

The Prologue Test

*Ten questions to find out whether your prologue is earning its place
— or hiding a chapter one that isn't ready yet.*

COMPANION TO "WHAT IS A PROLOGUE ACTUALLY FOR?"

Read your prologue once, then answer each question honestly. Check the box only if the answer is a genuine **yes** — not a "kind of" or a "could be." This isn't about whether the writing is good. It's about whether the prologue is doing the one thing a prologue is for.

- 1 Does the prologue change how the reader experiences Chapter One in a way that cannot be achieved by Chapter One alone? ☐
- 2 If you deleted the prologue entirely, would the novel lose something essential — not just context, but tension, irony, or emotional shading? ☐
- 3 Does the prologue make a promise to the reader that the opening chapters will take time to deliver? ☐
- 4 Is the POV or time-frame shift from prologue to Chapter One intentional and justified — not just a workaround for a slow opening? ☐
- 5 Does the prologue contain at least one moment of genuine tension, mystery, or unresolved action (not just atmosphere or backstory)? ☐
- 6 Is the prologue free of long descriptive passages that exist mainly to "set the world" rather than hook the reader? ☐
- 7 Is the prologue under 2,000 words — or, if longer, does every paragraph earn its length with new information or escalation? ☐
- 8 Could a thoughtful beta reader explain, after finishing the book, why the prologue needed to exist? ☐
- 9 Does the prologue's tone match the novel's overall voice, even if the content is different? ☐
- 10 Does the prologue respect genre norms — or, if it breaks them, does it do so with clear purpose rather than ignorance? ☐

YOUR VERDICT

8–10 checked

Keep it. Your prologue is likely earning its place.

4–7 checked

Revise. There may be a stronger Chapter One hiding underneath.

0–3 checked

Consider cutting the prologue or reworking it from scratch.

BONUS MATERIAL

3 Prologue Types That Usually Work

These aren't rules — they're patterns. If your prologue fits one of these shapes and passes the test above, it's probably doing its job.

THE THREAT REVEAL

Shows the reader a danger the main characters don't yet know about. Creates dramatic irony that fuels tension through the early chapters. Works best when the threat is specific and visual, not abstract.

THE TONAL OVERTURE

Sets mood and emotional register rather than plot. Tells the reader what kind of story they're entering. Often lyrical, short, and atmospheric. Succeeds when it makes the reader feel something before they know anything.

THE HISTORICAL ANCHOR

Depicts a key past event that shapes the present-day story. Gives the reader a piece of history they'll need to understand what follows. Works when the event is dramatised, not summarised.

5 Red-Flag Opening Phrases

Not a rule — but if your prologue opens with one of these, check whether it's leaning on melodrama rather than earned tension.

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| ✗ "Long ago..." | Often signals unearned mythic weight. |
| ✗ "Legend has it..." | Distances the reader from the story before it begins. |
| ✗ "Little did she know..." | Tells the reader what to feel instead of showing. |
| ✗ "In the beginning..." | Echoes genesis without the gravity to support it. |
| ✗ "For centuries, [x] had..." | Compresses time in a way that flattens stakes. |

NEXT STEP

Ran the test and still not sure? A second pair of trained eyes catches what a checklist can't. Contact me for a sample edit, or book a full Editorial Assessment, and I'll tell you, page by page, whether your opening is doing its job.