

## LESSON 5: The Inciting Incident

You thought about who your main character is deep down inside, you've thought about what your main character wants or what story problem they must face, now it's time to think about why this is happening *now*. What triggered it?

The **inciting incident** is a story event that occurs at the start of the story (within the first three chapters, typically), that sets your main character off on the path toward the story goal. If you can't identify an inciting incident within the first three chapters, it's possible that your story isn't starting in the right place.

### Starting in the Right Place

In the previous lesson you brainstormed about what the character wanted, their overall story goal. When trying to figure out where to start your story, that character's overall story goal plays an important role.

Because now the question to ask, after you know what the character wants, is "**Why now?**" Why is this goal so important **right this moment**? Why wasn't it important yesterday, a month ago, a year ago? The answer to this question will help you pinpoint where your story should start, because this is your story's **Inciting Incident**. That moment that takes your character's day from ordinary to extraordinary.

Think of this this way: Your character is going along in their regular ol' unsatisfying life when suddenly *bang!* **Something happens**. A major shake-up. Something unexpected.

That *something* is what not only starts your story, but also what sets in motion your character's desire for whatever that story goal is. That push to change their life for the better. They didn't want this yesterday, because yesterday this "something" hadn't happened yet.

Or if it was something they already wanted, they hadn't yet made the decision to **take actionable steps toward it until the inciting incident forced them to**. Something at the start of your story triggers the desire to set off on this story goal quest. What was that trigger?

### Examples

**Let's look at our ongoing example** of the heroine who wants to build a B&B. We identified that she's probably had this goal for a while, but suffers from the inability to finish things (caused by a fear of failure). Although she's had her "dream" on her mind, *something* makes her suddenly **take action now**. What?

The **Inciting Incident** is the **fire that destroyed her current home**. This moment forces her to make a **choice** and sets up her **external story goal**. She now has a large chunk of insurance money (something she didn't have before) and can choose to rebuild her current home (keep her

unfulfilled life as it is) or take a chance and go for her dream. She chooses to try for her dream, and that's her first step toward not only her B&B goal, but also toward facing her emotional issues and proving to herself that she can finish something she starts. And while this first choice to act has not solved all her problems, she's (unconsciously) set herself on a path toward those solutions.

**Let's look at another example:** a woman who's in love with her best friend. They may have been like this for years, since their childhood even, and she's always dreamed that maybe one day they'd be a couple...

Now suddenly he comes to her and says he's going to propose to another woman and wants her help picking out the ring. Yikes! That's an **inciting incident**, all right. If the main character doesn't **act quickly**, she's about to lose the man she loves to someone else.

So now **she acts on her story goal**, which is to **stop him from marrying the wrong person** and get him to realize that she's the right person. (Notice how even though this goal is related to love, it's not love itself. It's a tangible goal with actionable steps.)

The key here to identifying the **inciting incident** is **ACTION**. Action related to the **external story goal**.

Ideally, your inciting incident should happen within the first Act of the story, which in terms of chapter lengths is usually about the first three chapters, or first 1/3 of the book.

**Most inciting incidents happen in the first chapter because they make an excellent "hook" to propel the reader into the next chapter**, but in some stories (particularly those that require a lot of world building—such as fantasy and sci-fi novels), the author may take longer to show the main character's "ordinary world" before the major shake-up.

There's no "rule" to say an inciting incident must happen by page X, but keep in mind that **anything that happens before this incident is back story, not "the story" yet**. The story, your main character's journey to become a better person, etc., starts with "the inciting incident."

So, you need to look carefully at what comes before the incident, and make sure this information needs to be there, that it's not just details that could be woven in piece by piece in later chapters as it becomes necessary to know. This is one of the reasons the exercises in the earlier lessons had you focus so much on learning back story details, creating a timeline of past events, and how to reveal back story in context of present events.

## Inciting Incident Examples from Books and Movies

- *Las Vegas Pregnancy Surprise by Shirley Jump* – when Molly discovers she's pregnant after a one-night stand in Vegas.

The pregnancy test is the very first scene (very first line, in fact). Definitely starts the story off with a bang. As the chapter progresses, you learn more about Molly's ordinary life through her worries about how the unexpected pregnancy affects it. (Back story revealed in context).

- *Blue Dahlia by Nora Roberts* – when Stella's husband Kevin dies in the plane crash.

Although there is an engaging prologue at the start of the story to set up the supernatural story element, it's the plane crash in Chapter 1 that turns Stella's world upside down and sets her on the path that becomes the plot of the book. Stella's husband dies leaving her with children to care for, which presents her with choices of what to do next. She *acts* on her choice and her new adventure begins.

- *While You Were Sleeping* – when Lucy rescues Peter from the train tracks.

This happens close to the start of the movie, but you do get a glimpse at Lucy's empty life before this moment and the voice-over gives you some of her relevant back story to help paint the picture of a woman with no family, alone during the holidays, who fills her time with day dreams about adventures she'll never take.

- *Raiders of the Lost Ark* – when Indy receives a visitor on campus asking for his help in retrieving the ark.

Notice how this happens after an introductory action sequence that shows Indy in his "ordinary life." When the visitors arrive and explain the problem to him, he might be resistant at first, but ultimately makes a **choice to act** on this information. Thus his external story goal is created and the real story begins.

## Exercise

1. Describe your main character's "ordinary life"--job, family, hobbies, daily or routine activities
2. Review your main character's GMC, particularly the Story Goal and Motivation.
3. Ask "Why now?" about the story goal. What happened that made this goal so vital, so urgent?

Ask yourself, "What's the shake-up in the story that gets my main character to act and start on the road toward their overall story goal?"

Identify your story's "inciting incident" and jot down some notes about what you think might happen in that scene.

Consider what story questions the incident might raise and what sort of **dilemma\*** it poses for your main character. What's the story problem that your character must solve?

(\*A dilemma is a type of problem where the solutions seem to just add another problem to the mix and there is no clear solution at first. You create conflict right away by making the choice to act on the inciting incident a difficult one.).

*The brainstorming to get to the incident is for your use only.*

Post to the loop a **brief description** (a paragraph or so) of your story's "**Inciting Incident**," **what choices it presented to the character**, and how your character's **story goal** originates from this incident or choice.

### **Ongoing Reading Assignment**

Look at the book you've been reading during the workshop and identify the inciting incident. Note where it occurs in the story.

**Save your answers to the reading assignment for the last day.**