



## Colorado Gold Writers Conference UNLOCK YOUR STORY'S INCITING INCIDENT

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The inciting incident is the event that launches the plot

- An event with clear significance to the protagonist.
- A catalyst that changes the course of the protagonist's life. **It upsets the status quo.**
- Usually an external force. It can be caused by the protagonist or done to the protagonist.
- Not backstory! An event that occurs within the main timeline of the story.

Five Elements

1. **Early.** Occurs early in the story, usually within the first 10%.
2. **Interruption.** An interruption in the main character's normal life.
3. **Action-related.** Not a result of the protagonist's thoughts.
4. **Life-changing.** Higher-than-normal stakes and the potential to change the protagonist's life.
5. **Urgent.** Time sensitive or something that necessitates a response.

Positive or Negative?

- It can be either a positive or a negative experience for the protagonist.
  - Positive: Alexa meets Drew in an elevator and agrees to be his plus-one to a wedding. (The Wedding Date by Jasmine Guillory)
  - Negative: Astronaut Mark Watney gets stabbed by an antenna and then stranded on Mars. (The Martian by Andy Weir)
- Whether a positive or negative experience, the inciting incident creates internal and external conflict for the protagonist.

When Should the Inciting Incident Occur?

- Good rule of thumb is at the first 10% mark, but it can vary by genre.
  - Short story: usually on the first page
  - Novel:
    - Mystery: usually on the first page.
    - Romance: within the first 5-10%.
    - Women's: first 10%
    - Suspense/thriller: first 5-10%
    - Fantasy/sci fi: first 15%

- Memoir: first 10%
- Consider how much set-up the reader needs to understand the world of the story before the event that changes it.
- It should be placed as early as possible, but not so early that it lacks impact for the reader.

#### How Long Is the Inciting Incident?

- It is usually a single event in the protagonist's life, rather than something ongoing for an extended period of time.
- It is developed in a scene, not summary. The reader should feel this moment unfold, not told about it after it happened.
- The scene itself can be as long as needed.
- The protagonist should be in a different emotional position at the end of the scene.

#### How to Find the Inciting Incident in Your Story?

1. What's an event that could "spark" your protagonist?
  - In this context, "spark" means an event that would force them to (re)consider their situation. For example: a 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, losing a job, their mother comes to visit, their child failing school...
2. What kind of event should the inciting incident be?
  - The type of event can be anything from war breaking out to meeting a new boyfriend, but it should be very important to your protagonist and in keeping with the genre.
3. Does the inciting incident prompt the reader to wonder how this will turn out?
  - The reader needs to be invested and ask themselves what happens next.
4. How does the inciting incident connect to your protagonist's goal?
  - This event should spur your protagonist to follow their dream/desire.

[Jacquelin Cangro](http://jacquelin Cangro) is a seasoned developmental editor, book coach, and writing instructor with twenty years of publishing experience at Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster. She gravitates toward women's, historical, romance, and YA genres.

Her goal is to help you strengthen your work while remaining true to your vision by providing clear suggestions with actionable feedback.

Please visit her website (<http://jacquelin Cangro>) to learn more about editing services and upcoming workshops.