

## Keeping Readers Guessing

by B.K. Stevens

The first sentence of a newspaper article, experts say, must answer five basic questions, usually referred to as the five Ws: who, what, when, where, and why. Some people say the first page of a novel or short story must provide the same sort of information. As soon as possible, writers should let readers know who the protagonist is, what he or she is doing, and where, when, and why all this is happening. I've had a contest judge tell me my first page doesn't work because it doesn't include a physical description of the protagonist; I've seen agents and editors on conference panels toss first pages aside because they don't precisely identify the threat the protagonist faces. If you Google "first page checklist," you'll find confident assertions that the first page must establish the plot's central conflict, reveal the protagonist's primary motivation, and do eight or ten other things as well.

Maybe. I understand why professionals working through slush piles get impatient with first pages that don't provide basic information up front. But sometimes, I think, writers can intrigue readers by mystifying them for a while, even by confusing them a bit. Sometimes, holding back basic information might make readers want to turn to the next page.

Here are the first two pages of "Silent Witness." This short story was first published (with a different title) in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* in December, 2010. (It's now available in a Kindle edition on Amazon; it should be a free download through January 8.) The story won a Derringer from the Short Mystery Fiction Society, so it must have hooked at least a few readers. This is how it starts:

Spotting Sandra Blakemore didn't take long. Like me, she wore a simple, dark dress—high neckline, long sleeves, no distracting prints or stripes, no jewelry, no buttons. She was a tall, solidly built woman in her mid-fifties; her hair, like mine, was pulled back tightly. The only extravagant thing about her appearance was her eyebrows, plucked and penciled into sharp, dark peaks.

I walked over to her. "Ms. Blakemore?" I said. "I'm Jane Ciardi."

She looked me over quickly—with approval, I thought—and shook my hand. "Thanks for helping at such short notice, Jane," she said. "Well, what a mess. Not that I blame Christine. If your husband has a heart attack, you wait in the hospital with him, no question. Still, it's hard to bring someone new in now—after pre-trial hearings, and jury selection, and most of the prosecutor's witnesses. And this is your first time interpreting in court?"

"In criminal court, yes," I said. "I've interpreted in family court and small claims. But nothing like this."

“Nothing like this,’ indeed.” One of the eyebrows arched into a still steeper inverted V. “Thank goodness things like this don’t happen often. It casts the whole community in such a negative light. And after all the controversy—well.” She arched the eyebrow again, then switched to a brisker, more businesslike tone. “I thought I’d handle both voicing and signing when there’s a deaf witness, leave the signing when there’s a hearing witness to you. That way, you won’t have to voice. All right?”

“Fine,” I said gratefully. Like most sign-language interpreters, I find signing for hearing people easier than voicing for deaf people, especially if I haven’t gotten to know the deaf people involved, haven’t gotten used to their inevitably more or less distinctive styles of signing. “And we’ll stand by the defendant’s table?”

“I will,” she said. “You’ll be right by the witness stand. Since there are so many deaf spectators, the judge wants you where everyone can see you. You realize that we’ll be videotaped? If the defendant appeals, if he wants to claim the jury was prejudiced by incompetent signing, a videotape will be crucial. You know about the case, of course?”

“Only what I’ve read in the newspaper,” I said. There had been plenty to read. When a distinguished educator from California was hired as principal of the Cleveland School for the Deaf, both students and faculty protested that a hearing person shouldn’t be chosen, that only a deaf administrator could do the job; when student demonstrations got vigorous, almost violent, local newspapers and television stations covered them eagerly. And when James Douglass was found dead in his office barely two months after starting his job, when his deaf assistant principal was charged with crushing his skull, the coverage turned constant, and gleeful.

In a short story, some might argue, writers need to provide basic information even more quickly than in a novel. Maybe all that information should be in the first paragraph, not just on the first page. “Silent Witness” definitely doesn’t meet that standard. The first paragraph does provide readers with some information, but that information is designed to spark questions, not answer them. I hoped the first paragraph would leave readers asking who the protagonist is, where she is, what she’s doing there, and why she and Sandra Blakemore are both dressed in such a distinctive way. Are they Amish? Are they nuns? But even nuns who still wear habits are allowed buttons. (I made buttons the last item in that series because I thought a button ban would seem especially surprising, and I wanted to build to a climax.) I hoped readers would want to keep reading precisely because the first paragraph raises questions it refuses to answer.

The following paragraphs reveal more information, but only gradually, and sometimes only by implication. Where are these characters? They’re in a courtroom (paragraph three); it’s a criminal courtroom (paragraph four); a murder case is being tried (paragraph eight). We learn in the third paragraph that Jane Ciardi and Sandra Blakemore have come there to do “interpreting” of some sort, but many readers might not realize it’s sign-language interpreting until the fifth paragraph mentions “a deaf witness.” When

Sandra Blakemore first refers to “the whole community,” many readers probably won’t realize she means the deaf community. Not until paragraph eight do we get the basic facts about the murder at the heart of the story. And the story never explicitly explains why Jane and Sandra dress as they do (it’s so deaf people can focus on their hands and faces, without being distracted by their clothing), and it never defines “voicing,” a term that’s probably unfamiliar to many readers.

I think that’s fine. I did it on purpose. I don’t think mystery readers are troubled by some initial confusion. I think they enjoy piecing together bits of evidence and gradually figuring things out for themselves. If they didn’t relish that challenge, they wouldn’t read mysteries. To steal some words from John Keats’ definition of negative capability (and I know I’m ripping those words out of context and using them in a way Keats never intended), I think mystery readers are “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts” without throwing their books down in disgust or their hands up in despair.

These first two pages also don’t provide much description of the protagonist, Jane Ciardi. We have an idea of what she’s wearing (and of what she’s not wearing), but that’s about it. We get more details about a secondary character, Sandra Blakemore. I did that on purpose, too. I thought alert, active readers would enjoy using the description of Sandra to draw inferences about Jane. Sandra’s in her mid-fifties; unlike Jane, she’s interpreted in criminal court before; and she looks Jane over—“with approval,” Jane thinks. Readers can infer that Jane’s younger, less experienced, and anxious for her colleague’s approval. Jane’s description of Sandra as “solidly built” also suggests something about Jane—a different sort of person might have said “fat.” And Jane is struck by Sandra’s “extravagant” eyebrows, so it’s reasonable to assume Jane’s own appearance is subtler. We don’t know the color of Jane’s eyes or the length of her hair, but I think that’s okay. I think there’s enough in these first two pages to give readers a basic mental image of Jane, a general sense of her appearance and personality.

These first pages also don’t reveal much about Jane’s motivation, and they reveal nothing about the plot’s central conflict. Some readers might guess Jane’s motivation has something to do with her desire to prove herself as an interpreter in a challenging new situation, but even that would be a stretch, and it wouldn’t be entirely accurate. Yes, Jane wants to prove herself. As the story goes on, however, a second, stronger motivation arises, one even Jane doesn’t know about yet. And I can’t honestly say these pages provide any clues at all about the plot’s central conflict. That comes later—many pages later. If I’d wanted to provide all the information some experts insist on, I would have had to begin the story with something like this:

As I walked into the courtroom, I felt nervous. I was only twenty-eight, and this was an important day in my career as an American Sign Language interpreter. I looked around for Sandra Blakemore, who would share interpreting duties with me on this controversial murder case. Little did I know that she and I would soon be locked in conflict, that soon I would be forced to make a painful choice between my desire for professional success and my

determination to see that an innocent man would not be unjustly convicted, that the real murderer would not go free. I patted my long auburn hair into place, blinked my deep blue eyes, and walked forward as quickly as my slender, shapely legs would carry me.

Well, that's an exaggeration. No decent writer would begin a story with such a clunky, information-laden paragraph. But that's what some of these checklists almost seem to require.

Thank goodness, there are other ways to capture a reader's attention. In this story, I tried to capture it with intriguing bits of information about sign-language interpreting—about the way interpreters dress, about the relative difficulties of signing and voicing, about why interpreters are videotaped when they work in court. And I tried to capture it by revealing information gradually, dropping hints, and inviting readers to draw inferences.

I don't think the first two pages always have to spell everything out. Often, I think, those pages work better when they take a more indirect approach, teasing readers with bits of information and inviting them to put those bits together and figure things out for themselves.

Get your copy of "Silent Witness" [here!](#)



B.K. (Bonnie) Stevens' *Interpretation of Murder* is a traditional whodunit that continues the story of Jane Ciardi, the American Sign Language interpreter introduced in "Silent Witness." *Fighting Chance* is a martial arts mystery for young adults. In addition, B.K. has published over fifty short stories, most of them in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. She's won a Derringer and has been nominated for Agatha and Macavity awards. [www.bkstevensmysteries.com](http://www.bkstevensmysteries.com).