

The First Draft Planner

Ten guided steps to pin down your story essentials and build your novel from scratch.



Hi! I'm Hannah.

I'm an Author Accelerator **certified book coach** with an **MFA in fiction** from the University of South Carolina. I help fiction writers transform their novels-in-progress into page-turners worth publishing.

I put together this resource to help writers establish their story basics and give their first drafts a solid foundation.

The First Draft Planner is designed for writers who have always wanted to write a novel but don't know where to start.

It's for the writer who's been working on the same story for years with no clear path forward.

And it's also for the writer with a full manuscript that doesn't quite work.

Wherever you are in the novel-writing process, I hope this guide can help you find the clarity you need to ***finally finish your novel.***

I can't wait to see where your story takes you.

Happy Writing!

Best,

Hannah (and Pesto)



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Step 1: Choose your genre and audience.

Your genre and audience determine what type of story you are telling and for whom.

If you want to write a novel, you likely already have a genre and audience in mind. Writers tend to gravitate towards the same stories they like to read.

Understanding your genre and audience early will help you plan, outline, and write your novel. In addition, if you plan to query agents, you'll need to state your genre and audience in your submission.

Below, I define genre and audience and provide recommendations for choosing each.

Genre

There are three broad genres—or categories—of literature: **fiction, poetry,** and **creative nonfiction.**

In addition, there are several **genres of fiction,** such as horror, fantasy, and mystery. These genres are the focus of this step.

A novel's genre relates to reader expectations, genre conventions, and story structure. Knowing a novel's genre gives readers an idea of the sort of story they're about to read.

Determining your genre early will help guide other decisions about your novel, such as:

- Your target word count.
- What tropes or story beats to include.
- Your protagonist's character arc.

I recommend researching current trends in your chosen genre to better understand these three points. For example, romance novels must include a meet-cute, a breakup, and a happily ever after, and they're usually between 70,000 and 90,000 words long.

Some books are a blend of genres. These books have one main genre while also engaging in other genres. A popular blend right now is romantasy, which incorporates both fantasy and romance elements.

Here is a breakdown of the essential fiction genres and examples of each:

- **Fantasy** (*Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros, *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien)
- **Historical** (*The Women* by Kristin Hannah, *The Fraud* by Zadie Smith, *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr)
- **Horror** (*Freakslaw* by Jane Flett, *It* by Stephen King)
- **Literary** (*Intermezzo* by Sally Rooney, *Let Us Descend* by Jesmyn Ward, *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng)
- **Mystery** (*The Guest List* by Lucy Folley, *Arsenic and Adobo* by Mia P. Manansala)
- **Romance** (*Seven Days in June* by Tia Williams, *The Love Hypothesis* by Ali Hazelwood, *Just for the Summer* by Abby Jimenez)
- **Science Fiction** (*Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir, *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline)
- **Thriller** (*The Housemaid* by Freida McFadden, *The Only One Left* by Sager Riley)
- **Women's Fiction** (*Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus, *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens)

Audience

In addition to genre, you'll need to establish your audience. For novels, the three core audiences are:

- Middle Grade
- Young Adult (YA)
- Adult

Middle grade fiction is written for children ages 8 through 12. Novels written for middle grade audiences will have short chapters and age-appropriate content. The protagonist is usually a preteen child.

Examples: *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* by Rick Riordan, *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, and *Gregor the Overlander* by Suzanne Collins.

YA fiction is written for readers age 12 to 17. The protagonist is usually a teenager whose story deals with coming-of-age, understanding themselves, and finding their place in the world.

Examples: *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* by Jenny Han.

Some YA books also appeal to adults. These are often called crossover books. Books dealing with college-aged protagonists and young adulthood are sometimes called new adult fiction, but most agents and publishers would simply label these as adult.

Adult fiction is written for readers who are adults. The protagonists are usually grown, and the content can be quite broad. While writers might avoid mature topics in middle grade fiction and YA fiction, they may address these topics more directly for their adult audiences.

Examples: *The Martian* by Andy Weir, *Black Cake* by Charmaine Wilkerson, *Beach Read* by Emily Henry, and most general fiction.

Step 2: List some potential comp titles.

Comp titles or **comparative titles** are published novels that are similar to your own. In the publishing industry, comp titles are used to quickly identify a novel's genre, audience, and tone.

As writers, we recommend books to each other all the time: **"If you liked X, you have to read Y!"** Your comp titles do something similar; they indicate the vibe of your story and what sort of reader might enjoy it.

Don't worry about finding novels *exactly* like yours. Instead, try to find comp titles that match the genre and audience of your novel. In addition, there should be one or more similarities. For example, a comp title might have the same structure or deal with the same themes or questions as your novel.

The importance of comp titles

I recommend listing potential comp titles early because comp titles can provide guidance throughout the planning, outlining, and writing process. This is true even if you don't wish to query agents or pursue traditional publishing.

If you find yourself stuck on your novel, flip through one of your comp titles to see how other authors handled the same issue.

Not sure which point of view to choose? Consult your comp titles. Having trouble drafting an opening scene? Again, check your comp titles.

Comp titles are important when querying agents

Agents use comp titles to better understand how to sell and market a book.

Some writers think their novels are unlike anything that has ever been written. This is a weakness, not a strength. It's also probably not true.

When querying agents, beware of listing comp titles that are too commercially successful or too old. Saying that your novel is the next *Twilight* sounds a little braggish—also, the YA fiction industry has moved on from vampires.

When querying agents, I recommend focusing on comp titles written in the **last five years**.

Step 3: Get to know your protagonist.

Your protagonist is the hero of your story. In other words, they are the main character.

Some stories might alternate between the perspectives of two or more characters. In dual-perspective novels, such as a romance, there may be two protagonists. But more often there will only be one. In novels with many points of view, there is still typically one central character.

Example: *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee is written from the viewpoints of many characters, but the main protagonist is Sunja.

Here are three main points to consider when developing your protagonist:

Who are they? What is their name?

Give your protagonist a name and begin to sketch out their character. Perhaps you'll decide on their age, their occupation, or a key part of their identity. You might also imagine what *kind* of person they are: grumpy, clever, optimistic, etc.

Here are some additional questions to guide your brainstorming:

- What is their worldview?
- How do others see them?
- How do they see themselves?
- How has their past shaped them?
- How do they speak?

What do they want, what is standing in their way, and what will happen if they don't get it?

These questions relate to the protagonist's motivation.

A story at its core is about *someone* who wants *something* and then overcomes obstacles to get it...or not get it. That something is often both internal and external.

Example: In the *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, Katniss wants to survive the games for her family (external) without letting her oppressive government turn her into something she's not (internal).

How does the page-one version of your protagonist differ from the version on the final page? What happens in between to cause this change?

These questions ensure that your protagonist undergoes a character arc. Static characters remain consistent throughout a novel. But protagonists are usually **dynamic**; they change.

Ask yourself how your protagonist will evolve from the first chapter to the last—and *why*.

In a romance novel, the protagonist is usually changed by a relationship. In a fantasy, the protagonist might be changed by the events of a quest.

Here are some additional questions to guide your brainstorming:

- Does their worldview change?
- Do they overcome a character flaw?
- Does their character arc tie into their internal and external goal?

Example: In *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig, the events of the book transform Nora from depressed and regretful to grateful and full of hope.

Step 4: Determine your story's setting.

Your novel's **setting** refers to the *where* and *when* of your story.

This step is pretty straightforward, but it's still necessary. I spent years working on a historical fiction novel without a clear understanding of the decade or precise location. This led to inconsistencies and a lot of frustration.

When determining your story's setting, consider both the time and the place. If you plan on having multiple locations, jot those down as well.

If you are unsure of where to set your story, review Step 3 or jump ahead to Step 10. In Step 3, you began sketching your protagonist. What setting best serves their character arc? In Step 10, you'll write your novel's jacket copy and list your novel's themes. Where would these themes best play out?

Example: Charlotte McConaghy's *Wild Dark Shore* has themes of environmentalism and takes place on a remote island, which is ravaged by climate change and home to the world's last surviving seed bank.

Worldbuilding for Fantasy, Sci Fi, and Historical Fiction

Your setting will be especially important if you are writing fantasy, science fiction, or historical fiction—or if your setting will play a major role in the story.

Example: *Mexican Gothic* and *The Dutch House* center around grand mansions.

If you are building a fantasy world or science fiction setting, you don't need to have everything planned out right now. But it would be helpful to be able to answer some preliminary questions:

- Does your story take place in the past, present, or future?
- Does your story world have a magic system?
- What is the basic political situation of your story world?
- In what ways is your story world different from ours? In what ways is it the same?
- If you are writing fantasy, is it **high or low fantasy**?
 - High fantasy takes place in an imagined world. (*Lord of the Rings, Game of Thrones*)
 - Low fantasy introduces fantasy elements into our own world. (*Harry Potter, Chronicles of Narnia*)
- If you are writing science fiction, is it **hard or soft sci fi**?
 - Hard sci fi emphasizes scientific accuracy. (*Project Hail Mary*)
 - Soft sci fi uses science as a backdrop to tell human stories. (*Spaceman of Bohemia*)

Step 5: Decide on a timeframe.

A novel's **timeframe** refers to the amount of time the story covers.

Some books take place over the course of a school year, a single summer, a week, a day, or even an entire lifetime. Whatever your novel's timeframe, I recommend defining it early.

Specifically, I recommend pinning down the timeframe of your **story present**.

Your story present or narrative present is where your main story begins and ends. In addition to your story present, your novel might also delve into past events via backstory or flashbacks. It can also explore future events through flashforwards, which are frequently used in epilogues.

It's easy for your novel to become a jumble of past, present, and future events. By establishing the timeframe of your story present before drafting your novel, you can make sure to write within that scope.

Step 6: Nail down the structure, point of view, and verb tense.

This step focuses on the more technical aspects of your novel.

First drafts are often plagued by unclear structures and inconsistencies in point of view and verb tense.

By defining your structure, point of view, and verb tense early, you can remain consistent and establish the reasoning behind these decisions. As you pen your first draft, you can return to the First Draft Planner and remind yourself why you're writing the way you're writing.

Below, I define structure, point of view, and verb tense and guide you through your decision-making for each.

Structure

A novel's structure refers to how the story is organized and the order in which it is told.

Some novels are told chronologically or alternate between time periods and perspectives. Others are written as diaries or letters or include interviews like *Daisy Jones & the Six*.

There are many well-known storytelling frameworks and plotting tools that can help writers structure their novels, including the three-act structure, the hero's journey, and Save the Cat!.

At the very least, your novel will likely have some version of the following:

- **An Opening**, in which you introduce your protagonist and the inciting incident.
- **A Core**, in which your protagonist faces obstacles. The stakes

- rise as the protagonist continues to make choices that propel the story forward. The Core makes up the majority of your novel.
- **A Conclusion**, in which the story reaches its climax and reveals how the events of the book have left the protagonist altered.

Decide on your story's structure and embrace that structure as you work through your first draft.

Note: When in doubt, I recommend keeping things simple and writing your story chronologically.

Point of view

Also known as perspective, a novel's point of view (POV) is its chosen narrative style. It determines **who** is telling the story.

The main points of view in a novel include:

First-Person POV

Novels written in first-person point of view are told from the perspective of a character, usually the protagonist. It's a great way to get directly into a character's head and relay their personal thoughts and feelings.

Example: "I woke up."

In a first-person story, only the narrator's thoughts are known.

While first-person POV books are often written from the perspective of an "I," first person POV also includes the perspective of "we."

Tip: If the first-person narrator is an adult reflecting on their childhood, the voice will likely be mature even if the protagonist is young.

Second-Person POV

Novels written in second-person point of view speak directly to the reader (or some other subject), referring to them as "you."

Example: "You woke up."

Sometimes, novels use "you" in place of "I."

This perspective can be controversial. It can be perceived as amateurish or gimmicky. I recommend only using second-person point of view if you have a good reason to do so.

Third-Person POV

Novels written in third-person point of view are told via an outside narrator. These novels follow the thoughts and feelings of one or more characters and refers to characters using their names and pronouns.

Example: "She woke up."

There are two main types of third-person point of view.

In **third-person limited**, the narrator only relays the thoughts and feelings of one character. In **third-person omniscient**, the narrator knows the thoughts and feelings of all characters.

In addition to determining the point of view of your novel, consider whether you want to write from a single perspective or multiple perspectives. Some books are told through shifting first- or third-person point of view.

Example: *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell is told through alternating third-person limited point of view tied to the title characters.

Verb tense

A novel's **verb tense** determines where its story sits in time. Most novels are written in **past tense**. **Present tense** is also a popular choice.

Past tense

As the name suggests, novels written in past tense describe actions that have already happened. Dialogue tags in a novel written in past tense include *said* and *asked*.

Example: I opened my eyes and blinked against the sunlight.

Present tense

Novels written in present tense describe ongoing action. Dialogue tags include *says* or *asks*.

Example: I open my eyes and blink against the sunlight.

Step 7: Define your inciting incident.

When you sit down to write your novel, you might find yourself wondering where to start. While your *novel* may open with a prologue in flashback or a character going about their day, your *story* actually starts with the **inciting incident**.

The inciting incident is the event that sets your story in motion. It's the moment your story truly begins.

Here are some examples of inciting incidents in well-known books (that also happen to be movies):

- In ***The Martian***, the inciting incident is the sandstorm that causes Mark Watney to be accidentally left behind on Mars.
- In ***The Hunger Games***, it's the moment Primrose Everdeen's name is drawn at the reaping.
- In ***Harry Potter***, it's the arrival of Harry's letter from Hogwarts.

The inciting incident often forces the protagonist to act. It might present them with a choice or require them to take a leap of faith. In romance novels, the inciting incident is almost always the meet-cute. In mysteries, it's the discovery of the crime.

Tip: As you draft your novel, consider starting your story as close to the inciting incident as possible. Also, take a look at your comp titles and identify where those books begin in relation to their inciting incidents.

Step 8: Develop a working title.

A **working title** transforms your novel from just an idea to an actual project. It's not set in stone. As your story evolves, you may find yourself changing the title, or you may stick with your first choice.

When developing a working title, your comp titles are a good place to start. What patterns do you see? You want your title to give a hint about your novel's genre and tone. Consider also looking up recent bestsellers in your chosen genre and following their lead.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Include your protagonist's full name.** *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo, Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine, Jane Eyre.*
- **Or just the first name.** *A Man Called Ove, Matilda, Life of Pi, James.*
- **Specify a group of people.** *The Berry Pickers, The Guest List, The Wedding People, The Nickel Boys.*
- **Utilize your story's setting.** *The Dutch House, Days at the Morisaki Bookshop, The Vaster Wilds, The Writing Retreat.*
- **Incorporate color.** *The House in the Cerulean Sea; Onyx Storm; Red, White, and Royal Blue.*
- **Write your title in the form of a question.** *What Happened to Ruthy Ramirez?, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*
- **Try a single, evocative word.** *Bewilderment, Room, Sandwich.*
- **The _____.** *The Housemaid, The Idiot, The Alchemist.*
- **_____ and _____.** *Pride and Prejudice, Writers & Lovers, Eleanor & Park, Shadow and Bone.*
- **_____ of _____.** *Days of Distraction, City of Girls, A Court of Thorns and Roses.*

Once you have a first draft, you may find a phrase that stands out to you. This might make an excellent title later on as well.

Step 9: Prepare a brief elevator pitch.

An **elevator pitch** is a succinct, one-sentence summary that encapsulates an entire novel.

It's a useful marketing tool and a way to ensure you can talk about your novel with confidence. It also helps organize the novel in your mind and can serve as a reminder of what your story is all about.

Other resources might encourage elevator pitches of 1-3 sentences, but I recommend keeping things as concise as possible.

Crafting your elevator pitch

Here's how to put together your elevator pitch:

1. Start with your protagonist.

You'll want to offer a brief description indicating their age, personality, or identity. For example, a socially awkward accountant, a grieving teenager, or a grumpy older gentleman.

Example: In a dystopian near-future, **a young woman** volunteers to take her sister's place in a televised fight-to-the-death.

2. Include some action, stakes, lesson, or context.

This might include your novel's inciting incident. Ask yourself what your protagonist *does* in the story. What is the story about?

Example: In a dystopian near-future, a young woman **volunteers to take her sister's place in a televised fight-to-the-death.**

3. (Optional) Describe the setting.

If your novel is fantasy, science fiction, or historical fiction, a brief description of the setting might be useful as well.

Example: In a dystopian near-future, a young woman volunteers to take her sister's place in a televised fight-to-the-death.

Step 10: Write the jacket copy.

Jacket copy is a short summary of your novel. It is usually **between 150 and 200 words** and printed on the back of a book (or inside the left-hand flap).

The goal of jacket copy is to entice readers to read your book. Good jacket copy should hook the reader and share enough of the plot to give a general idea of your story. It's a kind of sales pitch used to market and encapsulate the book.

I recommend writing your book's jacket copy early because it requires you to make decisions about the plot of your story. By writing the jacket copy, you'll develop a sense of the shape of your story. In addition, it will encourage you to define the book's main themes and understand what your book is *about* in a deeper sense.

Tip: Read the jacket copy for your comp titles and other titles in your chosen genre. You can usually find the jacket copy online as well.

Examining a real-life example

Below is the actual jacket copy from Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* (Penguin Books, 2017).

In Shaker Heights, a placid, progressive suburb of Cleveland, everything is meticulously planned – from the layout of the winding roads, to the colors of the houses, to the successful lives its residents will go on to lead. And no one embodies this spirit more than Elena Richardson, whose guiding principle is playing by the rules.

Enter Mia Warren – an enigmatic artist and single mother – who arrives in this idyllic bubble with her teenage daughter Pearl, and a disregard for the status quo that threatens to upend this carefully ordered community. Suspicious of Mia and her motives, Elena is determined to uncover the secrets in Mia’s past. But her obsession will come at unexpected and devastating costs.

Little Fires Everywhere explores the weight of secrets, the nature of art and identity, the ferocious pull of motherhood—and the danger of believing that following rules can avert disaster.

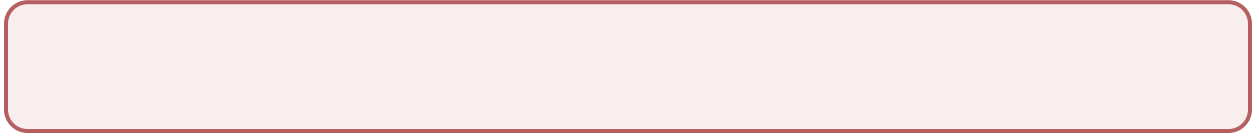
Notice how the jacket copy first establishes the setting, which is a key part of the novel, and then introduces its main characters—Elena and Mia—along with brief descriptions of each.

The jacket copy also reiterates the book’s themes: “playing by the rules,” secrets, art, identity, and motherhood.

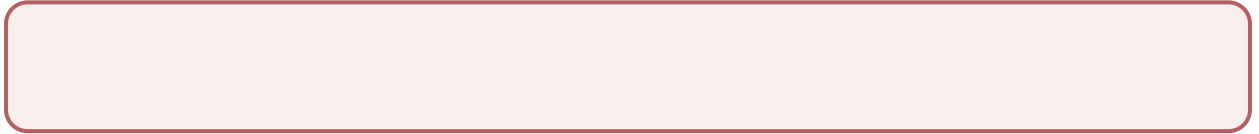
Some of its descriptions are just vague enough to tease the reader, such as “unexpected and devastating costs” and “the weight of secrets.” In your own jacket copy, such descriptions will allow you flexibility as you craft your story.

Putting it All Together

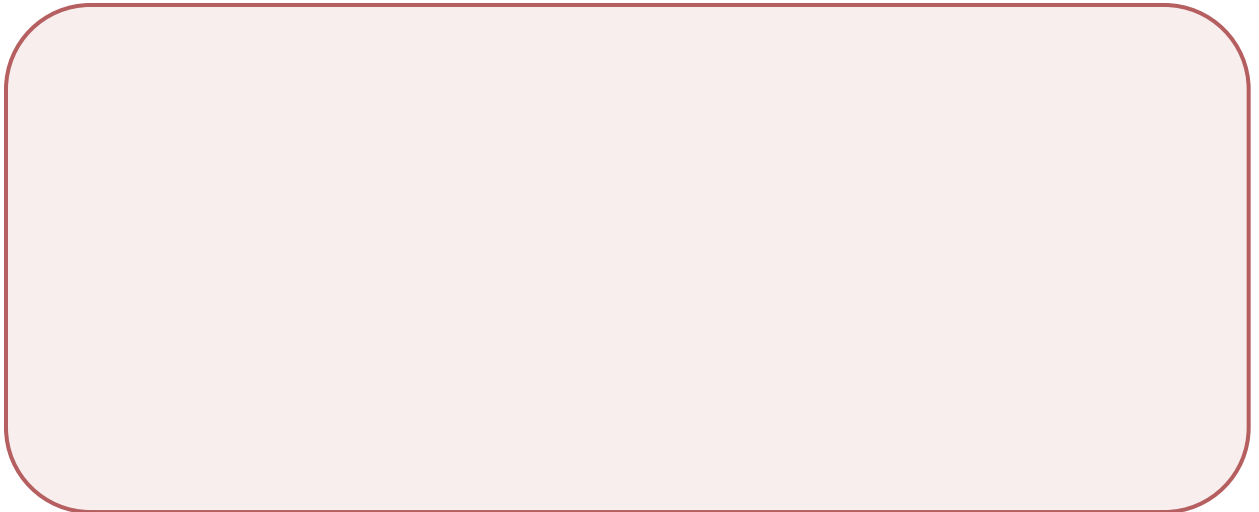
Step 1: Choose your genre and audience.



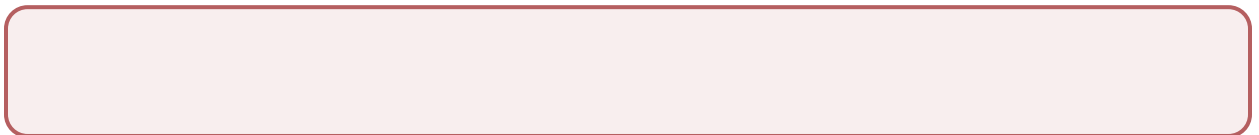
Step 2: List some potential comp titles.



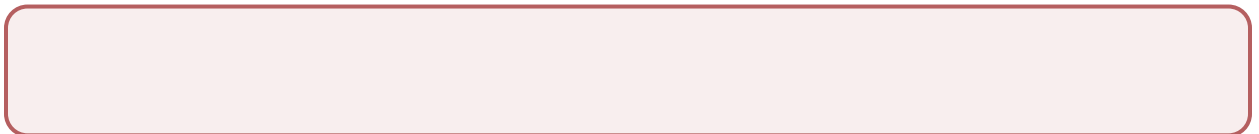
Step 3: Get to know your protagonist.



Step 4: Determine your story's setting.



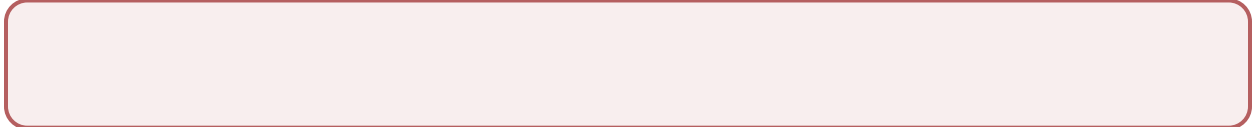
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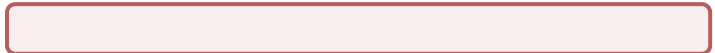
Step 6: Nail down the structure, point of view, and verb tense.



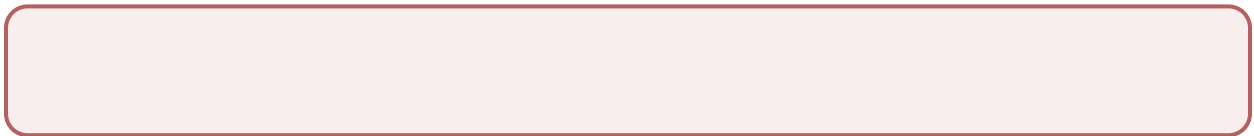
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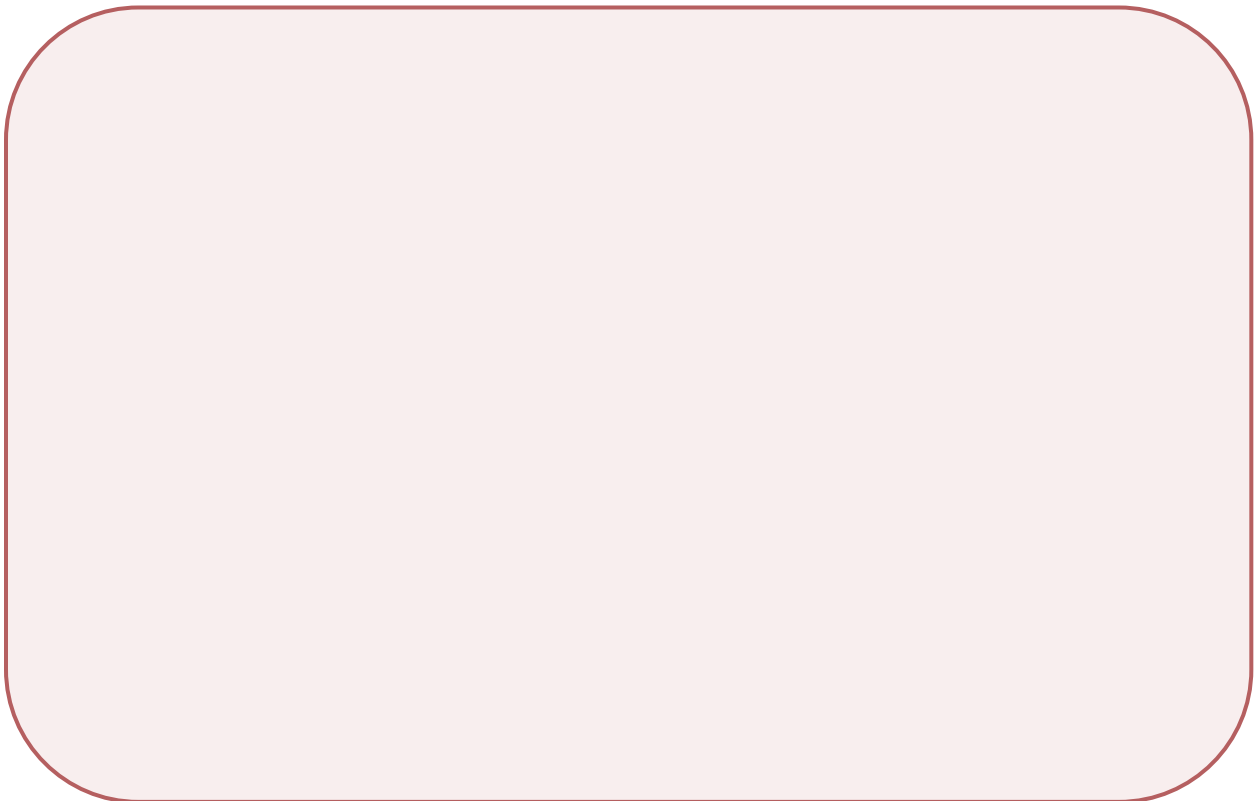
Step 8: Develop a working title.



Step 9: Prepare a brief elevator pitch.



Step 10: Write the jacket copy.



The First Draft Planner in Action

I decided to put the First Draft Planner to the test and build a new novel from scratch myself.

Originally, I had no intention of actually writing this novel. But after going through the ten steps, I fell in love with the concept and plan on drafting it this year.

Here's what I came up with:

Step 1: Choose your genre and audience.

Whodunnit Thriller, adult.

Note: Originally, I selected Women's Fiction as my chosen genre. But when I began to develop my protagonist's backstory—which includes a mysterious death—I realized the story had shifted more toward Thriller, and I decided to roll with it.

Step 2: List some potential comp titles.

In a Dark, Dark Wood by Ruth Ware, *The Hunting Party* by Lucy Foley, and *The Writing Retreat* by Julia Bartz.

Step 3: Get to know your protagonist.

Who are they? What is their name?

Auden Green, paleontologist. Late twenties in the story present; college junior in the flashbacks.

What do they want, what is standing in their way, and what will happen if they don't get it?

Auden wants to finish her dissertation and get her life together, but she's standing in her own way; she just can't get over what happened to her in Antarctica. If she doesn't finish her dissertation, her life will remain

stagnant. She needs closure on Dr. Seeley's murder in order to move on.

How does the page-one version of your protagonist differ from the version on the final page? What happens in between to cause this change?

On page one, she's lost. Her life is going nowhere. Dr. Seeley's death just doesn't add up, and she can't get over what happened. She's obsessed with exploring predator-prey relations and answering the question: *what makes a killer?*

By the final page, she's faced her demons. She is able to finish her thesis, forgive her father, and socialize again.

Step 4: Determine your story's setting.

The Canadian Rockies (story present) and Antarctica (flashbacks). Opens and closes at an annual paleontology conference.

Note: After I decided to make my protagonist a paleontologist, I did an internet search for cutting-edge paleontological dig sites. I fell in love with the idea of using the Canadian Rockies and Antarctica as my setting, so I found a way to incorporate both.

Step 5: Decide on a timeframe.

Story present: three weeks at a research camp site in the Canadian Rockies. Flashback: six weeks at a research facility in Antarctica.

Step 6: Nail down the structure, point of view, and verb tense.

Dual timeline with chapters alternating between the Canadian Rockies expedition (present tense) and Antarctic expedition (past tense). Third person limited, tied to Auden.

Note: I chose present tense for my story present and past tense for the flashback chapters to help distinguish between the two timelines.

Step 7: Define your inciting incident.

A member of the infamous Antarctic field expedition runs into Auden at a paleontology conference and invites her to a dig in British Columbia.

Step 8: Develop a working title. The Dig Site.

Step 9: Prepare a brief elevator pitch.

Murder strikes a remote field expedition in the Canadian Rockies as paleontologist Auden Green is forced to dig up her own haunted past.

Step 10: Write the jacket copy.

When Auden Green was a wide-eyed undergraduate, she spent six weeks as a field assistant in Antarctica, a dream come true until a freak accident landed her favorite professor on ice. After weeks of cabin fever alongside a frigid corpse, the scientists developed a new hypothesis: Dr. Seeley's death was no accident, but cold-blooded murder. Was it the shifty field safety expert, the ambitious post doc, the misogynistic expedition leader, or even Auden herself? Finally back in the States, the coroner blames natural causes, but Auden isn't convinced. She transfers schools, cuts ties with the field party, and tries her best to move on.

Ten years later, she's on another extreme expedition--this time to dig up dinosaur bones in the remote slopes of the Canadian Rockies. But there's more than one familiar face on this dig, and Auden begins to suspect she's sharing a campsite with a killer.

Note: This isn't perfect jacket copy by any means, but it gets the job done.

What's Next?

Congratulations! By going through the First Draft Planner, you've established your story basics. When you sit down to write, you don't have to question the point of view, the verb tense, or where your story starts—these are decisions you've already made.

You don't have to worry your novel will drag on with no point and no plot: you've already established your protagonist's character arc, their motivation, and their main conflict. And in your jacket copy, you articulated the novel's broader themes.

What's more, because your novel has a title and an elevator pitch, you're prepared to talk about your novel with others. You know who your novel is for and what it's all about.

So, what's next?

Book a free consultation.

If you finished the First Draft Planner, I'd love to hear from you. You can [fill out this form](#) to book a free half-hour consultation. I'll provide feedback on your planner and answer any questions you have about the novel-writing process.

Set a deadline.

I recommend giving yourself a minimum of three months to write your first draft.

If your goal is to write an 80,000-word first draft in three months, you'll need to commit to writing around 890 words a day.

For six months, your daily word count decreases to 445.

For a year, it decreases to 220.

Set a deadline based on the daily or weekly word count goal that works best for you. Remember, whether you write a novel or not, the time will still pass. In a year (or two, or three), you could have a completed first draft of a new novel! How many people can say that?

Determine your writing schedule.

Do you write best in the mornings? Late at night? Maybe all you have time for is a frantic 15-minute writing sprint during lunch. Or maybe you can block out two hours every Saturday as devoted writing time.

There is no right or wrong way to schedule your writing time—as long as you are actually writing. Commit to yourself and your novel by establishing a writing routine and sticking to it.

Build a personal curriculum.

Technically, this step is optional—but highly recommended.

Come up with a personal curriculum of novels and craft material to immerse yourself in your genre and the art of writing.

If you are writing a fantasy and can't think of comp titles other than *Harry Potter* or *The Hobbit*, you likely have some catching up to do. Seek out commercial and critical successes in your genre published in the last five years. Read everything. *Everything*.

In addition to immersing yourself in your genre, take the time to study the craft of writing. You can do this by listening to podcasts, reading craft books and author interviews, attending literary events in your community, and seeking out free resources like this one.

You're a writer, now, so act like it!

Outline your novel.

Some writers eschew an outline of any kind. At the very least, I recommend jotting down where your story starts and ends. This gives your novel a sense of forward momentum; when you sit down to write, you'll be writing *toward* something.

On the other hand, many writers prefer some kind of outline. This can be a general skeleton or a detailed chapter-by-chapter blueprint.

Whatever you choose, make sure your protagonist makes choices that *cause* plot to happen. You want an active protagonist, not a passive one. Ask yourself how every choice your protagonist makes after the inciting incident moves the story forward.

Write!

After establishing your story basics, setting a realistic deadline, pinpointing your writing routine, and outlining your novel, it's finally time for the fun part.

You're ready to *write*.

Good luck!