checklist

*A detailed workbook for pressure-testing the pages that decide whether a reader continues.*



This workbook is designed to be practical. Move through it slowly, write into it honestly, and return to the exercises more than once. The strongest manuscripts are not built by inspiration alone, but by careful decisions made page by page.

## Why the First Ten Pages Matter

The opening pages do not need to explain everything, but they do need to create confidence. A reader is asking: am I in capable hands, do I care, and is there enough tension or curiosity to keep going? Agents, publishers, booksellers, and casual browsers often make an early judgement long before the plot has fully unfolded.

- The opening should establish control rather than rush to prove everything at once.
- Readers look for orientation, voice, and movement, not a complete information dump.
- Curiosity works better than confusion. Mystery should feel intentional, not vague.
- The first pages often reveal deeper manuscript problems in miniature: weak stakes, generic voice, thin scene work, or delayed conflict.

### Use this workbook in three passes.

Pass one: read for instinct and mark where attention drifts. Pass two: diagnose craft issues with the checklist. Pass three: rewrite one page at a time, keeping what is already working.

## The Core Test

By page ten, most manuscripts benefit from delivering enough of the following:

Element	What the reader should feel	Warning sign
Voice	A particular intelligence or sensibility is guiding the prose	The writing could belong to anyone
Orientation	I know where I am, roughly when I am, and whose experience I am in	I am working too hard to decode the basics
Movement	Something is changing, pressing, looming, or being withheld on purpose	The pages feel static
Character interest	I am curious about the person on the page, whether or not I like them	The protagonist is only described, not dramatised
Promise	I can sense the type of reading experience being offered	The genre, tone, or scale feels muddled

## Detailed Checklist

Work through each category slowly. A single weak area can flatten an otherwise strong opening.

### 1. Opening Line and Opening Paragraph

- Does the first line create texture, tension, contrast, voice, or a compelling image?
- Does the paragraph move, or is it only decorative?
- Have you opened with energy that belongs to this book, rather than a generic dramatic sentence?
- Are you overloading the first paragraph with names, backstory, weather, or abstract reflection?
- Would a stranger understand why this scene begins here and not five minutes earlier or later?

## 2. Point of View and Reader Orientation

- Is the point of view clear and stable?
- Do we know whose desire, discomfort, or perception is shaping the scene?
- Have you grounded us in place with selective concrete detail rather than a travel brochure description?
- Do we understand enough about the immediate situation to read with confidence?
- If you are withholding information, is the withholding strategic rather than accidental?

## 3. Character Interest

- Has the protagonist done, chosen, noticed, avoided, or wanted something on the page?
- Do the details selected around them reveal attitude, not just appearance?
- Can we sense a contradiction, vulnerability, obsession, fear, or pressure point?
- Are you relying on biography when dramatisation would be stronger?
- Does the character seem affected by the scene, or merely placed inside it?

## 4. Tension, Curiosity, and Stakes

- Is there a live question, pressure, imbalance, or threat by page ten?
- Does something appear to be at risk, even if the full stakes are not yet visible?
- Are you delaying the true point of the scene because you are warming up on the page?
- Do small actions create forward pull, or does the scene circle itself?
- Would a reader naturally ask what happens next?

## 5. Setting and Atmosphere

- Is the setting doing work, or is it only being described?
- Have you chosen details the point-of-view character would genuinely notice?
- Does the physical world create mood, friction, symbolism, or a practical obstacle?
- Is there a balance between atmosphere and momentum?
- Could any of these details be cut without loss? If so, why are they here?

## 6. Genre and Tonal Promise

- Can a reader roughly tell what kind of novel this is becoming?
- Does the tone suit the material being introduced?
- Are you accidentally signalling one genre while writing another?
- If humour, menace, romance, unease, or lyricism matters later, is there an early trace of it here?
- Does the opening over-promise something the book does not sustain?

## Worked Examples

Use these examples to identify the difference between information and dramatic engagement.

Weak version	Why it struggles	Stronger version	What changed
Mara had always hated the sea, ever since her father drowned when she was seven.	This gives history immediately, but it states emotion instead of dramatising it and removes reader participation.	At the harbour, Mara kept three careful steps between herself and the edge. The gulls were loud; the water was louder.	Backstory is implied through behaviour. The physical detail lets the reader infer fear.

Weak version	Why it struggles	Stronger version	What changed
Tom woke up and thought about how difficult his life had become since the merger.	It opens in abstraction and retrospective summary.	Tom reread the email at 5:14 a.m., as if the third paragraph might have softened overnight.	The pressure is immediate, specific, and active.
The village was beautiful, with cobbled lanes, old cottages, and flowers everywhere.	The description is generic and tourist-like.	The village looked arranged for postcards, right down to the obedient line of hollyhocks, which made Nora distrust it on sight.	The setting is filtered through character attitude, which builds voice.

## Ten Common Opening Problems and Practical Fixes

### Starting too early

Fix: Cut the approach, arrival, waking, travelling, or remembering. Begin closer to the disturbance.

### Backstory flood

Fix: Convert explanation into selective implication. Ask what the reader truly needs now.

### Generic dramatic opening

Fix: Replace vague intensity with precise conflict, discomfort, or contradiction.

### Atmosphere with no motion

Fix: Let the setting interrupt action, complicate choice, or reflect mood under pressure.

### Too many named elements

Fix: Slow down introductions. Prioritise one anchor at a time.

### Withholding for the wrong reason

Fix: Do not create confusion merely to seem mysterious. Give the reader enough footing to feel curiosity rather than irritation.

### Character passivity

Fix: Let the protagonist decide, resist, lie, hide, notice, or reach for something.

### Tonally flat prose

Fix: Sharpen the diction so the sentence-level style reflects the book's emotional temperature.

### Scene with no friction

Fix: Introduce disagreement, anticipation, a deadline, or a bad option.

### Overwritten line-by-line style

Fix: Keep the prose alert, but stop admiring each sentence at the expense of movement.

## Revision Exercise

Print your first ten pages or read them in a different format. Then answer the following honestly.

**Where did my attention drop, even briefly?**

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**What is the most memorable image, line, or action in these pages?**

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**What is the clearest source of tension?**

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**What does the reader understand by page ten, and what do they still need?**

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**Which paragraph feels like throat-clearing and could be cut or moved later?**

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**What promise does this opening make about the rest of the book?**

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## Page-by-Page Audit Grid

Use this once you begin revising.

Page	What happens	What the reader learns	Where tension lives	Keep / Cut / Rewrite
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				

### **Final test**

After revising, ask someone to read only the first ten pages and tell you what kind of book they think they are reading, what they care about, and where they nearly stopped.