

The First Two Pages: “Black Friday”

By R.T. Lawton

When Art Taylor asked if I would contribute an article to this continuation of B.K. Stevens’ blog series, an article analyzing the first two pages of one of my recently published short stories, I wasn’t sure I was the right guy for the job. However, for Bonnie, whom I met at a previous Bouchercon and have long enjoyed reading her short stories and told her so, I thought I’d give it a try and let you, the reader, decide whether or not this article would be of any assistance to another writer in creating their own short story.

But first the reasons I hesitated to write an analysis of my own first two pages:

1. Yes, I’ve read several dozen books on various aspects of writing, and yes, I’ve attended sessions at Bouchercons and Left Coast Crime conferences, but no, I’ve not had any formal structure in creative writing or analyzing a story.
2. You see, most of my storytelling ability came from the gathering of people I worked with, meeting in a bar after a raid or an undercover buy or a dangerous arrest. In the process of relaxing from all that adrenaline, everyone would tell their stories of what happened to them. Naturally, the best stories got the most interest and acquired the

most laughter. Thus, I analyzed, or learned from that, how to put different elements of storytelling together in order to tell some of the best stories. Of course, now that I'm retired from federal law enforcement, I try to pick up my creative writing tips from other short story authors. As the British comedian Benny Hill used to say in his skits on flirting with good-looking women, "Always learning, always learning."

So, here's **my** analysis of the first two pages of my submission manuscript (double spaced and starting halfway down the first page) for "Black Friday" (10th in my Holiday Burglars series), published in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, Nov/Dec 2017 issue.

First line: It was the Friday after Thanksgiving and Yarnell knew he was in trouble as soon as the pawnshop door swung shut behind him and he saw Lebanese George standing with both hands stretched towards the ceiling.

Right away, the reader knows the time of year (the Friday after Thanksgiving or Black Friday) and the setting (a pawn shop). The reader also meets Yarnell, the protagonist, and Lebanese George, who plays an important part in the story, and realizes that if George has his arms up then something is wrong. The *hook of interest* is now set and it is up to the rest of the story to deliver. These days, an author wants to set the hook as soon as possible, else the submitted story

won't get past the editor to even get to a potential reader. And, how many guys do you know with a name like Lebanese George? It creates a certain curiosity about the character.

Second line: It sure as hell didn't look to him like George was in the process of changing any overhead light bulbs.

The second line backs up the premise in the first line that there is trouble ahead. It also suggests this story has the makings of a comedy.

Third line: If what was going on was what Yarnell thought it was, he was pretty sure that professional courtesy between criminals didn't necessarily get extended to off-duty burglars during a stickup.

Yep, just as the reader suspected, there is a robbery in progress of the pawnshop. And, the reader has just learned that the protagonist, Yarnell, is a burglar, but if Yarnell is in the pawnshop, then he must have other business to conduct. Now, what other business would a burglar have in a pawnshop? If you guessed he was there to fence stolen goods, you'd be close, except the reader doesn't find out until page 4 that he's there for a personal reason, one which could get him in trouble at home if this robbery is allowed to progress. And, since that's not part of the first two-page analysis, you'll have to read the story to find out Yarnell's personal situation.

On the second page, the robber instructs Yarnell to put up his hands, which he does. Yarnell, being a professional criminal, then proceeds to tell the robber why it isn't a good idea for him to raise his hands. Lebanese George, whose own arms are tired from being raised so long, chimes in, siding with Yarnell on why their hands shouldn't be in the air. This scene sets the stage for the entry on page 5 of Yarnell's partner in crime, Beaumont, who comes into the pawnshop unaware of the robbery in progress. Turns out, Beaumont has his own ideas about the proper protocol on a stickup and so the plot thickens.

In short, what I tried to do in the first two pages is:

- introduce some of the characters
- set the background and time
- hook the editor and any readers in the first sentence and follow up in the next two sentences in that first paragraph
- set the tone and type of story the reader can expect
- produce an unusual situation to keep the reader wondering how this will all turn out
- set the stage for continuing and complicating the plot action on subsequent pages

Now, you tell me, did I succeed? Did this help give you any ideas for your own stories as to what should be in the first two pages? What tips or ideas can I learn from you for me to use? Please give me your answers in the comments section.

#

R.T. Lawton is a retired federal law enforcement agent, past member of the Mystery Writers of America board of directors and three-time Derringer Award nominee. With over 100 short stories in various publications, including *Blood on the Bayou* (2016 Bouchercon anthology), *The Mystery Box* (2013 Mystery Writers of America anthology), *And All Our Yesterdays* anthology, *Who Died in Here?* anthology, *Deadwood Magazine*, *Easyriders*, *Outlaw Biker*, *Woman's World*, and 38 sold to *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*. He also has four e-collections at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) for Kindle, plus at [Smashwords.com](https://www.smashwords.com) for other e-readers.