

39 Endings

Ernest Hemingway wrote 39 different endings for his classic *A Farewell to Arms*. That only proves that even great writers struggle to get it right. It takes time and effort and multiple attempts. And it's not just endings. There are as many ways to start a story as there are to end one.

I take comfort in learning of the struggles of poor Ernest, because I have the same frustration, confusion, and difficulty pinning down what I think is the best version of my books, particularly in regard to endings and beginnings. Good to know it isn't just me.

I have developed some guidelines I like to follow. Endings should tie back to the beginning, more or less framing the story. The ending should address whatever problem was laid out in the initial pages and they should include a surprise, if possible. A surprise twist is particularly important in mysteries and suspense novels. Readers like that unexpected twist at the end and some expect it. So in *Carrie's Secret*, you get one last twist right at the end. And in my first book *Development*, there is an unexpected reconciliation between two characters at the very end.

Beginnings have their own guidelines as well. Arguably, there is no more important section to any book. If the beginning does not capture the reader, it will matter little what happens later on, let alone how the story ends. Beginnings need to be compelling and dramatic. You need to meet the main characters right there and get a sense of what kind of story you are embarking on. Perhaps my strongest belief is that the beginning should start with action. I hate books that wander off into description and slowly wind to some important event chapters later. Maybe that worked two hundred years ago, but not today.

Sometimes I have to try many versions of beginnings and endings before I am satisfied. In early drafts of two of my two novels, I realized that the best beginning occurred some chapters in. The first chapter of *Carrie's Secret*, for example, started out as chapter eight, but it was moved to the front because it turned out to be where the important action took place.

My best advice is to finish writing a complete draft of your novel and then look critically at the beginning and the end. Most likely they can be greatly improved.