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# Drop the hammer.

“Well begun is half done.”  
—ARISTOTLE, Philosopher

## QUICK TAKE

To set up and draw people into your story, introduce your hero and then construct an event that hits their existence like a hammer, something that radically alters their life. It can be as dramatic as a plane crash or subtle as a glance that fuels an obsession. Whatever it is, it is important and meaningful, changes the hero's emotional state, and must be dealt with immediately.

When you drop the hammer, you lay a track for the story to ride on from start to finish. It firmly establishes what kind of story you're telling and what it's about. It helps settle you in when you're writing and, later, helps your audience settle in to experience the story.

The importance of dropping an effective hammer can't be overstated. Countless writers start stories in a blaze of inspiration, but because they fail to set up their story properly, they get lost and quit. That means months, or even years, of wasted time and frustration. By learning how to drop the hammer, you make the process more rewarding and increase your odds of finishing a coherent—and if the gods are with you, *inspired*—story that can be published or produced.

## HOW IT WORKS

One key reason writing makes people so anxious is that there are an infinite number of choices—of settings, characters, events, and more. This is particularly true when you're at the very beginning and haven't made a single decision yet. By starting with the construction of the “drop the hammer” event or moment, you give yourself a problem to solve—writing the beginning. We'll work backwards, first defining exactly what a hammer drop is, and then exploring how it's set up.

### The Drop

When the hammer drops, something profound happens to your hero. The following are the eight essential qualities of an event big enough to launch a story:

1. It is surprising or even shocking—we didn't see it coming and neither did the hero. This puts the hero in a heightened emotional state.
2. It not only heightens the hero's emotional state, it changes their attitude and indicates a shift in fortunes. Note that the hammer can be positive. For example, the hero falls madly in love or wins the lottery.
3. It builds sympathy or empathy for the hero—we know and feel that *this* event, happening to *this* person, at *this* time, profoundly changes their life. After this event we care more about what will happen to the hero.
4. It instills a sense of urgency—your hero must respond immediately to the hammer. It can't be put off. Whether the hammer is as powerful as a tornado destroying a house or as subtle as a woman realizing she's losing her memory, this new reality must be dealt with immediately.
5. It makes clear what kind of story this is in terms of tone and genre—whether it's a comedy, drama, dramedy, tragedy, etc. It doesn't tell us what will happen, but it emotionally prepares us for how the end will feel—heartbreaking, joyful, thrilling, terrifying, etc. It helps to settle in the audience.

6. It establishes an “object of desire”—a person, thing, action, or state of being the hero needs to acquire in order to exist in the new reality. A mother needs to find her missing child, a boy needs to gain his scoutmaster’s respect, an athlete needs to break a world record.
7. It provokes a dramatic question in the audience’s mind: Will the hero acquire the object of desire? (We’ll explore dramatic questions in detail in the next chapter.) For now, note that the simplest definition of storytelling is this: Ask a dramatic question, answer it. By dropping the hammer you provoke the central dramatic question, the one that fuels the story.
8. It projects possible endings. Once the dramatic question is asked, our minds provide answers. If the hammer drops when a wife tells her husband she’s no longer sure that she loves him, we picture various endings: the couple getting divorced, renewing their vows, deciding to live in a loveless marriage, etc. While we don’t know exactly how the story will end, we know the ballpark and begin to wonder.

If this seems like a lot, that’s because it is. It’s essential that every moment in your story is well-written, but none more so than this one. We talked earlier about the hammer drop laying down a track for your story to ride on. Each of these elements will help strengthen that track. If you lay down weak tracks, your story will get derailed. You want your tracks made of the highest-quality steel. You want to instill in your audience a deep-seated sense that “this is gonna be good.” When you drop the hammer, you tell the audience you’re in control. You let them know that this story is going to be entertaining and meaningful, that you won’t waste their time.

### The Setup

Every story has its own unique needs and every storyteller has their own style, taste, and preferences. Your hero, genre, setting, the length of your story, and the medium you work in all impact the amount of time required to set up the hammer. Some heroes

are complex, contradictory characters with elaborate histories, who take a long time to introduce. A story set in 5437 in a distant galaxy on a world no one has seen before needs more setup than a story set in the present day. Therefore, there are no hard and fast rules about when you drop the hammer. Some hammers come down at the very start because they need minimal setup—a loved one dies. Some drop halfway through the story or even later. Many come at roughly the one-third mark. Some stories, like *Finding Nemo* (which we’ll explore in the next chapter), drop two hammers; the first is critical to setting up the second. Our goal here is to give you enough information to structure your story but not so much it strangles your creativity. Only you know what your story needs.

It’s helpful to think about the effect you want your hammer to have. If it’s a comedy, you want your audience to burst out laughing. If it’s horror, you want to terrify them. But above all, you want your audience to care about your hero and what will happen. To effectively set up the hammer, focus first on two things:

1. What information is essential to fully understanding the event?
2. What can you do to amplify the impact of the event?

Imagine a story about a man who is paralyzed in an accident. What must we learn in order to care deeply about the accident? What if he’s a star athlete or in love with a model who is obsessed with her appearance? What if he’s fiercely independent? Or the sole caretaker for five kids and needs to walk to do his job?

If your story is about a single father who must overcome an accident to raise his kids, you need to show him at work. And his job must require physical labor—he’s a plumber, telephone line repairman, etc. You’re not merely telling us, “This is Ned, he’s a fireman.” You’re setting up your hammer by showing how important his strength and athleticism are to his identity and career. This way when the hammer drops, we’re shaken by it.

If it's important to know he has five kids, you might show him struggling to get them all ready for school. Once you establish the necessary information, you can add nuance, depth, and texture—weather, time period, history of the characters, location, etc.—as you see fit.

When you properly set up and then drop the hammer, you're off to the races. When you drop one that's weak—that has no impact, that sparks no action—you're bound to struggle miserably through the writing process and quit before you finish. So, take your time and have fun with it.

## HOW A MASTER DID IT

*The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (ca. 1600)*

William Shakespeare

When the play starts, two watchmen, Barnardo and Francisco, meet atop a castle in Denmark late at night. The fog rolling off the jet-black sea is so thick they can barely see each other. They're stressed out of their minds. Two nights in a row, a ghost—in the form of the recently deceased King Hamlet—has appeared but said nothing. Barnardo asks if it has come again tonight, but it hasn't. As Francisco heads off, another guard, Marcellus, who's seen the ghost, comes in with Horatio, a scholar and friend of Prince Hamlet. They've brought Horatio in the hopes that he can confirm the ghost's identity, talk to it, and figure out why it's come. Horatio is skeptical of their story.

But sure enough, the ghost appears. Horatio is shocked and terrified. He calls out to the ghost to reveal what or who it is and say why it has come. But the ghost, as if offended, disappears. Pale and trembling, Horatio is shaken to his core. He confirms that the ghost is exactly as they described but adds that it wears the armor King Hamlet wore into battle when he recently defeated the Norwegian army, led by King Fortinbras, to claim the Danish lands. And the ghost at one point frowned just

like King Hamlet did before he went into battle. It's clear King Hamlet was revered for his courage and the honor he brought to Denmark.

Marcellus says the whole country's on edge, that cannon-makers and shipbuilders are working on Sundays, and guards have all been put on strict schedules. Horatio says that King Fortinbras's son, also named Fortinbras, is hell-bent on avenging his father's defeat. He's gathering an army of thugs and mercenaries and could ride in to attack the castle at any moment. Horatio notes that before Julius Caesar was assassinated, corpses rose out of the ground to walk the Earth to warn of trouble coming. He's convinced the ghost has come to do the same. The ghost reappears and Horatio pleads with it to speak and help them avoid whatever might be coming. The ghost stays eerily silent. In a panic, Horatio strikes at it with his dagger, but it vanishes once again. They decide to get the dead king's son, Prince Hamlet, certain that the ghost will speak to him.

### Scene Two

The newly crowned King Claudius addresses his court, including several lords, his nephew Prince Hamlet, and Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. Claudius assures everyone that he is in control. He has done what all have asked and not only assumed the throne, but married Gertrude who was, only a month ago, the wife of his brother, King Hamlet. He says that Prince Fortinbras demands that he return the Norwegian lands taken from his father, but Claudius tells the court he has no intention of giving in. Young Prince Fortinbras underestimates him. Claudius insists, correctly, that the lands were won fairly in battle and therefore will not be returned.

The king turns his attention to Hamlet, "But now my cousin, Hamlet and my son," (cousin back then also meant nephew) and Hamlet mutters an aside, "A little more than kin and less than kind." This is a fully loaded line. He means being a nephew and a son is too many relations, that Claudius is not only unkind as in not nice, but also not the same kind of man

as Hamlet, not really from the same bloodline as his nobler father. Claudius and Gertrude plead with Hamlet to stop wearing black and mourning the loss of his father. Claudius says it's unmanly to grieve so bitterly for so long and asks to be welcomed as Hamlet's new father. Gertrude says her dead husband lost his father who lost his father, as do all men. Hamlet agrees this is true. Then, when his mother asks why his loss seems particular to him, he's offended by the word *seems* and states that his weeping and outward signs of sorrow can barely express the depth of his pain. Claudius and Gertrude plead with him not to return to Germany, where he's been attending college in Wittenberg, and Claudius tells him he needs him by his side as his "chiefest courtier," his most important confidante and aid. Hamlet is well-liked, the rightful heir to the throne, and the son of a revered king. To win popular approval, to be seen as legitimate, Claudius needs Hamlet's support. After Hamlet agrees to stay, they're delighted, and Claudius leads his court off to celebrate his kingship and the nation's return to normalcy.

Hamlet is left alone, and Shakespeare lays out his emotional state, his exact thoughts and feelings in explicit detail. He's devastated. He can't fathom that this nightmare is his new reality. He would kill himself if it were not a mortal sin. He says his father loved his mother so much he couldn't bear to let the wind touch her face, that she loved him so much she shrieked in agony at his funeral. He says the shoes that she wore to the funeral were hardly broken in when she wore them barely two months later at her wedding. He is disgusted by his uncle, and states with self-deprecating humor that though his uncle is his father's brother, he is as unlike the fallen king as Hamlet is to Hercules. He is sickened by the thought of his mother having sex with Claudius and considers it incest, every bit as vile and unnatural as a parent sleeping with a child. He is desperate to express his true feelings but can't. He knows that as a prince you must always consider the greater good, that the proper handling of the affairs of the state is more important than his individual feelings.

Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus come in to tell Hamlet what they've seen. He grills them until he's certain it was his father that they saw, then makes them promise to keep this secret. He is sure there's been some foul play but has no clue what. He will meet them tonight atop the castle and speak to the ghost—even if Hell itself opens up to stop him.

### Scene Three

Polonius, a high-ranking member of the court, and his daughter, Ophelia, meet with his son, Laertes, who is returning to college in France. Polonius gives Laertes a short lecture, packing all the life advice he can into a single farewell monologue. The two then warn Ophelia about spending too much time with Hamlet, who they're convinced doesn't truly love her but only wants to sleep with her. The scene adds emotional and thematic depth in that Polonius and Laertes share the father-son bond that Hamlet has lost. Ophelia, young and naïve, trusts her father and brother and promises to refrain from seeing Hamlet, which only adds to his stress.

### Scene Four

Late at night, atop the castle wall, Hamlet and Horatio wait for the ghost to reappear. They hear trumpets and cannon fire. The king and his court are up dancing and drinking. Hamlet notes that this tradition of hardcore partying to celebrate the new king's ascent is in bad taste. He feels Denmark, especially under his father, has had many great accomplishments and this behavior minimizes their stature.

Then the ghost appears. Hamlet terrified, cries out, "Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" He urges the ghost to say if it's good or evil, if it's really his father, to explain what it wants. The ghost drifts off and beckons Hamlet to follow. Horatio and Marcellus beg him not to, fearing it could be a trick to hurl him into the sea. He rejects their pleas. When they try to block his way, he draws his sword and threatens to make ghosts of them. Hamlet goes off. Horatio wonders what this means. Marcellus

responds with one of the most famous lines in theater: “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

### Scene Five

When the ghost is alone with Hamlet, he tells him that he is, in fact, the ghost of his father, and that he is trapped in purgatory, where his days are spent in torment. Since he died unexpectedly before he could fully repent his sins, he could not go to Heaven. But his death was not caused by a snake bite as everyone believes. He was killed by a snake, but the snake was his own brother, who poured poison in his ear while he was sleeping. This led to a gruesome, agonizing death. Though Hamlet suspected foul play, he is traumatized by the news that his beloved father has endured so much pain. The ghost tells him to avenge his murder, but not to dare take any action against the queen. Hamlet vows he will.

He returns to Horatio and Marcellus excited, teeming with conflicting emotions—fear, rage, outrage, sorrow, even a dark kind of ecstatic joy that his suspicions are confirmed. But above all, he is fiercely determined to avenge his father’s murder. He says that the ghost is definitely real. “There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” he says, and cryptically asserts that villains do exist in Denmark. But he doesn’t tell them what the ghost said about his uncle. He warns them he may seem mad in the coming days, but not to let on that they know about the ghost. As he orders them to swear to keep this secret, they hesitate. The ghost bellows, “Swear!” which they quickly do. The first act ends with Hamlet’s lines, “The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right. Nay, come. Let’s go together.”

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Now let’s go through each element of a well-struck hammer drop and see how the moment Hamlet learns his father was murdered stacks up.

1. **It’s surprising, even shocking.** Though Hamlet suspected something was wrong, it is not only surprising to hear it confirmed by the ghost of his father, but the details of the murder—its wanton cruelty, its fallout, that his father must exist in torment, in purgatory—are shocking.
2. **It changes the hero’s fortunes and heightens his emotional state.** In Scene Two, Shakespeare makes it clear that Hamlet is heartbroken and depressed, bordering on suicidal. He must watch helplessly as his uncle, whom he despises, replaces his father as not only the king, but also as his father and his mother’s lover. His state changes radically when he moves from being a man with no purpose to one with a sacred mission.
3. **It builds sympathy or empathy for the hero.** Hamlet is morally righteous, loving, sensitive, intelligent, passionate, intense, and funny. He is as fully aware as a character can be. We feel for a young man who learns his uncle is a traitor, his father was murdered and condemned to purgatory, and his mother is committing what he considers to be incest with a villain. That’s a heavy load to bear. And note the specificity of how *this* moment affects *this* character at *this* time. Consider how diluted the impact of this moment would be if Hamlet met the ghost two years after his father’s murder instead of two months.
4. **It instills a sense of urgency.** Hamlet must deal with this immediately. His father’s soul, his honor, his nation, and his mother’s body are being desecrated, and the ghost will surely return to punish Hamlet further if he doesn’t rise to the occasion.
5. **It makes clear what kind of story this is in terms of tone and genre.** The play is a tragedy. When the hammer drops, a prince meets with the tortured ghost of his dead father, in the middle of the night, by the black, foggy sea. And he’s given a

mission—to kill a king who has the full backing of the nation’s lords—that is likely to end with the prince’s own death.

6. **It establishes the “object of desire.”** We know what Hamlet must do to achieve his objective: kill the king.
7. **It provokes a dramatic question in the audience’s mind:** Will Hamlet kill the king?
8. **It projects possible endings in the audience’s mind.** We know that for this story to end, Hamlet must kill the king, get executed for trying to kill the king, or even quit trying to kill the king. We don’t know exactly how this will end, but we can narrow it down to a few credible choices.

Now let’s review some of the key choices Shakespeare made in his setup.

Because he is the greatest storyteller who ever lived, he not only brilliantly sets up the start of his story but also the end. The play is a tragedy. We know that Hamlet is going to die. At its heart, the play is an exploration of the nature of life and death, most notably all that is lost when a human being dies: the mind, consciousness, all the thoughts, ideas, personality, emotions, desires, history, relations—all of it, every single thing, comes to an end. Of course, common sense dictates that when you set up a story, you must tell us all of the obvious stuff: where it takes place, who it’s about, what kind of story it is, etc. You know this.

But we’re hunting bigger game.

This is why we started with Hamlet, one of the most complex characters ever written. What Shakespeare does in Act One, with the setup of his greatest play, is introduce the reader/audience to a character who is spiritually dead, and then construct an event that shatters his hero’s state of being. When the ghost reveals he was murdered and instructs Hamlet to avenge the murder, Hamlet springs to life with as much passion, authenticity, and humanity as one can. Just consider for a moment all that

is involved in this moment: power, sexuality, family, purgatory, the religious symbolism of brother killing brother in a garden. . . . What Shakespeare sets up is the most alive character he could in order to explore what it means to be alive and what is lost when we die.

## HOW YOU DO IT

The following bullet points will help you think through and execute the principle.

- ▶ Focus on your objective. You’re constructing an event that is powerful enough to get your reader’s attention, to hook their interest, and make them want to go on the journey.
- ▶ Briefly sketch out a character. For now, keep it simple: for example, a middle-aged, married cop from Brooklyn who loves to cook.
- ▶ Establish their basic state of mind. They are happy, unhappy, or just going through the motions. Things are going well, badly, or life is business as usual. Our cop from Brooklyn is profiled in the newspaper or wins an award. He is still young—in his late forties—but has worked hard, saved money, and will retire soon after he puts in his twentieth year, which is a few months away. He loves his wife, who runs the emergency room of an inner-city hospital. Both are a bit burned out and plan to retire to North Carolina. Their dream is to build a little “breakfast shack” so they can work mornings and then golf, sail, fish, and watch the sun set on the ocean.
- ▶ Construct an event that impacts your character. It may be the smallest thing in the world (seeing a homeless child, catching a romantic interest’s eye) or it may be cataclysmic (an asteroid strike, monster attack, terrorism), but whatever it is, it radically

alters your character's state of mind. If they were happy, now they're sad. If they were sad, now they're happy. If they were numb or on cruise control, now they spring to life. The cop who is excited about his upcoming retirement shows up at yet another crime scene to find that the dead body is his only son, who just turned twenty-one. This event shatters life as he knew it.

- ▶ Define the need that arises as a result of the hammer coming down. The cop needs to catch his son's killer. This need is the object of desire.
- ▶ Now make it active. Phrase this as a dramatic question. Will the hero acquire their object of desire? Will the cop catch his son's killer?
- ▶ Once you define how the hammer drops, focus on setting it up to so it comes down hard. There's an inherent cruelty in the way writers treat their characters. You're telling the audience, "See this cop? He thinks he's about to retire and enjoy the good life. Watch this." Now, go through what happens before the hammer comes down and make certain it strengthens the emotional impact of the hammer. If the cop tells his wife that he's taking their son out for dinner, he's been worried about him, this would strengthen the impact of the hammer by showing he loves his boy. If the weather is icy and cold, this might up their desire to get to North Carolina, a dream that's put off after the hammer comes down. The point is that what you're doing here is making your reader care. You want your reader to think, "Oh, man, this event, happening to this character, at this time, is a very big deal."
- ▶ You're writing the beginning of your story. Have fun. You'll know you've got it when you feel a rush of confidence that comes from knowing you can finish a coherent, inspired story.

## MINI FINAL EXAM

Read the following, then answer the question below.

An aging woman takes a long walk in the park. She sees someone who reminds her of a dear friend who passed away. She feeds the birds. She sits on a bench and rubs her foot. It really hurts. On her way home, she shops for tonight's dinner. She drives in heavy traffic. Back in her apartment, her son telephones and yet again rushes through the call as if he is checking it off his to-do list. She considers saying something but lets it go.

She makes tea. She watches the rain fall. She falls asleep watching a political talk show. She looks through some travel brochures, but none interest her. She stares at a collage of photos of her and her husband in happier times—atop a mountain, on the beach, celebrating their anniversary. She checks her phone book, an old one, handwritten. But there's no one she cares to call. There are lines through several names with little crosses that mean they've died. Finally, she heaves a big broken sigh and helplessly watches the sunset.

Which of the following events would drop the strongest hammer in this story?

- a) She learns she has skin cancer
- b) Her neighbor asks her to compete in a mahjong tournament
- c) She learns that her dead husband was gay
- d) An anonymous letter arrives, with photos, that says her husband faked his death and now lives in Vienna
- e) Her beautician talks her into wearing a wig that looks fantastic!

## CONTINUING ED

In Thomas Hardy's 1891 classic novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, a young teenager, Tess Durbeyfield, is sent off to live with another family, the D'Urbervilles, whom her father believes are wealthy relatives. The hope is that through the D'Urbervilles' connections, Tess, a kind, hardworking, and genuinely lovely gal, will meet a rich husband. At the estate, Tess does attract the interest of a man—but he has no interest in marriage. What does he do to her? How does this incident drop the hammer on Tess and radically alter her life? How does it build empathy for the hero, make readers care what happens to her, and make a political statement about society's treatment of women in the late nineteenth century? Take your time and go through each chapter leading up to this moment. List each thing Hardy does to make the hammer more impactful.

### MINI FINAL ANSWER

The best answer is **d) An anonymous letter arrives, with photos, that says her husband faked his death and now lives in Vienna.**

This information is impossible to ignore, raises questions, radically alters the hero's state, and provokes her to act.