

Name: _____ Date: _____

Writer's Craft: Begin with a Bang!

► Please read the first page of *Charlotte's Web*.

"Where's Papa going with that ax?"

Suppose you overheard someone in your kitchen say that. Would you imagine your father with a big ax? Would you want to hear more?

If the answer's yes, congratulate E. B. White. In the very first sentence of the book, he's got you hooked. How does he do it? Well, suppose the first sentence of the book was more like this:

Fern Arable was eight years old, and she was a nice girl.

Yuck. You might as well have started with her phone number. There are quite a few nice eight-year-old girls on the planet. That sentence gives you no good reason to read a story about *this* one. No picture springs to your mind. Nothing's happening.

But Papa on a mysterious mission with a naked blade, now, *that* gets your attention. Even if you didn't have to read this book for your studies, you just might anyway, after that first sentence.

A good first sentence:

- Flashes a picture in your mind, using concrete details (such as a big ax).
- Puts you right in the middle of something *happening*.

A good beginning is so important that thousands of years ago a man named Aristotle was already talking about it. They didn't have children's books then, but they did have plays, and Aristotle suggested that a play begin *in media res*, which is Latin for "in the middle of the thing." (Aristotle spoke Greek, actually, but for some reason we know this saying in Latin). E. B. White clearly understands Aristotle's suggestion; he starts with Papa already on his way with the ax, instead of back when Papa wakes up and starts brushing his teeth.

That's a good beginning. So let's keep reading.

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► **Please read Chapters 1 and 2 of *Charlotte's Web*.**

1. After his great opening sentence, E.B. White sets the scene so quickly that within moments we're immersed in the story. Look at the first four paragraphs. Just for fun, count how many words they have.
2. Now list all the details you already know just from those few words. For instance, what kind of room are the characters probably in? Where is this room—a factory, a school, where? What time of day is it? Why is Papa carrying the ax? Are there any other interesting details?
3. When Avery first walks in, what kind of boy do you think he is? Why?
4. Why do you think Mr. Arable lets Fern keep the pig?
5. Look again at how Fern cares for Wilbur. Would you like to care for a baby pig? Why or why not?

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Charlotte's Web Answer Key

Chap. 1-2

1. 79 words
2. They're in a kitchen or dining room on a farm in the morning, and Papa's going to kill a newborn pig because it's a runt. Other details may include: Fern's eight; they're setting the table; Fern probably lives with both her parents; some pigs were born last night.
3. Avery seems a rough, active boy, judging from his weapons.
4. Answers vary.
5. Answers vary.

A complete chapter-by-chapter unit for *Charlotte's Web* is available for members of abcteach.com