



Writing the first page of a novel: Tips from Canadian writers

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TEACHER GUIDE – Grades 7 to 12

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Introduction

Canada has come a long way since Confederation, but where will be in another 150 years? How will the events of today play out in the next century and a half?

The First Page student writing challenge invites students in Grades 7 to 12 to write the first page of an original book set 150 years in the future, with the protagonist facing an issue that's topical today and setting the scene for how it's all playing out in a century and a half.

For example, how will Donald Trump as U.S. president affect the course of events 150 years from now? Who will be the Drake of 2169? How will climate change impact human life, where people live, the struggles they are facing?

The book could be any literary genre, from mystery or thriller to literary fiction, from adventure or romance to satire or sci-fi.

This exercise is a fun, creative and challenging project for students. It aims to prime their critical thinking abilities and develop their skills and passion for storytelling.

The purpose of this guide:

On Curio.ca, educators may access a series of video writing tips featuring Canadian authors Linwood Barclay (*Escape*), Katherena Vermette (*The Break*), M.G. Vassanji (*Nostalgia*), Erin Bow (*The Scorpion Rules*), Vikki VanSickle (*The Winnowing*), Cherie Dimaline (*The Marrow Thieves*) and more. In each piece of media, the authors read the first page of their books and discuss the power of the first page. This guide provides suggested questions to help stimulate students' discussion and understanding of the elements of an excellent first page of a novel.

The videos are self-contained, meaning they can be watched individually or as a series. In addition to discussion questions, a number of checklists have been developed based on authors' advice. These may prove helpful to students as they are developing the first page of their novel. Note that there is some overlap between checklists.

Find out more about
THE FIRST PAGE
Student Writing
Challenge:
cbc.ca/thefirstpage



Materials in this guide:

- First page writing tips from Canadian authors
- Questions to stimulate conversation about what makes a good first page
- First page checklists
- List of possible topics for students to write about

A note on content:

Before viewing the video content with your students, please be sure to preview the videos and ensure the material is appropriate for the grade level. Sensitive themes, particularly around violence, are implicit in the material.



Key Concepts

This guide will introduce students to five key concepts when it comes to writing a compelling first page.

➔ 1. Set the tone

From M.G. Vassanji, author of *Nostalgia*: “The first page sets up the novel. It creates a little sense of suspense and creates a voice for the book.”

➔ 2. Introduce new characters and settings

From Katherena Vermette, author of *The Break*: “The first page of any book has to situate the reader. As writers we kind of write ourselves into a story, but readers have to be there right away. So you need to know who you’re talking to, you need to know where you are, you need to have all of those questions answered, as soon as possible [and] with as much intrigue sometimes, or at least enough of a pull so that people will be interested. You have to not only tell us where they are, but you have to tell us why we should care about that person who’s in that place doing that thing.”

From Jennifer Chen, author of *Super*: “You want to keep the four Ws in mind: Who, What, When and Where. Who is talking? Who is the narrator? Who are we perhaps seeing around them, if anyone else at all? Where are we? Are we still on Earth? Are we in space? In a field? In a forest? When are we? Are we in the past? The present? Are we in the future? Is it day? Is it night? You want to be nice and clear on that so the readers can actually see it in their head. And then, what is the situation around them? What, perhaps, are the actions that they are seeing? What are they doing at the moment? You want to keep the four Ws in mind so that your reader is able to get directly into the core of your book and then they are engaged.”

From Cherie Dimaline, author of *The Marrow Thieves*: “A lot of my books, they’re very character-driven so I introduce you to the character first. It’s not about what colour hair they have or what clothes they’re wearing, it’s about something that’s almost desperate or passionate or important to that character. I want you to immediately emote or connect with that character so that you want to follow them through your journey.

“When I was developing the dystopian world my characters live in, right from the first page I wanted it to be familiar because I wanted readers to connect. I wanted them to see two kids, skipping school, hanging out in a tree house, but something was off. So I wanted to immediately have that connection of it being familiar but then turn it on its head with the kids running for their lives, and the fact that on the first page you learn that Toronto doesn’t exist anymore, that the



big cities have changed that the population is on the move. So it's about taking the same picture and using different colours to fill it in."

From Erin Bow, author of *The Scorpion Rules*: "Great first pages are hard, but my favourite thing to do with them is put a great character on them with something of a voice, something that really comes through with the voice. My theory is that people connect to other people. I've read so many books where like someone is running through the woods being chased by werewolves and I'm like, 'Am I supposed to care about you? I might be rooting for the werewolves for all I know.' So I really like to start with voice and with dialogue and one striking image."

➔ 3. Write a great hook

From Vikki VanSickle, author of *The Winnowing*: "The secret to a first page is writing a great hook. You really want to hook people into the story right away, so they can't look away. One of the ways to do that is to set up a question. It doesn't have to be an actual question that you're asking someone, but you want people to know why, how or what's going on. In *The Winnowing*, I start with the words 'I'm flying.' That can mean many things. Are you in plane? Do you have special powers? You're not sure, so hopefully you want to keep reading on from that first line."

From Cherie Dimaline, author of *The Marrow Thieves*: "When I'm thinking about writing a first page, I think about welcoming someone into my home. It's a welcome visitor, not someone just showing up at the door. I don't want them to knock at the door and then I come outside and describe to them what they're going to see when they get into the house or walk them around the perimeter to talk about shingles or siding or what they might see when they get inside. I want them to come directly into the house, right into the home."

"It's the same thing with stories. Ideally, I need for someone — a reader — to be pulled in immediately. And the first page does that. The first page is one of the most vitally important parts of the story because it decides whether or not you're going to have a browser or an actual reader. If you're going to talk about a landscape, you need to talk about, what's unique in that landscape? What's intriguing in the landscape? If you're going to introduce a character, make your character want something. Put him in danger even. You need to really yank your reader in from the very first word."

From Jennifer Chen, author of *Super*: "Hooking the reader normally happens in the first sentence. You want your first sentence to be really really exciting and catchy. You want it to be nice and short and succinct, so when people are glancing through your book and they see that first sentence, they go 'Wow. I want to read more of this.' The only rule about a hook is not to be boring."



From Linwood Barclay, author of *Chase and Escape*: “I think a really good hook is, first of all, one that’s a bit unique, that hasn’t been done before or at least not done in that way. I think a good hook touches you in a kind of personal way, that maybe you read that and think, “Oh my gosh, what if that happened to me? And what would I do?” And a great hook also, I think, also has to have a real strong element of mystery. Why did this happen?”

➔ 4. Show, don’t tell

From Fonda Lee, author of *Exo*: “I think a really important thing to keep in mind is not to give the reader too much information on the first page. Especially if you’re writing a fantasy novel or a science fiction novel, it’s tempting to try and put too much information about the world in this first page and overwhelm the reader with everything that’s different. You want to draw the reader in gradually. And, ideally, you want them to learn about the world slowly, so that they are being immersed in [the story].”

From Erin Bow, author of *The Scorpion Rules*: “Often you’re tempted to dump everything you know on to page one and that’s typically a bad idea because then the first page is like the first page of an encyclopedia entry. It reads like the top of a Wikipedia article and that’s not fun for anybody. So what I try to do is focus on the character and on the cool thing about the world and get them both onto page one. It really helps if the character wants something or needs something or has some unsolvable problem. And there’s a cool trick where you make that thing related to the cool thing about the world and then they’ll kind of move together seamlessly.

➔ 5. Leave your reader with questions

From Omar El Akkad, author of *American War*: “A lot of readers, if they aren’t with you from the first page, they’re not with you at all. I think a big part of what goes into a good first page is what you don’t say. Especially in the realm of speculative fiction, there’s a lot of work that goes on under the surface. For example, when I was writing this book, the walls in my office were covered with Post-It Notes and various corkboards and all kinds of stuff with all of the elements of the things that had happened between now and then. My book is set about 50 or 60 years in the future and I had covered almost everything — economics, culture, all of it. But you can’t dump all of that into the book, let alone the first page. So part of the most important thing for me in the first page was all the stuff that I would hint at, but not say outright. I think that’s a really difficult balance to find; it’s not so much what you tell the reader up front, but what you hold back.”



Suggested Discussion Questions

Radicalized by Cory Doctorow

Book summary:

Radicalized by Cory Doctorow is a collection of sci-fi novellas tells four prescient stories about technology: the first follows a refugee who jailbreaks her smart appliances, the next is about a white superhero who becomes embroiled in case of police brutality, the third is about a man whose insurance company denies his wife life-saving treatment and the fourth is about rich preppers who prepare for the end of the world.

In the video on Curio.ca, Cory Doctorow reads from the first page of *Unauthorized Bread*, the first novella in *Radicalized*. He talks about one approach to editing and ways that sci-fi writers create a world for their readers.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. What do we know about the world in *Unauthorized Bread*?
2. What parallels do you see between this world and ours?
3. What role does technology play in the story so far?
4. How would you describe Salima, the main character?
5. What details in the story stood out to you? What makes this story sci-fi?
6. What are you curious to learn more about, in terms of Halima and her world?
7. What are some of the key pieces of advice Cory Doctorow has for writing a first page?

First Page checklist:

Before writing a first page, ask yourself:

- What is the hook of my story? Have I captured my readers attention?
- Have I cut all of the unnecessary parts? Have I kept only what my story needs?
- What does the reader know about the world I'm building? What do they need to know?
- Have I left clues for my readers to piece together?



Suggested Discussion Questions

Exo by Fonda Lee

Book summary:

Exo by Fonda Lee takes place in the western U.S. in the distant future. Earth has long been colonized by an alien race called the zhree and humankind has adapted to extraterrestrial governance. The protagonist is a soldier named Donovan, a human who happens to be the son of the Prime Liaison, the human race's ambassador to the alien. Despite a long period of peace, war is in the air and Donovan is kidnapped by a human rebel group called Sapience.

In this video, Lee reads the first page of her book and provides tips as to what makes a good first page of a speculative fiction book. Below are some suggested discussion questions to use after the watching video. As well, a first page checklist has been created based on Lee's advice, and may be helpful to students while developing the first page of their novel.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. What have we learned about the world *Exo* is set in — the time period, the history, where the characters live?
2. How did you feel after listening to the first page of *Exo*?
3. What questions does the first page raise? As a reader, what are you curious to know more about?
4. What are some of the author's key pieces of advice for setting up the first page?
5. How does the reader paint a picture of the time period?

First page checklist:

- In what ways is the world you're writing about different from present-day?
- In what ways is the world you're writing about similar to present-day?
- What has happened economically, culturally and environmentally to the world in 150 years to create the events you're writing about?
- What is the tone of this book? Is it hopeful or grim?
- Who are the characters? What conflicts are they facing as a result of the reality of the world?
- What questions are raised that will keep the reader engaged with the book?



Suggested Discussion Questions

Escape by Linwood Barclay

Book summary:

The novels *Chase* and *Escape* by Linwood Barclay are part of a series about a part-robot spy dog called Chipper and his new human friend Jeff Conroy, a 12-year-old boy. Chipper has escaped from the laboratory that created and performed experiments on him. This shadowy institution is dead-set on hunting Chipper down when he runs into the arms Jeff, a dispirited boy who helps his aunt manage a fishing camp.

In this video, Barclay reads the first page of his *Escape* and provides tips as to what makes a good first page of a book. Below are some suggested discussion questions to use after the watching video. As well, a first page checklist has been created based on Barclay's advice, and may be helpful to students while developing the first page of their novel.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. Can you summarize what is happening in the first scene of *Escape*?
2. Who are the central characters of the first scene of *Escape*?
3. What questions do you have after listening to the first page of *Escape*? As a reader, what are you curious to know more about?
4. How did you feel after listening to the first page of *Escape*?
5. What are some of the author's key pieces of advice for setting up the first page?
6. What is the author's advice for writing fiction set in the future?

First page checklist:

- What is the hook of this first page?
- What do you think the reader will be curious about after they finish reading it?
- What questions do you want to leave the reader with in regards to the characters or the setting?
- What kinds of emotions are the characters experiencing?



Suggested Discussion Questions

American War by Omar El Akkad

Book summary:

American War by Omar El Akkad takes place in the U.S. roughly 50 years in the future. It is told from the perspective of Sarat Chestnut who is born in the climate change-ravaged southern U.S., which is caught up in a bloody war with the northern states over the use of fossil fuels. Sarat grows up in a refugee camp and is radicalized by her experiences there, while being educated by a fellow refugee who has some shadowy connections with foreign governments.

In this video, El Akkad reads the first page of his book and provides tips as to what makes a good first page of a speculative fiction book. Below are some suggested discussion questions to use after the watching video. As well, a first page checklist has been created based on El Akkad's advice, and may be helpful to students while developing the first page of their novel.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. Can you summarize what is happening in the first scene of *American War*?
2. What have we learned about the characters in the book — their personalities, their relationships to one another?
3. What information did we learn about the setting?
4. How did you feel after listening to the first page of *American War*?
5. What questions does the first page raise? As a reader, what are you curious to know more about?
6. What are some of the author's key pieces of advice for setting up the first page?

First page checklist:

- In what ways is the world you're writing about different from present-day?
- What has happened economically, culturally and environmentally to the world in 150 years to create the events you're writing about?
- What is the tone of this book? Is it hopeful or grim?
- Who are the characters? What conflicts are they facing as a result of the reality of the world?
- What questions are raised that will keep the reader engaged with the book?



Suggested Discussion Questions

Super by Jennifer Chen

Book summary:

In the world of *Super* by Jennifer Chen, the world's attentions are trained on a group of superpowered teens who make up the government organization known as the League Of Supers. Their daring acts of bravery are always caught on-camera, to the slight annoyance of Beata Bell, who is the descendent of the very first super. Many teenagers develop superpowers during puberty, but, despite her famous genetic legacy, Beata remains stubbornly normal.

In this video, Chen reads the first page of her book and provides tips as to what makes a good first page. Below are some suggested discussion questions to use after the watching video. As well, a first page checklist has been created based on Chen's advice, and may be helpful to students while developing the first page of their novel.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. Can you summarize what is happening in the first scene of *Super*?
2. What information did we learn about the setting?
3. How did you feel after listening to the first page of *Super*?
4. What questions does the first page raise? As a reader, what are you curious to know more about?
5. What are some of the author's key pieces of advice for setting up the first page?

First page checklist:

- In what ways is the world you're writing about different from reality?
- What is the tone of this book? Is it hopeful or grim?
- Who are the characters? What conflicts are they facing as a result of the reality of the world?
- What questions are raised that will keep the reader engaged with the book?
- Do I have a hook? Is it effective in drawing the reader in?
- Have I clearly laid out the setting of the novel and the challenges of the time period?



Suggested Discussion Questions

The Break by Katherena Vermette

Book summary:

The Break by Katherena Vermette is told from the perspective of several characters and takes place in a small Winnipeg community. The novel begins from the point-of-view of Stella, a young Métis mother, who witnesses a violent attack from her kitchen window and calls the police for help. As the book unfolds, each of the narrators make attempts to come to terms with this traumatic incident.

In this video, Vermette reads the first page of her book and provides tips as to what makes a good first page. Below are some suggested discussion questions to use after the watching video. As well, a first page checklist has been created based on Vermette's advice, and may be helpful to students while developing the first page of their novel.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. Can you summarize what is happening in the first scene of *The Break*?
2. What have we learned about the characters in the book — their personalities, their relationships to one another?
3. What information did we learn about the setting?
4. How did you feel after listening to the first page of *The Break*?
5. What questions does the first page raise? As a reader, what are you curious to know more about?
6. What are some of the author's key pieces of advice for setting up the first page?

First page checklist:

Before writing the first page of a book, ask yourself:

- What is the tone of this book — is it hopeful or grim? Fast-paced or slow-moving?
- Who are the characters? What challenges are they facing?
- Where and when is your story set?
- What questions are raised that will keep the reader engaged and continue with the book?



Suggested Discussion Questions

Nostalgia by M.G. Vassanji:

Book summary:

Nostalgia is set in a time where humans have discovered how to extend life eternally. The process involves wiping all memory and installing new, invented versions of a person's past. In this way, doctors prevent the brain's storage capacity from being overwhelmed. But the process is not perfect — some suffer from Leaked Memory Syndrome, meaning true memories are pushing through their new reality. Extending life also creates a class war over the availability of jobs between the younger and older generations.

The book is narrated by Frank Sina, a respected physician. Sina's journey begins when he is visited by a patient suffering from Leaked Memory Syndrome.

On Curio.ca, M.G. Vassanji reads from the first page of his book. Below are some suggested discussion questions to use after the watching video. As well, a first page checklist has been created based on Vassanji's advice, and may be helpful to students while developing the first page of their novel.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. How would you describe the voice of this novel?
2. What techniques did the author use to create a feeling of suspense?
3. What information did we learn about the characters in this book?
4. What motivates this narrator? What does he want?
5. What hints does the author drop about the setting of this book?
6. What questions are we left with after the first page?
7. Did this first page want you to keep reading more? Why or why not?

First page checklist:

Before writing the first page of a book, ask yourself:

- What is the tone of this book — is it hopeful or grim? Fast-paced or slow-moving?
- Who are the characters? What challenges are they facing? What do they want?
- Where and when is your story set?
- What questions are raised that will keep the reader engaged and continue with the book?



Suggested Discussion Questions

The Winning by Vikki VanSickle:

Book summary:

Marivic Stone lives with her grandfather in a small town, which is famous for being the birthplace of a medical breakthrough that saved humanity from extinction, but not without severe repercussions. After a tragedy, Marivic is separated from her best friend Saren and decides to avenge her. This novel is a coming-of-age adventure, set in a fantastic, haunted world.

On Curio.ca, VanSickle reads the first page of her novel *The Winning*. She then provides tips as to what it takes to write a great first page. Suggested discussion questions that go with the video are available below. As well, a first page checklist has been created based on VanSickle's advice, and may be helpful to students while developing the first page of their novel.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. What did the author use as a hook?
2. How would you describe the tone and pace of the book?
3. What did we learn about the setting in the first page?
4. What did we learn about the characters in the first page?
5. What questions did *The Winning* leave unanswered on page one?
6. What are some of the tools the author uses to write a first page?

First page checklist:

When writing a first page, ask yourself:

- What is my hook?
- What hints can I drop about the character or the setting that will give people a sense of the world, without giving too much away?
- What is the tone of this book, and how does it convey the atmosphere of the future I am envisioning?



Suggested Discussion Questions

The Marrow Thieves by Cherie Dimaline

Book summary:

In a world destroyed by climate change, all humans — except for the Indigenous Peoples of North America — have lost the ability to dream. The secret to recovering dreams is in the bone marrow of Indigenous people, leading to a violent, continent-wide manhunt. This novel follows a young Indigenous teenager named Frenchie, who is on the run from Recruiters, people who capture young Indigenous kids and contain them in a special school system.

On Curio.ca, Cherie Dimaline reads the first page of *The Marrow Thieves* and provides tips on writing a first page. Below are some suggested discussion questions to use after the watching video. As well, a first page checklist has been created based on Dimaline's advice, and may be helpful to students while developing the first page of their novel.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. Can you summarize the events of the first page of *The Marrow Thieves*?
2. What do we know about the characters and their relationships to one another?
3. What do the characters want?
4. What have we been told about the world they live in? What answers haven't they given us about their world?
5. In what ways is the world in *The Marrow Thieves* familiar? In what ways is it unfamiliar to us?
6. What are some of the author's key pieces of advice when it comes to writing a first page?

First page checklist:

Before writing a first page, ask yourself:

- Who is the character and what is their personality like?
- What does the character want? What is the character passionate about?
- What hints about the character, and the world they live in, can I drop to intrigue the reader?
- What is familiar about the world I have created? What is different about it?



Suggested Discussion Questions

The Scorpion Rules by Erin Bow

Book summary:

In *The Scorpion Rules*, the world is ruled by Artificial Intelligence named Talis. Each royal family must give Talis a royal child, which Talis keeps as a hostage. If a royal family declares war on another country, the hostage is killed. Greta was taken as a young princess to the Precepture as a hostage and grows up. Nearing Greta's 18th birthday, which is when she'll be set free, a boy named Elian arrives and begins an out-and-out rebellion against Talis. Elian's actions open Greta's eyes to the oppressive rule of Talis.

In the video on Curio.ca, Erin Bow reads the introduction to her main character, Greta, and provides some writing advice on first pages. Below are some suggested discussion questions. As well, a first page checklist has been created based on Bow's advice, and may be helpful to students while developing the first page of their novel.

Suggested discussion questions:

1. What do we know about the world in *The Scorpion Rules*?
2. How would you describe Greta, the main character?
3. Was there anything about Greta you connected to? What kinds of things made her a relatable character?
4. What are you curious to learn more about, in terms of Greta or the world she lives in?
5. What are some of the emotions you felt listening to the first page of the book?
6. What are some of the key pieces of advice the author has about writing a first page?

First page checklist:

When writing the first page of your novel, ask yourself:

- What makes the world extraordinary?
- Is it a joyful world, or an oppressed one? How will that shape the tone of the first page?
- What is the central problem or passion that the main character is fixated on? How is it related to the world he or she lives in?
- What is relatable about the main character?
- What questions have I left unanswered to keep the reader interested?



No Choice by Juliana Narváez Gutierrez

This first page was the Grades 7 to 9 category winner in 2019. This is provided as an example to students as they prepare their entries.

Subject: A futuristic society where emotion is manufactured and individuality is censored.

Comments from judge Kelly Armstrong: "Genre fiction has a tradition of the slow burn, where a seemingly everyday scene takes on greater and more unsettling weight as it progresses, culminating in a final, chilling twist. Science fiction also pushes us to look at ideas and issues we may not have considered before.... *No Choice* accomplishes both of those, the impact made even more effective by its deceptively cheerful narrative voice."

Winning entry:

My sheets smell like bleach — not the most pleasant aroma to wake up to. I quickly rub my eyes and glance over at the clock at the foot of my bed. It reads 8:30 a.m.. I'm right on time.

Stepping into my slippers, I look at myself in the mirror opposite. As usual, my face looks as blank as my sheets; I still haven't chosen my personality for the day. I'm running out of capsules — I must remember to go shopping for more tomorrow.

I step into my bathroom, where my A.I. assistant greets me with a perfunctory "good morning." As I brush my teeth, my eyes wake up, and I see emotion in my reflection.

My assistant interrupts me. "The tooth-brushing period has ended." I spit out the toothpaste.

I make my way to my closet. As always, I pick out a grey ensemble, but my inner rebel kicks in and I throw on an orange cardigan. Technically, I'm not allowed to wear it. My work personality is, according to the label, "bland, hardworking and dissociative." But I do it anyway. It makes my day to bend the rules a little.

My parents always thought it was odd, how I would smile when I didn't have my Happy on, or cry when I didn't have my Sad on. They thought the Starter Pack they had been given was faulty, but they didn't say anything because the woman next door had the same problem and they swept her son, Frederick, away. I pretended not to realize, but from that forwards I acted like the capsules were doing their job.



They were thrilled.

I open the grey box, and my eyes fall upon ten personality pills nestled in cheap cotton. I knew I was running out; I only have five work ones. I sigh and quickly swallow.

Instantly, I feel heavier, and my head is filled with numbers and expense report details — but I am still me. I've never said it out loud; that word has been banned for years, and I'd get arrested for even thinking it if they knew.

I grab my purse and head outside. The air is stiff, as if with hairspray. I am lucky to have a transport station so close. Someone is already there. A man: hair matted, shirt wrinkled. His eyes are darting along the street, scared.

I'm positive it's Frederick.



Below Zero, Above Thirty-Two by Leonardo Mete

This first page was the Grades 10 to 12 category winner in 2019. This is provided as an example to students as they prepare their entries.

Subject: A future ravaged by the effects of global warming.

Comments from judge Kelly Armstrong: "The best issue-driven science fiction approaches those issues obliquely, laying them out for the reader to experience and interpret.... *Below Zero, Above Thirty-Two* does that with a very well-written and evocative scene that reserves its final punch for the ending."

Winning entry:

I peered out at my surroundings from the dusty, oval-shaped window of the cabin. It bore a crack across its diameter that branched out erratically, like a river delta. I can only imagine it was one of the relentless storms that damaged my shelter. Ultimately, they were all me and my crew were met with during our endless trudge up north.

"What we didn't bring is what we didn't need," our captain told us. Now that we were separated, I could scoff at his words. But I was far too exhausted. Slouching against the knotted wooden wall, I pulled my damp snowcoat tighter and fumbled in my pouch, fingers numb. The small stone fireplace was the best heat I've felt since the journey began. It was strange how fiercely the cold and the hot battled each other.

Thankfully, my compass was still intact. I zipped up the hail-crusted pouch and fixed my sunken eyes on its needle. Surprisingly enough, the cabin faced our instructed destination. Standing up and stretching, I pushed open the rigid door. Afternoon sunlight blazed my sensitive face and gleamed off of the melting snow dunes. Shielding my eyes, I departed to try and locate my crew mates. Then I heard mechanical movement.

I spun on my heels, nearly losing my balance, and squinted at the distant figure. The source of the noise was an expedition rover. Its heavy-duty wheels skittered on the icy surface, spitting leftover hailstones to the side. As it advanced towards me, it seemed to abruptly halt and veer from its path in an unorthodox manner.

The rover stopped after it was close enough. The cracked panel covering its front screen raised. I waited to be flashed by a scanning light, but instead it wobbled in place and sputtered,



"Northwest—detected—return to Borealis crew C—Northwest—detected—return—" The pile of junk was repeating itself. Fractals of frost around its screen showed an obvious sign of abandonment.

Nevertheless, it resumed its pace, indeed to the northwest. I followed its lead to the top of a hill, where its system shut down and it toppled over. We were unexpectedly close to the frozen shore, where each breaking wave brought no more than three patches of ice towards us. I gasped at the sight — my objective fulfilled. Clinging for life was the last of her kind, wet fur pressed against her bony frame, beady black eyes staring into mine.



Taxidermied by Stella Xia

This first page was the Grades 7 to 9 category winner in 2018. This is provided as an example to students as they prepare their entries.

Subject: "Deforestation and the ignorance of humanity."

Comments from judge Cherie Dimaline: "This first page shows a gift for metaphor and vivid description. We are brought into a world where the last tree was carved into a grave and the youth share their disappointment with robots. I was moved by the development of scene and structure and am eager to see what this young writer will create now."

Winning entry:

I can see, now, why the ticket bot warned me to stay on the path. The trees are rigid statues, their arrangement deliberately random. If an errant breeze strayed inside the climate-controlled bubble, the whole expanse might go toppling down. The lack of commotion is unnerving. There is no ever-present hum of electricity here, no angry drivers. Nothing except the crunch of my feet on the pristine gravel road. Animals that should be scurrying in the underbrush stand taxidermied in plain sight, counterfeit spirit bottled in beady eyes. Surely, this is not the replica of nature that they advertised. This diorama pales to my grandmother's vivid descriptions of forest floors. Has it been so long since a real tree stood that we've already forgotten what they look like? This falsehood is a mournful eulogy of what used to be, written all over the fake snow-covered leaves.

"Did you enjoy your visit?" a service bot asks me as I step out of the greenhouse.

"It was splendid," I laugh. I can still feel the coolness of mist clinging on my skin. There was an international funeral procession the day the last tree died. We carved its stump into a replica of Earth; a singular, looming grave amongst the dead grass.

The Nature Era — another one for the textbooks.

I wait for it to process my sarcasm.

"Oh no! Where did we go wrong?" Its pixelated eyebrows curve down in disappointment.



"Maybe we went wrong the day we invented industry," I start, spit flying from my consonants.
"Or the day scientists warned of deforestation, and we did nothing to stop it. Or the day people realized they could exploit the lack of nature for money."

Humanity is a delicate ship, and ignorance conquers all — each day a fraction harder than the last, another millimetre of water. All the advancements in technology, and not one can save us from sinking; from the blind lookouts to the deaf captains. We don't prevent holes, we patch up the existing ones with bandages and paper towels, then proceed to ignore them forever. Our ambitions sparkled in the horizon, and we gave everything up to chase them, despite being neck-deep in water. And you know the sad thing? It isn't only the trees.

The bot nods.

"Your feedback will be taken into consideration, as always. Come again soon."



Greater Than Or Equal To by Peter Ola Paul

This first page was the Grades 10 to 12 category winner in 2018. This is provided as an example to students as they prepare their entries.

Subject: Genetic modification.

Comments from judge Cherie Dimaline: "This entry is cinematic in scope. With just a few lines and compelling narrative dialogue, the author lures you into a world that is as immediate and visceral as it is unique. It's quite an accomplishment to bring readers this far in with so few words. I want to know what happens next!"

Winning entry:

"TEN"

All right Aji. Deep breath in.

"EIGHT"

Deep breath out.

"SIX"

Deep breath in.

"FOUR"

Quick breath out.

"THU-REE"

Muscles tense.

"TWOOO"

Body's rise.

"ONE, AND..." a pause arrives, building up a crescendo of excitement. The tension in the air is so thick, molasses would float.



With an expectant grin the Gamemaster finally yells the awaited word "GO!"

Instantly kids begin to cascade out and race forward hollering like a pack of hyenas.

A voice booms out through the air. "Sup everyone, y'all know me as Psycho P. and Ima be your host today, so you in for a treat."

A group breaks off and makes for a river. "With Dylan as their leader, it looks like the Hounds are trying the colossus method." The group stops at the base of a waterfall. They gather parts from their packs and assemble a suit with the speed you can only get from hours of practice.

"Looks like they think they can handle it, but with a mod like Dylan, that's probably more than a thought. I mean, check that bod. He was probably benching 80s, one month before he could walk — so... fresh from the oven." That gets a couple laughs from the watchers who actually listen. Most are too busy observing the events unfold.

"In other news the forerunners have nearly reached the wall. Calling it now, Aji is gonna be there first." People move to the edge of their seat, and you can feel the adrenaline pumping through the air.

"They've arrived, and in a turn of events that absolutely everyone expected, Aji reaches there first, but what do you expect, he's modded so much he's practically a different species." This one gets a greater response but the main focus is still on me.

The closer I get to the cliff, the more I speed up. As I reach the edge. While wearing a grin on my face, I jump. I could never abandon this course; The wind gives me life. If a mountain goat tried what I did, it would break its legs. Although, anything dumb enough to do that should already be dead. Veteris natural selection ensured that. I simply bound down the cliff and let my legs give me power that no human can achieve.

Having the ultimate body at the pinnacle of perfection, without having to work for it, what could be better?



Nameless by Sari Warshawsky

This first page was the Grades 7 to 9 category winner in 2017. This is provided as an example to students as they prepare their entries. On Curio.ca, there is an audio version of actor Nicole Volossetski reciting the story:

www.curio.ca/en/audio/the-first-page-performance-of-2017-winner-grades-7-to-9-nameless-by-sari-warshawsky-18947/

Subject: The pressure of perfection.

Comments from judge Erin Bow: "*Nameless* works on its own terms, but it also could be read as a sharp critique of the omnipresent world of social media that envelopes today's young people. It made my heart ache for today's kids, and it made me think."

Winning entry:

My new room was perfect in every possible way. Smooth, light wood floors. Fluffy mattress with a gray duvet. Shaggy yellow carpet, perfectly centered relative to the clean, shining bright window. Huge closets full of the newest styles. It made my head spin. It also made me want to gouge the Augmented Reality contact lenses out of my eyes.

But my reputation was everything. The only concrete notion in this artificial world. It would be a terrible idea to ruin it.

Sighing, I crossed to my dressing table and sat down. Pulling out the small fingerprints full of moisturizing liquid, I swiped my finger over my right eye. Suddenly, half of my vision showed my perfect gray and yellow room, the other half showed a somewhat well kept chamber, with a threadbare carpet and sunken bed.

I repeated this process with my left eye, then smiled. The room was just fine in my opinion, and besides, MY room should look like MY room. Not like some flashy, new-fangled interior designer's.

"Child! Come down! It's almost time to leave," Parent called from down the stairs. I stomped down to them.

Once again, I was shocked by how different they looked compared to his/her AR self. My parent was taller, paler and had completely different eyes.



Parent pursed his/her lips "None of that attitude, Grace." I was shocked. Names had been left behind decades ago. There was no need to have separate names for everyone, the facial recognition aspect of the contacts reminded you of your past interactions with them. Addressing someone with a name was giving them a label, a gender. That was an offence.

Because Parent was in our house, addressing me, the maple leaf, signifying an offence, did not disappear from his/her arm. Or maybe it did. My lenses were still upstairs on my plain wooden table.

Parent fixed me with a slightly metallic stare. "Go put your contacts in at once! Do you want to shred your reputation? More importantly, are you trying to shred mine?!"

"No, Parent," I answered. "I'll go put them back in."

"Good. Remember, we have your appointment with the AR surgeon. I've picked out a new identity for you. They'll program that into the mainframe as well as replace your skin sensors. You had better be well-behaved this time." That tone hinted at an "or else."

"Yes, Parent.



The Greater Good by Abby Robitaille

This first page was the Grades 10 to 12 category winner in 2017. This is provided as an example to students as they prepare their entries.

Subject: Oppressive dictatorships and press censorship.

Comments from judge Erin Bow: "I picked *The Greater Good* because it's just so much fun. If you read teen fiction, you've seen it before: the crowd of nervous teens waiting for some terrible trial or competition to begin. But here, it gradually emerges that the kids are waiting to see who is going to be picked as an apprentice to the evil dictator....The story stayed with me. I would absolutely read more of it, and in the end, that's what storytelling is about."

Winning entry:

"The beauty of running a benevolent dictatorship, is that benevolent is a relative term."

Roman Lythe stared at us audience members, the luckiest 50 teens in the Continent, and I realized he was waiting for us to laugh.

"Such wisdom! Such candour!" I heard someone shriek, loud enough to overpower the faint doubt haunting their voice. I nodded along, forcing a laugh. Not that laughter ever really came naturally.

It was surreal, being here. I had researched everyone in this room. I even had my personal guesses about who would last. This program was notorious for starting with 50 and ending with five. I glanced at the head in front of me, one of the few redheads. It might be Calliope Germaine. She was ruthlessly smart, but she wouldn't last long. She didn't come from an affluent village and it was just hard to believe she would be taken seriously. Still, she might make a good ally. Anyone in this room would be a good ally, if they had made it this far. Teens who had clawed their way to the top of their schools and villages, all in hopes of getting into this program. To be trained on how to rule the Continent by Roman Lythe.

More of a divine figure than a politician, Roman Lythe was what held this Continent together. He had overthrown the democracies that had once formed the Continent. He had taken away all the disarray by making all decisions himself. He knew what he was doing, so the people didn't have to. No one was forced to understand what was happening on either planet. If anything was urgent, it would be posted, sent as an alert directly from Roman.



In fact, based on these notifications, he was improving everything! Tithes were increasing, which meant more money for the government, which was more money spent on the people. Brilliant! Not to mention all the military victories we'd had.

So we all gathered around Roman now, leaning forward, waiting to memorize every word.

"Now why do I say this?" Roman asked, savouring our undivided attention. "I say benevolent is a relative term because I can redefine benevolent to be whatever I want. The beauty of power! So people think I'm peaceful if I say I'm more peaceful than the other Continents; or more fair, or more just. You understand?"

I didn't.



Student Writing Challenge – Possible writing topics

In The First Page student writing challenge, CBC Books asks students to look at a trend or issue from the past year (November 2019 to November 2020) and imagine how it might play out in 150 years. Below is a list of possible topics that may inspire students, though they may choose to come up with their own subject.

- COVID-19 global pandemic www.cbc.ca/1.5767494
- Black Lives Matter, Anti-Black racism and police brutality www.cbc.ca/1.5655267
- George Floyd killing www.cbc.ca/1.5642789
- BTS releases first English-language single Dynamite www.cbc.ca/1.5694971
- Dogface208's Fleetwood Mac TikTok goes viral www.cbc.ca/1.5752437
- Kobe Bryant dies in helicopter crash www.cbc.ca/1.5441090
- Harry and Meghan step back from British royal family www.cbc.ca/1.5515130
- Australian wildfires devastate the country www.cbc.ca/1.5414325
- The future of TikTok in question www.cbc.ca/1.5725352
- How Animal Crossing helped boost Nintendo's profits while calming the world www.cbc.ca/1.5559300
- NBA 'bubble' championship and player protests www.cbc.ca/1.5701574
- U.S. presidential election www.cbc.ca/1.5753574
- Michael Jordan documentary series 'The Last Dance' premieres www.cbc.ca/1.5548551
- Nova Scotia fishing disputes www.cbc.ca/1.5765665
- Disney Plus hits 10M subscribers in 1 day www.cbc.ca/1.5358047
- Indigenous Canadians' access to water continues to be an issue www.cbc.ca/1.5652581
- 5G networks coming to Canada www.cbc.ca/1.5462994
- Chinese Uighur detention camps and surveillance www.cbc.ca/1.5369835
- WE Charity scandal www.cbc.ca/1.5666676
- Ukrainian plane crash www.cbc.ca/1.5418610
- Brexit takes effect www.cbc.ca/1.5448443
- Trump acquitted of charges in impeachment www.cbc.ca/1.5452967
- 2020 Summer Olympics cancelled www.cbc.ca/1.5547830
- Nova Scotia shooting rampage www.cbc.ca/1.5709767
- Oil prices hit record lows www.cbc.ca/1.5538048
- Hong Kong protests against Chinese government www.cbc.ca/1.5686642
- Former NASA astronaut Kathryn D. Sullivan becomes first woman to reach deepest point in ocean www.cbc.ca/1.5612548
- Beyoncé releases 'Black is King' visual album www.cbc.ca/player/play/1770752067835

Find out how your students can enter **THE FIRST PAGE**
Student Writing Challenge! Visit cbc.ca/thefirstpage