

Novel Writing — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into a finished manuscript. Each section maps to one course module and moves you from premise to a tracked submission campaign. Do the work in order, fill every field, and keep the templates open as living documents while you draft and revise.

Story Architecture and Premise

Forge a one-sentence premise and map it onto a complete 15-beat structural skeleton before you draft.

Exercise: The One-Sentence Premise Forge

Write your story five different ways using the template 'A [character] must [goal] or else [stakes], but [obstacle].' Make each version more specific than the last, especially in the character and obstacle slots. Then circle the strongest version and underline any bracket that still feels vague, because that vagueness is where your draft will stall.

- Who specifically is your protagonist, including the flaw that makes them interesting? Avoid job-title placeholders.

- What concrete, filmable goal does the protagonist pursue, and why can they not simply walk away?

- What opposing force has a goal that is mutually exclusive with your protagonist's, and what is the exact cost of failure?

- Read your final premise aloud to one person. Did they immediately understand the conflict and stakes? If not, which bracket failed?

Worksheet: 15-Beat Structural Map

Fill in one to two sentences for each beat, then estimate the target word count using the percentage of an 80,000-word novel. Leave a beat blank only if you genuinely do not know it yet, and flag those blanks as your pre-draft homework.

Opening Image (around word 800)

Theme Stated (around word 4,000)

Catalyst / inciting incident (around word 8,000)

Break into Two / commitment (around word 16,000)

B Story / thematic relationship (around word 18,000)

Midpoint reversal (around word 40,000)

All Is Lost / lowest point (around word 60,000)

Break into Three (around word 64,000)

Finale (words 64,000 to 79,000)

Final Image (around word 80,000)

Checklist: Pre-Draft Readiness Check

- My premise fits in one sentence and names character, goal, conflict, and stakes
- I have chosen one structural skeleton (15-beat, Three-Act, or Hero's Journey) and committed to it
- I know my four signposts: opening, Midpoint, All Is Lost, and ending
- I have decided my method (outliner, pantsier, or plantser) and chosen a tool to match
- My Midpoint reversal lands near the 50 percent mark, not later
- Every beat on my map either pursues the goal or attacks the protagonist's flaw

Character, Voice, and Point of View

Engineer character arcs from wound to need, choose a point of view on purpose, and find your narrator's voice.

Worksheet: Want-Need-Lie Character Profile

Complete this profile for your protagonist first, then repeat it for your antagonist and one major supporting character on separate copies. The strongest antagonists believe a version of the same lie, so look for that mirror.

Character name and role

The wound (the past event that shaped the false belief)

The lie they believe (a single false sentence about themselves or the world)

The want (external, conscious, filmable goal)

The need (internal truth they must accept to be whole)

Arc type (positive change, flat, or negative/fall)

The moment they must choose the need over the want

Distinct verbal fingerprint (sentence length, vocabulary, what they avoid saying)

Exercise: Point of View Audition

Take your hardest or most emotional scene and write the opening 200 words three times: once in first person, once in third person limited, and once in third person omniscient. Compare how much intimacy, information, and voice each gives you, then commit to one POV for the whole novel.

- In which version did the emotion land hardest, and why?

- Which version forced you to withhold information you would rather reveal, or reveal information you would rather hide?

- Find every filter word ('saw,' 'felt,' 'heard,' 'noticed,' 'realized') in your favorite version and rewrite without them. Did it pull the reader closer?

- Within your chosen version, where did you open the psychic distance wide and where did you zoom in close?

Exercise: Dialogue Subtext Lab

Write a two-page scene where two characters argue about a small surface topic (the dishes, a late arrival, a parking spot) while each secretly wants something larger (respect, reassurance, control). Never let either character state the buried want directly.

- What does each character actually want from this exchange, beneath the surface argument?

- Remove all dialogue tags. Can a reader still tell who is speaking from voice alone? If not, sharpen each verbal fingerprint.

- Does the scene have a winner and a loser by the end, or is it just a chat that could be cut?

- Read it aloud or with a text-to-speech tool. Which lines sound stilted or on-the-nose, and how will you bury them in subtext?

Checklist: Character and Voice Check

- My protagonist has a named wound, lie, want, and need
- My antagonist wants something specific and believes a mirrored version of the lie
- I have committed to one POV that makes my hardest scene work
- I can control psychic distance deliberately rather than jolting between distances
- Each major character is identifiable by voice with dialogue tags removed
- My important conversations carry subtext and end with a winner and a loser

Scene Craft, Pacing, and the Sagging Middle

Build scenes that change the story, control pace at the sentence level, and repair the Act Two slump.

Worksheet: Scene-and-Sequel Builder

Fill this out for your next three scenes before writing them. Every proactive scene needs a Goal, Conflict, and Disaster; pair it with a sequel (Reaction, Dilemma, Decision) wherever the character needs to process and bond. Short sequels can be a single paragraph.

Scene goal (what the POV character wants in this scene)

Conflict (the obstacles and who or what opposes the goal)

Disaster (the setback that ends the scene worse than it began)

Reaction (the emotional fallout)

Dilemma (a bad-options choice with no clean answer)

Decision (the new goal that launches the next scene)

Keep / cut / merge (does anything actually change in this scene?)

Exercise: Pacing Gear-Shift Drill

Take one action passage and one emotional passage from your draft. Rewrite the action passage to feel faster and the emotional passage to feel slower, using only sentence length, paragraph breaks, white space, and the scene-versus-summary choice.

- In the action passage, how short can you make the sentences before it loses sense? Where does a fragment hit hardest?
 - In the emotional passage, where can you add interiority and sensory detail to slow the reader down and let the feeling land?
 - Identify one stretch where nothing important changes. Can you compress it from scene into a single summary sentence?
 - Read both passages and mark where your own attention drifts. Drift usually means the pace is wrong; how will you fix that spot?
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Checklist: Sagging-Middle Diagnostic

- My Midpoint at roughly 50 percent is a real false-victory or false-defeat reversal, not a quiet scene
- After the Midpoint, my protagonist shifts from reactive to proactive
- The stakes rise in every Act Two beat; what was bad keeps getting worse
- I have a ticking clock or deadline forcing forward motion
- A subplot complicates the main goal rather than distracting from it
- Reading my one-line chapter summaries top to bottom, I can feel the tension climbing

Exercise: The One-Line Chapter Ladder

Summarize every chapter in a single sentence that states what changes. List them in order and read the whole ladder top to bottom. This is the fastest way to see a sagging middle at the structural level, where it is cheap to fix.

- Are there two or more adjacent chapters where nothing meaningful changes? Which will you cut or merge?
 - Where on the ladder does the protagonist stop pursuing an active goal and start merely reacting?
 - Does the cost of failure visibly increase as you read down the list? Mark the first rung where it flattens.
 - Which chapter endings are hooks (a question, reversal, or threat) and which simply stop? Rewrite the weakest three.
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Revision and the Path to Agents

Run a structured three-pass revision, gather useful feedback, and launch a tracked agent submission campaign.

Checklist: Three-Pass Revision Tracker

- I let the finished draft rest two to six weeks before revising
- Pass 1 (developmental): structure, arcs, plot holes, and sagging middle fixed before any sentence work
- I gathered beta-reader feedback between the developmental and line passes
- Pass 2 (line): tightened prose, cut filter words, strengthened verbs, varied rhythm, controlled psychic distance
- Pass 3 (copy/proofread): grammar, punctuation, and consistency of names, eye color, and timeline
- I changed format (print, new font, or read-aloud) to see the text fresh before the final proofread

Worksheet: Beta Reader Feedback Synthesizer

After each beta reader returns the manuscript, log their experiential answers here. Focus on where things went wrong, not their proposed fixes. When two or more readers flag the same spot, treat it as a confirmed problem to fix.

Reader name and how close they are to your target audience

Where they got bored or skimmed (page numbers)

Where they were confused or had to reread (page numbers)

Where they stopped believing a character's action (page numbers)

Whether and where they put the book down

Favorite and least favorite character, and why

Was the ending satisfying? If not, what did they expect?

Consensus problems (flagged by two or more readers) to fix this revision

Exercise: Query Letter Drafting

Draft your one-page query (under 350 words) in three parts: housekeeping, pitch, and bio. Then cut it by 20 percent. The query's only job is to make an agent request pages, so tease the conflict and withhold the ending the way back-cover copy does.

- Write your housekeeping line with title, exact word count, genre, and two recent (last three to five years) comparable titles.
- Write the pitch in 150 to 250 words: protagonist, want, inciting conflict, stakes, and the impossible choice, ending on tension not resolution.
- Write a two-to-three-sentence bio. If you have no publishing credits, close professionally; that is completely fine.
- Does your query accidentally summarize the whole plot or reveal the ending? Cut anything that resolves the central tension.

Checklist: Submission Campaign Launch Check

- My manuscript is fully finished and revised before I send a single query
- I drafted both a query and a one-to-two-page synopsis that reveals the ending in present tense
- I researched agents on QueryTracker, Manuscript Wish List, and Publishers Marketplace and confirmed each represents my genre
- I personalized every query and never mass-emailed a visible list of agents
- I am querying in batches of six to ten so I can adjust the letter between batches
- I verified no agent charges reading or upfront fees; legitimate agents earn only by selling the book

Your Action Plan

1. Week 1: Forge your one-sentence premise and complete the 15-Beat Structural Map; do not draft until both are done.
2. Week 2: Write the Want-Need-Lie profile for your protagonist, antagonist, and one supporting character, and choose your POV via the audition.
3. Weeks 3 to 12: Draft to a daily or weekly word-count target, using the Scene-and-Sequel Builder to plan scenes a few ahead.
4. At the halfway mark: Run the One-Line Chapter Ladder to confirm the Midpoint reversal and rising stakes before continuing.
5. On 'The End': Set the finished draft aside for two to six weeks without reading it.
6. Revision Pass 1: Run the developmental edit, fixing structure, arcs, plot holes, and any sagging middle.
7. Feedback round: Send to three to five beta readers with experiential questions and synthesize their answers.
8. Revision Passes 2 and 3: Complete the line edit, then the copy edit and proofread, in that order.
9. Submission prep: Write and tighten the query and synopsis, then build a researched agent list.
10. Campaign: Query in batches of six to ten, track every submission, and diagnose results (query problem versus manuscript problem).

