

When you read hundreds of stories a year, you gain a new perspective on clichés that even experienced writers may lack. Here’s an easy checklist of some of the most common clichés and bad habits we see in submissions—especially in the first pages. They’re easy to avoid with just a little effort—and doing so might make all the difference for your chances:

1. “Good morning, sunshine!” Avoid having the first scene depict your main character waking up. Even from cryogenic sleep.
2. “I bolted awake, covered with sweat. It had been a dream.” Starting with a dream sequence is like the previous checklist item, but even worse.
3. “I checked my reflection.” Try not to describe your character by having them look in a mirror. Please.
4. “He had auburn hair and dark blue eyes.” Physical descriptions of hair and eyes are extremely common.
5. “I saw tall mountains, green trees, and red flowers.” If all your descriptions are visual, you’re letting four perfectly good senses go to waste.
6. “She ran through the woods with the werewolf in hot pursuit.” Starting *in medias res* does not automatically count as a good hook. Use this technique sparingly.
7. “There was Pedro, my brother, next to Yukio, my oldest friend...” Dumping the entire cast list into the first paragraphs is bewildering.
8. “In the 721<sup>st</sup> cycle after the 11<sup>th</sup> Tenebrael Affectation, scholars reviewed the 38 Amended Absolutes of Emberiarch Lar...” Dense worldbuilding lore makes for a tough start.
9. “No!” “We must.” “It’s too soon.” “They have to know the truth.” Ungrounded dialogue is off-putting, especially as a starting point.
10. “It was a peaceful village, until one day...” Sure, things often go wrong in stories, but go easy on the overly-idyllic setups.
11. “Brayforth Starblast trained for many years as a child, first under Colonel Smugpuff, then...” Laying out detailed backstory before getting to the actual story is a bad move.
12. “The killer’s knife sank deep into living flesh...” A disturbing scene requires that we care about what’s going on. Opening with vivid gore is bad pacing.
13. “I’m angry and persecuted and everyone is mean to me.” It’s good for a character to have problems, but starting with a long gripe-fest gets tiresome very fast.
14. “My partner pointed his gun at me.” There’s a kind of startling opener that works in a series because it upends the status quo. But you have to *have* a status quo first—which you haven’t established if you’ve got a stand-alone story.
15. “It was a dark and stormy night.” Just... maybe don’t start by describing the weather, okay?

Oh, one more thing. Odds are good that at least one item on this list is something you’ve seen a successful author do. So how can it be bad? While it’s true that every rule has an exception—and sometimes there are valid ways to use what is normally a cliché—consider that ideas become clichés because they’re overused. Think of these as wells that have long since run dry.