

The First Two Pages of “The Dead Snitch” by Doug Allyn
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An Essay by Doug Allyn

What a lovely thought. Two pristine pages, untouched, as pure and virginal as new fallen snow. Fallow, waiting to convey the mental images of your next brilliant story.

But then? A reality check. Here’s a newsflash from the post-covid planet of the World Wide Web. We don’t *get* two pages anymore, kids. Think about it. When was the last time you were in a bookstore, checking out the wares, when you actually *read* two full pages before deciding, yes or no?

The hard truth is, over the past decades, we’ve all been programmed as thoroughly as Pavlov’s dogs *not* to read complete pages. Instead, we glance, we skip, we skim over. We *elide*. We’re so used to being awash in info from the web that we bunny hop every other line. But . . . back to our bookstore browse.

If the writing’s good, and the story’s intriguing, we may actually read the first paragraph. Completely. And then, possibly a second. But honestly, at that point we’ll most likely skip to the middle to see if it holds our interest. Read the first two complete pages? Not. At the end of the second paragraph,

either your reader is already hooked, or your book's back on the shelf and he or she has blithely skipped on to the next.

The world where prospective readers scanned two pages is a lovely memory. Unfortunately, that's all it is.

Still, is this automatically a bad thing? Not necessarily. A century and more ago, Poe said a story should 'begin a moment before the most important instant in a character's life' or words to that effect. Actually, that's still pretty good advice. Poe didn't need two pages to kick off "Amontillado," or "The House of Usher," so let's refocus a moment, forget the first two pages, and consider snaring the reader with the first two paragraphs.

For example, consider engaging the reader in conversation. If the stranger sitting next to you at a bar starts talking to you, say, you listen, if only to be polite. Writers have that option too. Here's the opening paragraph from a Derringer Award winner called "Famous Last Words."

Have you ever wondered what you'd say? If you *knew* that the next thing you said would be the *last* thing you ever said?

Would you try to justify your life? Or say I love you? Or goodbye? Or try to pray? Could you even assemble a coherent sentence? I couldn't. And I had my chance.

It's tough to turn away from that intro, because the author begins by asking you a serious question, one that actually makes you consider your

answer. When the guy next to us at the bar says something interesting, we listen. Can't help it.

Here's a second two-paragraph approach from a recent story in EQMM called "Blind Baseball."

The roadside bomb was a beauty. Neatly wired, compact. First rate workmanship. Good. Every tech's nightmare is getting blown away by some kid's cobble job.

This unit was cached in a schoolboy's backpack, hidden under a cardboard box by the roadside. Four bricks of Semtex wrapped with duct tape, with its trigger—no, two triggers in plain view. The wiring was laid out in straight lines, the soldered joints sheathed in shrink tubes. Precise, professional work.

All good. And yet—

Okay, maybe it's not Poe, but the principle still holds, the character is instantly placed in deadly jeopardy and has to make a decision in the next few seconds that will save his life, or end it . . .

And yet a third: this from an Edgar winner called "The Scent of Lilacs."

March 11, 1865
Reynolds County, Missouri

The horsemen drifted out of the dawn mist like wolves, strung out loosely across the hillside in a ragged line, their animals snorting steam in the morning chill. Two outriders on the flanks, five troopers in the main body. Polly guessed they'd already placed riflemen along the stone fence beyond her barn, ready to cut down anyone who tried to run.

Her son was sitting on the corner of the porch, whetting the scythe, daydreaming. “Jason,” Polly said quietly. “Riders are coming. Get to the barn. And walk! Slow. All the way.”

This one is a bit more subtle, in that the threat is implied, rather than direct. And yet, you definitely sense the situation is dangerous, and want to see what happens next. Why would Polly tell her son to walk?

There are countless ways to approach the two-paragraph introduction. When it’s right, you know it immediately, and the energy will sometimes carry you all the way to the denouement. But when it’s wrong . . . ?

A few years ago, I was asked to judge entries for an anthology chaired by the marvelous Charlaine Harris. The premise? Noir stories flavored with a soupcon of the supernatural. Fun, right? Charlaine thought we might receive seventy-five entries. We got nearly *two hundred*. Which, oddly enough, didn’t prove as difficult to vet as I expected, because roughly a third of them opened with the same introduction. The alarm goes off at the private eye’s bedside. Hung over, he fumbles it to silence. Or . . . the phone rings, same setup, same outcome. Is it a terrible introduction? No, in fact it’s classic noir. But is it fresh, does it capture your attention? See the previous answer.

So the next time you commence a new tale, consider narrowing your focus to the first two paragraphs rather than two pages.

I mean, c'mon, two teensy little paragraphs?

How hard can that be?

The First Two Pages of “The Dead Snitch” by Doug Allyn

I hate hospitals. I've never had a good time in one, never met anyone who did. When my Jeep tripped a Nazi mine outside Salerno, September of '43? I woke up in a base hospital in Catania, Sicily. Spent six *very* long weeks there, getting stitched, plastered, and bandaged back together. It felt like six years. And after the medics finished patching me up, I spent two more weeks camped out in a transient tent, waiting for my best friend to die. He finally did, and considering how many pieces of him the docs cut away, I suspect death was a blessing when it finally punched his ticket.

Back stateside with a medical discharge, I landed a job with my hometown cop shop, Valhalla, Michigan P.D., as a detective. And my first assigned call was, naturally...to a freakin' hospital.

Of a sort. A hospice, actually.

I expected it to be a grim and gloomy place, because the patients aren't there to heal, only to wait out their time, the months or weeks they have left. Or days. But Milady of Grace wasn't so bad. The nurses wore whites, the corridor walls were decorated with colorful murals, even a few Kilroy cartoons. It was the brightest, cheeriest facility I've ever seen.

I still hated it.

I found my guy sitting alone in a sun room, in a wheelchair equipped with an oxygen tank. He was listening to a Detroit Tigers game on the Zenith console radio, gaunt as a skeleton.

He had a clear plastic cannula in his nose to aid his breathing, and his outfit hung loosely on his bony frame like death camp pajamas. I guessed the dying man was two or three sizes smaller than he used to be. His wispy hair was gunmetal

gray, half hidden under a black baseball cap with a star on the bill. Valhalla P.D.

“Sergeant Dugan?” I asked.

He glanced up. Slowly. “I’m Doo to my friends, which you ain’t. Who are you?”

“I’m Detective Dolph LaCrosse, North Shore Major Crimes.”

“Ah. You’re the F.N.G. who’s takin’ over my job? Where you from, son?”

“I’m a local actually, a north Michigan backwoods boy, but I’ve been away. Enlisted the day after Pearl Harbor, straight out of high school. Army. North Africa, Sicily, then Italy.”

“Doing what?”

“I was an MP, bustin’ AWOLs, bustin’ dopers, bustin’ heads. Then Criminal Investigations. Smuggling mostly. Not so different from here, I expect.”

“True dat,” he nodded, and I smiled involuntarily.

“What?”

“Haven’t heard ‘true dat’ in a while, Sarge. Where I’ve been, they don’t speak much *patois*.”

“No Frenchies where you was?”

“True dat ain’t French, it’s north country redneck.”

“So are we,” he shrugged.

“True dat,” I said, and we both smiled. But his quickly morphed into a wince.

“You okay, Sarge?”

“I will be,” he said, squeezing the plunger on his pain medication drip. “Soon as my buzz kicks in. But if you got anything important to ask me, you’d best get to it. In three minutes I won’t remember my damn name.”

I quickly ran down my list of the open cases I’d be taking over, picking up a few details on each. Dugan was visibly tiring, though, so I wrapped it up without pushing him.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“Most of it,” I said. “Once I get up to speed on these, I’ll probably be back.”

“Best call ahead,” he said drily, “make sure I ain’t out for a jog. Do me a favor?”

“Sure. If I can.”

“Can you get me some weed, son? Painkillers here are either aspirins or Mickey Finns. Had a kid who’d slip me a few sticks of homegrown but he ain’t been around recent. Help a brother out?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said. Which was a flat lie. I was the fucking new guy, didn’t have the vaguest idea of who to hit up for weed without risking a bust for it. He might be right about the hospital painkillers, but as drifty as he was? With luck, he’d forget he asked.

We sat awhile in silence, listening to the game, waiting for his meds to kick in. And after a few minutes, he sighed softly, and closed his eyes. I thought he’d zoned out. Or maybe died. I rose to go.

“Are you working that reefer deal, sonny?” he asked, his eyes still closed, speech a little slurred. “The shootout at that dive? The Dry Dock?”

“I—saw some paperwork on it, but the drugs make it federal. It’s still an open case but all they got is a body, a gungsel out of Detroit, not much more. Why?”

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The author of eleven novels and more than 130 short stories, Doug Allyn has been published internationally in English, German, French and Japanese. His most recent, *Murder in Paradise* (with James Patterson), was on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for seven weeks. More than two dozen of his tales have been optioned for development as feature films and television. Allyn studied creative writing and criminal psychology at the University of Michigan while moonlighting as a guitarist in the rock group Devil’s Triangle and reviewing books for the *Flint Journal*. His background includes Chinese language studies at Indiana University and extended duty with USAF Intelligence in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

Career highlights? Sipping champagne with Mickey Spillane and waltzing with Mary Higgins Clark. “Twice an Edgar Allan Poe Award winner, and the record holder in the *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* Readers Award competition, Doug Allyn is one of the best short story writers of his generation—and probably of all time. He is also a

novelist with a number of critically-acclaimed books in print.”—*Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*