How do produced films open?

What Sinners and Shaun of the Dead make us worry about by page five

A stranger knocks at a farmhouse door. In a pub, a woman tries to tell her boyfriend she wants more time alone. In Sinners, an earlier warning makes the knock sound dangerous. In Shaun of the Dead, finding the source of a scary noise tells us why the couple can't get a moment's privacy.

01 / Sinners (2025) · Ryan Coogler

Who needs shelter from whom?

A match flares on the third strike, lighting a woodcut of a guitarist. As Annie speaks, a series of woodcuts shows musicians drawing listeners from beyond the living world. In the last one, people gather inside a juke joint while a red-eyed figure peers through the window. The warning reaches us before we meet anyone who has to act on it. (p. 1)

An injured man hobbles towards a farmhouse, looking back at someone we can't see. Inside, Bert picks at a guitar while Joan tries to persuade him to drink a remedy. A knock interrupts them. Bert reaches for a gun stored beside a folded Ku Klux Klan uniform. Now there's reason to fear for the stranger as well as to fear him. He sees the uniform, offers gold and Bert lets him in. (pp. 2—4)

> **By page five.** Chayton, the leader of the Choctaw search party, warns Joan that the man they're pursuing is dangerous. She denies having seen him. The sun goes down, the party leaves, and Joan closes the door with a sigh. For her, the confrontation is over. We're still waiting for Bert to come back from the nursery. (p. 5)

In the nursery, Bert lies in blood and begins to stir. Early on page seven, he stands and smiles like the stranger. Joan tries to scream. We stop there, before the cut to the lumber mill: we have the answer to what happened when Bert opened the door. (pp. 6—7)

02 / Shaun of the Dead (2004) • Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright

Can Liz get a moment alone with Shaun?

First come the electronic noises. A bell rings and the landlord calls last orders. We're close on Shaun's blank face as Liz talks to him about his friend Ed. Then she turns to address Ed himself. He's right beside them, playing a horror-themed fruit machine. That explains the bleeps. It also reveals that Liz has to discuss Ed in front of Ed. (p. 1)

On the next page, Ed's outbursts keep interrupting the sentence in which Liz asks for time alone with Shaun. Then we discover that her flatmates are sitting there too, ready with relationship advice. When Liz asks for more from their evenings, Shaun offers her a pork scratching. (pp. 2—4)

> **By page five.** Liz wants Shaun to want a change, too. There's affection as well as frustration in the way she looks at him. But her mention of his mum sets everyone talking again. We know what she's asking; we're still waiting for his answer. (p. 5)

Shaun promises to book a restaurant for just the two of them. Then he stares into space again. The bell rings and the electronic sounds carry us into the titles. We stop as we leave the pub, before the Saturday-morning montage. The opening has given us both a promise and a reason to doubt he'll keep it. (p. 6)

Try it on your own opening

Give two characters a conversation and interrupt it. Write the interruption twice. In one version, plant a detail beforehand that makes the reader fear what's coming. In the other, explain the interruption straight away, but let its source reveal something awkward between the characters.

Once the interruption is over, what does the reader still want to know?

About this study

We chose these two feature screenplays because both suggest danger but give the reader different reasons to turn the page. We noted what the text establishes by the end of screenplay page five, then followed the action to its first clear break. The illustrated prelude in Sinners ends on page one; the farmhouse sequence that follows ends early on page seven. The pub sequence in Shaun of the Dead ends on page six. These are readings of the drafts, not measurements of how often other films use either approach.

Neither screenplay copy gives a draft date on its cover. Page references use story pages: the unnumbered first page follows the cover in both PDFs. Screenplay page 5 is PDF page 6; the farmhouse and pub sequences end on PDF pages 8 and 7 respectively. The descriptions are paraphrases. The reading and source checks were AI-assisted.