

I HAVE AN **IDEA!** NOW WHAT?



How to Become Extremely Busy Without Knowing What You're Doing

A Sort-of Guide to Writing and Publishing Your First Book

LENA R. HALDEN

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*How to Become Extremely Busy Without Knowing
What You're Doing*

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PROLOGUE

I HAVE AN IDEA

I first had the idea of writing a book when I was twelve.

I am forty-five now.



So if you bought this book because you have an idea and would like to know what to do next, the first piece of good news is that apparently there is no immediate rush.

My idea survived for thirty-three years.

Mostly because I did absolutely nothing dangerous with it, such as trying to turn it into a book.

For a very long time, writing a book belonged to the comfortable category of things I would definitely do one day.

One day is an excellent place for ambitious projects.

There are no deadlines there.

No bad reviews.

No plot holes.

Nobody asks what your genre is.

You don't need an ISBN in one day.

You certainly don't need to know what an ISBN is.

The book I was going to write changed many times over the years. Sometimes it was a vague story. Sometimes it was a slightly less vague story. Sometimes it was simply the pleasant knowledge that I was probably the kind of person who could write a book if I ever decided to.

This is an extremely efficient way of being a writer.

Nothing can go wrong.

Then, eventually, I made the mistake of actually writing one.

That was when I discovered that having an idea and making a book are separated by a surprisingly large number of activities, many of which appear to have been designed by people who strongly preferred that I do something else with my life.

At first, I expected the obvious problems.

Characters.

Plot.

Dialogue.

The minor inconvenience of needing approximately eighty thousand words when you currently have seventeen.

Those seemed fair.

I wanted to write a book.

Writing would presumably be involved.

What I did not expect was everything else.

I stopped asking questions like *What does this character really want?* and started asking questions like *Does this paperback need bleed?*

I learned about trim sizes.

Metadata.

Keywords.

Categories.

ISBNs.

ASINs.

Margins.

Front matter.

Back matter.

I discovered that there are several different ways to describe the exact same book and that apparently I was expected to know which one Amazon wanted at any particular moment.

I learned that a cover can look beautiful at full size and become completely useless when reduced to something approximately the size of a postage stamp.

I learned that publishing a book and helping another human being discover that the book exists are two entirely different professions.

This book is about the first one.

The second profession would very much like my credit card details.

We'll get to that another time.

None of this was part of the original idea.

The original idea had characters in it.

This is how you become extremely busy without knowing what you're doing.

You start with a story.

Then you make the perfectly reasonable decision to write it down.

And somewhere between Chapter One and pressing Publish, you find yourself at eleven thirty at night comparing two almost identical fonts while reading an article about ebook metadata and wondering when exactly you became this person.

The strange thing is that none of this made me want to stop.

Quite the opposite.

Because underneath all the technical nonsense, new terminology, wrong turns, unnecessary experiments and occasional moments of staring at a screen with genuine hostility, something was actually happening.

The imaginary thing was becoming real.

A sentence became a scene.

Scenes became chapters.

Chapters became a manuscript.

The manuscript became a file.

The file became a book.

And eventually, somewhere I couldn't see, someone I had never met opened it and started reading.

That part is still slightly ridiculous to me.

For thirty-three years, the book existed in the safest possible place:

nowhere.

Nobody could dislike it there.

Nobody could misunderstand it.

Nobody could give it three stars because they liked the story but found one character annoying.

It was perfect.

Then I published it.

Less safe.

Much more interesting.

This book is about everything between those two points.

It is not a promise that following a particular sequence of steps will make you a bestselling author.

I have no such sequence.

And I would be deeply suspicious of anyone claiming to have one.

It is not a comprehensive encyclopedia of publishing either. There are professionals who know vastly more about editing, typography, book design, distribution, copyright and everything else we're going to wander into than I do.

You may eventually want to hire some of them.

This is a map for the person standing where I stood, looking at an idea and thinking:

Okay.

Now what?

We'll start with the story.

We'll find out whether the idea can survive more than seventeen pages.

We'll build characters, a skeleton, a timeline and several problems that did not exist before we started.

Then we'll write it.

We'll make it worse.

We'll make it better.

We'll give it to other humans.

Then we'll turn the manuscript into an actual book.

We'll choose a title.

A cover.

A size.

A font.

We'll meet ISBN.

We'll meet metadata.

And eventually, after learning considerably more than seemed reasonable when we began, we'll arrive at a button.

PUBLISH.

There will be useful things in this book.

Actual useful things.

Checklists. Processes. Questions to ask yourself. Ways of organizing a story. Things worth doing before you press Publish. Things you probably don't need despite the internet insisting otherwise.

I'll tell you what worked for me.

I'll also tell you what didn't.

And when something is simply my preference rather than a rule,
I'll try very hard not to turn it into one.

Especially considering how much of writing consists of staring at
something you wrote yesterday and wondering what the hell you
meant.

You don't need permission to start.

You don't need to understand everything we're going to cover
before writing your first sentence.

Right now, you need something much smaller.

An idea.

If you already have one, congratulations.

So did I.

For thirty-three years.

Having an idea was the easy part.

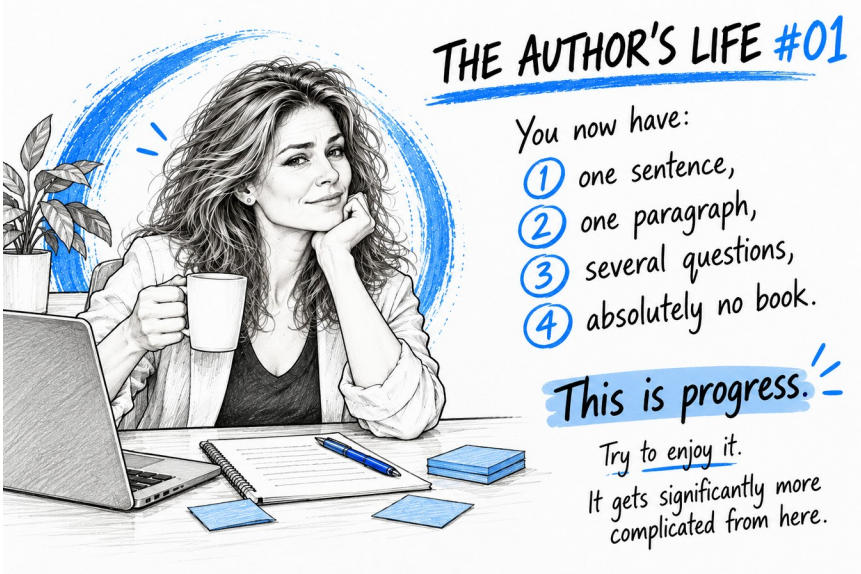
This was my first mistake.

PART I

BEFORE YOU WRITE THE DAMN THING

1

IS THERE ACTUALLY A BOOK IN THIS?



Ideas are generous.

They usually arrive with absolutely no concern for whether they can support a book.

You hear a sentence. See something strange on a train. Read an article. Remember an argument from fifteen years ago. Wake up at three in the morning with what appears, briefly, to be the greatest premise in the history of literature.

You write it down.

Sometimes.

The next morning you look at it.

Woman receives letters from herself.

Excellent.

Now we only need approximately three hundred pages.

This is the first useful distinction I learned to make:

An idea is not a story.

That sounds obvious until you have an idea you really like.

Then it becomes offensive.

An idea can be a situation.

A man discovers that his entire business can run without him.

It can be a character.

A psychologist who can identify everybody else's lies but not her own.

It can be an image.

An empty chair in front of a computer that is still working.

It can even be a question.

What happens when convenience becomes more important than control?

All of these can be good ideas.

None of them is a book yet.

A story begins when something changes and somebody has to deal with it.

THE QUESTION UNDER THE IDEA

When I have an idea now, I try not to ask immediately:

What happens next?

I ask:

What is actually interesting about this?

Not what sounds clever.

Not what would look good on a cover.

Not what could produce an excellent trailer involving a woman running through rain for reasons that remain unclear.

What is it about the idea that makes me want to keep looking at it?

Sometimes that is a moral problem.

A contradiction.

A mechanism.

Sometimes it is simply a question I genuinely don't know how I would answer.

That question matters because plots are surprisingly good at becoming complicated.

Questions are better at remembering why the complication exists.

Suppose your idea is:

A successful executive discovers that somebody has been secretly moving money through her company.

Fine.

We can build a thriller around that.

But there are hundreds of ways to build it.

Now suppose the question underneath it is:

How far would you go to prove your innocence if proving it could destroy the thing you're trying to protect?

Suddenly we have pressure.

The investigation is no longer just about finding out who moved the money.

Every answer can cost something.

That is much closer to a story.

SOMEBODY HAS TO CARE

Ideas tend to become stories when they acquire a person with something to lose.

This doesn't need to be a life.

Writers have killed enough fictional people already.

It can be a marriage.

A reputation.

A friendship.

A career.

Money.

Freedom.

A belief about oneself.

The possibility of getting what the character wants.

But there has to be a reason why walking away is difficult.

This gives us one of the simplest tests I know:

What happens if the main character does nothing?

If the answer is:

Not much.

We may have a problem.

If your protagonist can solve the entire novel by turning off the phone and going to lunch, you need either a stronger problem or a very compelling lunch.

The pressure doesn't have to begin enormous.

It only has to matter.

Then we can make it worse.

We will become very good at this.

THE PREMISE

This is where I find it useful to turn the idea into a premise.

Not a blurb.

Not a synopsis.

Not the sentence you will eventually use to convince strangers on the internet that your book will change their lives.

Just a working sentence that tells **you** what story you are building.

A useful premise usually contains some version of:

Someone + disruption + goal/problem + pressure/stakes.

For example:

When a woman discovers evidence linking her late husband to a financial scheme, she must uncover what he was involved in before the investigation turns toward her — while deciding whether clearing her name will destroy the company they built together.

That is not necessarily beautiful prose.

It doesn't need to be.

It has a job.

It tells me who the story belongs to.

It tells me what changed.

It tells me what she has to do.

And it suggests why doing it will become increasingly unpleasant.

Beautiful comes later.

Useful first.

CAN IT SURVIVE PAGE SEVENTEEN?

This is where I would stress-test the idea before becoming emotionally attached to a 40-chapter outline.

Ask it some rude questions.

What changes?

If the situation at the end is essentially the same as the situation at the beginning, what exactly filled the middle?

What can get worse?

A story needs somewhere to escalate.

If your premise begins at maximum volume, you may spend the next three hundred pages screaming.

What can the character discover?

Information changes decisions.

Almost every story depends on somebody learning something they didn't know before.

What decisions become difficult?

A sequence of events is not automatically a story.

Events become interesting when they force choices.

Can the obvious solution fail?

It probably should.

What would make me curious after Chapter Three?

Not what happens on page 287.

Why would I turn page 28?

That question is less glamorous and considerably more useful.

DON'T BUILD THE HOUSE YET

There is a temptation, once an idea passes the first few tests, to start constructing everything.

Character biographies.

Maps.

Family trees.

Thirty-seven chapter titles.

The protagonist's favorite breakfast.

A detailed political history of a fictional country mentioned twice in Chapter Six.

This can feel remarkably productive.

Sometimes it is.

Sometimes you are decorating a house that does not yet have foundations.

Before I build too much, I want two things.

A **one-sentence premise**.

And a **one-paragraph story promise**.

The story promise is not marketing copy. Nobody else needs to see it.

It answers:

Who is this about?

What disrupts their life?

What do they now want or need?

What stands in the way?

Why will solving the problem cost them something?

And, crucially: **What kind of experience am I promising the reader?**

A claustrophobic psychological thriller and a romantic comedy can begin with exactly the same event:

A woman receives a message from her ex.

What happens next should probably differ.

Genre is not merely the shelf Amazon eventually puts you on.

It is part of the agreement you make with the reader.

THE USEFUL BIT

Before going further, write these two things.

1. Your premise

When _____ happens, _____ must _____
before/because _____.

Do not worry if it sounds mechanical.

It is scaffolding.

Scaffolding is allowed to be ugly.

2. Your story promise

Write one paragraph explaining the story as if you were describing it to an intelligent friend who will not let you escape with:

It's difficult to explain, but trust me, it's really good.

Include the protagonist, disruption, central problem, stakes and the type of story you think you're telling.

Then read it once.

And ask:

Would I want to know what happens?

Not:

Would everybody want to know?

Everybody is an inconvenient target audience.

For now, you only need enough story to make **you** curious.

You're going to be spending quite a lot of time with it.

2

PEOPLE NEED TO DO THINGS



Characters are difficult because people are difficult.

This is inconvenient.

It would be much easier if characters simply did what the plot required.

You need Elena to enter the basement, so Elena enters the basement.

You need Daniel to hide the letter, so Daniel hides the letter.

You need Claire not to mention the extremely important thing she discovered yesterday because revealing it now would destroy Chapter Twenty-Seven, so Claire suddenly develops a deep respect for narrative structure.

Readers notice this.

They may not always be able to explain what is wrong, but they can feel the author's hand moving people around.

The character stops being a person.

They become furniture.

Useful furniture, admittedly.

But still furniture.

This leads to one of the rules I find most useful when building a story:

If your plot only works because everyone suddenly becomes stupid, your plot does not work.

Your characters are allowed to be wrong.

They are allowed to misunderstand things.

They are allowed to make terrible decisions.

In fact, terrible decisions are extremely useful.

But their decisions should make sense **to them**.

That changes everything.

PEOPLE RARELY THINK THEY ARE MAKING THE WRONG DECISION

A villain who wakes up in the morning, looks in the mirror and thinks:

Today I will do evil.

is certainly convenient.

You immediately know where everyone stands.

Unfortunately, most interesting people are considerably more annoying.

They have reasons.

They explain themselves.

They remember the facts that support their position.

They become surprisingly philosophical about the ones that don't.

They call fear caution.

Control becomes responsibility.

Ambition becomes necessity.

Revenge becomes justice.

Cowardice becomes protecting the family.

And occasionally they are right.

This is where characters become useful to me.

I don't need to agree with what they do.

I need to understand how they got there.

There is a significant difference.

If I can follow the chain from what a character believes to what they eventually choose, I can let them make an objectively terrible decision without making them feel stupid.

Ideally, the reader will even understand the decision.

Sometimes the reader should think:

I wouldn't do that.

The more interesting version is:

I wouldn't do that.

Probably.

WANT

The easiest place to start is with what the character wants.

Not in life.

In the story.

They may want to be loved, respected, safe and financially independent while finally learning conversational Italian.

Good for them.

What do they want **now**?

Find the missing person.

Keep the company.

Get the promotion.

Save the marriage.

Leave the marriage.

Prove they didn't do it.

Discover who did.

Prevent somebody from discovering that they did.

A useful want creates movement.

It gives the character a direction.

If I know what somebody wants, I can put something in the way.

One of the less admirable pleasures of writing fiction.

NEED

Want and need are not the same thing.

A character can spend an entire novel pursuing something while actually needing something else.

They may want control.

They may need to accept uncertainty.

They may want the truth.

They may need to admit that the truth will not repair what happened.

They may want to protect someone.

They may need to stop protecting them.

You do not need to turn this into therapy.

Please don't make every protagonist discover their inner child on page 312.

Sometimes the need is much more practical.

But the tension between **what a character is trying to get** and **what would actually change them** can produce an enormous amount of story.

And unlike the want, the character does not necessarily know what the need is.

That is rather the point.

FEAR

Fear is useful because it gives decisions a price.

Ask:

What does this person most want to avoid?

Humiliation?

Abandonment?

Failure?

Exposure?

Dependency?

Loss of control?

Now put the thing they want on the other side of that fear.

Things become interesting surprisingly quickly.

A character who wants the truth is useful.

A character who wants the truth but is terrified of what the truth might say about them is a story.

CONTRADICTION

People are wonderfully inconsistent.

Use this.

A generous person can be possessive.

A confident person can desperately need approval from one specific person.

Someone who values honesty can lie beautifully when the right subject appears.

A psychologist can understand exactly why another person behaves irrationally and remain completely incapable of recognizing the same mechanism in herself.

Contradiction does not make a character inconsistent.

Unmotivated contradiction does.

The difference is important.

We behave differently with different people.

Under different pressures.

When different parts of our identity are threatened.

The character who is calm during a financial crisis may completely unravel because somebody doesn't answer a text message.

That is not necessarily bad characterization.

It may be the most revealing thing about them.

LEVERAGE

This is the part I find particularly useful for plot.

Once you know what a character wants and fears, you know where to apply pressure.

That is leverage.

If Elena wants to protect the company, threaten the company.

Obvious.

But if she also needs to prove that she did not benefit from her husband's death, suddenly protecting the company can itself become suspicious.

Now the same action can solve one problem and worsen another.

That is much better.

The best pressure rarely gives a character a choice between:

good thing and bad thing

That is not a difficult decision.

The interesting choices are:

good thing / good thing

when they can only have one.

Or:

bad thing / different bad thing

when doing nothing is secretly a third bad thing.

Now the character has to reveal something about themselves.

Plot becomes character.

Character becomes plot.

And we no longer need somebody to walk into a basement just because Chapter Twelve requires it.

WHY DON'T THEY JUST...?

This is one of the most useful questions a reader can accidentally ask.

Why doesn't she call the police?

Why doesn't he tell his wife?

Why don't they leave?

Why doesn't she check the bank account?

Why doesn't he ask the obvious question?

Sometimes there is a perfectly good answer.

Put it in the story.

Sometimes the answer is:

Because then the book would end.

When outlining, I actively look for these exits.

Imagine the reader sitting beside you being irritatingly practical.

Why don't they just...

If one obvious action destroys the entire plot, you have not necessarily failed.

You have discovered something useful early.

Now you need a reason the character cannot, will not, or should not take that action.

And that reason should come from the world or the character.

Not from you needing another 180 pages.

SMART PEOPLE ARE ALLOWED TO MAKE STUPID DECISIONS

Intelligence does not protect people from bad decisions.

Sometimes it simply gives them better vocabulary for defending them.

A smart character can ignore evidence.

They can stay in a destructive relationship.

They can trust the wrong person.

They can take an absurd risk.

They can convince themselves that something obviously personal is actually strategic.

The question isn't:

Would an intelligent person do this?

The better question is:

What would an intelligent person have to believe for this to feel reasonable?

Maybe the alternative looks worse.

Maybe admitting the truth threatens their identity.

Maybe they have incomplete information.

Maybe somebody they trust has framed the situation for them.

Maybe they desperately need one particular version of reality to be true.

Humans are remarkably capable of using logic to arrive exactly where they wanted to go.

DON'T WRITE A CV

When creating characters, there is a temptation to document everything.

Date of birth.

Height.

Education.

Favorite food.

Favorite song.

First pet.

Relationship with mother.

Relationship with father.

Relationship with gluten.

If this helps you, use it.

But I don't personally need to know what my protagonist ate on her eighth birthday unless somebody poisoned it.

I would rather know:

What does she want?

What is she afraid of?

What does she believe that may not be true?

What will she refuse to do?

What would make her do it anyway?

That last question is particularly useful.

Because somewhere in the book, you may want to make her do it.

THE USEFUL BIT

For every major character, try filling in this:

WANT

What does this person actively want during the story?

NEED

What may they actually need, whether they know it or not?

FEAR

What outcome are they trying hardest to avoid?

BELIEF

What do they believe about themselves, another person or the situation?

CONTRADICTION

What two apparently incompatible things are true about them?

LEVERAGE

What can the story threaten to force them into a difficult decision?

LINE THEY WON'T CROSS

What will they absolutely not do?

Then add:

What would have to happen for them to cross it?

You now have considerably more useful information than their favorite color.

A SMALL TEST

Take one important decision from your planned story.

Write down why the character makes it.

Then ask **why** again.

And again.

For example:

Why does she investigate the transaction herself?

Because she doesn't trust the official investigation.

Why?

Because investigators already suspect she benefited.

Why does that matter beyond the obvious inconvenience of being suspected of a crime?

Because keeping the company now looks like evidence of motive.

Why doesn't she simply walk away from the company?

Because doing so would mean abandoning something she believes she built with her husband.

Why does that matter?

Because she still hasn't decided whether continuing his work is honoring him or profiting from his death.

Now we are no longer talking about a bank transaction.

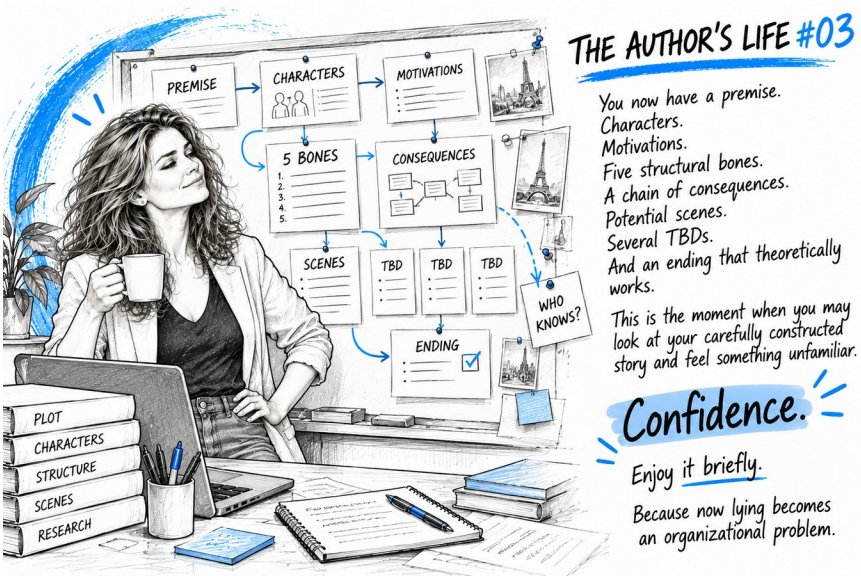
Good.

The bank transaction is plot.

The reason she cannot leave it alone is character.

3

BUILD THE SKELETON



Eventually, your excellent idea needs bones.

This is where writers traditionally divide into two groups.

Plotters plan the story before writing it.

Pantsers discover the story while writing it.

There are books, articles, podcasts and probably minor religious conflicts devoted to explaining why one of these approaches is superior.

I have no intention of resolving this.

Mostly because I don't think the distinction is particularly useful.

You can plan every chapter and still discover halfway through that your protagonist would never do the thing required in Chapter Nineteen.

You can begin with nothing but a character and a vague sense of unease and eventually discover that some structure might have been useful before writing forty thousand words in the wrong direction.

Most of us probably live somewhere between the two.

I like knowing where I'm going. I just don't particularly trust the route.

That is what the skeleton is for.

Not to tell me exactly what happens on every page.

To make sure the story can stand.

START WITH THE END

Before I build the middle of a story, I like to know something about how it ends.

Not necessarily the final sentence.

Not every detail.

Sometimes not even exactly who wins.

But I want to know:

What is the story ultimately forcing the protagonist to confront?

And:

What decision, discovery or consequence makes the ending different from the beginning?

If your premise asks a question, the ending should probably do something with it.

Not necessarily answer it neatly.

Life rarely does.

But the book should know why it spent three hundred pages asking.

Suppose our story is about a woman trying to prove she did not profit from her husband's death while fighting to keep the company they built together.

The ending cannot merely be:

The police found the actual criminal.

Useful development.

Possibly excellent news for her lawyer.

But emotionally, we still owe the story something.

What does she decide about the company?

What does she now believe about her husband?

About herself?

What did proving her innocence cost?

What can she no longer return to?

That is the destination.

Now we can start making her journey unnecessarily difficult.

THE FIVE BONES

Before chapters, scenes or clever opening lines, I want five things.

Not because every novel must follow five points.

Because five things fit nicely on one page and prevent me from pretending that a list of scenes is already a story.

1. THE NORMAL

Where is the character before the story disrupts them?

"Normal" does not mean happy.

Your protagonist may already be divorced, bankrupt and hiding from three governments.

That can be normal.

We simply need enough of the existing world to understand what changes.

2. THE DISRUPTION

Something happens that makes continuing normally impossible, difficult or increasingly expensive.

A message arrives.

Someone disappears.

Money moves.

A diagnosis is made.

A stranger appears.

A husband dies and leaves behind something he was not supposed to have.

The disruption does not have to explode.

It has to matter.

3. THE COMMITMENT

This one is important.

Something happening to a character does not automatically create a story.

Eventually, the character needs to do something about it.

They investigate.

Lie.

Leave.

Stay.

Accept the job.

Open the letter.

Hide the body.

Please use the last example selectively.

The commitment is where the character stops merely receiving the plot and begins participating in it.

4. THE ESCALATION

The original problem becomes more difficult, more expensive or more personal.

Ideally all three.

Answers create new questions.

Solutions create consequences.

Allies become liabilities.

The character learns enough to understand that the problem they thought they had is not actually the problem they have.

This is usually where most of the book lives.

It is also where many outlines become:

And then some stuff happens.

We will try to improve on that.

5. THE CONSEQUENCE

Not merely the climax.

What is true now that was not true before?

A mystery can be solved while a relationship remains destroyed.

The villain can be caught while the protagonist loses the thing they were trying to protect.

The protagonist can get exactly what they wanted and discover that this was unfortunate.

The ending is not only where events stop.

It is where the story collects its bill.

WRITE THOSE FIVE FIRST

Seriously.

Before you create forty-seven chapter cards, write five paragraphs.

One for each bone.

They can be ugly.

Mine often are.

Something like:

NORMAL: Elena is trying to preserve the company after Adrian's death while convincing herself that continuing their work is different from benefiting from what happened.

DISRUPTION: Evidence appears suggesting Adrian was connected to financial activity now being investigated.

COMMITMENT: When suspicion begins moving toward her, Elena starts tracing Adrian's decisions herself rather than walking away from the company.

ESCALATION: Each answer connects the company, Adrian and people around them more tightly, while the actions required to

protect the business increasingly resemble the motive investigators suspect her of having.

CONSEQUENCE: Elena learns what happened and clears the central accusation, but must decide whether keeping what she fought for still means what she thought it meant.

That is not a synopsis.

It is not even particularly pretty.

But I can see a book.

More importantly, I can see where the book might break.

NOW MAKE IT WORSE

Once I have the five bones, I ask a very simple question at each stage:

What makes this harder?

Not:

What else can happen?

That distinction matters.

Random events make stories longer.

Consequences make stories deeper.

Suppose Elena finds a document.

We could have someone steal her car.

That is definitely something happening.

It may even be exciting.

But unless the stolen car changes the central problem, it is probably just a very expensive way of moving Elena onto public transport.

Instead, perhaps the document helps prove Adrian was involved.

Useful.

But it also contains Elena's authorization.

Now the answer created a worse question.

Or perhaps she finds evidence that protects herself but implicates someone she trusts.

Or the document proves the transaction was legitimate — which means the suspicious part must have happened somewhere else.

The story moves because each step changes the next one.

This is escalation.

Not volume.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

A useful skeleton has arrows in it.

Not literal arrows.

Although I use those too.

Something happens **therefore** something else happens.

Or:

Something happens **but** something prevents the expected result.

This is much stronger than:

Something happens **and then** something else happens.

Consider:

Elena finds the transfer. And then she meets the accountant. And then somebody follows her. And then she discovers another company.

Things are happening.

Everyone is very busy.

We may even have a thriller.

Now:

Elena finds the transfer, **therefore** she confronts the accountant.

But the accountant shows her that Adrian authorized it.

Therefore she investigates Adrian's records.

But doing so alerts someone who believed those records were inaccessible.

Therefore somebody starts watching her.

Now the events belong to each other.

The difference is enormous.

PRESSURE SHOULD CHANGE DECISIONS

Escalation is not simply making the same problem bigger.

A threatening email.

Then two threatening emails.

Then twelve threatening emails.

Eventually you have spam.

Pressure becomes interesting when it changes what the character is willing to do.

Remember the line they would not cross from the previous chapter?

Good.

We kept it for a reason.

Early in the story:

I will never lie to the police.

Later:

I am not lying. I simply haven't told them everything yet.

Later:

There are things they don't need to know.

Later:

If I tell them now, everything collapses.

Same person.

Different pressure.

Now the plot is not simply moving forward.

It is changing the character's definition of reasonable.

That is where the good stuff usually lives.

SCENES ARE NOT CHAPTERS

This took me longer than it should have.

A scene is a unit of story.

A chapter is a unit of presentation.

They often overlap.

They do not have to.

A scene might begin with a character wanting something, introduce resistance, change information or power, and end with the situation different from where it began.

A chapter decides how much of that experience the reader receives before you give them a small white space and permission to go to sleep.

Sometimes one scene is one chapter.

Sometimes a chapter contains several scenes.

Sometimes a scene crosses a chapter boundary because ending at a particular moment creates exactly the effect you want.

Do not force your story into chapters too early simply because books contain chapters.

Build movement first.

Package it later.

Your chapter numbers are not structural support.

They are signage.

THE SCENE TEST

When I start expanding the five bones, each potential scene has to justify its existence.

I want to know at least one of these:

What changes?

What is learned?

What decision is made?

What becomes harder?

What relationship shifts?

What expectation is created or broken?

A scene does not need to do all of them.

If it does none of them, I become suspicious.

This does not mean every scene needs gunfire, betrayal or a newly discovered offshore account.

Two people drinking coffee can completely change a story.

But something should be different when they finish the coffee.

Even if the only difference is that one of them now knows the other is lying.

THE MIDDLE IS NOT A STORAGE FACILITY

Beginnings are seductive.

Endings are exciting.

Middles are where optimism goes to die.

You know the opening.

You know the reveal.

You know the confrontation.

Unfortunately, there appear to be 180 pages between them.

This is where skeletons earn their keep.

Do not ask:

What can I put in the middle?

Ask:

What must become true before the ending can happen?

Then work backward.

For the protagonist to make the final decision, what must they know?

For them to know that, what must they discover?

For them to discover it, what must they do?

What makes them do that?

What goes wrong?

What does that force them to try next?

Suddenly the middle is not empty space.

It is a chain.

Then move forward from the beginning:

Because this happens, what would the character reasonably do next?

Then move backward from the ending:

For this ending to happen, what must already be true?

Eventually the two chains should meet.

If they don't, congratulations.

You have found the hole before a reader did.

This is preferable.

Readers are less polite.

LEAVE SOME DOORS OPEN

A skeleton should give you direction without removing discovery.

If I know every conversation, every gesture, every reveal and every emotional beat before I write the first chapter, I personally start feeling as though I've already read the book.

I want structure.

I also want room for the story to surprise me.

So I deliberately leave some spaces unresolved.

Maybe I know Elena must obtain a piece of information between A and C.

I do not yet know exactly how.

Fine.

Write:

**B — Elena gets evidence connecting Adrian to the account.
METHOD TBD.**

That is allowed.

The skeleton is a working document.

It is allowed to contain questions.

In fact, questions are useful.

They tell you where the story still needs engineering.

YOUR OUTLINE IS NOT YOUR BOSS

This deserves its own section.

You will change the skeleton.

You should.

You will discover better scenes.

Characters will develop motives you did not anticipate.

A reveal will work better twenty pages earlier.

Something you thought required three chapters will take six paragraphs.

Something you thought was obvious will require an entirely new sequence.

Readers cannot access the information stored privately inside your head.

Change the outline.

The purpose of planning is not to predict the manuscript perfectly.

It is to reduce the number of expensive mistakes.

A wrong turn discovered at the bullet-point stage costs thirty seconds.

A wrong turn discovered after twenty thousand words costs considerably more.

Both are fixable.

One involves less swearing.

THE USEFUL BIT

Take the premise from Chapter One.
Now build this:

THE NORMAL

What is true before the central disruption?

THE DISRUPTION

What happens that makes normal increasingly impossible?

THE COMMITMENT

What does the protagonist decide to do?

THE ESCALATION

What sequence of consequences makes the problem harder and more personal?

THE CONSEQUENCE

What is permanently different by the end?

Then connect the major steps using only: **THEREFORE** and **BUT** as often as possible.

If you have:

This happens.
And then this happens.
And then this happens.
And then this happens.

You may have a sequence.

You do not necessarily have a story.

Then expand each major step into potential scenes.

For every scene, write one sentence:

By the end of this scene, _____ has changed.

If you cannot finish the sentence, don't automatically delete the scene.

But ask why it is there.

Finally, mark anything you do not yet know:

TBD

Do not solve every problem simply because it exists.

Some problems become easier after you write the characters into them.

Others become significantly worse.

This is also progress.

THINGS I LEARNED FOR NO GOOD REASON

At this stage, your notes may begin developing their own ecosystem.

You may have:

a manuscript file,

an outline,

a timeline,

character notes,

research,

a folder called **FINAL**,

another called **FINAL 2**,

and eventually:

FINAL_ACTUAL_USE_THIS_ONE

This is normal.

It is not good.

But it is normal.

4

WHO KNOWS WHAT, AND WHEN?



Suspense is information management.

Which sounds considerably less exciting than suspense.

Nobody puts this on the back cover:

A breathtaking new thriller about the controlled distribution of information.

But underneath the missing person, suspicious transaction, locked room, unreliable witness or husband who apparently had several hobbies nobody knew about, that is often exactly what is happening.

Someone knows something.

Someone else doesn't.

The reader knows some of it.

You know all of it.

Hopefully.

That last part is important.

YOU ARE ALLOWED TO KNOW THE ANSWER

There is a particular kind of confidence available to writers who have not yet decided what actually happened.

Anything is possible.

Every character could be lying.

Every clue could mean something else.

The mysterious phone call could have come from anyone.

This feels wonderfully open.

It is also dangerous.

Because ambiguity created **when you know the truth and carefully control access to it** feels very different from ambiguity created **when you make things up until one explanation eventually wins**.

Readers may not see your notes.

They can still feel the difference.

Before I build the reveal structure, I want something brutally simple:

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

Not what Elena thinks happened.

Not what the police think happened.

Not what I want the reader to suspect on page 140.

The boring, objective version.

Who did what?

When?

Why?

What evidence did it leave?

Who saw it?

Who misunderstood it?

Who lied about it?

What was genuinely accidental?

What is still unknowable?

Write this version without suspense.

Make it painfully clear.

You are not writing the novel here.

You are establishing reality.

Once reality exists, you can start hiding it.

THREE VERSIONS OF THE SAME STORY

I find it useful to think about three layers.

THE AUTHOR'S TRUTH

What actually happened.

THE CHARACTER'S TRUTH

What a particular character currently believes happened.

THE READER'S TRUTH

What the reader currently has enough information to believe happened.

These three things do not need to match.

In fact, it is often useful when they don't.

Suppose Adrian transferred money to an Austrian company before his death.

The author knows:

Adrian authorized the transfer because he believed it was part of a legitimate transaction.

Elena believes:

Adrian may have been hiding something from her.

The reader has seen enough suspicious details to think:

Adrian was probably involved in the scheme.

Same transfer.

Three truths.

Only one is objective.

For now.

THE REVEAL LADDER

Here I use something I think of as a reveal ladder.

A reveal ladder is simply the order in which information changes meaning.

Not the order in which things happened.

That distinction matters.

Chronology might be:

$$\mathbf{A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D \rightarrow E.}$$

But the reader may learn:

$$\mathbf{D \rightarrow B \rightarrow E \rightarrow A \rightarrow C.}$$

And suddenly the same events produce an entirely different experience.

For each important piece of truth, I want to know:

What actually happened?

Who knows it from the beginning?

Who discovers it later?

When does the reader learn it?

What does the reader believe before learning it?

What changes after the reveal?

That last question prevents a reveal from becoming trivia.

A good reveal does not merely add information.

It changes the meaning of information we already had.

INFORMATION IS NOT A REVEAL

Suppose Elena discovers that Adrian visited Vienna three months before his death.

That is information.

It becomes a reveal when the reader already knows that a suspicious company involved in the investigation is based in Vienna.

Now the trip changes meaning.

Later we discover that Adrian travelled there for an unrelated meeting.

The meaning changes again.

Then we learn someone from the suspicious company attended the same meeting.

Again.

The fact itself may barely change.

Its **meaning** keeps changing.

That is useful.

You do not need to invent a new corpse every forty pages.

Sometimes you can simply make the old train ticket more interesting.

CLUE, REVEAL, CONFIRMATION

I like separating these because they do different jobs.

A **clue** creates possibility.

A **reveal** changes the reader's understanding.

A **confirmation** removes meaningful uncertainty.

Suppose we find a photograph showing Adrian on a yacht with a man we later identify as Varga.

At first:

CLUE: Adrian knew Varga.

Later:

REVEAL: Varga was connected to the transaction Elena is investigating.

Later still:

CONFIRMATION: Adrian and Varga were involved in the same project.

The photograph did not change.

The surrounding knowledge did.

Objects, messages, photographs, documents and remembered conversations are useful for exactly this reason.

You can show them early.

Explain them later.

A CLUE SHOULD SURVIVE THE TRUTH

This is one of my favorite tests.

Once the reader knows what actually happened, go back to the clues.

Do they still make sense?

If yes, excellent.

If a clue only worked because you carefully prevented the reader from noticing that it was physically impossible, less excellent.

The best clues often have at least two interpretations:

the interpretation available then

and

the interpretation that becomes visible later.

Before the reveal:

Adrian deleted the message because it implicated him.

After the reveal:

Adrian deleted the message because it implicated someone else.

Same action.

Different meaning.

That is fair.

Now imagine:

Adrian deleted the message.

Then, two hundred pages later:

Actually, Adrian never received the message.

That is not a reinterpretation.

That is you quietly replacing the floor while the reader is standing on it.

MISDIRECTION IS NOT LYING

You are allowed to make the reader wrong.

You are not allowed to make them wrong by secretly changing reality.

Misdirection works when the reader sees real information and draws a reasonable but incorrect conclusion.

Suppose Elena opens Adrian's drawer and finds a second phone.

Fair.

She assumes it means he was hiding communications.

Fair.

The reader draws the same conclusion.

Also fair.

Later we discover the phone belonged to somebody else.

Still potentially fair — if the story supports that possibility.

But if Elena recognizes the phone immediately and the narration carefully avoids telling us that simply to preserve the twist, we have a problem.

The character knows.

The narrator knows.

The author knows.

The only person being deliberately kept stupid is the reader.

POV IS A CONTRACT

Point of view gives you enormous control over information.

Use it carefully.

If you are writing from Elena's perspective, the reader does not automatically know what Maya knows.

Excellent.

That creates natural uncertainty.

But the reader should usually have access to what Elena herself experiences and understands.

You can delay interpretation.

You can show denial.

You can let Elena misunderstand something.

You can let emotion distort what she pays attention to.

People do this constantly.

What becomes dangerous is artificial blindness.

Elena read the name on the document.

Chapter ends.

Three chapters later:

The name had been her father's.

Why didn't we get the name?

There may be a reason.

If there isn't, the reason was probably:

because the author wanted a chapter ending.

Your reader will notice eventually.

Possibly while writing the review.

CHARACTERS CAN LIE

This is much easier.

People lie.

A character can deliberately tell another character something false.

The reader can hear the lie.

The reader may believe it.

No problem.

Compare:

"I never met Adrian," Varga said.

Perfectly legal.

Varga may be lying.

Now:

Varga had never met Adrian.

If we are inside Varga's head and he absolutely has met Adrian, we are doing something different.

Unreliable narration is not permission to write random falsehoods and reveal later that they were random falsehoods.

The unreliability needs to belong to the character.

Not merely to the twist.

THE READER SHOULD BE ABLE TO BE RIGHT

This is important to me.

I don't need the reader to solve the book.

But I want the correct explanation to exist among the possibilities.

A reader who pays attention should occasionally be able to think:

Wait.

And be right.

This does not ruin the twist.

It validates the story.

Some readers will see things early.

Good.

They were reading.

Do not punish them by adding another twist purely because somebody might have guessed the first one.

A twist is not successful because zero readers predicted it.

A twist is successful when, after it happens, the reader can look backward and see why it was possible.

The ideal reaction is not necessarily:

I never could have guessed that.

Sometimes it is:

Oh, fuck. Of course.

I prefer the second one.

THE REVEAL SHOULD DO SOMETHING

A reveal that changes nothing is merely an interesting fact.

Suppose we discover that Adrian secretly owned a red motorcycle.

Fine.

Did Elena believe he hated motorcycles?

Does ownership connect him to another character?

Does an earlier event suddenly make more sense?

Does knowing about it change what Elena does next?

No?

Then congratulations to Adrian on his motorcycle.

For each major reveal, ask:

What changes because the reader or character now knows this?

Does the goal change?

Does suspicion move?

Does trust collapse?

Does an earlier scene acquire new meaning?

Does the next decision become harder?

Information should move the story.

Otherwise we are simply distributing facts.

DON'T SPEND EVERYTHING AT ONCE

Imagine you have five important pieces of information.

There is a temptation to save all five for the dramatic confrontation near the end.

Then somebody explains everything for eleven pages.

This character often has excellent memory.

They may even have prepared visual aids.

Try distributing the truth.

Reveal something.

Let the character react.

Allow the reaction to create consequences.

Then reveal something else that changes the interpretation.

Truth becomes more powerful when characters have time to make decisions based on incomplete versions of it.

Then the reveal doesn't merely change what they know.

It can make them regret what they already did.

Much more useful.

THE USEFUL BIT

For every major reveal, create a small table.

Objective truth	What actually happened?
Who knows?	Which characters know all or part of it?
Reader initially believes	What explanation currently looks strongest?
Clues already visible	What has the reader seen?
Alternative explanation	What else could those clues mean?
Reveal	What new information changes the model?
Confirmation	When does uncertainty meaningfully end?
Consequence	What decision or relationship changes afterward?

You do not need every reveal to move through exactly the same number of steps. The structure is there to help you track the information, not to force every reveal into the same shape.

Then add one final question:

After the reveal, do the earlier clues still make sense?

If yes, good.

If they make **more** sense, even better.

If they require you to explain for three pages why technically none of this contradicts Chapter Eight...

You may wish to revisit Chapter Eight.

THE AUTHOR'S TRUTH DOCUMENT

For stories with mysteries, conspiracies, financial mechanisms, multiple timelines or characters lying to each other, I would keep one separate document containing only objective reality.

No suspense.

No beautiful prose.

No reader experience.

Just facts.

12 March — Adrian signs document.

14 March — Varga learns about filing.

16 March — Maya receives email but does not open attachment.

17 March — Elena believes document was signed after the meeting. She is wrong.

Boring?

Extremely.

Useful?

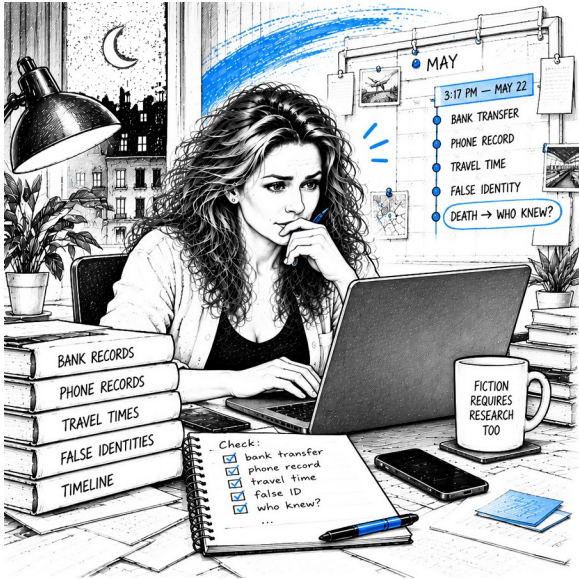
Also extremely.

Because eventually you will be 73,000 words into the manuscript trying to remember whether somebody can plausibly know something on Tuesday that another character did not discover until Thursday.

At that point, boring becomes attractive.

5

YOUR CALENDAR IS NOW EVIDENCE



THE AUTHOR'S LIFE #05

You started with an imaginary person having an imaginary problem.

You now have a calendar proving where that imaginary person was at 3:17 p.m. on May 22.

This document may also contain:

- bank transfers,
- phone records,
- travel times,
- false identities,
- and a list of people who knew about a death before it occurred.

Do not leave it open during a Zoom call.

You are no longer writing fiction.

You are investigating something that never happened.

Sooner or later, someone will ask:

What day is it?

This may be a character.

It may be a reader.

Unfortunately, it may be you.

You wrote Chapter Three in March. Chapter Twenty-Seven in April. Somewhere in between, your protagonist spent three nights in Paris, attended a Monday meeting, received a document dated the 17th and referred to something that happened "two weeks ago."

Everything seemed perfectly reasonable at the time.

It is now Thursday.

Except it can't be Thursday.

Welcome to continuity.

STORIES HAPPEN IN TIME

The moment your story contains words like:

yesterday

next week

three months earlier

Monday

before Christmas

after the funeral

you have created a system.

The system can break.

This matters more in some books than others.

If your novel takes place over twenty years and exact dates rarely matter, you may need very little.

If your thriller takes place over twelve days and contains flights, bank transfers, meetings, police interviews and a character who says *I saw him last Tuesday*, congratulations.

You now need a calendar.

BUILD IT BEFORE YOU NEED IT

Mine can be extremely simple:

Date	Story event	What matters
May 10	Elena arrives in Paris	Day 1
May 11	First meeting	Monday (be sure to check the year)
May 12	Document discovered	Changes investigation
May 13	Call with Maya	Maya now knows X

That is enough to catch a surprising number of mistakes.

Then add whatever your story requires:

location

time

travel

who is present

what each person knows

documents created or received

You do not need project-management software.

A spreadsheet is perfectly capable of destroying your happiness.

DISTANCE ALSO EXISTS

Characters need time to move.

This was disappointing to learn.

If somebody leaves Paris at 9:00, appears in Vienna at 10:15 and has apparently travelled on a commercial flight, you may have accidentally invented teleportation.

Check it.

Flights.

Trains.

Driving times.

Time zones.

Opening hours.

Even sunrise and sunset, if they matter.

You do not need to describe all of this.

You need to know enough that the reader never has to.

Research should make the story feel effortless.

Not demonstrate that you researched it.

OBJECTS HAVE TIMELINES TOO

People are not the only things moving through your book.

Phones.

Keys.

Documents.

Weapons.

Cars.

Photographs.

USB drives.

Letters.

If an object matters, know where it is.

A useful question is:

Who physically has this right now?

Because otherwise Chapter Thirty may depend on Elena opening a file that is currently in Antoine's apartment.

This is inconvenient.

Particularly if Antoine is in another country.

Or dead.

KNOWLEDGE HAS A TIMELINE

We already dealt with this in the previous chapter, but now attach dates to it.

If Maya learns something on 14 May, she cannot casually refer to it on 12 May.

Unless you are writing time travel.

In which case you need a better spreadsheet.

Track important knowledge exactly like an object:

When did they learn it?

From whom?

What did they understand?

What did they misunderstand?

This prevents characters from becoming mysteriously omniscient whenever the plot needs help.

PEOPLE AGE

Dates create another problem.

Birthdays.

If your character is thirty-eight in 2026 and graduated from university in 1998, check the arithmetic.

If their twelve-year-old daughter appears in a photograph from fourteen years earlier, something has gone wrong.

Probably not with the child.

With you.

THE USEFUL BIT

Before the manuscript gets complicated, create one **master timeline**.

At minimum, track:

DATE / TIME - When does it happen?

EVENT - What happens?

LOCATION - Where is everyone who matters?

KNOWLEDGE - Who learns something new?

OBJECTS / DOCUMENTS - Does anything important change hands?

Then periodically test:

Could this person physically be here?

Could they know this yet?

Does the previous chapter happen before this one?

Has enough time passed for what the text claims?

Is the date actually the day of the week I say it is?

That last one takes approximately ten seconds to check.

Finding it after publication takes considerably longer.

DON'T PUT THE SPREADSHEET IN THE NOVEL

This is the other danger.

Once you have spent four hours confirming that the 19th was a Tuesday, you may develop a powerful desire for somebody to appreciate this.

Resist.

The reader does not need:

At 08:47 on Tuesday, 19 May, exactly thirty-seven minutes after leaving her apartment—

unless those thirty-seven minutes matter.

Accuracy should be invisible.

The spreadsheet exists so the prose can feel natural.

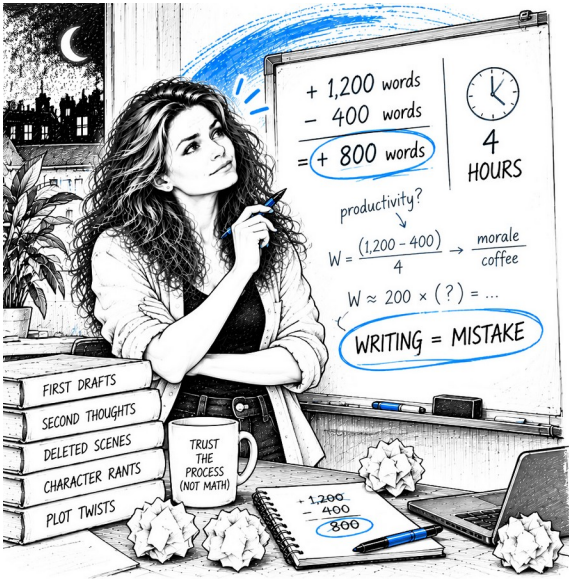
Not so the prose can become a spreadsheet.

PART II

WRITE THE DAMN THING

6

THE FIRST DRAFT IS ALLOWED TO BE UGLY



THE AUTHOR'S LIFE #06

You wrote 1,200 words today.
Then deleted 400 from
yesterday.

Your manuscript is therefore
800 words longer.

You worked for four hours.

At this rate, according to
mathematics, writing was
a mistake.

IGNORE MATHEMATICS.

Unfortunately, your characters
have started talking.

You have an idea.

You have characters.

You have a skeleton.

You know what actually happened, who knows about it, and
where everyone was on Tuesday.

There is now only one small administrative detail left.

You have to write the book.

This is unfortunate.

Planning a novel is wonderfully safe.

Everything exists as potential.

The scene in your head is tense, elegant and emotionally precise.

The dialogue is sharp.

The pacing is perfect.

Then you type it.

And somehow:

“We need to talk,” she said.

Excellent.

Eighty thousand words to go.

THE FIRST DRAFT HAS ONE JOB

Exist.

That is not permission to write carelessly.

It is permission to stop expecting unfinished work to look finished.

Those are different things.

A first draft needs enough quality that you can understand what you were trying to do.

It does not need to survive publication.

This means a sentence can be functional before it becomes good.

A scene can contain the right information before it has the right rhythm.

A chapter can work structurally while still sounding terrible.

Fixable.

An empty page is much harder to edit.

WRITE THE SCENE, NOT THE BOOK

A novel is intimidating.

A scene is usually manageable.

So when I sit down to write, I try not to think:

I need to write 80,000 words.

I need to know:

What does this scene need to accomplish?

Maybe Elena enters wanting information.

Maya doesn't want to give it to her.

During the conversation, Elena notices something that contradicts what Maya told her earlier.

She leaves with less trust than she arrived with.

Good.

Now I have something to write.

The entire novel can remain somebody else's problem.

Specifically, mine tomorrow.

ENTER WITH SOMETHING

Scenes become much easier when characters arrive wanting something.

Information.

Permission.

Reassurance.

Money.

An apology.

To avoid a conversation.

To end one.

They don't always need to get it.

In fact, it is often more useful when they don't.

But desire gives the scene direction.

Two characters entering a room because you need them to discuss the plot can produce a remarkable amount of dialogue in which nobody seems to have a reason to be speaking.

Give somebody an agenda.

Preferably both of them.

Even better if the agendas are incompatible.

Now you barely have to make them talk.

LEAVE DIFFERENTLY

Remember our scene test?

Something should change.

That gives you a simple way to draft.

Before the scene:

Elena trusts Maya.

After:

Elena still trusts Maya, but now knows Maya hid something.

That is enough.

You don't need to know every line before writing.

You know where the scene enters.

You know where it leaves.

Now discover the route.

Here the skeleton stops being a cage and starts being useful.

YOU MAY USE UGLY PLACEHOLDERS

This was liberating.

Sometimes you are writing a scene and suddenly need to know the exact procedure for obtaining archived corporate filings in Austria.

You have two options.

Stop writing.

Open Google.

Read one article.

Open another.

Discover a government database.

Learn something about Austrian corporate law.

Notice an interesting link.

Forty-five minutes later you are reading about a financial scandal from 1998 and have completely forgotten what Elena was doing.

Or write:

[CHECK AUSTRIAN FILING PROCEDURE]

and continue.

You are allowed to do this.

Also:

[BETTER DESCRIPTION]

[NAME THIS GUY]

[HOW LONG PARIS-VIENNA FLIGHT?]

[THIS DIALOGUE IS SHIT — FIX LATER]

The last one is particularly versatile.

A placeholder protects momentum.

Research it later.

Just make sure you actually do.

RESEARCH CAN BECOME PROCRASTINATION WITH FOOTNOTES

Research feels responsible.

That is what makes it dangerous.

You can spend three days learning exactly how a bank compliance department works without writing the scene in which the compliance department appears for four paragraphs.

The useful question is:

Do I need this information to continue?

If yes, research it.

If not, mark it and move.

There is also a useful distinction between:

I need to know this

and

the reader needs to know this.

Those are rarely the same amount of information.

You may need to understand the entire mechanism.

The reader may need one sentence.

This will feel unfair after six hours of research.

WORD COUNT IS A TOOL, NOT A RELIGION

Some writers love daily word-count targets.

Five hundred words.

One thousand.

Two thousand.

Three thousand before breakfast, presumably followed by agricultural labor and a cold shower.

If targets help you write, use them.

If they make you spend the last forty minutes of the day producing 614 words you already know you will delete, perhaps measure something else.

A scene completed.

A problem solved.

An hour of focused work.

Progress is not always additive.

Sometimes the best writing day ends with fewer words than you started with.

This will become especially obvious during revision.

DON'T POLISH CHAPTER ONE FOR SIX MONTHS

The beginning is dangerous because it is always available.

You can improve the opening sentence.

Then the opening paragraph.

Then the first page.

Then perhaps the opening sentence again.

Meanwhile Chapter Two remains a theoretical concept.

There is a point where polishing becomes avoidance.

Your first chapter will probably change anyway.

You do not yet know the book as well as you will after finishing it.

The final version of Chapter One is being written partly by Chapter Thirty-Seven.

Let it go.

Move forward.

You can return later with information you currently do not possess.

WHEN THE STORY CHANGES

It will.

You will write a scene and discover something better than the outline.

Good.

Do not immediately panic and rebuild the entire book.

Ask:

Is this actually better?

What does it change downstream?

Does it break anything important?

If the answer is manageable, update the skeleton and continue.

This is why we built a skeleton rather than a constitution.

Your plan exists to help the book.

The book does not exist to obey the plan.

THE USEFUL BIT

Before writing each scene, answer four questions:

1. Who wants what?

2. What prevents them from getting it easily?

3. What changes during the scene?

4. Why does the next scene now need to happen?

Then write.

If you hit something you need to research but can safely postpone, use:

[CHECK]

If the prose is ugly but structurally correct:

keep going.

If the scene is going somewhere unexpected:

check the skeleton.

If you spend forty minutes changing *looked* to *glanced* and back again:

you are editing.

Stop pretending otherwise.

DON'T EDIT A BOOK THAT DOESN'T EXIST

There will be time for beautiful sentences.

Time for rhythm.

Time to discover that you have used the word slightly 147 times.

For now, the objective is not to produce the final manuscript one perfect paragraph at a time.

It is to create enough book that you can finally see the book.

Because something strange happens when you reach the end of a first draft.

For the first time, you are no longer trying to write the story you imagined.

You have an actual story in front of you.

It will contain good scenes.

Bad scenes.

Missing scenes.

Scenes performing jobs they were never designed for.

Characters who changed halfway through.

Clues pointing toward an explanation you abandoned thirty thousand words ago.

All of this is fixable.

You can fix those things.

Later.

First, finish.

7

DIALOGUE IS NOT PEOPLE TALKING



THE AUTHOR'S LIFE #07

You spend forty minutes making dialogue sound natural. Then you read it aloud. Nobody has ever spoken this way.

You remove half.
Better.

You remove another line.
Better.

Eventually the scene contains:

"No."
"Fine."
Perfect.

You have discovered editing.

Unfortunately, you are still supposed to be writing the first draft. Perhaps something should happen in it.

Real people are terrible at dialogue.

We repeat ourselves.

We interrupt.

We forget words.

We explain things badly.

We start sentences we never—

Anyway.

If you recorded an actual conversation and put it into a novel exactly as spoken, readers would probably complain that nobody talks like that.

This is unfair.

It is also true.

Dialogue is not real speech.

It is **compressed speech with a job.**

SOMEBODY WANTS SOMETHING

The easiest way to improve dialogue is the same way we improved scenes.

Give people incompatible objectives.

Imagine Elena asks Maya:

“Did Adrian ever mention Varga?”

Maya can say:

“Yes. Once, I think. They met in Vienna.”

Information delivered.

Efficient.

Dead.

Now give Maya a reason not to answer.

“Did Adrian ever mention Varga?”

Maya looked at her. “Why?”

“That's not an answer.”

“No. It's a question.”

We still haven't learned anything.

But something is happening.

Elena wants information.

Maya wants to know why Elena wants it before deciding what to reveal.

Dialogue now has pressure.

PEOPLE DON'T ANSWER QUESTIONS

At least not reliably.

Ask someone:

“Where were you last night?”

They might answer:

“At home.”

Or:

“Why?”

Or:

“You know where I was.”

Or:

“Is that what this is about?”

Or:

“Jesus, Elena.”

Every answer does something different.

The factual question is identical.

The character is not.

This is where dialogue starts carrying personality without requiring anyone to say:

“As you know, I am a defensive person with unresolved trust issues.”

Useful.

SUBTEXT IS THE OTHER CONVERSATION

Characters often talk about one thing while negotiating another.

A couple argues about being late.

They may actually be arguing about respect.

A manager asks whether the report is finished.

The conversation may really be about authority.

Someone says:

“You could have called.”

The factual subject is telephone usage.

It probably isn't about telephone usage.

Subtext does not mean every line needs a secret meaning.

That would become exhausting.

The more useful question is:

What is this conversation really about for each person?

Sometimes the answer is exactly what they are saying.

Sometimes it very much isn't.

DON'T MAKE CHARACTERS EXPLAIN THE BOOK TO EACH OTHER

“As you know, Adrian was my husband for fourteen years before he died unexpectedly six weeks ago.”

Yes.

Maya probably knows.

She attended the funeral.

Characters should not tell each other things both already know solely because the reader doesn't.

Find another route.

Let information emerge because somebody disputes it, remembers it differently, needs it, hides it or reacts to it.

Instead of:

“As you know, Adrian left Meridian three years ago after the Veyra acquisition.”

try:

“This is Meridian again.”

“Adrian left three years ago.”

“That didn't stop Meridian following him.”

Now the information belongs to the conflict.

Much better.

NAMES ARE NOT PUNCTUATION

“Listen, Elena.”

“I understand, Maya.”

“But Elena—”

“Maya, please.”

Real people occasionally use names in conversation.

Fictional people sometimes appear terrified that the reader will forget who is speaking.

Once we know there are two people in the room, let them relax.

EVERYONE SHOULD NOT SOUND LIKE YOU

This is difficult because, inconveniently, you are writing everyone.

One character speaks in complete sentences.

Another cuts thoughts short.

One answers directly.

Another answers the question they wish had been asked.

Someone uses humor when uncomfortable.

Someone becomes more formal when angry.

Someone fills silence.

Someone weaponizes it.

You do not need to give everybody a verbal gimmick.

Please don't make one person say *indeed* every seven pages so we know it's him.

Voice is usually built from smaller habits:

sentence length,

directness,

vocabulary,

rhythm,

what the character notices,
what they avoid,
and how much they are willing to say.

SILENCE IS DIALOGUE TOO

You do not need a response to every line.

Sometimes:

“Did you know?”

Maya looked away.

does more work than another paragraph.

Actions inside dialogue can change power, create pauses and prevent conversations from becoming floating voices in a white room.

But use them because something is happening.

Not because every fourth line requires someone to sip coffee.

READ IT OUT LOUD

Annoying advice.

Works.

Your eyes will forgive sentences that your mouth refuses to say.

Reading dialogue aloud exposes:

awkward rhythm,

sentences that are too complete,

repeated names,

unnecessary explanation,

and the disturbing discovery that every character apparently speaks exactly like you.

You do not need to perform it.

Just listen for friction.

If you repeatedly stumble over a line, the line may be the problem.

Not your acting career.

THE USEFUL BIT

For an important conversation, write four things before polishing it:

A WANTS:

What does the first character want from this conversation?

B WANTS:

What does the second character want?

INFORMATION:

What does the reader genuinely need to learn?

CHANGE:

What is different when the conversation ends?

Then look at every line and ask:

Is the character saying this because they would say it — or because I need the reader to know it?

If the second answer keeps winning, rewrite.

And when the dialogue feels flat, do not immediately make it cleverer.

Make the objectives sharper.

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SOMETHING SHOULD PROBABLY HAPPEN



You have characters.

They want things.

They talk.

Sometimes beautifully.

Readers may eventually expect something to happen.

This does not mean explosions.

It does not mean a murder every three chapters.

Or ending every chapter with:

She opened the door.

And froze.

Although doors in thrillers do appear to have an unusually high freezing rate.

Pacing is not how many things happen.

It is how effectively the story keeps creating a reason to continue.

TENSION IS NOT ACTION

Two people sitting across a table can create more tension than a car chase.

A car chase can also be boring.

The difference is usually not speed.

It is **uncertainty plus consequence**.

If Elena asks Maya a question and we know:

Maya has the answer,

Elena desperately needs it,

Maya has a reason not to give it,

and the answer could change what Elena does next,

we have tension.

Nobody needs to run anywhere.

This is useful because running is tiring.

GIVE THE READER A QUESTION

One of the simplest ways to create forward movement is to make the reader want an answer.

Who sent the message?

Why did Adrian lie?

What is Maya hiding?

Will Elena sign?

These do not all need to be mysteries. Will Elena sign? is a perfectly good narrative question. So is What happens if she refuses?

The reader continues because something remains unresolved.

The mistake is thinking you must answer every question immediately.

You don't.

But you should usually reward the reader for waiting.

ANSWER ONE. CREATE ANOTHER.

A useful rhythm is:

QUESTION → ANSWER → CONSEQUENCE → NEW QUESTION

Elena discovers who authorized the transfer.

Question answered.

It was Adrian.

That answer creates a worse problem.

Why?

She discovers the transfer was legitimate.

Another answer.

Then why was somebody trying to hide it?

Now the story has moved.

Compare that with:

QUESTION → QUESTION → QUESTION → QUESTION

Who authorized the transfer?

Where did the money go?

Who is Varga?

Why was Adrian in Vienna?

Who sent the email?

What happened in Boston?

Eventually the reader may stop feeling intrigued and start feeling that you have misplaced the answers.

Mystery requires withholding.

It also requires delivery.

ESCALATION SHOULD COST SOMETHING

We already made problems harder in the skeleton.

Now make sure the scenes actually reflect that.

A useful escalation changes at least one of these:

risk

knowledge

relationships

options

cost

At the beginning, Elena can walk away.

Later, walking away looks suspicious.

Later still, staying may destroy something else.

The situation has not merely become louder.

Her available choices have changed.

That is pressure.

QUIET SCENES ARE NOT THE ENEMY

After a major reveal, characters may need to absorb it.

Let them.

A book operating at maximum tension all the time becomes strangely flat.

If every chapter is urgent, urgency becomes normal.

Quiet scenes give the reader room to absorb what changed.

The important distinction is:

quiet

versus

inactive.

A character sitting alone after discovering her husband lied to her may be doing nothing physically.

But if her understanding of the marriage changes during that scene, the story is moving.

A character spending four pages making tea while thinking things we already know is simply making tea.

ENTER LATE. LEAVE EARLY.

Scenes often improve when you remove the polite edges.

You do not always need:

Elena arriving.

Taking off her coat.

Ordering coffee.

Asking how Maya has been.

Maya saying busy.

Elena saying same.

The waiter bringing water.

Start here:

“You knew.”

Much better.

The same applies to endings.

Once the scene has done its job, consider leaving.

You do not need everyone to summarize what just happened, arrange transportation and say goodbye.

Readers are capable of imagining people eventually leaving restaurants.

CHAPTER ENDINGS ARE PROMISES

A chapter ending should create some form of forward pull.

Not necessarily a cliffhanger.

Sometimes it is a reveal.

Sometimes a decision.

Sometimes a new question.

Sometimes a sentence that changes how we understand the previous scene.

Sometimes simply an emotional turn that makes stopping feel inconvenient.

What matters is that the ending points somewhere.

A weak ending often looks like:

Elena went home and tried to sleep.

A stronger ending might be:

Elena went home knowing exactly what she had to do.

She just wasn't sure she could still do it.

We haven't thrown anyone from a roof.

But something remains open.

DON'T FAKE THE CLIFFHANGER

There is a particular chapter ending:

She looked at the screen.

Impossible.

Chapter break.

Next chapter:

The battery was at two percent.

Technically, yes.

Emotionally, I may now dislike you.

A cliffhanger creates a promise.

The next scene should respect it.

If you manufacture enormous tension and resolve it with something trivial, you are not surprising the reader.

You are training them not to trust you.

Use dramatic chapter endings when the thing is actually dramatic.

INFORMATION HAS SPEED

Pacing problems are often information problems.

Too slow:

The reader understands something long before the characters do, and waits fifty pages for them to catch up.

Too fast:

Three major revelations arrive in four pages and none has time to matter.

Too repetitive:

The reader learns the same information several times because each character apparently requires a separate briefing.

Too withheld:

Everyone knows something except the reader, for reasons increasingly difficult to justify.

When pacing feels wrong, don't only look at action.

Look at **when information arrives**.

Sometimes moving one reveal twenty pages earlier fixes an entire middle.

CUT THE SECOND EXPLANATION

This one will probably matter to this book too.

Writers explain.

Then, because the point is important, we explain it again slightly differently.

Sometimes a third time for safety.

Readers understood the first one.

Usually.

If a scene demonstrates that Maya no longer trusts Elena, you may not also need:

Elena realized Maya no longer trusted her.

And then:

Something between them had changed.

We have now received the message.

Trust the scene.

THE USEFUL BIT

When a chapter feels slow, ask:

What question is currently pulling the reader forward?

What changes in this chapter?

Does new information affect a decision?

Am I repeating something the reader already understands?

Can I enter later or leave earlier?

Then look at the ending:

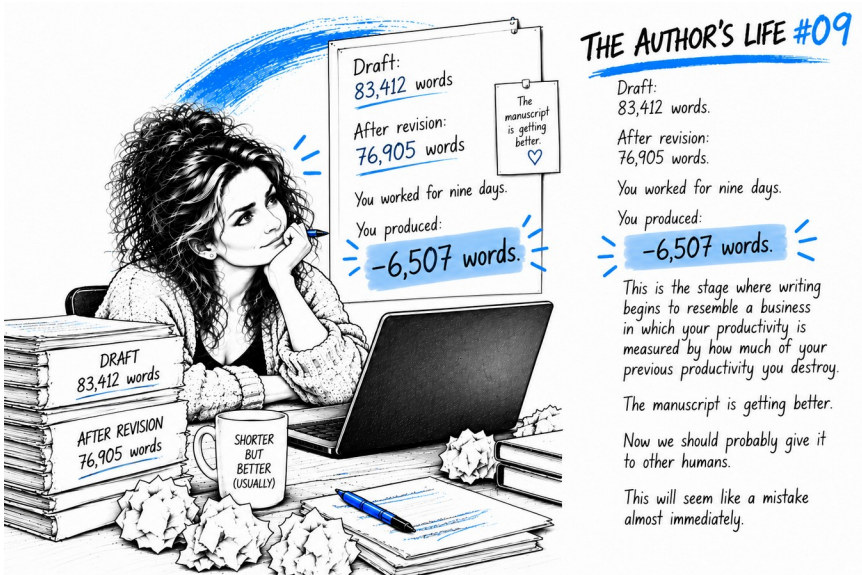
Why would I read one more page?

You do not need a corpse.

You need unfinished business.

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THE BOOK YOU WROTE IS NOT THE BOOK YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE WRITING



You finished the first draft.

Congratulations.

This is a real achievement.

Take a moment.

Save the file.

Back it up somewhere sensible.

Maybe send yourself a copy.

Then resist the urge to open Chapter One and start replacing adjectives.

You do not have an adjective problem yet.

You may have a book problem.

READ THE THING

Preferably after some distance.

A few days.

A week.

Long enough that you stop remembering what you intended to write and start seeing what is actually there.

Then read the manuscript from beginning to end.

Do not fix everything.

This is difficult.

You will see a sentence you hate.

Leave it.

You will find a repeated word.

Leave it.

You will discover that somebody nods six times during one conversation and appears to be developing a neurological condition.

Leave it.

For now.

You are looking for larger things.

Where does the story drag?

Where does it become confusing?

Where did a character suddenly change?

Which scene feels unnecessary?

Which reveal arrives too late?

Which relationship never became as important as you thought it would?

Where did the book become interesting?

That last question can be painful.

Especially if the answer is Chapter Nine.

FIX BIG THINGS BEFORE SMALL THINGS

This sounds obvious.

I did not always behave as though it was obvious.

There is something extremely satisfying about improving a sentence.

You can see the result immediately.

Structural revision is less polite.

You may spend three hours deciding that Chapter Four should not exist.

There is no beautiful new paragraph to show for this.

You simply have fewer problems.

This is progress.

And it gives us the basic rule of revision:

Do not polish something you may still delete.

There is little value in spending twenty minutes perfecting a description of a hotel lobby before discovering that the entire hotel scene needs to go.

The lobby will not appreciate your effort.

PASS ONE: STRUCTURE

Ignore the sentences.

Look at the book.

Does the central problem begin early enough?

Does the protagonist commit to something?

Does each major section create consequences for the next?

Does the middle escalate or merely continue?

Does the climax actually resolve the pressure the book created?

Does the ending answer the story rather than merely stop it?

This is where you move chapters.

Delete scenes.

Combine scenes.

Create missing ones.

Move reveals.

Change decisions.

Possibly discover that the clever subplot you loved is actually a second novel attempting to live inside this one.

Evict it.

PASS TWO: CHARACTER

Now follow each major character through the book.

Not the plot.

The person.

What do they want at the beginning?

What do they believe?

What changes that belief?

Which decisions belong to them?

Where are they merely obeying the outline?

Does their behavior change under pressure?

Does the final version of the character match the person who appeared in Chapter Two?

Characters evolve while you write them.

This can create a strange phenomenon where someone becomes intelligent around page 80.

Go back and inform their earlier self.

PASS THREE: CONTINUITY

Now reopen the evidence.

Dates.

Locations.

Travel.

Ages.

Objects.

Who knows what.

Who has which document.

Whether the person currently answering the phone is supposed to be on an airplane.

Check your timeline against the manuscript.

Do not trust memory.

You wrote the thing.

You are the least reliable witness.

PASS FOUR: DIALOGUE

Now read conversations as conversations.

Does everyone sound suspiciously similar?

Are characters explaining things both already know?

Can five lines become two?

Read important exchanges aloud.

You will feel ridiculous.

Continue.

PASS FIVE: RHYTHM AND REPETITION

This is where the manuscript starts revealing its habits.

Characters smile.

Then smile again.

They nod.

They look away.

They take breaths.

You will also find ideas repeated in different forms.

The first version explains something.

The second reinforces it.

The third exists because apparently you did not trust the first two.

Cut.

This pass is often where a manuscript becomes noticeably faster without losing any actual story.

We will be spending some quality time here ourselves.

PASS SIX: PROSE

Now you may care about the sentence.

Finally.

Word choice.

Rhythm.

Clarity.

Unnecessary qualifiers.

Weak verbs.

Awkward constructions.

The sentence that made perfect sense at 1:14 a.m. and now appears to have been translated from another language by a washing machine.

Fix it.

Read difficult sections aloud.

Cut words that are performing no useful function.

Do not replace every simple word with a more impressive one.

Nobody has ever abandoned a novel because the author used *said*.

PASS SEVEN: FINAL QA

This is the least glamorous pass.

Which means it is extremely good at finding embarrassing things.

Search for placeholders:

[CHECK]

[TBD]

[FIX THIS]

[NAME?]

Search for double spaces.

Repeated punctuation.

Wrong quotation marks.

Missing chapter numbers.

Broken scene breaks.

Names you changed halfway through.

The character who was called Haller in Chapter Three and Hale in Chapter Twenty-One.

Check the title page.

Contents.

Headers.

Page numbers.

Front matter.

Back matter.

Links in the ebook.

Then export the manuscript and look at the actual file.

Not the document you edited.

The file the reader will receive.

They are not always the same thing.

ONE PASS, ONE JOB

You do not have to use exactly seven passes.

The useful principle is separation.

If you are simultaneously asking:

Does this scene belong?

Is this character believable?

Is this comma correct?

Have I used *slightly* too often?

Was Tuesday actually May 19?

your brain is doing five different jobs badly.

Give each pass a purpose.

Structural problems become easier to see when you stop looking at punctuation.

Sentence problems become easier to see once you know the sentence is staying.

FEEDBACK IS NOT AN INSTRUCTION

Eventually, another human may read the manuscript and say:

I didn't understand why she stayed.

That is useful.

They may then say:

You should make her secretly pregnant and have Varga be her brother.

That is a solution.

You are not required to use it.

Readers are often excellent at identifying where they had a problem.

They are not automatically responsible for redesigning the book.

Listen carefully to:

where they became confused

where they became bored

what they expected

what they did not believe

Then decide what caused it.

Fix the problem.

Not necessarily the proposed solution.

KNOW WHEN TO STOP

Revision can become another form of not publishing.

There will always be a sentence you can change.

Open a finished chapter six months later and you will probably find something you would write differently.

That does not mean the previous version was wrong.

At some point the question changes from:

Can I improve this?

Of course you can.

To:

Is this improvement meaningful enough to justify another revision?

That is harder.

Eventually, you need to stop protecting the book from readers.

Which is unfortunate because readers are exactly what we made it for.

THE USEFUL BIT

Before revising, decide what each pass is for.

**STRUCTURE → CHARACTER → CONTINUITY → DIALOGUE →
RHYTHM / REPETITION → PROSE → FINAL QA**

You do not have to use exactly this sequence or exactly seven passes.

The important part is:

one pass, one job.

Finish one job before becoming obsessed with the next one.

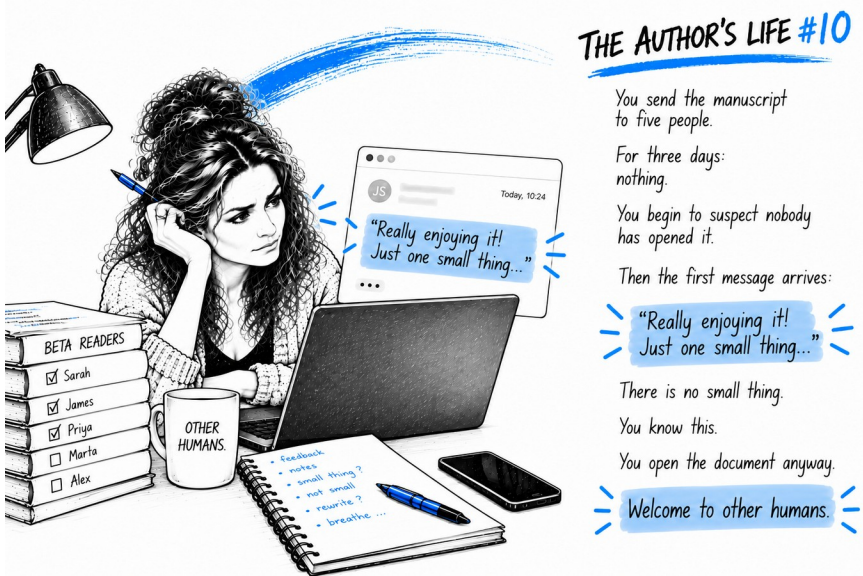
And keep an untouched backup before major revisions.

You will probably never need it.

This is exactly when backups become useful.

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OTHER HUMANS



The manuscript has to leave the building.

This is unpleasant.

Until now, every problem in the book has belonged to you.

You could fix it quietly.

Nobody needed to know that Chapter Twelve once made absolutely no sense.

Now you are going to give the manuscript to another person.

They may notice things.

This is technically the point.

It will not always feel like the point.

BETA READERS ARE NOT EDITORS

A beta reader experiences the book as a reader.

That is valuable precisely because they are **not inside your head**.

You already know why Elena makes the decision.

You know what the clue means.

You know who Varga is.

You know the sentence on page 47 becomes important on page 219.

The beta reader knows none of this.

Which is exactly what you need.

They can tell you what the manuscript actually communicated rather than what you intended it to communicate.

Those are occasionally different books.

ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

If you ask:

Did you like it?

you will often receive:

Yes!

Wonderful.

Completely useless.

Try:

Where did you become confused?

Was there anywhere your attention dropped?

Did any decision feel unbelievable?

Was anything explained after you had already understood it?

Now you have information you can use.

You are not asking readers to write the book for you.

You are asking where their experience differed from what you intended.

ONE READER IS A READER

This is worth remembering.

One person hates a character.

Interesting.

Four unrelated readers hate the character at exactly the same point.

Very interesting.

One reader wants more romance.

Another wants no romance.

A third wants the book set in Scotland.

We may not have discovered a manuscript problem.

We may have discovered three readers.

Look for patterns.

Especially repeated confusion, boredom, disbelief or disappointment at the same point.

DON'T DEFEND THE MANUSCRIPT

This is difficult.

A reader says:

I didn't understand why Elena didn't call Maya.

And immediately you know the answer.

It is clearly established in Chapter Eleven that—

Stop.

If you need to explain the book outside the book, the reader has accidentally given you useful information.

Maybe the explanation exists but is too easy to miss.

Maybe it comes too early.

Maybe the reader simply missed it.

All possible.

But arguing will not change their reading experience.

Write the comment down.

Investigate later.

You are collecting evidence, not winning a case.

BETA IS NOT ARC

These get mixed together constantly.

A **beta reader** helps you improve the manuscript while meaningful changes are still possible.

An **ARC reader** receives an **Advance Reader Copy** when the book is essentially finished and approaching publication.

The purposes overlap slightly, but they are not the same.

Beta: Help me find problems.

ARC: Here is the book before release.

An ARC reader may still catch a typo or tell you something useful.

Good.

Fix it if you can.

But if your ARC readers collectively discover that the protagonist's motivation makes no sense, you have probably started the ARC process too early.

That is beta feedback wearing nicer clothes.

HONEST FEEDBACK MEANS HONEST

If you ask people for feedback, you have to allow them to dislike things.

Otherwise you are not asking for feedback.

You are arranging applause.

This does not mean every opinion is correct.

There is no such thing.

A reader can dislike exactly the thing another reader loves.

What matters is understanding the difference between:

preference

and

problem.

“I don’t enjoy first-person narration.”

Preference.

“I didn’t realize the narrator had changed for three pages.”

Problem.

“I wanted Elena and Antoine to have more romance.”

Preference.

“Their relationship suddenly felt romantic without anything earlier supporting it.”

Potential problem.

Those require different responses.

DO NOT FIX EVERYTHING

Feedback can destroy a manuscript surprisingly efficiently if you obey all of it.

Reader A wants more explanation.

Reader B wants less.

Reader C wants faster pacing.

You respond by adding explanation, then cutting scenes to make it faster, then adding another scene to clarify what you cut.

Return to the story promise.

What book are you trying to write?

Feedback helps you see whether that book is working.

It does not require you to turn it into every book readers might personally prefer.

THE USEFUL BIT

When you send a beta manuscript, give readers a small set of questions.

For example:

- 1. Where were you most engaged?**
- 2. Where did the story slow down?**
- 3. Was anything confusing?**
- 4. Did any character decision feel unconvincing?**
- 5. Which reveals did you anticipate?**
- 6. Did anything feel overexplained or repeated?**
- 7. Did the ending feel earned?**

Then add:

You do not need to suggest fixes. I am primarily interested in where something did not work for you.

That sentence can save everybody time.

When feedback returns, sort it into:

REPEATED PROBLEM

POSSIBLE PROBLEM

PERSONAL PREFERENCE

CLEAR ERROR

You are still the author.

Responsibility remains annoyingly yours.

DON'T ASK FOR A REVIEW YET

Beta feedback and public reviews are different things.

Do not make someone helping you improve an unfinished manuscript feel that their reward is now an obligation to publicly praise the finished one.

Later, if they genuinely want to review it, lovely.

But feedback is already valuable.

Treat it that way.

Reviews are a different problem.

There will be stars. You will develop feelings about them.

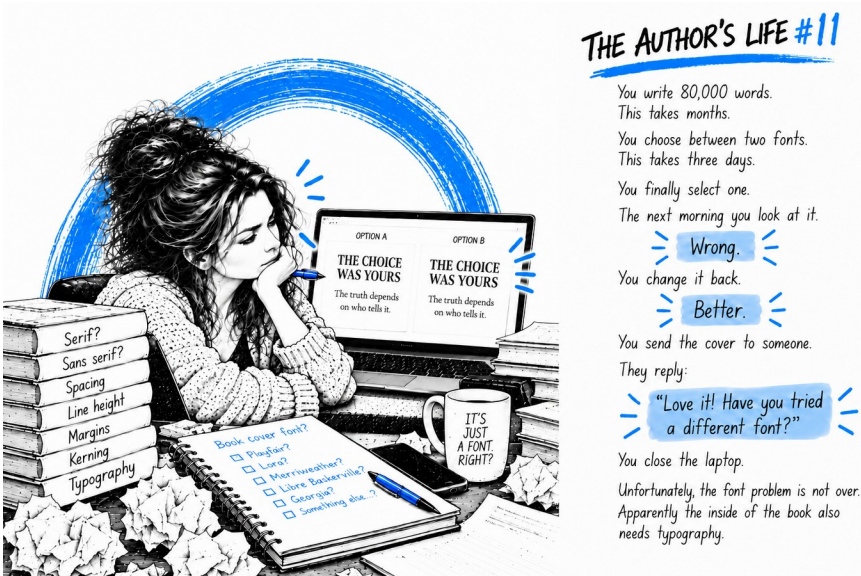
Not yet.

PART III

APPARENTLY THIS NEEDS TO BECOME A BOOK

11

TITLE. COVER. PANIC.



You have written a book.

Other humans have read it.

You have revised it.

There is now an inconvenient practical question.

What is it called?

This seems like something you should probably have considered earlier.

Maybe you did.

Perhaps the manuscript has spent the last eight months living in a folder called:

BOOK

or:

NEW THRILLER

or, increasingly confidently:

UNTITLED_FINAL

This was fine while nobody else needed to know what it was.

Now they do.

A TITLE HAS MORE THAN ONE JOB

A title can be beautiful.

Memorable.

Intriguing.

Funny.

Disturbing.

Elegant.

Unfortunately, it should probably also help the reader understand what kind of book they are looking at.

Consider:

The Last Summer

Could be romance.

Literary fiction.

A thriller.

A memoir.

Climate fiction.

Possibly a cookbook about tomatoes.

Context will eventually help.

But your title is often encountered alongside only a cover, an author name and a thumbnail.

It does not have to explain the plot.

It should not actively fight the book.

START WITH THE STORY, NOT THE WORDS

When I struggle with a title, I find it useful to stop generating titles.

Instead, write down:

What is the central question?

What is the central choice?

What changes meaning during the story?

What image or phrase keeps returning?

What is the emotional promise?

What would still describe this book after the plot details were removed?

Then look for language.

This tends to produce stronger titles than opening a thesaurus and searching for increasingly dramatic synonyms for *truth*.

Although eventually you may do that too.

TEST THE TITLE IN THE REAL WORLD

A title does not live alone in 36-point type on your screen.

Say it aloud.

Imagine someone recommending it.

“Have you read _____?”

Put it on a cover.

Reduce the cover to thumbnail size.

Search it.

Does another famous book already own the phrase?

Does the title accidentally belong to twelve romance novels, a death-metal album and a plumbing company?

Can people spell it?

Can they remember it?

None of these automatically kills a title.

They are simply useful things to discover **before** publication.

SUBTITLES SHOULD DO WORK

Fiction often needs no subtitle.

Nonfiction frequently benefits from one because the title can attract attention while the subtitle explains the promise.

For example:

I HAVE AN IDEA. NOW WHAT?

How to Become Extremely Busy Without Knowing What You're Doing

The title asks the question.

The subtitle establishes tone and gives some idea of the experience.

It does not say:

The Complete Proven 27-Step System for Writing, Publishing and Marketing Your Guaranteed Bestseller

because I would then have to leave the country.

A subtitle should clarify.

Not make promises the book cannot keep.

NOW THE COVER

This is where authors discover an extraordinary ability to develop emotional attachments to fonts.

The cover is not decoration added after the book.

It is packaging.

Its first job is not:

Express everything the book means.

Its first job is much smaller:

Make the right reader look again.

Then:

Tell them roughly what kind of thing this is.

Then perhaps:

Make them curious enough to investigate.

Your cover does not need to summarize 80,000 words.

This is fortunate.

There is very little room.

GENRE IS A VISUAL LANGUAGE

Readers have learned visual shortcuts.

Typography.

Composition.

Color.

Imagery.

Spacing.

A cozy mystery usually announces itself differently from psychological suspense.

A business book looks different from epic fantasy.

A dark satire may borrow signals from several categories, but it still needs to communicate deliberately.

You can break genre conventions.

But it helps to know which convention you are breaking and why.

Otherwise you may produce an excellent cover for a completely different book.

This is especially dangerous when designing something yourself.

You know what the book is.

The stranger scrolling past it does not.

THE THUMBNAIL TEST

This may be the least romantic and most useful cover test.

Make it small.

Really small.

Approximately the size it will appear in an online store.

Now ask:

Can I read the title?

What do I notice first?

Does the composition still work?

Can I identify the central image?

Does the cover become a dark rectangle containing several mysterious pixels?

A beautifully detailed cover that only works at full size is an excellent poster.

Your book will spend much of its life online being approximately two centimeters tall.

Design accordingly.

HIERARCHY

A cover needs to decide what the eye sees first.

Usually some combination of:

title

image

author

subtitle/tagline

Not everything can shout.

If the title is enormous, the image complex, the tagline bright, the author's name equally large and there is also a sticker-shaped object explaining that this is BOOK ONE OF THE SERIES...

the reader may experience the visual equivalent of several people trying to enter an elevator simultaneously.

Choose hierarchy.

Let some things be quieter.

White space is allowed.

YOUR COVER IS NOT YOUR BOOK

This becomes important when you love an image.

Perhaps you have found or created something genuinely beautiful.

Unfortunately, the question is not:

Do I love this image?

It is:

Does this image sell the correct expectation?

A cover can be artistically excellent and commercially misleading.

If the book is a claustrophobic psychological suspense novel and the cover looks like an inspirational memoir about finding yourself in Provence, somebody is going to be disappointed.

Possibly after buying it.

Which is worse than before.

SERIES NEED FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

If you are writing a series, think one book ahead.

You do not need every future cover finished.

You do need to ask whether the design system can survive another title.

Shared typography.

Composition.

Borders.

Color logic.

Illustration style.

Title placement.

Some recurring element that tells the reader:

these belong together

without requiring every cover to be identical.

This is much easier to plan before Book Four.

Ask me how I know.

Actually, don't.

YOU MAY CHANGE YOUR MIND

This applies to titles and covers.

A working title can change.

A cover can change.

A series identity can evolve.

You are not engraving the first draft into stone.

But once readers begin seeing the book, consistency starts acquiring value.

So experiment early.

Commit deliberately.

Then stop redesigning everything every Thursday because you discovered another font.

There will always be another font.

THE USEFUL BIT

Before approving a title, test:

Does it fit the book and the expectation it creates?

Can I say and remember it easily?

Does it work beside the author name?

Does it work as part of a series, if relevant?

Have I checked what already uses it?

For the cover:

Does it communicate the right genre?

Is the title readable at thumbnail size?

Is there one clear visual hierarchy?

Does the central image still work when small?

Does anything exist purely because I couldn't bear to remove it?

Then show the cover to someone who has not spent six months staring at the manuscript.

Ask:

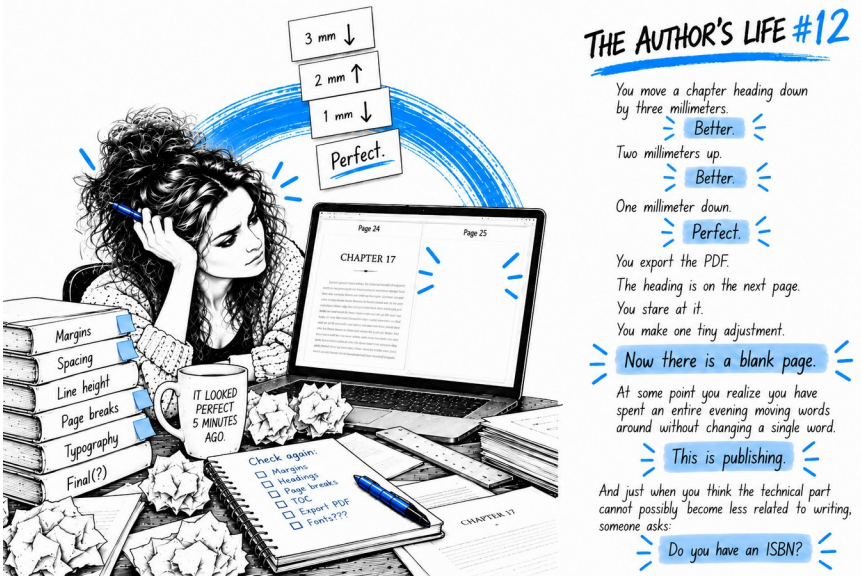
What kind of book do you think this is?

Do not explain first.

Their wrong answer may be more useful than their compliment.

12

WELCOME TO TYPOGRAPHY



Your manuscript is finished.

Your title exists.

Your cover exists.

Now you need to turn a Word document into something that looks like a book.

This sounds straightforward.

It is mostly text.

Books have contained text successfully for several centuries.

You should be fine.

Three hours later you are researching whether chapter titles should begin 35 or 40 percent down the page.

Welcome to typography.

THE BEST INTERIOR DESIGN IS MOSTLY INVISIBLE

Readers rarely finish a novel and say:

Fantastic story. Exceptional line spacing.

Good.

That means the typography did its job.

Interior design should make reading effortless.

The reader should not be thinking about margins, paragraph indents, running headers or whether the body text is 10.5 or 11 points.

You will think about all of these things.

So they don't have to.

START WITH THE TRIM SIZE

Before adjusting fonts, decide what physical book you are making.

Trim size is simply the final dimensions of the printed page.

It affects almost everything:

page count

line length

margins

spine width

printing cost

how the book feels in your hand

This is why formatting an entire paperback before deciding its trim size is an exciting way to format it twice.

Look at comparable books in your genre.

Not because you must copy them.

Because thousands of books have already conducted the experiment of what feels normal in a reader's hand.

Use the data.

MARGINS ARE NOT EMPTY SPACE

A page needs room to breathe.

It also needs room near the spine so readers do not have to physically dismantle the book to finish a sentence.

The inside margin — the gutter — becomes particularly important as page count increases.

Print platforms have technical requirements for minimum margins.

Meet them.

Then remember that:

technically printable

and

pleasant to read

are not necessarily the same thing.

The minimum is a requirement.

It is not a design philosophy.

CHOOSE A BODY FONT AND CALM DOWN

For a novel, the body font should usually be extremely readable.

This is not the place to demonstrate that you found a font nobody else has heard of.

Serif typefaces are common in printed fiction for good reasons.

Choose something readable.

Print a few pages.

Read them.

Do not evaluate it at 180 percent zoom on a 27-inch monitor.

Your reader will not be carrying that around.

Also check whether you are actually allowed to use the font commercially.

Fonts are software.

They have licenses.

FONT SIZE IS NOT A NUMBER IN ISOLATION

Eleven-point text in one typeface can look completely different from eleven-point text in another.

So when someone says:

Novels should use 11 pt.

the correct response is:

Which font?

Size interacts with:

x-height

line spacing

page dimensions

line length

margins

This is why the useful test remains annoyingly physical:

Print it.

Hold it.

Read it.

If the page looks like a legal contract, something has gone wrong.

If it looks like a children's book despite containing an international financial conspiracy, something else has gone wrong.

PARAGRAPHS NEED A SYSTEM

Most fiction uses first-line indents to distinguish paragraphs.

Usually you do not also need blank lines between every paragraph.

And the first paragraph after a chapter heading or scene break is often treated differently from subsequent paragraphs.

The precise convention matters less than choosing one intentionally and using it consistently.

Do not format paragraphs by repeatedly pressing the space bar.

Do not create indents with tabs scattered manually throughout the manuscript.

Use paragraph styles.

This will feel unnecessarily technical for approximately ten minutes.

Then you will change one setting and fix 312 pages at once.

You will become religious about styles.

SCENE BREAKS NEED TO SURVIVE

Perhaps your manuscript contains:

• • •

or an ornament.

Or extra vertical space.

Whatever you choose, make sure it survives conversion.

A blank line that clearly indicates a scene break in your editing document may disappear or land at the top of a new page where nobody can see it.

Suddenly two scenes become one.

A character is in Paris.

Next paragraph:

New York.

No explanation.

Use a deliberate scene-break marker and check the exported file.

CHAPTERS NEED RULES TOO

Decide:

Where does a chapter begin?

New page?

Recto page only?

How much space above the title?

Chapter number, chapter name, or both?

Does the first paragraph indent?

Do running headers disappear on chapter-opening pages?

There are many legitimate answers.

What looks amateur is usually not choosing the “wrong” convention.

It is using four conventions accidentally.

Consistency makes surprisingly ordinary choices look intentional.

PRINT AND EBOOK ARE DIFFERENT ANIMALS

A paperback has fixed pages.

An ebook generally does not.

The reader can change:

font

font size

line spacing

screen orientation

device

So trying to force an ebook to behave exactly like your paperback can produce impressive disasters.

For ebooks, structure matters more than precise page geometry.

Use proper headings.

Proper paragraph styles.

Functional navigation.

Real chapter breaks.

Avoid creating layouts with dozens of spaces and empty paragraphs.

Your ebook reader does not respect the tiny architectural model you built in Word.

He will move the furniture.

THE TABLE OF CONTENTS

For many novels, the printed table of contents is optional.

For an ebook, navigation is much more important.

Make sure chapters are correctly identified and the ebook's navigation works.

Click things.

Actually click them.

Do not assume the links work because they are blue.

LOOK AT THE ACTUAL OUTPUT

This may be the most important rule in the chapter.

Export the PDF.

Open it.

Go through it.

Upload the ebook file to a previewer.

Change the font size.

Preview it on different devices.

Jump between chapters.

Look at page breaks.

Look for orphaned headings, strange blank pages, broken scene breaks, enormous gaps and paragraphs that have suddenly decided to become centered.

Formatting software is remarkably creative when unsupervised.

CHECK THE BORING OFFICIAL STUFF

If you made it this far, you have already demonstrated a surprising willingness to learn things you never expected to know.

Good.

Use some of it here.

Publishing platforms have technical requirements for things like trim sizes, margins, bleed, file formats, image resolution and ebook structure.

These requirements can change.

Do not trust a screenshot from 2019.

Do not trust a random forum post because somebody sounds confident.

And, for once, do not trust this book either.

Check the current official specifications of the platform you are actually publishing on.

I can explain what a gutter is.

The platform can tell you how large it needs to be this week.

You have already researched fictional bank transfers, train schedules and the emotional consequences of imaginary marriages.

You can survive a technical requirements page.

THE USEFUL BIT

For a print interior, check:

TRIM SIZE

MARGINS / GUTTER

BODY FONT

FONT SIZE

LINE SPACING

PARAGRAPH INDENTS

SCENE BREAKS

CHAPTER OPENINGS

HEADERS / FOOTERS

PAGE NUMBERS

Then inspect the exported PDF page by page.

For an ebook, check:

HEADING STRUCTURE

PARAGRAPH STYLES

CHAPTER BREAKS

NAVIGATION / CONTENTS

SCENE BREAKS

LINKS

MULTIPLE FONT SIZES / DEVICES

Do not ask only:

Does my source document look right?

Ask:

Does the file the reader receives look right?

That is the book.

Remember the ARC readers from Chapter Ten?

This is roughly where they enter.

The manuscript is finished. The book is essentially finished. You still have enough time to correct a genuine problem before publication.

You are not building an ARC strategy here.

You are giving advance readers the advance copy.

The clue is in the name.

13

ISBN AND OTHER THINGS YOU NEVER WANTED TO KNOW



THE AUTHOR'S LIFE #13

You wrote one book.

You now have an ebook.

A paperback.

A hardcover.

Apparently these are three different things.

They have different identifiers.

Different files.

Different specifications.

You create a spreadsheet.

You did not want a spreadsheet.

The spreadsheet does not care.

You wanted to write fiction.

Please remember that.

You have written the book.

Rewritten the book.

Named the book.

Designed the cover.

Formatted the interior.

At no point during the original creative impulse did you think:

I cannot wait to assign identifiers to different product formats.

Nevertheless, here we are.

Your novel is about to become a product.

Products enjoy numbers.

WHAT THE HELL IS AN ISBN?

ISBN stands for **International Standard Book Number**.

It is a unique identifier used for a particular edition and format of a book.

Think of it less as the identity of your story and more as the identity of a specific publishing product.

Your paperback has one ISBN.

Your hardcover has another.

A substantially revised edition may need another.

The exact rules depend on what you are publishing and where, which is why this innocent-looking number eventually leads you to several websites containing phrases like:

identifier assignment

and

publication format

and

registrant element.

You wanted to write fiction.

Please remember that.

ONE BOOK CAN BECOME SEVERAL THINGS

Here is the part that initially feels unnecessarily complicated.

You wrote:

one book.

Publishing sees:

ebook

paperback

hardcover

audiobook

and potentially different editions of those things.

To you:

Same book.

To the publishing infrastructure:

Absolutely not.

This distinction starts making more sense when you remember that a hardcover and an ebook are not interchangeable products.

Still, the first encounter with it feels a little like being told your left shoe requires separate registration from your right one.

DO I NEED TO BUY ONE?

Maybe.

And this is where I strongly recommend not memorizing advice from a random blog post written in 2017.

ISBN systems vary by country.

Some national agencies provide ISBNs free.

In some places you buy them.

Some publishing platforms can provide an ISBN for eligible print formats.

The consequences of using a platform-provided ISBN versus obtaining your own can differ, particularly **in terms of** how the publisher or imprint is represented and how portable your publishing setup is.

So before doing anything:

check the official ISBN agency for your country

and

check the current rules of the platform you intend to use.

This is one of those areas where ten minutes with the official source can save you several hours of strangers confidently disagreeing on the internet.

FREE IS NOT THE SAME AS YOURS

A platform-provided ISBN can be perfectly suitable.

Especially if your goal is simply to publish the book there without building a broader publishing operation around it.

But understand what you are accepting.

Who is listed as the publisher?

Can the ISBN be used elsewhere?

What happens if you later distribute the same edition through another service?

Do you want your own imprint attached to the book?

There is no universally correct answer.

There is only the annoying requirement that you know which answer you are choosing.

AND THEN THERE IS THE ASIN

If you publish through Amazon, you will encounter another identifier:

ASIN — Amazon Standard Identification Number.

This is Amazon's identifier for products in its system.

An ISBN and an ASIN are therefore not two different names for the same thing.

Your Amazon listing may involve both, depending on the format.

This is usually the moment when your manuscript folder begins acquiring a spreadsheet.

You may resist.

The spreadsheet will win.

KEEP A BOOK RECORD

Once you have more than one format — or more than one book — stop relying on memory.

Create a simple publishing record.

Something like:

FORMAT	IDENTIFIER	PLATFORM	STATUS
Ebook	ASIN / relevant ID	Amazon	Live
Paperback	ISBN	Amazon / distribution	Live
Hardcover	ISBN	Amazon / distribution	Draft

Add whatever matters to you:

publication date

price

trim size

page count

edition

cover filename

interior filename

territories

links

You will initially think this is excessive.

Then Book Two happens.

Then Book Three.

Then you update a paperback and wonder which file named **FINAL** is actually live.

The spreadsheet stops looking excessive.

YOUR FILES ALSO NEED NAMES

This sounds unrelated.

It isn't.

Sooner or later you may have:

book.pdf

book_final.pdf

book_final2.pdf

book_final_NEW.pdf

book_final_NEW_FIXED.pdf

book_final_NEW_FIXED_USE_THIS.pdf

This system works beautifully until approximately the seventh file.

Use version numbers or dates.

For example:

TITLE_PB_INTERIOR_v1.3.pdf

Suddenly civilization returns.

Do the same with covers.

Do the same with ebook files.

Keep the published version.

COPYRIGHT IS NOT ISBN

These concepts often get bundled together because they appear around the same stage of publishing.

They are not the same thing.

An ISBN identifies a publication.

Copyright concerns rights in the work.

Registering or assigning an ISBN does not magically create copyright protection, and copyright rules differ by jurisdiction.

Again:

official sources.

Your country's copyright framework.

Your publishing platform's current documentation.

Not a person in a Facebook group whose profile picture is a wolf.

They may be correct.

This does not make them your legal department.

DON'T TURN ADMINISTRATION INTO A NEW HOBBY

There is a danger here.

Once you discover publishing infrastructure, there is always another thing to research.

ISBN prefixes.

Imprints.

Distribution channels.

Legal deposit.

Tax forms.

Suddenly you have spent four days researching international publishing logistics for a paperback that has not yet sold one copy.

Learn what you actually need for the book you are publishing now.

Record it properly.

Then move on.

You can build Penguin Random House later.

THE USEFUL BIT

Before publication, create one record for the book containing:

TITLE

SUBTITLE

AUTHOR NAME

EDITION

LANGUAGE

PUBLICATION DATE

FORMAT

ISBN / PLATFORM IDENTIFIER

TRIM SIZE

PAGE COUNT

PRICE

FINAL INTERIOR FILE

FINAL COVER FILE

PLATFORM

LIVE URL

For identifiers, verify the current requirements with:

your national ISBN agency

and

the platform where you are publishing.

Do not buy something merely because somebody told you every author needs it.

Do not avoid something merely because somebody else got it free.

Your publishing setup determines what you need.

THINGS I LEARNED FOR NO GOOD REASON

You begin by writing a psychological thriller.

Several months later you can explain the difference between an ISBN and an ASIN.

Nobody asked you to acquire this knowledge.

You possess it anyway.

This is becoming a pattern.

And unfortunately, giving your book a number is not enough.

Now you have to tell the machines **what the book actually is.**

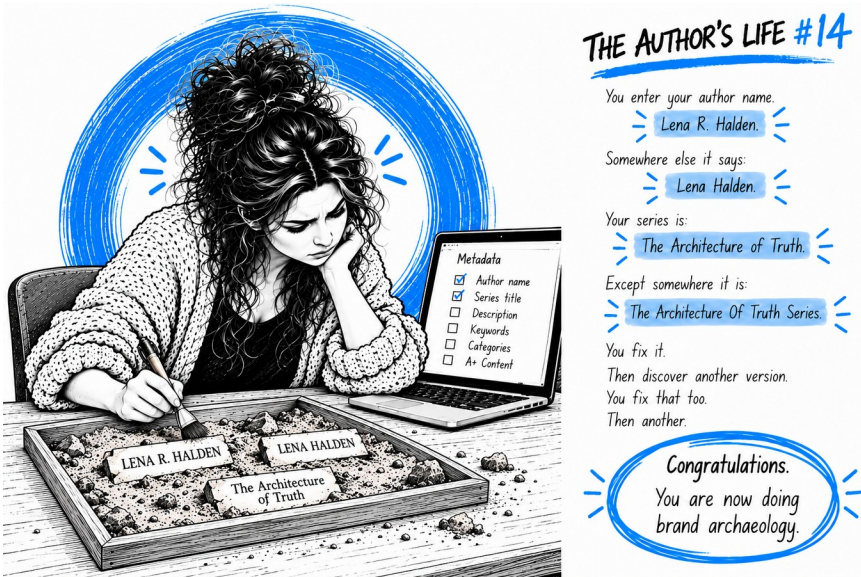
Welcome to metadata.

It sounds boring because it is.

It remains boring after you discover that it matters.

14

METADATA: BORING UNTIL IT COSTS YOU MONEY



You wrote a book for people.

Unfortunately, before people can find it, you need to explain it to machines.

This feels backwards.

It is also publishing.

The machines would like to know:

What is it called?

Who wrote it?

What is it about?

What kind of book is it?

Who is it for?

Which categories does it belong in?

Which words might people use when looking for it?

You have already answered most of these questions while writing the book.

Now you get to answer them again.

In little boxes.

METADATA IS THE BOOK AROUND THE BOOK

Metadata is information describing your book.

Title.

Subtitle.

Author.

Series.

Description.

Categories.

Keywords.

Language.

Publication information.

Identifiers.

Some of it is administrative.

Some of it affects how stores, databases and search systems understand and display the book.

And some of it affects whether a potential reader ever encounters it.

This makes metadata simultaneously:

boring

and

important.

An unfortunate combination.

START WITH THE THINGS THAT SHOULD NOT CHANGE THEIR MINDS

Your title should be the same title everywhere.

Your author name should be the same author name everywhere.

Your series name should not mysteriously acquire punctuation on one platform.

Book Two should preferably remain Book Two.

This sounds insultingly obvious.

Then you publish in several formats, create an author profile, open Goodreads, build a website, upload a paperback, update an ebook and discover that one place says:

Lena R. Halden

another says:

Lena Halden

and a third has decided the series is called:

The Architecture Of Truth Series

Congratulations.

You now have brand archaeology.

Keep one master metadata document.

Copy from it.

Do not repeatedly type important information from memory.

Memory is how punctuation becomes a publishing issue.

YOUR DESCRIPTION IS NOT A SUMMARY

A book description has a job.

That job is not to prove that you remember everything that happens in the book.

Especially in fiction.

The reader does not need:

Chapter One happens.

Then this happens.

Then she discovers this.

Then this person appears.

Then—

Stop.

A description should make the reader want to know more.

Give the reader:

the situation

the central pressure

the stakes

the tone

a reason to continue

Then get out before you explain the book they are considering buying.

This is particularly important if your story contains reveals.

Do not spend months carefully controlling information in the manuscript and then spoil Chapter Thirty-Seven in the Amazon description.

That would be efficient.

In the wrong direction.

CATEGORIES ARE SHELVES

Imagine walking into a bookstore.

Your book has to go somewhere.

Categories are the digital version of that problem, except the bookstore may contain millions of books and the shelves are partly controlled by databases.

Choose categories that genuinely describe the book.

Specific is useful.

Fantasy is broad.

Urban fantasy is narrower.

Psychological fiction is different from a police procedural even if somebody commits a crime in both.

Do not ask only:

Where can I rank most easily?

Ask first:

Where would the right reader reasonably expect to find this book?

A number-one ranking in a category nobody relevant visits is a lovely screenshot.

It may not be a readership.

KEYWORDS ARE NOT MAGIC SPELLS

At some point you will encounter advice suggesting that the correct combination of keywords can unlock the secret chamber where Amazon keeps all the readers.

I have not found the chamber.

Keywords help systems connect searches, subjects and books.

Think like a reader.

What might someone genuinely type when looking for a book like yours?

Not just:

thriller

Perhaps:

psychological suspense marriage secrets

or whatever accurately reflects your particular book and the platform allows.

Use phrases connected to:

genre

themes

setting

character type

central situation

reader interest

Avoid irrelevant terms merely because they are popular.

Someone searching for dragons will not become delighted when presented with your corporate thriller because you found a clever keyword strategy.

They wanted a dragon.

Respect the dragon.

YOUR AUTHOR NAME IS DATA NOW

This one feels slightly strange.

Until recently, your author name was a name.

Now it is a field.

Spell it consistently.

Use the same version across your books where appropriate.

Check how platforms display initials.

Check whether another author uses a similar name.

If you use a pen name, decide what identity belongs publicly to that name and keep your publishing records organized accordingly.

You are building a connection between books.

The machines need to understand that these books came from the same author.

The humans eventually should too.

SERIES DATA MATTERS

If your books belong to a series, tell the platform correctly.

Series name.

Book number.

Relationship between titles.

Again, boring.

Again, useful.

A reader who finishes Book One should not have to conduct independent research to discover that Book Two exists.

The easier you make the path:

Book One → Book Two → Book Three

the less work the reader has to do.

Do not reward them with administrative detective work.

WHEN THE BOOK GOES LIVE, CHECK THE PRODUCT PAGE LIKE A STRANGER

Once the book is live, open the listing.

Do not admire the cover.

Inspect the page.

Is the title correct?

Author?

Series?

Description?

Format?

Price?

Cover?

Does the author name lead where you expect?

Does the series connection work?

Does the description contain some bizarre formatting artifact?

Is anything missing?

Click things.

This is becoming another pattern.

Publishing contains a surprising amount of clicking your own links to discover which one betrayed you.

METADATA CAN CHANGE

Some metadata can be updated after publication.

Some changes are more restricted.

Rules vary by platform and format.

So before changing something fundamental, check the platform's current documentation.

Do not assume:

It's just a title field. I'll fix it later.

Sometimes *later* is where administration lives.

Getting the core information right before publication is considerably less exciting.

It is also considerably easier.

THE USEFUL BIT

Create one **MASTER METADATA** document for every book.

Keep:

TITLE

SUBTITLE / TAGLINE

AUTHOR NAME

SERIES NAME

SERIES NUMBER

BOOK DESCRIPTION

SHORT DESCRIPTION

GENRE

CATEGORIES

KEYWORDS

LANGUAGE

PUBLICATION DATE

ISBN / IDENTIFIERS

FORMATS

PRICES

LIVE LINKS

Then use that document as your source of truth.

If you change something, update the master.

Not twelve random places and hopefully the thirteenth next Tuesday.

THINGS I LEARNED FOR NO GOOD REASON

You wrote a novel about guilt, truth, manipulation and the unreliability of human perception.

You are now deciding whether:

psychological thriller

or

psychological suspense

better describes it to a database.

This is your life now.

And eventually, you finish.

Every little box has something in it.

There is nothing left to configure.

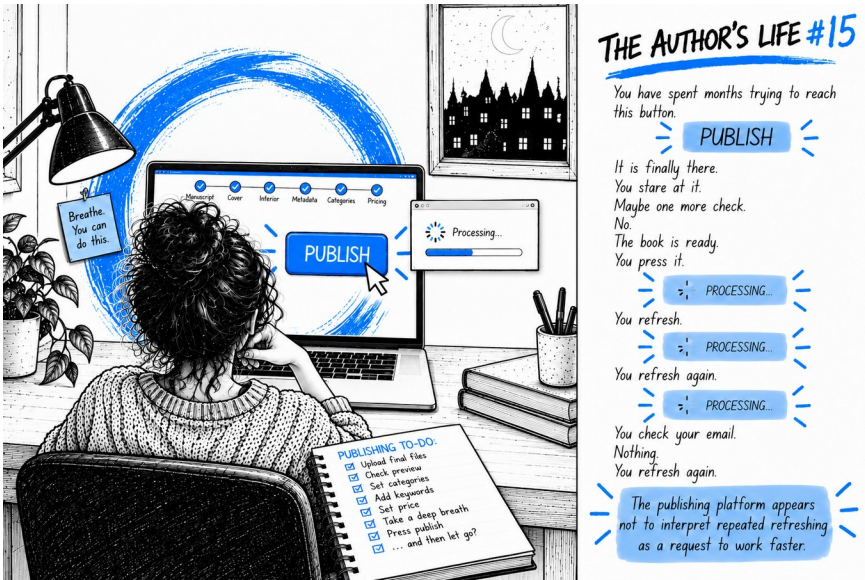
There is only one button.

PUBLISH.

You stare at it.

15

PRESS PUBLISH



There is nothing left to do.

This is not true.

There are approximately four hundred things left to do.

But the book is ready enough that continuing to adjust it has started looking suspiciously like fear.

The files are uploaded.

The metadata is entered.

The cover is there.

The price is there.

The preview looks right.

Probably.

At the bottom of the page is a button.

PUBLISH.

You have spent months trying to reach this button.

You now regard it as a threat.

DO ONE BORING CHECK

Before pressing it, you will probably have two competing impulses.

The first:

Fuck it. Let's go.

The second:

Maybe I should reread the entire manuscript one more time.

Neither is particularly useful.

Instead, do one final publishing check.

Correct interior file?

Correct cover?

Correct title?

Correct author?

Correct description?

Correct categories?

Correct price?

Correct territories?

Correct format?

Correct edition?

Preview checked?

Good.

You are not trying to rediscover the novel.

You are checking that you are publishing the thing you intended to publish.

There is a difference.

THEN PRESS IT

This is surprisingly difficult.

Not technically.

The button is large.

Emotionally.

While the manuscript lives on your computer, it contains potential.

Once published, it becomes something other people can judge.

Before:

I'm writing a book.

After:

I wrote this book.

That sentence has evidence now.

A product page.

A price.

Possibly a **BUY NOW** button.

This changes nothing about the text.

It changes something about you.

Press it.

AND THEN...

Nothing happens.

Or rather, something happens administratively.

Your book may enter review or processing.

You wait.

You refresh.

Still processing.

You refresh again.

The publishing platform appears not to interpret repeated refreshing as a request to work faster.

You check your email.

Nothing.

You return ten minutes later.

Still nothing.

At some point you remember that you are an adult with other responsibilities.

You perform one of them.

Then refresh again.

YOUR BOOK IS LIVE

And then the email arrives.

Your book is available.

You open the product page.

There it is.

The cover.

Your title.

Your author name.

A price.

A button allowing complete strangers to purchase something that previously existed only inside your laptop.

This is genuinely strange.

Enjoy it.

Take the screenshot.

Send it to someone.

Open the page again for no reason.

You made a book.

That matters.

NOW CHECK EVERYTHING AGAIN

Sorry.

Open the live listing.

Because the live product page is where theory becomes evidence.

Check:

title

author

description

cover

format

price

series information

links

preview, if available

If you published multiple formats, check each one.

Paperback and ebook are siblings.

They are not the same child.

Make sure they are connected correctly where the platform supports that.

Some connections may take time to appear.

And if something is wrong, do not immediately conclude that your publishing career is over.

Some things can be corrected.

Some take time to propagate.

Some require support.

Some require a new edition.

Find out which problem you actually have before setting fire to anything.

SAVE THE FINAL VERSION

Once the book is live, preserve the files that created it.

Not:

probably_final.pdf

The actual uploaded interior.

The actual uploaded cover.

The actual ebook file.

The metadata used.

The publication date.

Identifiers.

Live links.

Put them somewhere clearly marked.

For example:

PUBLISHED

This folder has one important rule.

Do not casually replace things inside it.

It is your record of what actually went live.

Six months from now, when you notice a typo and decide to upload an updated interior, you will want to know which version you are replacing.

Memory will tell you:

Obviously the newest one.

Memory is a liar.

YOU WILL FIND A TYPO

Possibly within seventeen minutes.

This is a law of publishing.

You can read the manuscript twenty times.

Beta readers can read it.

Software can check it.

You can inspect the PDF.

The moment the book becomes publicly available, a typo that has been invisible for six months will walk onto the page wearing a fluorescent jacket.

You will stare at it.

How?

It was always there.

Fix genuine errors when appropriate.

But do not enter permanent panic mode because a comma offended you on page 184.

There is a difference between maintaining a book and compulsively reopening a finished project.

Learn it.

I am working on this too.

PUBLICATION IS NOT DISCOVERY

Here comes the less romantic part.

Your book is live.

Excellent.

Now absolutely nobody knows it exists.

Publishing platforms are stores.

They are not automatically audiences.

Uploading a book does not summon readers.

There are millions of other books sitting beside yours, each written by someone who also pressed **PUBLISH** and briefly expected the universe to react.

The universe is busy.

This does not mean something failed.

It means publication and discovery are two different jobs.

You have completed the first.

Congratulations.

The second is considerably weirder.

DON'T PANIC ABOUT DAY ONE

You may sell copies immediately. You may not. If your ebook is enrolled in Kindle Unlimited, someone may read it there. Someone may buy the paperback.

Your mother may buy three.

Do not build a complete theory of your writing career from the first twenty-four hours.

A book is not yogurt.

It does not necessarily expire next Tuesday.

For now, separate:

I published a book

from:

the book immediately became commercially successful.

Those are not the same achievement.

THE USEFUL BIT

Before pressing **PUBLISH**, verify:

FILES

Correct interior and cover.

IDENTITY

Title, subtitle, author, series, edition.

DISCOVERY

Description, categories, keywords.

COMMERCIAL DETAILS

Price, territories, formats.

OUTPUT

Preview the actual book.

After publication:

CHECK THE LIVE LISTING

SAVE THE PUBLISHED FILES

SAVE THE IDENTIFIERS

SAVE THE LINKS

RECORD THE PUBLICATION DATE

Then leave the book alone long enough to recognize that it exists.

You can fix things later if they genuinely need fixing.

And yes, despite everything in the previous fourteen chapters, it is entirely possible to discover half of this after publishing your first book.

Perhaps your second.

And somehow both books still exist.

Punk's not dead.

16

I PUBLISHED A BOOK



THE AUTHOR'S LIFE #16

*This started as something
you intended to do one day.*

Now you did it.

It took longer than you expected.

*It involved more checklists
than you ever imagined.*

*More tabs. More files. More decisions.
More moments of "why am I doing this?"*

*But here it is.
A real book.
In the world.*

*And somewhere between the spreadsheets,
the metadata and the self-doubt,
you actually wrote it.*

Punk's not dead.

Your book is live.

Actually live.

Not:

almost finished

or

waiting for final edits

or

I just need to fix one thing

or

coming soon.

Someone you have never met can find it, pay money for it and read it.

For months, perhaps years, the book existed almost entirely between you and your computer.

Now it doesn't.

You pressed the button.

THE LIST IS EMPTY

Not permanently.

Don't worry.

The internet will provide another list shortly.

But the list that began with:

I want to write a book

is finished.

You had an idea.

You found the story inside it.

You built the skeleton.

You populated it with people who refused to behave.

You decided who knew what and when.

You constructed a timeline for events that never happened.

You wrote an ugly first draft.

You made people talk.

You deleted things you loved.

You gave the manuscript to other humans.

You changed it.

You named it.

You put it inside a rectangle of the correct dimensions.

You learned things about typography that nobody in your family will ever ask you about.

You acquired numbers.

You explained your book to machines.

And eventually there was nothing useful left between you and the button.

So you pressed it.

That is how you publish a book.

YOU PROBABLY DID SOME OF IT WRONG

I did.

You will discover things later that you should have done earlier.

A better workflow.

A formatting mistake.

Metadata you misunderstood.

A file naming system you should have started six months ago.

Something another author mentions casually that makes you think:

Wait.

Then:

Fuck.

Then:

Well, it's published now.

Fix what matters.

Learn from the rest.

Do the next one better.

There is no requirement for your first published book to demonstrate complete mastery of the international publishing industry.

The important part is that it crossed the line between:

something you intend to do

and

something you did.

That line matters.

EPILOGUE

THIRTY-THREE YEARS LATER

I wanted to write a book when I was twelve.

I published one when I was forty-five.

Thirty-three years.

It turns out the idea was not the difficult part.

Neither was wanting it.

I had both of those.

What I did not have was any idea what came between:

I want to write a book.

and

I published a book.

Now I do.

Sort of.

I know considerably more about structure, characters, revision, typography, ISBNs, metadata and PDF files than my twelve-year-old self considered necessary.

She was probably right.

But eventually the file became a book.

And if you started this book with an idea and absolutely no idea what to do with it, I hope the distance between those two things now looks a little smaller.

Not easy.

Not guaranteed.

Just possible.

Unfortunately, publishing the book creates an entirely new set of problems.

People have to find it.

Apparently you need an author identity.

A website.

Social media.

A reliable ARC list.

Reviews.

A launch.

Perhaps advertising.

There are algorithms.

There are dashboards.

There are strangers who will *come across your amazing book* approximately fourteen minutes after publication and immediately identify several exciting opportunities for your marketing budget.

I have learned some things about those too.

Mostly by doing them wrong first.

But that is another book.

I am still collecting mistakes for it.

I PUBLISHED A BOOK. NOW WHAT?

How to Become Extremely Busy Without Knowing What You're Doing

Sorry about that.

GET THE FREE AUTHOR TOOLKIT

The free toolkit helps you take a book from idea to publication. It includes an editable planning workbook for story structure, reveals, characters, timeline, research, revision, beta feedback, title and cover, and book data, plus a pre-publication checklist.

Get the free toolkit at lenarhalden.com/toolkit

Visit the page to request your download.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, I'm Lena R. Halden.

In real life, I'm a psychologist — which may explain why I keep writing about difficult choices, unreliable truths, and the uncomfortable gap between what people say, what they believe, and what they actually do.

My fiction moves between psychological suspense and dark satire, but the obsession underneath is usually the same: pressure, perception, self-deception, and the quiet systems people build around themselves.

Occupational hazard, apparently.

If a character starts rationalizing, avoiding, deflecting, or calmly making a terrible decision, I tend to get professionally curious.

Thank you for reading.

More stories. More questionable decisions.