

From Brainstorming to Bookshelf

Writing and Publishing a Novel, One Mistake at a Time



FOGBOTTOM

About this book

From Brainstorming to Bookshelf was researched and drafted by Claude, an AI model made by Anthropic, for Fogbottom. Ned Hollin, his novel and everyone in it are fictional. Real-world facts are drawn from the sources listed at the back of this book and were checked on the dates shown in the text.

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The Idea Audition

How to find a book idea, and how to tell whether it deserves a year of your life

Ned's Logbook

Ned Hollin writes ferry timetables for a living. He is very good at it. In twenty-two years, no boat has ever left Haddon Quay at a time Ned did not intend.

For roughly as long, Ned has been going to write a novel.

On a wet Tuesday in January he finally does something about it. He buys a notebook (hardback, ruled, pleasingly expensive) and spends the evening writing down every book idea he has ever had. By eleven o'clock there are eleven of them. He reads them back with the warm glow of a man who has just done the hard part.

His partner, Jo, reads them over his shoulder and asks a question that will haunt this entire series:

"Which one is the book?"

Ned has no idea.

(Ned is invented. His mistakes, unfortunately, are not. Every author in this series who makes a decision you recognise is fictional; every fact, rule and price is real and sourced.)

Welcome to the series

Over ten instalments we're going to follow a book from the first flicker of an idea to a finished, published, listed and (we hope) occasionally purchased product. We'll cover craft: planning, drafting, the dreaded middle, endings, revision and editing. Then we'll cover the business: covers, blurbs, metadata, ebook and print files, ISBNs, distribution, launch, and what happens after the launch party ends and the crisps go stale.

Ned is our guinea pig. He'll make the mistakes so you don't have to, or at least so you can make them knowingly, which is a kind of progress.

We start where every book starts, which is not with writing at all. We start with choosing.

Ideas are cheap, and that's good news

Writers are sometimes protective of their ideas in the way dragons are protective of gold: they sit on them, breathe smoke at anyone who comes near, and never actually spend them.

The uncomfortable, liberating truth is that ideas are plentiful. Most people who want to write have a notebook like Ned's, with several of them. The scarce resource isn't the idea. It's the year (or two, or five) of sustained attention you'll pour into one of them. So the real question isn't "Do I have an idea?" It's "Which idea can carry a whole book, and can I carry it?"

Before we audition Ned's candidates, it's worth knowing where ideas usually come from, because if you understand the sources you can go back for more.

The "what if". The oldest engine in fiction. "What if a ferry arrived with one passenger fewer than it left with?" A good what-if contains a disruption: something has gone wrong, or is about to.

The collision. Two things that don't belong together, put in a room. A retired midwife and a bank heist. A wedding and a flood warning. A lot of memorable premises are simply two ordinary things meeting at an unusual angle.

The question you can't stop asking. Some books are an author's attempt to answer something that won't leave them alone: "How does a decent person end up doing an indecent thing? What does a small town owe its outsiders?" These ideas often produce the deepest books, because the author has a genuine stake in the answer.

The place. Some writers start with a setting so specific it practically generates its own plot: a remote research station, a declining seaside hotel, the back office of a ferry company.

The thing you know. Your job, hobby, history or obsession. Not "write what you know" as a rule — you're allowed to write about dragons — but what you know is a mine of authentic detail and an unfair advantage over writers who have to research it from scratch. Ned knows ferry schedules better than almost anyone alive. This will turn out to matter.

None of these produces a book on its own. They produce raw material. Which brings us to the most useful distinction in this entire instalment.

An idea is not a premise

An idea is a seed: a situation, an image, a vibe, a “what if”. A premise is the seed with roots: it tells you who wants what, what’s in the way, and what it will cost.

You can tell the two apart with a simple test. An idea makes you say “Ooh.” A premise makes you ask “And then what happens?”

A workable premise usually contains five parts:

1. A specific protagonist — not “a woman”, but a woman with a job, a history and a problem.
2. A situation that disrupts their life.
3. A goal they actively pursue because of it.
4. Opposition — a person, force or flaw that makes the goal hard.
5. Stakes — what’s lost if they fail.

Here’s what happens when three of Ned’s ideas are pushed through that list:

Ned’s idea	Rewritten as a premise	Verdict
“A lonely lighthouse keeper.”	A lighthouse keeper... who is lonely... and... stays lonely?	Can’t be done without inventing a whole story. It’s a mood, not a premise.
“A man meets his exact double at a bus stop.”	A man meets his double; the double is living a better version of his life; he... envies him? Swaps places?	There’s a premise in here, but it’s thin — it may only sustain twenty pages.
“The ferry arrives one passenger short.”	On the last winter crossing, the ticket count says thirty-one people boarded; only thirty get off. The relief skipper, newly returned to the island she left in disgrace, is the only one who believes the count — and finding out who vanished puts her job and safety at risk.	Protagonist, disruption, goal, opposition, stakes. Now we’re talking.

That third version is longer, and it’s supposed to be. A premise isn’t a pitch line yet; it’s a working tool. We’ll shrink it later.

You’ll sometimes see the one-sentence version of a premise called a logline, a term borrowed from screenwriting and popularised for novelists by craft books such as Jessica Brody’s “Save the Cat! Writes a Novel”. Whatever you call it, it should fit in a breath and make a stranger want the next sentence.

The audition

Now the fun part. Ned's eleven ideas are going to audition for the role of Ned's Novel. The panel is strict but fair, and asks the same questions of every candidate. You can borrow the questions for your own notebook.

The seven audition questions

1. Is there an engine? Is there a central question the reader will turn pages to answer? ("Who did it? Will they escape? Will they choose love or duty?")
2. Does the protagonist drive it? Do they make choices that push the story, or does the plot just happen to them, like weather?
3. Are the stakes real? What does the character lose if they fail, and will a reader care?
4. Is there room to escalate? Can you list at least five ways things get worse before they get better? If you can only think of one, you may have a short story.
5. Do you know the genre's promise? What will a reader of this kind of book expect, and are you willing to deliver it?
6. Is it yours? Do you know enough, or are you willing to learn enough, to write it with authority, and will you still care about it in month nine?
7. Does it have a shelf? Can you name recent books that readers of yours would also enjoy?

Not every question needs a perfect score. But an idea that fails three or four of them is telling you something.

The candidates

Idea 1: The lonely lighthouse keeper. Beautiful. Atmospheric. Fails questions 1, 2 and 4. Nothing happens and nobody wants anything. This happens to a lot of ideas that arrive as images: the image is wonderful, but it's a setting waiting for a story. The panel thanks the lighthouse keeper for coming and suggests it keep the image for later. (A lonely lighthouse could make an excellent location for a story with an actual engine.)

Idea 2: A sequel to a novel Ned hasn't written. Ned has, it turns out, a detailed plan for Book Two of a series whose Book One does not exist. This is more common than you'd think. The panel gently points out that sequels traditionally follow something.

Idea 3: A Cold War spy thriller set in Moscow in 1962. Strong engine, high stakes, a well-loved genre. The problem is question 6. Ned's knowledge of 1962 Moscow comes entirely from two films and a jigsaw. This isn't automatically fatal — plenty of authors research their way into a period — but Ned should know he's signing up for months of reading before he can write a convincing street. The panel marks it possible, expensive.

Idea 4: A man meets his exact double at a bus stop. A brilliant short story wearing a long coat to get into the novel cinema. Ned can think of one twist and one ending. Question 4 sinks it. Short fiction is a real art with real markets; it's just not this project.

Idea 5: His own life story, "but with dragons". The panel admires the dragons. However, when asked what the dragons want, Ned says they "mostly sit around". The life-story part has the same problem: Ned's life has been pleasant, which is wonderful for Ned and terrible for plot.

Idea 6: A history of his ferry company. This is a non-fiction book, possibly a good one, for a small and devoted readership of people who like ferries. Wrong audition. The panel notes it in case Ned ever wants a second career in local history.

Idea 7: A romance between rival ferry operators. Now this one has legs. Built-in conflict, a strong genre with enthusiastic readers, a setting Ned knows. But question 5: Ned doesn't read romance, and romance readers can tell. The genre has a firm promise (a central love story and an emotionally satisfying, optimistic ending), and writing it well means loving it. The panel thinks someone should write this book. Not, perhaps, Ned.

Idea 8: A time-traveller who goes back to fix one mistake. Strong engine, clear stakes. But when the panel asks how the time travel works, Ned says "loosely". Readers of speculative fiction don't need a physics lecture, but they do need consistent rules. Without them, every problem can be solved by going back again, and suspense evaporates. "Callback list: needs more thinking."

Idea 9: A detective who solves crimes using bus timetables. Ned is attached to this one for obvious professional reasons. But it's a gimmick in search of a story: the panel can picture a funny scene, but not a protagonist with a problem. It's worth noting, though, that the detail is good. Readers love a specialist's eye. File the expertise, not the gimmick.

Idea 10: A post-apocalyptic island. Asked what happens after chapter one, Ned describes chapter one again, more slowly. The setting is doing all the work. "Next."

Idea 11: The ferry that arrives one passenger short.

The panel sits up.

- Engine: Who vanished, and how? A locked-room mystery, except the room is a ferry in the middle of a cold sea.
- Protagonist who drives it: Isla Crane, the relief skipper, is the only one who believes the count, so she has to act.
- Stakes: Her job, her already damaged standing on the island, and possibly her life if someone wants the question left alone.
- Escalation: Nobody reports anyone missing. The CCTV on the car deck has been

“broken for weeks”. A tide table turns up with times circled. Someone takes an interest in Isla’s car. Five complications arrive in the time it takes to write them down.

- Genre promise: Contemporary mystery. Ned reads them constantly. He knows what readers expect: a puzzle, fairly clued, and a satisfying solution.
- Is it his? Ferries, islands, timetables, the strange closeness of small communities. Ned couldn’t be better qualified if he’d been grown in a lab for the purpose.
- Shelf: There’s a well-stocked shelf of mysteries set in small, isolated communities. He’ll need to find specific recent examples, which we’ll come to in a moment.

Ned has his book. He even has a title, “The Tide Tables”, which he’s chosen because it sounds good and because the phrase sits in his work email signature. (Whether it survives to the cover is a question for Part 8. Spoiler: titles are rarely as settled as authors believe.)

What the audition actually taught

Notice why most of the ideas failed. Not because they were bad ideas, but because they were incomplete:

- a setting without a story (1, 10)
- a story without a protagonist (9)
- a protagonist without a problem (5)
- a problem too small for a book (4)
- a good book for somebody else (6, 7)

Several of those are fixable. The winning idea won because it was already closest to being a premise, and because it lined up with what Ned knows and loves to read. That second point matters more than beginners expect. A novel takes a long time. You will spend it with this idea through all its ugly middle stages. Choose one you’ll still like when it’s misbehaving.

Genre is a promise, not a cage

Writers sometimes resist naming their genre, on the grounds that their book is bigger than genre. This is understandable, and in practice it mostly creates a shelving problem.

Think of genre as a promise to a reader about what kind of experience they’re buying. A mystery promises a puzzle and a solution. A thriller promises danger and pace. A romance promises a central love story with an emotionally satisfying ending. A horror novel promises dread. Literary fiction promises attention to language and interior life, though it doesn’t promise much in the way of car chases.

You're free to blend and bend these. Plenty of great books do. But you should know which promise is primary, for three practical reasons:

1. Your structure follows from it. A mystery's ending must solve the mystery; a romance's must resolve the relationship. Get the primary promise wrong and the ending will feel like a cheat.
2. Your readers find you through it. Every online bookshop, library catalogue and bookshop shelf is organised by subject categories. When we reach Part 8 you'll choose official subject codes for your book, and "it defies categorisation" is not one of the options.
3. Your cover, blurb and title must signal it. A thriller dressed as a romance disappoints both audiences.

Ned's primary promise is mystery: a puzzle, fairly clued, solved by the end. His secondary threads — Isla's return home, her family, the island's judgement — are what will make it his book rather than everybody's. That's a healthy shape: a clear genre spine with a personal heart.

Comps: finding your book's neighbours

A comparable title, or "comp", is a recently published book that would appeal to the same readers as yours. Comps are useful long before you have a manuscript:

- They test your idea. If you can't find any readers who'd enjoy your book because they enjoyed something similar, either you've found a gap or you've found a reason why the gap exists.
- They teach the genre's current conventions. What length are these books? How do they open? How dark do they get?
- They'll become sales tools. Comps turn up in blurbs ("for fans of..."), in advertising choices and in pitches to agents if you go that route.

Ways to find them:

- Browse the relevant retailer categories and their bestseller and new-release lists for your genre. Look at what's selling now rather than what was famous twenty years ago.
- Ask a librarian or bookseller. "If someone loved X, what would you hand them next?" is a question they answer every day, and they're very good at it.
- Read the "readers also bought" and "you might also like" panels on books you'd consider your neighbours.
- Read them. All this is pointless if you don't actually read a handful of recent books in your genre. It's the cheapest market research there is, and the only kind that comes

with plot.

Two common mistakes:

- Comping to a phenomenon. Every fantasy writer would like their book to be “the next” mega-bestseller. Comps are about reader overlap, not ambition. Pick books that did well without being cultural events.
- Comping only to classics. “It’s like ‘Wuthering Heights’ meets ‘Moby-Dick’” tells a modern reader very little except that you’d like them to be impressed.

Myth vs Reality: “Someone will steal my idea.”

The myth: If you tell people your idea, someone will write it first.

The reality: Copyright protects how something is expressed, not the idea behind it. In US law, for instance, protection doesn’t extend to “any idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, concept, principle, or discovery” (17 U.S.C. § 102(b)). The UK, Australia, Canada and most other countries follow the same basic principle. The US Copyright Office’s guidance on works not protected by copyright also lists titles and short phrases as unprotected — which is why there are several novels with the same title on every shelf.

That cuts both ways. Nobody owns “a ferry arrives one passenger short”, including Ned. Two writers given that same premise would produce two entirely different books, because the book is in the execution: the characters, the voice, the choices. That’s the bit that’s protected, and that’s the bit that’s hard.

Be sensible about sharing unpublished work (more on that in Part 5), but don’t let fear of theft stop you talking about your book. Most people you tell will forget by Thursday.

This is general information, not legal advice.

A word about AI (because you’re wondering)

At some point in the next nine instalments, every reader of this series will ask: “What about AI writing tools?” So it’s worth knowing, before you write a word, that the publishing world has started drawing lines, and the lines matter commercially.

The biggest self-publishing platform, Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), distinguishes between two kinds of AI use. AI-generated content — text, images or translations created by an AI tool — must be disclosed to Amazon when you publish, even if you edited it heavily afterwards. AI-assisted content — work you created yourself and then used AI tools to edit, refine or check, or ideas you brainstormed with a tool before writing the text yourself — doesn’t need to be disclosed. Other retailers and distributors

have their own rules, and they don't all agree. Some refuse wholly AI-generated books outright.

Copyright adds another layer. In January 2025, the US Copyright Office concluded that copyright protects human authorship, and that prompting a tool doesn't by itself make you the author of what it produces; human creative contributions such as selecting, arranging or modifying material can still be protected.

We'll come back to all of this in detail when it matters: editing tools in Part 7, AI images and covers in Part 8, and every major platform's rules side by side in Part 10. For now, the practical lesson for the idea stage is simple: know the rules before you choose your methods, so you never discover at the upload screen that your process has created a problem.

Checked On

- KDP content guidelines on AI-generated vs AI-assisted content and disclosure — KDP Content Guidelines (https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200672390) — checked 28 October 2026.
- US Copyright Office, “Copyright and Artificial Intelligence, Part 2: Copyrightability” (29 January 2025) — [copyright.gov/ai](https://www.copyright.gov/ai/) (<https://www.copyright.gov/ai/>) — checked 28 October 2026.

Platform AI policies have changed several times since 2023 and will change again. Always check the current version before you publish.

(A note about this series itself: it was drafted by an AI, and we say so at the front of this book. Given the subject, it would be strange not to.)

Scam Watch: the “talent scout” who loves your idea

Once you start talking publicly about your book, you may be contacted by people who are extremely excited about it — before reading it. Writer Beware, the publishing watchdog sponsored by the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers Association, notes that unsolicited approaches are now one of the main signs of a scam, along with requests for upfront payment. A real publisher, agent or producer has more books than they can handle and doesn't need to cold-call you. If someone you've never contacted says your idea is “exactly what the market needs”, check them on Writer Beware (<https://sfwa.org/other-resources/writer-beware/>) before replying.

What Ned did next

Ned crosses out ten ideas. Not angrily; he puts a neat single line through each one, the way he'd cancel a sailing, so they can be reinstated if conditions improve. (The romance between rival ferry operators gets a small asterisk. Just in case.)

He writes the premise for "The Tide Tables" at the top of a fresh page. Then he writes it again, shorter. Then once more, until it fits in a sentence he can say to Jo without taking a breath:

When the last ferry of a winter night arrives with one passenger fewer than it left with, the only person who believes the count is the relief skipper who has just come home to an island that never forgave her.

Jo reads it twice.

"Who's missing?"

"I don't know yet."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know that either."

"So what do you know?"

Ned thinks about this, then goes online and buys a corkboard, three packs of index cards and a book about outlining.

Try This

Take your own notebook — the real one or the one in your head — and pick your three most promising ideas.

1. Rewrite each as a premise with the five parts: a specific protagonist, a disruption, a goal, opposition and stakes.
2. Score each against the seven audition questions. A simple ✓, ? or ✗ is enough.
3. For the strongest one, write the five ways things get worse.
4. Name three recently published books whose readers might enjoy yours. If you can't, go and find some — and read at least one.

If one idea comes out clearly ahead, congratulations: you have a candidate. If they all come out "fine", pick the one you'd most enjoy being stuck with in month nine.

Next Time

Ned has a premise, a corkboard and a book about outlining. He doesn't yet have a plan, and he's about to discover that writers disagree violently about whether he needs one.

Part 2: Architects, Gardeners and People Who Own a Corkboard.

Architects, Gardeners and People Who Own a Corkboard

Planning characters, setting, plot and structure before (or while) you write

Ned's Logbook

The corkboard arrives on Thursday. Ned mounts it above his desk with a spirit level, which takes forty minutes and is, he feels, a promising start.

He pins up a single index card. It says:

THE TIDE TABLES

He looks at it for a while. He opens the book about outlining, which recommends a forty-page synopsis before writing a single scene. He then reads an interview with a novelist he admires, who says she never plans anything and discovers the story as she goes, “like walking through fog with a torch”. He then reads a forum thread in which two strangers call each other names over which of these approaches is correct, for nine hundred replies.

Jo finds him at midnight, staring at a corkboard with one card on it.

“How's the plan?”

“There are,” says Ned, “schools of thought.”

(Ned is invented. The forum thread, in spirit, is very real.)

The great planning argument

Every writer eventually has to decide how much they'll plan before they start drafting. Writers have been arguing about it for about as long as there have been writers, and the argument has produced some memorable terminology.

The most-used labels are plotters (who outline first) and pantsers (who write “by the seat of their pants” and discover the story as they go). The more elegant version comes from George R. R. Martin, who has described the split in many interviews, including on NPR in 2019, as architects and gardeners. The architect designs the whole house before laying a brick, down to how many rooms and where the plumbing runs. The gardener plants a seed, waters it, and finds out what grows.

The arguments for each side are real:

The architect’s case. You know where you’re going, so you rarely stall. Structural problems get solved on paper, where they’re cheap, rather than in a 90,000-word draft, where they’re expensive. Clues, foreshadowing and payoffs can be planted deliberately. If you write in short bursts around a job — like Ned — an outline means you can sit down for forty minutes and know exactly which scene comes next.

The gardener’s case. The story stays alive and surprising, because you’re discovering it at the same time as the reader will. Characters can take over and do something better than you’d planned. Some writers find that once they’ve outlined a story, they’ve effectively told it to themselves, and the urge to write it evaporates.

And the part both sides tend to skip:

Everyone pays. They just pay at different times.

Architects pay up front, in planning time and occasionally in stiffness: a story that obeys its outline even when the outline was wrong. Gardeners pay later, in revision: discovery drafts often need heavy restructuring, because you didn’t know what the book was about until you’d finished it.

Neither is the “right” way. Most working writers sit somewhere on a spectrum between them, and many shift position between books. The useful question isn’t “which camp am I in?” It’s “How much do I need to know before I start, so I can keep going?”

To find out, we’re going to run an experiment.

One story, three Neds

Imagine three versions of Ned in three parallel universes. They have the same premise, the same corkboard, and the same Thursday evening. Each plans “The Tide Tables” differently.

Architect Ned

Architect Ned buys more index cards. By the end of the month, the corkboard holds sixty scene cards in four colours: blue for Isla's investigation, green for the island subplot, red for clues, yellow for red herrings. He knows who the missing passenger was, who killed him, how it was done, where every clue appears and in which chapter each suspect lies. He writes a thirty-page synopsis. He even knows what the weather is in Chapter 22.

"Strengths:" For a mystery, this is a huge advantage. The clue trail can be designed to be fair. Every red herring can be placed exactly where it'll do the most damage.

"Risks:" Three months have passed and he hasn't written a single sentence of the actual book. Worse, when he does start writing, Isla turns out to be funnier and angrier on the page than she was on the cards, and the outline doesn't know that. Architect Ned faces a choice he'll face many times: obey the plan or follow the character.

Gardener Ned

Gardener Ned writes the premise on one card and starts Chapter One that night. Isla steps onto the car deck of the ferry; the wind is "like a slap from a wet glove"; the ticket count is wrong. It's thrilling. By Chapter Six he has a vivid island, three intriguing suspects and an excellent scene in a pub.

"Strengths:" Energy, voice and momentum. The characters feel alive because they've had room to surprise him.

"Risks:" He doesn't know who did it. In most genres, that's survivable. In a mystery, it's a structural hazard, because a fair mystery depends on clues planted in early chapters that only make sense when you know the answer. Gardener Ned will almost certainly need to go back and rewrite the whole first half once he discovers his solution. (Many successful mystery writers do work this way. They simply budget for that rewrite.)

Hybrid Ned

Hybrid Ned plans the load-bearing walls and leaves the decoration for later. He decides:

- The opening situation: Isla's first week back; the short count on the last crossing.
- What actually happened on the boat: how a passenger disappeared during a forty-minute crossing in the dark, and what's wrong with the car-deck CCTV.
- A midpoint discovery: who the missing man was. He was Neil Garvie, a land surveyor from the mainland who had been quietly assessing parts of the island for a buyer, which gives half the island a reason to care.
- The final image: Isla on the bridge of the "Marram", taking the first boat of the

morning out, staying instead of leaving.

- Signposts in between: a few major turns, written as one-liners.

He hasn't decided who killed Garvie. He's narrowed it down to three suspects and tells himself he'll know "when he gets there".

"Strengths:" Enough structure to keep moving, with room for discovery.

"Risk:" That undecided culprit. It's a gamble, and we'll find out in Part 5 whether it pays off.

Which Ned are you?

Ask yourself honestly:

- When you've stalled in the past, was it because you didn't know what happened next (you may need more plan), or because you were bored by what you knew happened next (you may need less)?
- Does your genre depend on engineering? Mysteries, thrillers and intricate fantasy usually reward more planning. Character-driven literary fiction often tolerates less.
- How much time do you have per session? Short sessions favour knowing your next scene before you sit down.

Our real Ned, in the universe that matters, chooses the hybrid. It suits his genre, his schedule and his temperament. A man who writes timetables for a living was never going to be entirely comfortable walking through fog with a torch.

Structure: four maps of the same territory

Whatever your planning style, it helps to understand story structure: the recurring shapes that stories tend to take. Structure models aren't laws. They're maps drawn by people who studied thousands of stories and noticed patterns. Different maps emphasise different features of the same ground.

Here are four of the most influential, each applied to "The Tide Tables".

1. Three-act structure

The oldest and simplest map. Aristotle observed in the "Poetics" that a whole story has a beginning, a middle and an end, which sounds like the least helpful observation ever made until you see how many drafts don't. The modern version, popularised for screenwriters by Syd Field in "Screenplay" (1979), divides a story roughly into quarters:

- Act One (about the first quarter): the setup. Who, where, what's normal, and the

disruption that ends normal.

- Act Two (about the middle half): confrontation. The protagonist pursues the goal; complications pile up; there's usually a major turn near the middle.
- Act Three (about the final quarter): resolution. The final confrontation and its consequences.

"The Tide Tables" in three acts: Isla comes home and the count comes up short (Act One). She investigates, the island closes ranks, and she discovers who Neil Garvie was (Act Two). She confronts the truth and decides whether to stay (Act Three).

"Best for:" almost everyone, as a first check. If you can't say what happens in each act, the problem isn't your outline method.

2. The "Save the Cat!" beat sheet

Blake Snyder's "Save the Cat!" (2005) was written for screenwriters. Jessica Brody adapted it for novelists in "Save the Cat! Writes a Novel" (2018). It divides a story into fifteen "beats", each with an approximate position, from the Opening Image to the Final Image. In between come signposts such as the Catalyst (the disruption, around 10%), the Break into Two (the hero commits to the new situation, around 20%), the Midpoint (a false victory or false defeat that raises the stakes, around 50%), All Is Lost (around 75%) and the Finale.

"The Tide Tables" as beats (selection):

Beat	Approx. position	Ned's story
Opening Image	0–1%	Isla, hood up against the sleet, alone on the car deck — an outsider on her own island
Catalyst	~10%	The count: thirty-one boarded, thirty disembarked
Break into Two	~20%	When the company tells her to "correct the paperwork", she refuses and starts asking questions
Midpoint	~50%	The missing man is identified as Neil Garvie, a surveyor working for a buyer — suddenly everyone has a motive
All Is Lost	~75%	Isla is suspended from the ferry; her sister Tess stops speaking to her
Final Image	99–100%	Isla on the bridge of the "Marram"

Beat	Approx. position	Ned's story
		at dawn — no longer an outsider

“Best for:” writers who like concrete signposts, and anyone diagnosing a sagging middle (which we’ll do in Part 4). The percentages are guides, not a stopwatch.

3. *The Hero’s Journey*

Joseph Campbell’s “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” (1949) described a pattern he found across world mythology. Christopher Vogler, then a Hollywood story analyst, turned it into a practical writer’s tool, first in an internal memo and then in “The Writer’s Journey” (1992). Vogler’s version has twelve stages: the Ordinary World, the Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Meeting the Mentor, Crossing the Threshold, Tests, Allies and Enemies, Approach to the Inmost Cave, the Ordeal, the Reward, the Road Back, the Resurrection, and the Return with the Elixir.

It fits Ned’s story more naturally than you might think. Isla refuses the call (she wants to keep her head down). Her former mentor, harbourmaster Callum Rae, tells her to leave it alone, which is a nice inversion of the mentor role. And her “return with the elixir” is a return to the island itself, on new terms.

“Best for:” stories of transformation, adventure and fantasy. The danger is forcing every story through all twelve stages like a hotel guest following the fire-escape map.

4. *Kishōtenketsu*

A four-part structure with roots in classical Chinese four-line poetry (qí chéng zhua n hé) that passed into Korean and Japanese writing, where it’s known as kishōtenketsu:

- Ki: introduction
- Shō: development
- Ten: a turn — a twist, a shift of perspective, an unexpected element
- Ketsu: a conclusion that reconciles the turn with what came before

Its fame in Western writing circles comes from the observation that its central turn doesn’t have to be a conflict. It can be a change of angle that recasts everything. (It’s sometimes described as “plot without conflict”, which oversimplifies. Plenty of stories using it contain conflict; it just isn’t the only engine.)

A full mystery won’t run on kishōtenketsu alone, because readers expect a contest between detective and secret. But it’s a superb tool for individual chapters and for the emotional story. Ned’s subplot about Isla and her sister has exactly this shape: we meet

the sisters; we watch the old resentment; a turn reveals that Tess has been protecting Isla, not judging her; and the conclusion recasts everything we'd seen between them.

“Best for:” quieter stories, literary fiction, emotional subplots, and anyone who wants to escape the assumption that every story must be a fight.

And one method: the Snowflake

Not a structure but a planning process. Randy Ingermanson's Snowflake Method starts with a one-sentence summary and expands it in stages: to a paragraph, to character summaries, to a page, to a scene list. It grows outward from the centre, like a snowflake. Hybrid planners often like it because you can stop expanding whenever you know enough to start writing.

Choosing a map

You don't have to pick one. Ned uses three-act structure as his foundation, borrows the “Save the Cat!” midpoint and “All Is Lost” beats as signposts, and uses a kishōtenketsu turn for the sisters' story. That's normal. The maps are tools, not a religion.

The one thing structure shouldn't become is a checklist you fill in instead of thinking. If you find yourself inventing a “Meeting with the Mentor” because the chart says there must be one, put the chart down and go for a walk.

A mystery is two stories

Before we leave plot, there's something genre-specific Ned needs to understand, because it'll determine how much planning his book requires.

The critic Tzvetan Todorov, writing about detective fiction in the 1960s, pointed out that a classic whodunit contains two stories: the story of the crime (what really happened, mostly hidden until the end) and the story of the investigation (what the detective and reader experience, page by page). The second story is the one we read. The first is the one that makes it work.

The practical consequence: a mystery writer must know the hidden story, even if the reader doesn't. Every clue Isla finds is a trace left by events in the crime story. If Ned doesn't know those events, he can't plant honest clues.

This is why Hybrid Ned's gamble is a real risk. He knows how Neil Garvie disappeared from the car deck at 9:14 p.m. He knows who saw it. He doesn't know who did it. He can write the opening chapters without knowing, but every chapter he writes without that knowledge risks clues pointing nowhere.

If you're writing a mystery, a thriller with a conspiracy, or any story with a hidden layer, write a one-page secret history: what actually happened, in order, from the culprit's point of view. Nobody but you ever reads it. It'll save you weeks.

Characters: want, need and what they'd never do

Plot is what happens. Character is why it matters. The fastest way to build a character who can carry a novel is to answer a handful of questions about them.

What do they want? The conscious, external goal. Isla wants to keep her head down, hold onto the relief skipper's job, and stay out of the island's gossip.

What do they need? The deeper thing they'd be better for, which they often resist. Isla needs to stop running from the island's judgement, and from her own sense that she failed her family when her father's boatyard went under. Lisa Cron's "Wired for Story" argues that readers engage most deeply with this internal struggle: the gap between what a character wants and what they need.

What's their flaw, and how does it cause trouble? Isla is proud and allergic to asking for help. That's useful: it makes her investigate alone, which makes her vulnerable.

What would they never do? And then: can the story make them do it? Isla would never ask Callum Rae for help again. By the last act, she has to.

What's their secret? Everybody on a small island has one. In a mystery, this matters doubly: every suspect needs a reason to lie that may have nothing to do with the crime. Morag Lusk, who owns the island hotel, lies about the night of the crossing because she was meeting someone she shouldn't have been. Dr Euan Bell lies because of something he knows about a patient. Those lies are red herrings that come from character, which is the best kind.

The supporting cast has jobs

Every significant character should have a job in the story, not just a personality. Ned lists his:

- Callum Rae, harbourmaster: Isla's former mentor, now the voice of "leave it alone". Opposition with history.
- Morag Lusk, hotel owner: the island's information exchange, and a suspect.
- Dr Euan Bell, island GP: kind, trusted, and hiding something. A suspect.
- Tess Crane, Isla's sister: the emotional stakes. What Isla stands to lose, or win back.

If you can't say what a character's job is, they may be decoration. That's fine in small doses. In large ones, it's a sign you've got a cast list rather than a story.

A note on names

Give characters names that look different on the page: different first letters, different lengths, different sounds. Readers skim names, and a book in which Isla, Iona and Ina all appear in the same scene is a book in which readers lose track of who is doing what. Ned originally called the hotel owner Isobel. He changed it after reading back a sentence in which "Isla told Isobel" appeared twice.

Point of view and tense

These two choices shape every sentence you'll write, so they're worth deciding early.

Point of view is whose perspective the reader experiences the story through. The main options:

- First person ("I counted them again"). Intimate and voice-driven; limited to what the narrator knows.
- Close third person ("Isla counted them again"). Nearly as intimate, with a little more flexibility. Very common in contemporary fiction.
- Multiple close third. Several viewpoint characters, usually one per scene or chapter. Wider scope; risks diluting attachment to any one character.
- Omniscient. A narrator who can see into anyone's head and comment freely. Powerful and old-fashioned in the best sense, and hard to do well without seeming to "head-hop".

Ursula K. Le Guin's "Steering the Craft" has an excellent short chapter on these choices and what each costs. Read it before deciding.

For a fair-play mystery, point of view is also a fairness decision. If readers are inside the detective's head, they should know what the detective knows. If they're inside the culprit's head, the author has to work hard to avoid cheating.

Tense: past ("Isla counted") is the long-standing default and is nearly invisible to readers. Present ("Isla counts") feels immediate and has become common in some genres. Either works; inconsistency doesn't.

Ned chooses close third person, past tense, Isla only. Readers will know what she knows, no more, which is exactly what a fair mystery needs.

Setting: build what the story stands on

How much worldbuilding does a book need? Roughly: as much as the story touches, plus a bit underneath for stability.

An epic fantasy may need a magic system, a political map and several centuries of history, because the plot runs on them. A contemporary mystery set on a fictional island needs far less, but what it needs must be consistent. Readers will forgive an invented island. They won't forgive a crossing that takes forty minutes in Chapter 2 and two hours in Chapter 11.

Ned's island, Skerrow, needs:

- Geography: the harbour, the hotel, the surgery, the boatyard that used to be Isla's father's, and the single road. Ned sketches a map. It's terrible. It's also essential.
- Rules of the world: the crossing takes forty minutes. Tickets are scanned on boarding. CCTV covers the car deck (when it works). In winter there's no Sunday service. Ned writes this last point down. He will forget he's written it down.
- Texture: the weather, the gossip, what people eat, who drinks where, how news travels faster than the ferry.

If your setting is real, the job is research rather than invention, and you'll want to check facts as carefully as any journalist. Local readers are merciless about the wrong bus route.

One common trap: building the world instead of writing the book. Worldbuilding is enjoyable, consequence-free and endless. If you've designed the coinage of three kingdoms and haven't written Chapter One, the coinage is probably avoidance wearing a cloak.

The story bible: future you will be grateful

A story bible (or series bible) is a single reference document holding the facts of your book: names, ages, appearances, relationships, places, dates, rules, and anything else you'll need to keep straight. It's dull to make and invaluable to have. Professional series writers rely on them, and so do editors, who'll often build one for your book if you don't.

A useful bible for a single novel includes:

- Characters: full name, age, appearance, key history, relationships, verbal habits.
- Places: descriptions, distances, travel times, opening hours.
- Timeline: what happens on which day, including the "secret history" for mysteries.
- Rules: anything about how your world works, from magic to ferry timetables.
- Style notes: spellings, invented words, how characters address each other.

A plain document or spreadsheet works fine. Dedicated writing software can help, but the tool matters far less than the habit of updating it.

Ned starts his bible on a Sunday afternoon. He fills in Isla's age, eye colour and history. He describes the "Marram" down to its paint colour. He writes Callum's backstory, Morag's hotel, the surgery's opening hours.

Then he gets to the section labelled Timetable, the one area of life in which Ned Hollin is a recognised expert. He thinks: "I know this better than anyone. I don't need to write it down."

He types: Timetable: TBC.

He'll regret it in Part 6.

Tools: a brief, unglamorous note

People ask what software they should plan in. The honest answer is: whatever you'll actually use.

- Index cards and a corkboard (or a wall): tactile, visual, excellent for seeing the whole shape at once and moving scenes around.
- A spreadsheet: one row per scene, columns for chapter, point of view, what happens, what changes, clues planted. Unbeatable for mysteries and for continuity checking later.
- A word processor: perfectly good for synopses and bibles.
- Dedicated writing software: programs designed for long projects let you keep notes, research and chapters in one place, with outlining views. Useful, not required.

The trap is believing the right tool will make the planning happen. It won't. Ned spent forty minutes levelling a corkboard. It's an excellent corkboard.

What Ned did next

By the end of February, Ned's corkboard has twenty-eight cards on it. The opening is clear, the midpoint is clear, and the final image is clear. Between them sit a few signposts and a lot of white space with question marks in it.

There are three suspect cards, Callum, Morag and Euan, pinned in a little row near the bottom. None of them is marked as the culprit.

Jo stands in front of the board for a long time.

"It's very good," she says. "Who did it?"

“I’ll know when I get there.”

“Is that how it works?”

Ned considers the forum thread with nine hundred replies.

“For some people,” he says.

He clears the desk, opens a new document and types Chapter One.

Try This

1. Find your place on the spectrum. Write down how much you need to know before you can start. The ending? The midpoint? Just the first scene? Be honest about what made you stall in the past.
2. Map your story onto three acts. One sentence each for the setup, the confrontation and the resolution. If you can’t write the third sentence yet, that’s useful information, not a failure.
3. Fill in a character card for your protagonist: want, need, flaw, would never, secret.
4. If you’re writing a mystery, thriller or anything with a hidden layer: write a one-page secret history.
5. Start a story bible today, even if it’s three lines long. Include the thing you’re sure you’ll remember. Especially that.

Next Time

Ned has a plan, of sorts, and a document with “Chapter One” at the top. Every writer knows what happens next: an empty page, a blinking cursor and a sudden, urgent need to reorganise the stationery drawer.

Part 3: The Blank Page Is Not Your Enemy (Page Two Is).

The Blank Page Is Not Your Enemy (Page Two Is)

Starting the first draft, finding a routine, and writing an opening that works

Ned's Logbook — Day 1

A Sunday evening in early March.

Wrote Chapter One tonight. 1,400 words. Isla arrives on the island, sleet coming in sideways, the “Marram” rolling at the pier. I think it might be good. I think it might be very good. Jo asked how it went and I said “fine” in the voice of a man who has just written something very good.

Did the maths. At this rate the whole book will be finished in about eight weeks.

(Ned is invented. The maths, which is about to go badly wrong, is very common.)

Why a diary?

Most advice about drafting is written from the far side of a finished book, when the author has forgotten what the middle of the process felt like. So for this instalment we're going to stay close to the ground and follow Ned's first fortnight of drafting, day by day, stepping out of the diary whenever there's something worth explaining.

The first lesson is already sitting in Day 1, and it's arithmetic.

The arithmetic of a novel

Ned's eight-week estimate is based on writing 1,400 words every single day. He did that once, on a Sunday, full of adrenaline and the first-day glow that every writer knows. It's not a rate. It's a firework.

Here's what novel-length arithmetic looks like at sustainable rates, for a draft of 80,000 words:

Words per writing day	Writing every day	Five days a week
250	320 days	about 64 weeks
500	160 days	about 32 weeks
1,000	80 days	about 16 weeks
2,000	40 days	about 8 weeks

Two things jump out. First, even a modest rate finishes a novel within a year: 500 words a day, five days a week, is about the length of a long email, and it produces a first draft in roughly eight months. Second, the difference between the rows is less about speed than about consistency. The writer who does 300 words on most days usually finishes before the writer who does 3,000 on an occasional heroic Saturday.

History offers some reassurance here, and a pleasing parallel for Ned. Anthony Trollope, who wrote his novels while working full time for the Post Office, described in his “Autobiography” how he wrote early in the morning before work, with a watch in front of him, aiming for 250 words every quarter of an hour. He was, in other words, a man with a day job and a timetable. Ned would approve.

At the other end of the scale, Stephen King writes in “On Writing” that he aims for 2,000 words a day and believes a first draft should take no longer than a season: about three months. That’s a working professional’s pace. Read it as a description of King, not a target for you.

So how long should the book be?

It depends on the genre, and on where you plan to publish. For writers hoping to sell a debut to an agent or traditional publisher, the most widely cited guidance (from Chuck Sambuchino, formerly of “Writer’s Digest”) puts most adult genres — mystery, thriller, suspense, romance, literary and mainstream fiction — around 80,000 to 89,999 words, with science fiction and fantasy running longer, around 100,000 to 115,000. Other guides give somewhat wider ranges, and plenty of successful books sit outside them.

For self-published books, there’s no gatekeeper enforcing a range, but readers have expectations shaped by what they usually read. A cosy mystery that runs to 140,000 words will strike its readers as long. An epic fantasy that ends at 60,000 may feel thin. Your comps, which you found in Part 1, are the best guide. Check the page counts of half a dozen recent books in your genre and you’ll know your range.

Ned’s comps cluster between about 300 and 380 pages in paperback. He settles on a target of 80,000 words and, more importantly, a daily target he can actually meet. He’ll discover what that is in about a week.

Ned's Logbook — Days 2 to 5

Day 2. Read Chapter One again. It is not very good. It is possibly not good at all. Rewrote the first paragraph nine times. Now 1,392 words. Total progress today: minus eight.

Day 3. Didn't write. Work ran late (fog; three sailings cancelled; furious man with a caravan). Told myself I'd do double tomorrow.

Day 4. Did not do double. Spent an hour on one sentence because I couldn't decide whether it needed a semicolon. Looked up semicolons. Read a long article about semicolons. Am now unsure whether anyone, in the history of English, has ever used one correctly.

Day 5. 600 words. Isla meets Callum at the harbour office. He's colder than I meant him to be, which is interesting. Didn't reread anything. Felt better.

Draft now, fix later?

Days 2 and 4 show the most common trap of early drafting: editing while you write, and specifically, polishing material whose future you don't yet know.

There are two broad camps.

The "draft fast" camp says: get to the end. Don't reread, don't revise, don't look anything up. Leave a note like [CHECK: tide times] or [NAME?] and keep moving. The reasoning is that you can't tell what a scene needs until you know what the book needs, and you can't know that until you've finished. Stephen King's version is the memorable one: write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open. In other words, the first draft is just for you.

The "fix as you go" camp says: a clean foundation makes a stronger building. Some writers can't move on until a chapter feels right, and their first drafts need less revision as a result. They're slower forwards and faster at the end.

Both work. What doesn't work is the unhappy middle that Ned has wandered into on Day 2: endlessly polishing the opening chapter without moving forward. Openings are the parts of a novel most likely to be rewritten later, because they're written before you really know the book. Chapter One will change. Probably several times.

A practical compromise many writers use:

- Reread only the last page or two of yesterday's work, to pick up the thread.
- Fix only what blocks you: a major error that would make tomorrow's scene impossible.
- Leave everything else in brackets. A first draft full of [BETTER WORD] and [DOES

SHE KNOW THIS YET?] is a healthy first draft.

- Keep a running “fix later” list in a separate file, so the problems are remembered without being solved now.

Ned adopts this on Day 5. You can see the effect in his word count.

The opening page: what it has to do

That said, it's worth knowing what an opening needs to achieve, so that when you do revise it, you're revising towards something.

An opening page has a lot of jobs and very little space:

1. Establish a voice the reader trusts and wants to keep listening to.
2. Put a person on the page: someone specific, doing something.
3. Suggest a disruption: something is wrong, about to go wrong, or unusual.
4. Orient without drowning. The reader needs to know roughly where and when they are, but not the full history of the island since the Bronze Age.
5. Make a promise about the kind of book this is.

And there are some well-known ways openings go wrong. None of these is forbidden; they're just very hard to do well, and editors and agents see them constantly:

- The weather report. Two paragraphs on the sky before anything happens.
- The alarm clock. A character wakes up, looks in the mirror and describes themselves.
- The info-dump. Everything the reader might need to know, delivered before they have any reason to care.
- The crowd scene. Five named characters in the first paragraph, all of whom the reader must now remember.
- The false start. An exciting dream, or a dramatic scene that turns out to be a flashback, followed by the actual (quieter) story.

First-page autopsy

Here's the opening Ned wrote on Day 1. (This is fictional, written for this series.)

The sky over Skerrow was the colour of old pewter, and the sea beneath it was a darker grey still, heaving and restless as it had been for ten thousand years since the glaciers retreated and left the island behind like a forgotten thing. Isla Crane, thirty-four years old, with her father's dark hair and her mother's grey eyes, stood at the rail of the MV Marram, the island's ferry, which had been built in 1998 in a mainland yard and which

she had last sailed on eleven years ago, the night she left Skerrow after the boatyard failed and her father stopped speaking to her and the whole island seemed to turn its back.

It's not bad writing, exactly. Most of the sentences are perfectly competent. But look at what the paragraph does:

- The weather comes first, and so does geology.
- The description is a passport photo: age, hair, eyes, delivered as a list.
- The ferry's build history is information nobody needs yet.
- The backstory — eleven years, the boatyard, the father — is all here, in one breath, before the reader cares about any of it.
- Nothing happens. She stands at a rail.

Here's a revised version, as Ned might write it in Part 6 when he knows his book better:

Thirty-one tickets, the scanner said.

"Isla counted the cars, the foot passengers, the two lads with the bikes, and came to thirty. She counted again. The" Marram shouldered into the swell and somebody's dog started barking on the car deck, and she thought: first week back, and you're already the woman who can't count.

The revision is shorter and does more. There's a person, doing something. There's a disruption (the count). There's a hint of backstory ("first week back") that makes us curious instead of informing us. And there's a voice, wry and self-doubting, which is Isla's, not the narrator's.

The weather didn't vanish, by the way. It's in "shouldered into the swell". It's just doing a job now.

Ned, wisely, does not rewrite his opening in March. He'll have a much better idea of what Chapter One needs once he's written Chapter Twenty. But he copies the five jobs onto an index card and pins it to the corkboard.

Ned's Logbook — Days 6 to 9

Day 6. Missed. Jo's birthday. Correct decision.

Day 7. 450 words before work. Discovered that if I write before checking email, I write. If I check email first, I read about a delayed freight sailing and think about it until lunchtime.

Day 8. 520 words before work. Isla visits the surgery. Dr Bell is charming. Too charming? Wrote [TOO CHARMING? — SUSPECT] and kept going. Felt like a professional.

Day 9. Disaster. Wrote 600 words in the evening, very good ones (Isla and Morag at the hotel bar, sharp dialogue, best thing yet). Laptop announced it was installing updates and restarted itself mid-sentence. The document hadn't been saved since Day 7. Lost the lot.

Sat in the dark for a bit.

Emailed myself the remaining file under the name `tide_tables_FINAL.docx`, then realised that was a lie and re-sent it as `tide_tables_FINAL2.docx`.

Back up your book. Seriously. Now.

This is the least glamorous advice in the entire series. It may also be the most valuable.

Writers lose work all the time: to crashed laptops, stolen bags, failed hard drives, spilled tea, house fires, an automatic update at the wrong moment, or an over-eager “tidy up” of a downloads folder. Losing a day's work, like Ned, is miserable. Losing a whole manuscript happens, and it's the kind of thing people say they'll “sort out eventually”.

Data-protection professionals widely recommend the 3-2-1 rule:

- 3 copies of your work,
- on 2 different kinds of storage (for example, your computer's drive and an external drive or USB stick),
- with 1 copy kept somewhere else entirely (a cloud storage service, or a drive at a friend's house).

For a writer, a simple version looks like this:

1. Write in a folder that syncs automatically to a reputable cloud storage service. That's one copy on your computer, one in the cloud.
2. Once a week, copy the whole project folder to an external drive or USB stick. That's a third copy, on a different kind of storage.
3. Turn on autosave and version history in your writing software, and save often anyway.
4. Name versions sensibly. Dates beat adjectives. `tide-tables_2026-03-09.docx` tells you something; `FINAL2` tells you only that there will be a `FINAL3`.
5. Test a restore occasionally. A backup you've never opened is a hope, not a backup.

Emailing yourself files counts as a kind of off-site copy, and it's better than nothing. But it's not a system. Ned will learn this more painfully in Part 9, when he uploads the wrong version of his book.

Myth vs Reality: “My laptop is new, so I’m fine.”

The myth: New equipment doesn’t fail.

The reality: New equipment can be lost, stolen, dropped, rained on, or updated at the wrong moment, exactly like old equipment. The 3-2-1 rule isn’t about the quality of your laptop. It’s about not keeping all your eggs in one basket that also has your emails, photos and tax returns in it.

Routine: finding the time you actually have

By Day 9, Ned has learned something more useful than any writing advice: he writes best before work, before email. He’ll build his whole drafting routine on that.

Every writer’s version is different, but the questions are the same:

- When does your attention belong to you? Early morning, lunch break, after the children are in bed, Sunday afternoons? Pick the time that’s most reliably yours, not the time that sounds most writerly.
- How long can you protect? Twenty-five minutes counts. Plenty of novels have been written in lunch breaks.
- Where? A consistent place helps your brain recognise “this is writing time”. It doesn’t need to be a study. A kitchen table at 6 a.m. is a study.
- What’s the minimum? Set a daily target low enough that you can hit it on a bad day. You’ll often exceed it. Missing a modest target occasionally is fine; repeatedly missing an ambitious one is demoralising.
- What gets in the way? For Ned, it’s email. For many writers it’s the phone. For some it’s research: “just checking” a fact that turns into an hour. Use brackets ([CHECK]) and keep going.

Some writers swear by timed sprints: write for a fixed period (often 25 minutes) without stopping, then take a short break. Others track their word counts in a spreadsheet and enjoy watching the line climb. Use whatever makes you sit down again tomorrow.

You don’t have to do it alone

For many years, the best-known writing challenge in the world was National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo: write 50,000 words of a novel during November. It began in 1999 as a small challenge among friends organised by Chris Baty and grew into a nonprofit organisation with participants all over the world, local “write-ins” and a famously encouraging culture.

The organisation behind it closed in spring 2025. It cited financial difficulties; its final years had also been marked by controversies, including over forum moderation and a statement about AI writing tools. The idea didn't close with it, though. Community-run November challenges, writing groups, online sprint rooms and local meet-ups continue, many organised by former participants.

The lesson for a new writer isn't really about NaNoWriMo. It's that accountability helps. Telling someone your goal, writing alongside others (in person or online), or reporting your weekly word count to a friend makes it much more likely you'll keep going through the weeks when the book feels pointless. Look for:

- Local writing groups, often run through libraries, bookshops or community centres.
- Online sprint sessions, where people write together for set periods.
- One accountability partner: a friend who'll ask on Fridays how many words you wrote.

Ned's accountability partner is Jo. She doesn't ask how many words he's written. She asks who did it. It works surprisingly well.

Ned's Logbook — Days 10 to 14

Day 10. Rewrote the lost hotel-bar scene. Shorter than before. Possibly better. Not admitting this.

Day 11. 510 words, 6.20 a.m. Started a "fix later" file. First entry: Isla's eyes — grey or green? Ch 1 says grey. Ch 4 says green.

Day 12. 480 words. Isla finds the tide table with times circled. Didn't know it would be in her father's old boatyard until she walked in there. A gardener moment. Pleased.

Day 13. 530 words. Bought an external drive at lunch. Copied everything to it. Felt like a grown-up.

Day 14. 500 words. Running total: 6,780.

Two weeks in, and the maths is clear. Ned's real rate is about 500 words on a weekday morning, with the odd missed day. Not eight weeks, then. More like eight months.

He updates his spreadsheet and finds, to his surprise, that he doesn't mind. Eight months is a timetable he can keep.

What Ned did next

By the end of May, the spreadsheet says 31,000 words. Isla has found the tide table, argued with Callum, been charmed by Dr Bell and lied to by Morag. The fix-later file has forty-three entries. The external drive has a label on it in Ned's tidy handwriting: BOOK.

And then, one Tuesday morning at 6.20 a.m., Ned opens the document, reads the last page, and has absolutely no idea what happens next.

Try This

1. Do your own arithmetic. Choose a target length from your comps. Choose a daily target you could hit on a bad day. Work out your finish date honestly, with weekends and real life included.
2. Find your time. For one week, write at a different time of day each day and note your word count. Keep the time that wins.
3. Start a "fix later" file today. Every time you're tempted to stop and fix something, add it to the file instead.
4. Set up 3-2-1 backups before you write another word. Then test one: open the backup copy and check it's really there.
5. Tell one person your goal, and ask them to check on you every week.

Next Time

Ned is 31,000 words in. The story hasn't crashed. It has simply stopped, like a ferry with its engines off, drifting gently in a calm sea while the passengers start asking questions. Welcome to the middle.

Part 4: Here Be Swamps.

Here Be Swamps

Surviving the difficult middle: pacing, complications and keeping the story moving

Ned's Logbook

Ned's novel stops at 31,000 words.

Not with a crash. There's no dramatic block, no sobbing over the keyboard. It's more like a ferry with its engines cut: still afloat, drifting pleasantly, going nowhere.

Ned keeps writing, in the sense that words appear. In Chapter 12, Isla goes to the pub and discusses the missing passenger with Morag. In Chapter 13, she goes to the harbour office and discusses the missing passenger with Callum. In Chapter 14, she goes back to the pub and discusses what Callum said with Morag. Everyone is very articulate about the plot. Nobody is in any danger of having one.

To liven things up, Ned adds a storm. It's an excellent storm. Two chapters later, he adds another.

Jo reads the new pages and puts them down carefully.

"Is it always this windy on the island?"

(Ned is invented. The second storm, sadly, is a classic.)

Why middles sag

If you've read any writing advice at all, you've probably heard of "the sagging middle". It's so common that it has become a cliché, and like most clichés, it's a cliché because it's true.

There are good structural reasons for it. In three-act terms, the middle (Act Two) is roughly half the book. The energy of the setup is spent: the characters are introduced, the disruption has happened, the reader knows the question. The pull of the ending isn't yet strong enough to drag the story forward on its own. You're in open water, with the harbour lights behind you and the far shore not yet in sight.

Writers in this stretch often feel that the book has gone wrong. Usually it hasn't. It just needs a different kind of attention from the beginning. The beginning runs on novelty. The middle has to run on escalation: things getting more complicated, more costly and more personal.

This instalment is written as a repair manual. Like the kind that comes with a washing machine, it's organised by symptom. Find the one that sounds like your book, read the likely cause, try the fix. You don't need to read it in order, and you don't need all of it. With luck you'll only need one page.

But first, a diagnostic.

Step zero: find out what's actually wrong

Before fixing anything, find out what your middle is really doing, as opposed to what you think it's doing.

Take your last ten scenes and write one line for each, answering two questions:

1. What happens?
2. What changes?

Ned's version looks like this (excerpt):

Chapter	What happens	What changes
12	Isla and Morag discuss the missing passenger at the pub	Nothing. Isla already suspected Morag was hiding something
13	Isla and Callum discuss it at the harbour office	Callum tells her to drop it (he told her in Chapter 7)
14	Isla and Morag discuss what Callum said	Nothing
15	A storm	The ferry doesn't run. Isla is annoyed
16	Isla phones the police on the mainland, who say a man called Neil Garvie hasn't checked out of his hotel	Big change: the missing man has a name
17	Another storm	Same as Chapter 15

The "What changes" column is the diagnosis. In five of these six chapters, the story stands still. In the one where something big happens, the discovery arrives by phone call, with Isla passively receiving the news.

This exercise takes half an hour. It'll tell you more than a week of staring at the manuscript. (We'll use a fuller version, the reverse outline, for the rewrite in Part 6.)

Now, to the manual.

Symptom 1: Your characters keep having meetings about the plot instead of having the plot

What it looks like: Scene after scene of characters sitting in rooms explaining things to each other. The pub. The office. The kitchen. Back to the pub.

Likely cause: You're delivering information when the story needs action. This is especially common in mysteries, where the investigation can slide into a series of interviews, but it happens in every genre. Characters talk about events instead of living through them.

The fix: give every scene a goal, a conflict and an outcome.

The pulp writer and writing teacher Dwight V. Swain, in "Techniques of the Selling Writer" (1965), described a scene in three parts:

- Goal: what the viewpoint character wants in this scene. Something specific and immediate.
- Conflict: what stands in the way.
- Disaster: the outcome. Usually the character doesn't get what they wanted, or gets it at a cost, and things are now worse.

Applied to Ned's Chapter 12:

"Before:" Isla and Morag talk about the missing passenger at the bar.

"After:" Isla needs the hotel's guest register, because she suspects the missing man stayed there (goal). Morag refuses and claims it's confidential (conflict). Isla takes a photo of the register while Morag is serving a customer, and Morag sees her (disaster). Now Isla has a name and an enemy.

It's the same location, with the same two people and roughly the same information. But now something is at stake, Isla acts, and the relationship changes. The information Isla gets has cost her something, and information that costs something is information readers remember.

Symptom 2: Every chapter feels like the last one

What it looks like: The story moves, but in circles. The protagonist tries something, it doesn't work, she tries something similar, it doesn't work either. The stakes are the same in Chapter 18 as in Chapter 8.

Likely cause: Repeated beats. You've found a scene type that works and you're running it again and again, at the same intensity.

The fix: escalate, and make each attempt fail differently.

A useful pattern for the middle is the try–fail cycle: the protagonist tries to solve the problem, fails, and the failure makes things worse. The key word is worse. Each failure should raise the cost, narrow the options or reveal something that changes the problem.

A handy test, widely taught in writing workshops, is to ask of each outcome: is it a “yes, but...” or a “no, and...”?

- “Did Isla get the guest register?” Yes, but Morag saw her, and by evening the whole island knows Isla Crane is snooping.
- “Did the police take her seriously?” No, and the officer she spoke to phoned the ferry company, who are now asking why their relief skipper is “making trouble”.

Both answers move the story forward and make Isla's situation worse. Compare the dead answers: “Yes” (problem solved, tension gone) and “No” (nothing changes, try again).

You can also escalate along different dimensions rather than simply turning the volume up:

- External stakes: her job, her safety.
- Relationship stakes: her sister, her old mentor, the island's opinion.
- Internal stakes: what she believes about herself.

Symptom 3: Your protagonist is waiting for things to happen

What it looks like: Events arrive at the protagonist's door. She's told things, shown things and summoned places. She reacts, often thoughtfully, but she rarely starts anything.

Likely cause: A passive protagonist. It happens when the author is so focused on moving the plot that the main character becomes a camera the plot points at.

The fix: make her choose.

Look at each chapter and ask: what decision does my protagonist make here? It doesn't have to be dramatic. "Phone the police or not? Tell Tess or not? Take the photo or not?" The point is that her choices, and their consequences, should drive the story.

Ned's Chapter 16 is the textbook case. The biggest discovery in the first half of the book — the missing man's name — arrives by phone. Isla does nothing to earn it. Fix it by making her go and get it: she takes the photo of the hotel register, works out which guest never checked out, and goes looking for his car at the mainland terminal. "She" finds the name, and it costs her.

A related warning: avoid rescue by coincidence. If the answer to the protagonist's problem turns up by chance — overheard in a café, found in a drawer, delivered by a stranger — readers feel cheated. A widely used rule of thumb: coincidences that make things worse for your character are acceptable; coincidences that make things better are suspicious.

Symptom 4: There's no midpoint

What it looks like: The question that drives the story stays exactly the same for forty thousand words. The protagonist wants the same thing, pursues it the same way, and the reader starts to feel they've been on this ferry before.

Likely cause: Act Two lacks a turn. Without one, the middle is one long, flat stretch.

The fix: build a midpoint shift.

Many structure models (including the "Save the Cat!" beat sheet we met in Part 2) put a major turn around the middle of the book. Common versions:

- A false victory: the protagonist seems to get what they wanted, and it turns out to be a trap or the wrong thing.
- A false defeat: everything seems lost, and it turns out to open a door.
- A revelation: new information changes the question. It's no longer "Who vanished?" but "Why would anyone want this particular man gone?"
- A commitment: the protagonist stops reacting and goes on the offensive, and the cost of quitting becomes too high.

Ned already has a midpoint: discovering who Neil Garvie was. The trouble is that he'd made it a phone call in Chapter 16. Rebuilt, it becomes a sequence in which Isla finds Garvie's car, finds his survey notes in the glovebox, and realises what he was surveying: the land around her father's old boatyard. The land her sister Tess now owns.

The question changes. It's no longer just who vanished? It's who on this island needed that survey to never be finished, and is my own sister one of them?

That's a midpoint. Half the island has a motive, and one of them is family.

Symptom 5: Your subplot is wandering around the book on its own

What it looks like: Every few chapters, the story pauses for a subplot that has no connection to the main plot. A romance. A family feud. A hobby. Readers start skimming those chapters to get back to the "real" story.

Likely cause: A subplot that doesn't touch the main plot. It's carrying its own luggage on a different boat.

The fix: make the plots collide.

A good subplot does at least one of these jobs:

- Complicates the main plot: creates obstacles, or makes the protagonist's choices harder.
- Reflects the theme: shows another angle on what the book is about.
- Raises the stakes: gives the protagonist something more to lose.

Ned's sister subplot had been running alongside the mystery: Isla and Tess circling old resentments over dinner. Moving and well written, and completely separate. The midpoint fix above solves this at a stroke, because now the land Garvie was surveying belongs to Tess. Every conversation between the sisters is suddenly loaded. Does Tess know something? Is she protecting someone? Herself?

The subplot hasn't changed its emotional heart. It has just been connected to the plumbing.

Symptom 6: You keep adding storms

What it looks like: Whenever the story slows down, something dramatic happens to it: a storm, an accident, a fire, a sudden illness, an unexpected visitor with a gun. Each event is exciting. Taken together, they feel random.

Likely cause: You're using external events to supply energy the story isn't generating on its own. The events aren't caused by anything the characters did, and they don't cause anything either.

The fix: connect events with "therefore" and "but", not "and then".

A well-known piece of storytelling advice from the creators of “South Park”, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, in a widely shared talk to a university writing class: if the beats of your story are connected by “and then”, you’ve got a list of events. They should be connected by “therefore” or “but”.

- “Isla asks questions, and then there’s a storm, and then the police call.” (List.)
- “Isla photographs the register, therefore Morag tells the island she’s snooping, but the register gives her a name, therefore she goes looking for his car...” (Story.)

Ned’s storms can stay — it’s a story about an island and a ferry, and the weather is part of the world. But the weather has to do something to the plot: trap a suspect on the island, stop Isla getting to the mainland when she needs to, strand two characters who have every reason to lie to each other. A storm that changes nothing is scenery. A storm that forces a decision is plot.

Ned keeps one storm and cuts the other.

Symptom 7: The pacing feels slow, even though plenty happens

What it looks like: Readers (or you) feel the book dragging, but when you look at the outline, plenty is going on.

Likely cause: Pacing problems at the level of sentences and scenes rather than plot.

Common culprits:

- Summarising drama, dramatising trivia. The confrontation with Callum is reported in two lines (“They argued, and she left”). Isla’s journey from the hotel to the harbour gets two pages of description.
- Long sentences in fast moments. Action written in slow, winding, subordinate-clause-heavy prose.
- Over-long reactions. After every event, several pages of the character thinking it over.

The fix: match the speed of the prose to the importance of the moment.

- Dramatise (show in real time, as a scene) what matters most: confrontations, discoveries, decisions.
- Summarise what doesn’t: travel, routine, time passing. “Three days of ferry runs passed without incident” is a perfectly good sentence.
- In fast moments, shorter sentences and paragraphs speed the reader’s eye.

Swain had a name for the reflective passage after a scene: the sequel, made up of reaction (the emotional response), dilemma (weighing options) and decision (choosing what to do

next). Sequels are essential; they're where readers feel the impact of events and understand the character's choices. But they should be in proportion. A two-page scene doesn't usually need a five-page sequel.

Symptom 8: You've lost interest in your own book

What it looks like: Every writing session feels like homework. Meanwhile, a gorgeous new idea for a completely different book has turned up and won't stop flirting with you.

Likely cause: One of three things, and it's worth working out which:

1. Fatigue. The middle is long; you're tired. Normal.
2. The shiny new idea. Also normal. New ideas are always more attractive than a half-finished draft, because they haven't had their problems revealed yet. A new idea is a ferry seen from the shore on a sunny day.
3. A real structural problem, where your boredom is your instinct telling you the story isn't working. One of the symptoms above may be the real issue.

The fix:

- For fatigue: lower your daily target for a fortnight; protect the habit rather than the word count.
- For the shiny new idea: write it down in your idea notebook (Part 1), in as much detail as you like. Then close the notebook and go back. The idea will still be there, and you'll have the confidence of having finished something.
- For a structural problem: run the step-zero diagnostic again and see whether the "What changes" column is empty.
- For all three: try skipping ahead. Leave a note — [SCENE: Isla confronts Tess about the land. Write later.] — and jump to a scene you're excited about. Many writers draft out of order. You can fill the gaps later, and often you'll find the skipped scene has become easier, because now you know what it leads to.

Symptom 9: You've realised the whole thing is wrong

What it looks like: Somewhere around 40,000 words, you see it clearly. The killer should be someone else. The protagonist should be her sister. It should be set in winter. The first half of the book is now built on foundations you no longer believe in.

Likely cause: Discovery. Congratulations: you know your book better than you did when you started. This happens to architects as well as gardeners.

The fix: decide between "note and push on" and "go back".

A rule of thumb:

- If the change is big but you can see the ending, note it and push on. Write the rest of the draft as if the change has already been made. Add a note to the top of the document (“From Ch 18: Tess owns the boatyard land. Fix earlier chapters in revision”) and keep going. You’ll fix the first half during the rewrite, when you’ll know exactly what needs to change.
- If the change means you no longer know where the story is going, it may be worth stopping, re-planning (Part 2) and starting again, ideally re-using as much as possible.

What you should usually avoid is the trap of going back to Chapter One every time you have a better idea. Writers can spend years polishing the first third of a novel that never gets an ending. A finished draft with a known list of problems is enormously more valuable than a beautiful first act.

Myth vs Reality: “If the middle is this hard, the idea must be bad.”

The myth: Good ideas are easy to write, so struggling means you’ve picked the wrong one.

The reality: Almost every long project hits resistance in the middle. That’s a property of the middle, not a verdict on your idea. The difference between finished and unfinished books is rarely the quality of the idea. It’s whether the writer found a way through the swamp. The fixes above are the planks.

A brief word about continuity (Ned isn’t listening)

There’s one more thing worth doing in the middle, while the details are fresh: keeping a record of facts as you invent them. A character’s eye colour. The name of the dog. What day of the week the crucial crossing happened. When the ferry does and doesn’t run.

You started a story bible in Part 2. The middle is when it either earns its keep or quietly dies.

Ned’s dies. In June, he decides that updating the bible is “breaking his momentum”, and he’s on a roll. In Chapter 19, Isla needs to get to the mainland urgently on a winter Sunday, and Ned writes, with great confidence and without checking anything:

There were no boats on a Sunday. There never had been, not in winter, not in all the years she’d known the island.

It’s a good line. It’s atmospheric. It’s correct, too: Ned knows his fictional timetable perfectly well.

He just doesn’t remember Chapter 3.

What Ned did next

Ned spends a week on surgery instead of writing new words. He turns the pub conversations into scenes with goals and costs. He moves the discovery of Neil Garvie's name from a phone call to Isla's own detective work. He connects Tess to the land. He cuts a storm.

His word count goes down that week, from 31,000 to 29,500. It's the most productive week he's had since March.

Then the engines catch. By the end of August, the spreadsheet says 58,000 words. Isla has been suspended by the ferry company, Tess isn't speaking to her, and someone has let down the tyres on her car on a road where nobody locks their doors. The story is running again, and it's running towards an ending that Ned still hasn't decided.

The three suspect cards are still pinned in a row at the bottom of the corkboard. He's begun to look at them the way you look at a bill you haven't opened.

Try This

1. Run the step-zero diagnostic on your last ten scenes: what happens, what changes. Circle every scene where nothing changes.
2. Rebuild one circled scene using goal, conflict and disaster. Same characters, same setting, but now someone wants something and pays for it.
3. Check your joins. Read the one-line summaries aloud and listen for "and then". Replace with "therefore" or "but" wherever you can.
4. Find your midpoint. If you can't point to the chapter where the question changes, design one.
5. Update your story bible. Yes, now. Especially the thing you're sure you'll remember.

Next Time

Ned is closing in on the end, with a ferry, a missing man, three suspects and no idea which of them did it. In the next instalment, the suspects go on trial. So does Ned.

Part 5: The End (Terms and Conditions Apply).

The End (Terms and Conditions Apply)

Finishing the first draft, resting it, and judging it honestly

Ned's Logbook

It's October. The spreadsheet says 72,000 words. Isla has been suspended, frozen out by her sister, and warned off by half the island. She is three chapters from the truth.

Ned is not.

The three suspect cards are still pinned in a row at the bottom of the corkboard: Callum Rae, harbourmaster. Morag Lusk, hotel owner. Dr Euan Bell, island GP. In March, leaving the culprit undecided felt like artistic freedom. In October, it feels like arriving at the ticket office without a ticket.

Jo stands behind him with two mugs of tea.

"You still don't know, do you?"

"I've narrowed it down."

"To?"

"Three."

"There were three in February."

"Yes," says Ned, "but now I've narrowed it down with confidence."

(Ned is invented. Writing yourself into a corner where you have to choose a killer three chapters from the end is, unfortunately, a real and well-worn path.)

Endings are promises kept

Readers forgive a lot in the middle of a book. A slow chapter, a flat secondary character, a coincidence or two. They're much less forgiving about endings, because an ending is where every promise the book has made either comes good or doesn't.

That's the heart of it: a satisfying ending pays off what the book promised.

The promises come in several layers:

- The genre promise. A mystery promises a solution. A romance promises the relationship is resolved. A thriller promises the threat is confronted. Break the genre promise and you'll break your readers' trust, however beautiful the prose.
- The story question. Every book asks a central question early on ("Who vanished from the ferry?"). The ending must answer it, or, in some literary fiction, consciously transform it into a better question.
- The character's arc. If the protagonist has been struggling between what she wants and what she needs (Part 2), the ending is where that struggle is decided.
- The small promises. Every object, mystery, threat and hint that the book lingered on. This is the territory of "Chekhov's gun": the principle, which Anton Chekhov expressed in several versions in letters and conversation, that if a loaded gun appears in the first act, it should go off by the last. If you dwell on something, readers assume it matters.

You'll often hear that the best endings are surprising yet inevitable: the reader doesn't see it coming, but once it arrives, they feel they should have. That second half is the hard part, and it's built long before the last chapter. An ending is inevitable only if the book has been quietly preparing for it all along.

The special case of the mystery: playing fair

Mystery has one more promise, which is unusually explicit: fair play. The reader should have had a real chance to solve the puzzle.

This idea was being codified as early as the late 1920s. The writer and priest Ronald Knox published a "decatalogue", ten commandments for detective fiction, in 1929. The American writer S. S. Van Dine had published "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" the year before. The Detection Club, founded in 1930 by British crime writers including Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, embraced the fair-play spirit; its members swore a famously solemn and tongue-in-cheek oath that their detectives would rely on their wits rather than on divine revelation, coincidence or "acts of God".

Some of Knox's rules have aged badly. One reflects the casual prejudice of its era and is rightly quoted now mainly as a period curiosity. Others are still helpful as principles:

- The culprit should be someone introduced early, not a stranger who appears in the final chapter.
- The detective must not find clues that aren't shown to the reader.
- No supernatural solutions in a non-supernatural story, and no conveniently undiscovered poisons.
- The detective shouldn't solve it by accident or unexplained intuition.

Put more simply: by the end, a reader should be able to flip back and find the clues. Ideally they should also be slightly annoyed with themselves for not spotting them.

All of which explains why Ned's undecided culprit is a problem. You can't play fair with clues pointing to nobody.

The trial of three endings

Ned decides to settle the matter properly. He puts all three possible endings on trial.

The court sits at his kitchen table. Jo is the jury. The charge in each case is the same: Is this ending earned?

The questions the prosecution asks are ones you can use for any ending in any genre:

1. Does it answer the story question?
2. Does it pay off the promises already made, or would it need new ones?
3. Is it fair? Could an attentive reader have got there?
4. Is it surprising? Or will most readers have guessed by Chapter 12?
5. Does it complete the protagonist's arc? Does the ending mean something for her, beyond solving a puzzle?
6. Does it fit the book's themes?

Defendant 1: Morag Lusk, hotel owner

The case for: She's been lying since Chapter 12. She wouldn't show Isla the guest register. She was out on the night of the crossing and won't say where.

Cross-examination: All true, and that's precisely the problem. Morag has been the obvious suspect for half the book. Readers of mysteries are suspicious people, and the most suspicious character is very rarely the culprit. If she did it, most readers will have guessed,

and they'll feel a little cheated in the opposite direction: not by a surprise, but by the absence of one.

Worse, Ned has already given Morag a secret: she was meeting someone she shouldn't have been that night. That's her alibi, and it's a lovely red herring, a lie that comes from character, not from guilt. Make her the killer and the red herring is wasted.

Verdict: "Not guilty." She keeps her secret, and her lie becomes one of the book's satisfying smaller reveals.

Defendant 2: Dr Euan Bell, island GP

The case for: He's the surprise. Kind, charming, trusted by everyone. Nobody suspects the doctor. (Well — readers of classic crime fiction have been suspecting doctors for a century, but let's not tell Ned.)

Cross-examination: Ned's notes include [TOO CHARMING? — SUSPECT] from Day 8 of drafting, and a line in Chapter 9 about Euan knowing something about a patient. That's all. There's no motive connected to Neil Garvie, no means, no opportunity on the ferry. To make Euan the killer, Ned would have to invent a motive in the last chapter and explain it in a speech.

That's the classic unfair ending: the solution arrives with its own evidence, like a guest bringing their own chair. It is surprising. It's surprising the way a twist is surprising when a dream sequence turns out to be real: arbitrary, not inevitable.

To be fair to Euan, this ending could be made to work. Ned could go back and plant motive and clues throughout the book. But it would mean rebuilding the mystery around a character who currently has no connection to its central question.

Verdict: "Not guilty", with a note. Euan's secret about his patient is currently a promise with no payoff. It'll need dealing with.

Defendant 3: Callum Rae, harbourmaster

The case for: Callum has told Isla to "leave it alone" three times. He's the harbourmaster, so he knows the tides better than anyone and controls the harbour's CCTV, including the car-deck camera that's been "broken for weeks". And since the midpoint, the story has revolved around the land survey. What if Garvie's survey wasn't only going to value the land? What if it was going to expose that the harbour wall and pier, which Callum has certified as sound every year for a decade, aren't?

Cross-examination: But Callum wasn't on the passenger count. Thirty-one tickets were scanned, thirty passengers got off. How could he have been aboard?

Ned, who has written ferry timetables for twenty-two years, sits up straight.

“Staff don’t scan tickets.” Crew, company employees and the harbourmaster travelling on business board with a pass. They never appear in the count. Callum could have been on the car deck all along, completely invisible to the one piece of evidence Isla trusts.

It’s a clue hiding in plain sight, in the most important detail of the premise. It’s exactly the sort of thing Ned knows that nobody else does. And it’s fair: a reader who knows how ferries work, or who notices that crew are mentioned boarding without being counted, could get there.

Arc and theme: Callum was Isla’s mentor. He was there when the boatyard failed. He’s been the voice of the island saying keep your head down, and that turns out to be because the island’s judgement has been protecting him. Isla has spent the whole book refusing to ask anyone for help, least of all Callum. If, in the final act, she finally swallows her pride and asks him, and that request is what makes him give himself away, then her growth and the solution become the same scene.

Verdict: “Guilty.”

Jo, the jury, nods. “Obviously,” she says. “It was always him.”

It wasn’t always him. Ned has spent seven months not knowing. But that’s the effect a well-chosen ending has: once the right answer arrives, it starts to feel as if it was there from the beginning. Part of the reason is that, in a sense, it was. Callum’s warnings, the CCTV and the uncounted crew were all already in the draft. Ned’s job now is to make sure they’re placed so that they’re noticeable on a second reading and easy to miss on the first.

The promise–payoff ledger

With the culprit chosen, Ned does something every writer can do at the end of a first draft: he makes a promise–payoff ledger. On the left, every promise the book makes — every question, hint, object, secret and threat. On the right, where (and whether) it’s paid off.

Promise (setup)	Where	Payoff
The count: 31 boarded, 30 got off	Ch 27	Garvie went over the side; crew aren’t counted
Car-deck CCTV “broken for weeks”	Ch 27	Callum reported it fixed and switched it off
Callum: “leave it alone”	Ch 27	Revealed as self-protection
Morag’s secret meeting	Ch 24	Revealed and forgiven; her alibi

Promise (setup)	Where	Payoff
Someone interested in Isla's car	Ch 22	Tyres let down; a warning
Garvie's survey of the boatyard land	Ch 26	Exposes the harbour wall
Tess's coldness	Ch 25	She was protecting Isla from Callum
Tide table with times circled		— nothing —
Dr Bell's secret about a patient		— nothing —

Two orphaned promises are highlighted at the bottom. Readers will notice both. The tide table with circled times was a gardener moment back in March: a great image Ned discovered while drafting and never used. Dr Bell's secret was a red herring that never got its reveal.

Each orphan has three possible fixes:

1. Pay it off. The circled times turn out to be Garvie's own notes on tidal heights at the harbour wall, which is evidence for the survey's findings. That's satisfying and fair, and it ties in neatly.
2. Reduce it. If a setup can't be paid off, make it smaller, so readers don't expect a payoff. Dr Bell's secret becomes a single line, resolved quietly when Isla realises his evasiveness was about patient confidentiality, which is exactly what a decent doctor would be evasive about.
3. Cut it. If neither works, remove it in revision.

Ned writes both fixes into his "fix later" file. Then he writes the last four chapters.

The day it's finished

On a Thursday morning in late October, before work, Ned types the last line of "The Tide Tables": Isla on the bridge of the "Marram" at first light, taking the early boat out and coming back.

He types THE END.

The spreadsheet says 84,200 words. It has taken him eight months.

He'd like to report that he felt triumphant. He actually felt mostly strange: proud, flat and a little lost, all at once. Many writers describe something like this, and it's worth knowing

in advance so it doesn't alarm you. Finishing a draft is an enormous achievement. It is also, oddly, the end of a daily relationship.

It's worth marking. Tell people. Have the cake. Very few people who say they'll write a novel actually reach the end of a draft, and you have. Whatever happens next, that is real.

And then — this is important — do nothing with it for a while.

Put it in a drawer

The single most useful thing you can do with a freshly finished draft is leave it alone.

Right now, you can't see your book clearly. You remember what you meant each scene to do, so you can't tell whether it does it. You know what the characters are thinking, so you can't tell whether it's on the page. You're too close.

Time fixes this. Stephen King, in "On Writing", recommends putting a draft away for at least six weeks. The exact period matters less than the principle: long enough that when you come back, you read it more like a stranger would.

While it rests:

- Don't reread it. Not even "just the ending".
- Read other books, especially in your genre. You'll come back with sharper eyes.
- Start something else: the next idea from your notebook, short stories, anything. It helps loosen your grip.
- Get the admin going. Look ahead to the business side of the series (Parts 8 to 10), but don't commit to anything yet.
- Recruit your first readers (see below).

Ned puts the manuscript in a folder labelled DO NOT OPEN UNTIL DECEMBER. He spends November reading mysteries and, in a moment of weakness, starts an outline for the romance between rival ferry operators.

Reading your own draft

When the drawer opens, read the whole book in as few sittings as you can manage, as a reader, not an editor.

A few techniques help:

- Change the format. Print it out, or send it to an e-reader. Seeing the text in a new form makes it look less like your own work and more like a book.

- Read quickly. You're looking at the shape of the whole, not the sentences.
- Don't fix anything yet. Make notes only. If you stop to fix a sentence on page 12, you'll lose the experience of the book as a whole.
- Use simple margin marks. For example: B where you got bored, C where you were confused, ? where you didn't believe something, ! where something worked. The patterns will tell you more than the individual notes.
- Write a one-page letter to yourself at the end, as if you were an editor. What's the book about? What works? What are the three biggest problems?

Ned's letter to himself identifies: a slow stretch around Chapters 12 to 15 (despite his surgery), Isla being too quick to forgive Callum's warnings in the first half, the two orphaned promises, and, cheerfully, "Timetable feels very authentic."

He doesn't spot the Sunday problem. The author almost never spots the Sunday problem.

Alpha readers, beta readers and critique partners

You need other readers. Not because you're incapable of judging your own work, but because you can't un-know your own book. Other people can tell you where they were bored, confused, or ahead of you, and nobody else can give you that information.

The terms vary between writing communities, but broadly:

- Alpha readers read early, rough material (sometimes chapter by chapter during drafting), usually for broad reactions. They're often fellow writers.
- Critique partners are usually other writers who swap work with you, giving detailed craft feedback in exchange for yours. It's a reciprocal relationship, often lasting years.
- Beta readers read a complete (or nearly complete) draft as readers, telling you about their experience of the book. Ideally, at least some of them read your genre regularly.

A few guidelines for finding and using them:

- Not only family and close friends. People who love you are often too kind, or too worried about hurting you, to tell you the book drags. They're welcome readers; they shouldn't be the only ones.
- Readers of your genre are gold. A mystery reader will spot an unfair clue in a way a literary-fiction reader might not.
- Three to five readers is a common, manageable number. One reader's opinion is a data point. Three readers saying the same thing is a pattern.
- Be wary of sharing a full manuscript with strangers you know nothing about. Writing groups, critique communities and reader networks are the usual routes. Most beta reading is done in good faith, and as Part 1 noted, the real value of a book is in its

execution, but it's sensible to know who has your file.

- Paid beta reading services exist. Treat them like any other service: check reviews and credentials, and see Part 7's Scam Watch before paying anyone.

Ask better questions

"Did you like it?" gets you a polite "yes". Instead, give readers specific questions. For example:

Beta-reader question sheet (template)

1. Where, if anywhere, did you lose interest? (Page or chapter is enough.)
2. Where were you confused?
3. Was there anything you didn't believe — a choice, a coincidence, a reaction?
4. When did you guess the solution (if you did)? What made you suspect?
5. Which character did you most want to spend time with? Which did you not care about?
6. Did the ending feel earned? Was anything left unresolved that bothered you?
7. Did you notice any facts that didn't add up — names, times, places, dates?
8. Would you recommend it to a friend who reads this kind of book? Why or why not?

(You're welcome to answer more briefly than this. A list of page numbers with "bored" or "confused" is genuinely useful.)

Question 4 is gold for a mystery. Question 7 is gold for Ned, though he doesn't know it yet.

Receiving feedback without falling over

It's hard to hear criticism of something you spent eight months making. Some practical habits:

- Thank them, and don't argue. Even if they've misread something. "Especially" if they've misread something: that's information about what's on the page.
- Wait a day before responding, or deciding anything.
- Look for patterns. If one reader dislikes a character, that's taste. If three readers do, that's a problem.
- Separate the diagnosis from the prescription. Neil Gaiman put this memorably in a 2010 list of writing rules for "The Guardian": when people tell you something's wrong, they're usually right; when they tell you exactly how to fix it, they're usually

wrong. A reader's "this chapter dragged" is reliable. Their suggestion to "add a car chase" probably isn't.

- It's your book. You don't have to take every note. But if you're dismissing everything, ask yourself why.

What Ned did next

Ned sends the manuscript to three readers in December. Jo, who has heard about the book every day for a year and insists on reading it "properly, from the start". His brother, who reads thrillers on holiday. And Priya, a colleague from the scheduling office who reads about two mysteries a week and is, by universal agreement, the most precise person in the building after Ned.

He gives them the question sheet and a deadline in mid-January.

Jo finishes first. She says the ending made her cry, which Ned decides to take as a compliment. His brother sends a single text: "Good. Bit slow in the middle. Who's Kittiwake?" (It's the relief boat. Ned makes a note.)

Priya's response arrives on a Sunday afternoon. It's four pages long, single-spaced, with page references. It's thoughtful and generous, and it says she guessed Callum around Chapter 22, "which felt about right". She loved Isla and Tess. She wants to know what happened to Dr Bell's patient.

And at the bottom of page four, under question 7:

Small thing. In Chapter 3, Isla takes the Sunday afternoon boat to the mainland to talk to the police. In Chapter 19 it says there are no boats on a Sunday in winter, never have been. Which is it? (I checked our actual winter timetable, out of habit. We don't run Sundays either.)

Ned reads it three times.

Then he goes to his story bible, scrolls to the bottom, and looks at the line he wrote back in February:

Timetable: TBC.

Try This

1. Write a promise–payoff ledger for your draft (or, if you're still drafting, for what you've written so far). Highlight any promise without a payoff.
2. Put your own ending on trial with the six questions: answer, promises, fairness,

surprise, arc and theme.

3. Choose a rest period for your finished draft and write the date you'll reopen it in your diary.
4. Draft your own beta-reader question sheet, tailored to your genre.
5. Make a list of three to five possible readers, at least one of whom reads your genre and isn't related to you.

Next Time

Ned has a finished draft, three sets of reader notes, a promise–payoff ledger with two orphans, and a ferry that runs on a Sunday in one chapter and not in another. Time to open the bonnet and take the engine apart.

Part 6: Taking the Engine Apart.

Taking the Engine Apart

Structural revision: what to cut, what to move, and how to fix continuity

Ned's Logbook

It's 2 a.m. on a Monday in January, and Ned Hollin, who has written ferry timetables for twenty-two years, is sitting at the kitchen table discovering that his novel's ferry doesn't keep to its own timetable.

Priya's note was polite. "Small thing." In Chapter 3, Isla takes the Sunday afternoon boat to the mainland. In Chapter 19, there are no boats on a Sunday in winter, "never have been".

Ned's first reaction is relief. It's a one-line fix. He'll change "Sunday" to "Monday" in Chapter 3 and go to bed.

He opens Chapter 3 and changes the word.

Then he notices that Isla goes to the police on the mainland because she's off duty on Sunday. If it's Monday, she's working. So she'd have to swap shifts with someone, who would have to be mentioned. And if she goes on Monday, the police can't have "already heard by Sunday night" about the missing man, which is what Chapter 5 says. And Chapter 5 is when Morag first lies to her, which only works if—

At 3.15 a.m., Ned has a sheet of paper with eleven arrows on it.

Jo comes downstairs, looks at the paper, and puts the kettle on without a word.

(Ned is invented. The eleven arrows are, if anything, an underestimate of what most continuity fixes look like.)

Revision is not editing

People often use “revision” and “editing” as if they mean the same thing. It’s worth separating them, because doing them in the wrong order wastes an enormous amount of time.

- Revision (sometimes called structural or developmental revision) is about the big picture: the plot, the structure, the characters, the pacing, what happens and in what order. It’s taking the engine apart.
- Editing (Part 7) is about the text: paragraphs, sentences, words, consistency and correctness. It’s polishing the paintwork.

The golden rule is big things first. Think of it as a pyramid, worked from the bottom up:

1. Structure: the plot, the order of events, the ending.
2. Scenes: what each one does, and whether it’s needed.
3. Characters and arcs: motivation, consistency, change.
4. Continuity: the facts of the world, the timeline.
5. Paragraphs and sentences: clarity, rhythm, voice.
6. Words: precision, repetition, correctness.

The reason is simple. There’s no point spending a weekend perfecting the sentences in a scene you’re about to cut. Polishing a chapter that might be deleted is one of the most common, and most painful, wastes of a writer’s time.

Ned’s 2 a.m. attempt to fix the Sunday problem with one word is a small version of the same mistake. He’s treating a structural problem (the timeline of the book’s first week) as a word-level fix. That’s why it keeps unravelling.

So he puts the arrows aside and starts again, properly, from the bottom of the pyramid.

Step 1: Gather everything in one place

Before changing anything, collect every piece of feedback and every note into a single document:

- Your own read-through notes and the letter to yourself (Part 5).
- Beta reader responses.
- Your “fix later” file from drafting.
- The promise–payoff ledger (Part 5).

Then sort the notes by level, using the pyramid. Ned’s sorted list looks like this (abridged):

Level	Note	Source
Structure	Middle still slow, Chs 12–15	Self, brother
Structure	Sunday/no-Sunday contradiction (timeline)	Priya
Scenes	Ch 13 and 14 repeat each other	Self
Characters	Isla too quick to accept Callum's warnings early on	Self
Characters	What was Dr Bell's secret?	Priya
Promises	Tide table with circled times: never explained	Ledger
Clarity	"Who's 'Kittiwake'?"	Brother
Fairness	Guessed Callum around Ch 22 — "about right"	Priya
Words	Isla's eyes grey or green?	Fix-later file
Words	Characters nod a lot	Self

Notice what this does. It turns a heap of anxiety into a list of jobs, ordered by importance. It also shows which notes are patterns (the slow middle, raised by two readers and by Ned) and which are single observations.

It also shows that one of Priya's comments is a reassurance, not a problem. Guessing the culprit around Chapter 22, out of 27, is about where a mystery wants an attentive reader to be: suspicious, but not certain until the end. Feedback isn't only a list of faults. It also tells you what to keep.

Step 2: The reverse outline

In Part 4, Ned used a quick diagnostic on ten scenes: what happens and what changes. Now he does the full version for the whole book. It's called a reverse outline: an outline made after writing, describing what the draft actually does rather than what the author intended it to do.

A spreadsheet works best. One row per chapter (or per scene). Useful columns:

- Chapter
- Story day and time, meaning when this happens in the story's own calendar
- What happens (one line)
- What changes (one line)

- Clues and promises planted
- Word count
- Verdict: keep, cut, merge, move or rewrite

Here's an extract from Ned's:

Ch	Story day	What happens	What changes	Clues/ promises	Words	Verdict
1	Sat, 21:00–21:40	The last crossing; count is 31/30	Disruption	The count; Callum aboard? (not shown)	3,100	Rewrite opening
2	Sat, 22:00	Isla reports it; told it's a scanner fault	Isla isn't believed	CCTV "broken for weeks"	2,800	Keep
3	Sun, 14:00	Isla takes the Sunday boat to see police	Police dismissive	—	3,300	Timeline conflict
4	Sun, 18:00	Isla visits the old boatyard; finds tide table	Past intrudes	Tide table, circled times	2,900	Keep; pay off tide table
5	Mon	Morag first lies	First suspect	Morag's night out	3,000	Keep
...						
12	Thu	Hotel register photo	Isla has a name and an enemy	Register	3,400	Keep
13	Thu	Isla–Callum: "leave it alone" (2nd time)	Little	—	3,200	Merge with 14
14	Fri	Isla–Morag rehash Callum's warning	Nothing	—	2,600	Merge with 13
15	Fri	Storm; Isla stuck	Weather traps Euan on island	—	2,900	Trim
...						
19	Sun (week 3)	"No boats on a Sunday"	Isla can't get off the island	—	3,100	Keep (rule is right)

Two things become visible that weren't visible in the manuscript.

First, the "Story day" column shows the timeline problem plainly. In a 300-page book you can't see that Chapter 3 and Chapter 19 contradict each other. In a single column, you can.

Second, the "What changes" column shows that Chapters 13 and 14 do almost nothing. Together they're 5,800 words of characters discussing the plot, the same problem Ned met in the swamp of Part 4. He fixed some of it then, but these two chapters survived.

The reverse outline takes Ned two evenings. It's the single most useful document he'll make in the whole revision.

Step 3: Diagnose the scenes

With the reverse outline done, Ned asks three questions of every scene:

1. Does it change something? The situation, a relationship, what the protagonist knows or wants. If nothing changes, the scene is a candidate for cutting or merging.
2. Is it in the right place? Sometimes a good scene is simply too early (before the reader cares) or too late (after its information is old news).
3. Is it doing more than one job? The best scenes advance the plot and deepen character and plant a clue. A scene doing only one of those can often be combined with another.

Chapters 13 and 14 fail question 1. Ned merges them into one chapter in which Isla confronts Callum, not at the harbour office but on the car deck of the "Marram" itself, at the place where Neil Garvie disappeared. The new chapter is shorter (3,100 words instead of 5,800), sharper, and does three jobs at once:

- It escalates the conflict between Isla and Callum.
- It shows Isla not accepting his warning this time, which fixes the arc problem Ned noted.
- It plants the crucial fair-play clue: crew and staff board without scanning tickets.

That last point deserves a closer look.

Before and after: planting a clue in plain sight

Here's an extract from the original Chapter 13, as Ned drafted it. (Like all the examples from "The Tide Tables", it's fictional, written for this series.)

Before

“You need to leave this alone, Isla,” Callum said. He was sitting behind his desk in the harbour office, his hands folded in front of him, and he looked tired and older than she remembered.

“Somebody’s missing,” she said.

“Nobody’s missing. Nobody’s reported anyone missing. The scanner made a mistake, the company knows it made a mistake, and you’re making it worse.”

She thought about what he’d said. He had been her mentor once, when she’d first started on the boats, and he had always been fair to her. Maybe he was right. Maybe she was seeing things that weren’t there because she wanted something to be wrong, after everything that had happened. She nodded slowly.

“Maybe,” she said.

And the revised version, now set on the car deck during a crossing:

After

“Callum came down the stairs from the bridge as the” Marram cleared the harbour wall, and Mikey on the ramp waved him through without looking up from his scanner. Staff passes. Nobody ever looked at a staff pass.

“You need to leave this alone, Isla.”

“Somebody went over the side of this boat.” She put her hand flat on the rail. “About here. And you want me to write it up as a scanner fault.”

“I want you to keep your job.” He didn’t look at the rail. He looked at her. “Your dad never knew when to stop either.”

She’d have taken that from him once. She’d have nodded and gone back to the wheelhouse and told herself he was right, because he’d always been right. The boat lifted under them. Somewhere below, a car alarm started up and stopped.

“Then it’s lucky,” she said, “I’m not my dad.”

- “Mikey... waved him through” — the fair-play clue: staff don’t scan, so they’re never in the count. Delivered as background detail, not spotlighted.
- “About here” — the scene is set where the crime happened, raising tension.
- “He didn’t look at the rail” — a small tell, noticeable on rereading.
- “Your dad never knew when to stop” — Callum uses the past (the boatyard) as a

weapon. Character, history, and a hint about his role back then.

- “I’m not my dad” — Isla refuses the warning. The arc moves forward.
- Deleted: “She thought about what he’d said... She nodded slowly” — the old version told us Isla’s feelings and had her give in. The new one shows her temptation to give in, and her refusal.

Look at how the crucial clue is planted. The fact that staff don’t scan tickets appears as one line of background, in the middle of an arrival, before the conflict starts. A reader’s attention is on the coming argument, not on Mikey and his scanner. That’s what fair play looks like in practice: the clue is on the page, in plain sight, and the scene gives the reader something more interesting to look at.

Ned plants two more mentions of staff passes earlier in the book, each equally casual. By the time the solution arrives in Chapter 27, a reader who flips back will find all three.

Step 4: Fix the arcs and pay the debts

With the structure settled, Ned works through his character notes and the promise–payoff ledger from Part 5:

- Isla’s arc. In the first half, she accepts Callum’s warnings too easily, which makes her final defiance feel sudden. The fix is to show the temptation to give in and her resistance growing chapter by chapter, as in the new car-deck scene. An arc is a series of choices, not a single change of heart in the last act.
- The tide table. The circled times become Garvie’s own notes of tidal heights at the harbour wall, evidence of what his survey found. A dangling image becomes a clue.
- Dr Bell’s secret. Reduced to a single, quiet line in Chapter 24: Isla realises he’s been evasive because of patient confidentiality. Not a red herring any more, just a decent man doing his job.
- “Kittiwake”. Ned’s brother asked who Kittiwake was. It’s the relief boat, but the book never says so. Ned adds a sentence the first time it’s mentioned. Readers can’t ask you questions mid-chapter; if one reader stumbled, others will too.

Step 5: Continuity, or how to fix a plot hole without making two more

Now, finally, the Sunday ferry.

The lesson of Ned's 2 a.m. session is that continuity errors are usually symptoms of a timeline nobody wrote down. The fix isn't to change a word. It's to build the timeline, find the root cause, choose a fix deliberately, and then trace every consequence.

Build the timeline

Ned makes a simple calendar of the novel's first three weeks, one row per day, with what happens and which chapter shows it. (If he'd filled in the "Timetable" section of his story bible in Part 2, he'd have had this already. He notes this, without enthusiasm.)

Find the root cause

The rule in Chapter 19 (no winter Sunday service) is right. It's realistic, it matches the island's isolation, and it does a job: it traps Isla on the island at a crucial moment. The error is in Chapter 3, which Ned wrote in March without checking.

Choose the fix

Ned considers three options:

1. Change the rule. Give the island a Sunday service. "Rejected:" it would weaken Chapter 19 and the sense of isolation.
2. Move Chapter 3 to Monday. "Possible, but expensive:" it creates the chain of eleven arrows (shift swaps, police timing, Morag's lie).
3. Change how Isla gets to the mainland on Sunday. Isla doesn't take the scheduled ferry. She persuades an old friend of her father's, a fisherman, to run her across in his boat.

Option 3 wins. And it does more than fix the hole: it gives Isla an ally from her father's world, shows she still has some friends on Skerrow, and turns a dull ferry ride into a short, choppy and slightly illegal crossing in a small boat in winter. A continuity fix has become a better scene.

This is worth remembering. The best continuity fixes often improve the story. If a fix only patches the hole, look for one that does something else as well.

Trace every consequence

Even a good fix ripples. Ned goes through the reverse outline and finds three places that mention how Isla got to the mainland on that Sunday. All three are updated. He then adds the fisherman to the story bible, along with his boat's name.

Then, at last, write it down

Ned opens the story bible, scrolls to the bottom, and deletes Timetable: TBC. In its place he writes out the “Marram”’s winter timetable in full, crossing by crossing, Monday to Saturday.

It takes him eleven minutes. He’s been putting it off for eleven months.

Murder your darlings

At some point in every revision, a writer has to cut something they love. The traditional advice is famous: kill your darlings.

It’s often attributed to William Faulkner, and sometimes to others. The usual source, though, is the critic Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who told students in a lecture at Cambridge in January 1914, later collected in his book “On the Art of Writing” (1916), to “murder your darlings”. Murder, not kill. Quiller-Couch was arguing against ornamental writing: passages included because the writer was proud of them rather than because the work needed them.

Ned’s darling is a three-page passage in Chapter 4 about the history of Skerrow, from the Bronze Age to the arrival of the first steam ferry. It’s well researched. It’s lovingly written. It’s the best prose in the book, in Ned’s opinion. And it stops the story dead, right as Isla finds the tide table.

Cutting it is easier with a simple trick that many writers use: a darlings file. Nothing cut is deleted. It’s moved to a separate document. You might use it later: in another scene, on your website, in a newsletter for readers who like extras. Most of the time you never do. But knowing it’s safe makes the cut bearable.

The Bronze Age goes into the darlings file. One sentence of it survives, in Isla’s head, as she stands in her father’s boatyard.

Do you need a developmental editor?

Some writers hire a professional for this stage. Two common services:

- A developmental (or structural) edit. An editor reads the whole manuscript and gives detailed feedback on structure, pacing, character and plot, usually in an editorial letter of several pages plus notes in the manuscript. They diagnose and suggest; you do the rewriting.
- A manuscript assessment (sometimes called a critique or evaluation). A lighter, cheaper version: an editorial letter, usually without detailed notes in the text.

A good developmental editor brings what beta readers can't: professional experience of hundreds of manuscripts, knowledge of the genre's conventions, and the vocabulary to explain why something isn't working. For a first novel, it can be an enormous education.

It's also one of the most expensive services in self-publishing, priced by the word or by the hour, and you should know roughly what to expect before you contact anyone.

Checked On: editorial rates

Two professional bodies publish rate guidance. Neither is a fixed price; individual editors charge more or less depending on experience, genre and turnaround.

- Editorial Freelancers Association (US), 2026 rate chart, fiction: developmental editing about 3.0–3.5¢ per word (roughly \$52.50–\$70 per hour). The chart is based on a survey of rates charged in 2025. At those rates, a developmental edit of Ned's 84,000-word draft would cost roughly \$2,500–\$2,900. — the-efa.org/rates (<https://www.the-efa.org/rates/>) — checked 28 October 2026.
- Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (UK), suggested minimum hourly rates from 1 March 2026: substantial editing, rewriting and development editing £42.66 per hour. CIEP stresses these are minimums for an editor with core training and some experience, and many charge more. — [ciep.uk/resources/suggested-minimum-rates](https://www.ciep.uk/resources/suggested-minimum-rates) (<https://www.ciep.uk/resources/suggested-minimum-rates>) — checked 28 October 2026.

Australian and Canadian writers can find editors through the Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd) and Editors Canada respectively.

When it's worth it: when you've revised as far as you can on your own and with beta readers, and you know something is still wrong but can't see what. Or when you want to learn, and can afford to.

When it may not be: when you haven't yet done your own revision (you'll be paying a professional to tell you what a reverse outline would have shown you), or when the money would be better spent on copyediting and a cover (Parts 7 and 8).

Ned gets a quote for a manuscript assessment, thinks hard about his budget, and decides that Priya's four pages, his brother's text and his own reverse outline have given him enough to work on for now. It's a reasonable decision for him. It isn't the right decision for everyone, and we'll see in the next instalment where he does decide to spend money.

How many drafts?

There's no right number. Some writers do one deep structural revision; others go through five or six. What matters is that each pass has a purpose. Ned works in three passes over February and March:

1. The structural pass: the merged chapters, the Sunday fix, the clue planting, the new car-deck scene, the darlings cut.
2. The character pass: Isla's arc, Tess, Callum's tells, the payoffs.
3. The read-through: the whole book, start to finish, quickly, as a reader, to check it all hangs together.

He also does one small but important technical thing: he saves each draft as a separate, dated file, as he learned in Part 3. `tide-tables_draft2_14Feb.docx`. If a revision goes wrong, he can go back. If a cut turns out to be a mistake, the old version is still there.

At the end of March, the manuscript stands at 79,600 words, about 4,600 fewer than the first draft. Ned rereads the new Chapter 1, which opens with "Thirty-one tickets, the scanner said", and for the first time it feels like a book someone else might pick up.

Try This

1. Gather all your feedback in one document and sort each note by the revision pyramid: structure, scenes, characters, continuity, sentences, words.
2. Make a reverse outline of your draft, with a "Story day" column. Look for scenes where nothing changes, and for any day that appears twice with contradictory events.
3. Pick one scene that fails the "does it change something?" test and either merge it with a neighbour or rewrite it so that something changes.
4. Start a darlings file. Move one passage you love but the book doesn't need into it.
5. Fill in the section of your story bible that you've been avoiding. You know the one.

Next Time

The structure is sound. The ferry keeps to its timetable. But when Ned searches the manuscript for the word "breath", he finds that his characters let out breaths they didn't know they were holding on four separate occasions, and they nod 212 times.

Part 7: Three Editors Walk Into a Sentence.

Three Editors Walk Into a Sentence

Line editing, copyediting, proofreading, and how to tell whether the book is any good

Ned's Logbook

It starts innocently. In April, Ned reads an article about “crutch words”: words that writers lean on without noticing. Out of curiosity, he uses his word processor’s search function on “The Tide Tables”.

nodded: 212 results.

He stares at the number. Then he searches for sighed (64), shrugged (51) and smiled (139). Then, with a growing sense of dread, he searches for breath.

On four separate occasions, in four different chapters, a character lets out a breath they didn’t know they were holding. Twice it’s Isla. Once it’s Tess. Once, in a moment Ned has no memory of writing, it’s a dog.

He goes to find Jo.

“How many times,” he asks, “would you say is too many times for someone to nod in a book?”

Jo considers this. “Have you been counting?”

“The computer has.”

“Then,” says Jo, “it’s too many.”

(Ned is invented. The dog is not as rare as you’d hope.)

Three jobs, often confused

When people say a book “needs editing”, they could mean several quite different jobs. Part 6 covered the first and biggest one: developmental editing, which deals with structure, plot and character. Once the structure is sound, there are three more levels, each closer to the words on the page:

	Line editing	Copyediting	Proofreading
Focus	Style, voice, rhythm, clarity, the effect of the prose on the reader	Correctness and consistency: grammar, spelling, punctuation, usage, facts, internal continuity	The final check for errors that survived, or were introduced, on the laid-out pages
Question it asks	“Is this sentence doing its job as well as it could?”	“Is this right, and is it the same every time?”	“Is anything still wrong on the finished page?”
Typical changes	Tightening, reordering, cutting repetition, sharpening word choices, improving dialogue	Fixing errors, applying a style guide, building a style sheet, querying inconsistencies	Typos, missed words, layout problems, bad line and page breaks
When	After structural revision	After line editing	After the book is formatted, before publication
Works on	Manuscript	Manuscript	Proofs: the formatted ebook or print layout

Two warnings about terminology. First, the boundaries blur. Many editors offer a combined “line and copy edit”, and the names vary between countries and between editors. Second, always ask exactly what a service includes. “Editing” with no qualifier can mean anything from a quick spellcheck to a complete rewrite.

The best way to see the difference between the three jobs isn’t to define them, though. It’s to watch them work on the same sentence.

The life of a sentence

Here’s a sentence from the draft of “The Tide Tables”. (As always, it’s fictional, written for this series.) It’s from Chapter 20, after Isla has argued with Callum on the harbour wall.

Draft

Isla let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding as she slowly turned around to look back at the dark, brooding, ominous shape of the Harbour Office, its windows like dead eyes staring blankly out at the grey and restless sea, and she wondered, not for the first time, whether Callum Rae had ever really told her the truth about anything at all.

It's a perfectly understandable sentence. Ned likes it. It's also sixty-six words long and doing about four sentences' worth of work, badly.

Desk 1: the line editor

The line editor reads for effect. What's this sentence for, and does it get there?

Isla turned back. The harbour office sat dark against the sea, and she wondered whether Callum Rae had ever told her the truth about anything.

The line editor's notes:

- “let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding”: a stock phrase, widely used and widely mocked. It tells us Isla was tense, which the scene has already shown. Cut.
- “slowly turned around to look back”: three words doing the work of one. “Turned back.”
- “dark, brooding, ominous”: three adjectives that all mean roughly the same thing. When you pile them up, each one weakens the others. One is enough; here, “dark” is enough.
- “its windows like dead eyes staring blankly”: a simile that's been used many times before, and “staring blankly” repeats “dead eyes”. Cut. If you want an image here, find a fresh one Isla would think of.
- “grey and restless sea”: the sea has been grey and restless eleven times already in this book. (The line editor has been counting.)
- “not for the first time”: filler.
- “ever really told her the truth about anything at all”: “really” and “at all” are padding. The sentence is stronger without them.
- Split the sentence. The short first sentence (“Isla turned back.”) creates a beat, a pause, before the thought lands.

The new version is twenty-five words. It's quieter, and it hits harder.

Notice what the line editor didn't do: change the meaning, add new material, or impose their own style. A good line editor makes the writing more like the writer at their best, not more like the editor.

Desk 2: the copyeditor

The copyeditor reads for correctness and consistency. Their sentence after the line edit:

Isla turned back. The harbour office sat dark against the sea, and she wondered whether Callum Rae had ever told her the truth about anything.

Hardly any visible change. But the copyeditor's notes tell a different story:

- Style sheet entry: The manuscript uses "Harbour Office" (capitalised) in Chapters 2, 7 and 13 and "harbour office" (lower case) elsewhere. Decision: lower case throughout, as it's a description, not a proper name. "Applied across the manuscript (14 changes)."
- Style sheet entry: "harbourmaster" (one word) used 36 times, "harbour master" (two words) 9 times. Decision: one word, as in the author's most frequent usage. "Applied (9 changes)."
- Query to author: "In Chapter 7, the harbour office has a light on at night because Callum works late. Is it deliberately dark this evening? If so, consider making that a point, since it may matter to the plot. If not, should it be lit?"

That last note is the kind of thing a good copyeditor catches and an author almost never does. It isn't a grammar error at all. It's a question of internal continuity, and it might even be an opportunity. (It is. Ned makes the dark window a small, deliberate tell: Callum isn't where he says he is.)

A copyeditor's other outputs include a style sheet for the whole book (more on that below) and fixes to grammar, spelling, punctuation and factual errors throughout.

Desk 3: the proofreader

Weeks later, the book has been formatted for print (Part 9). The proofreader sees the sentence on a laid-out page:

Isla turned back. The harbour office sat dark against the the sea, and she wondered whether Callum Rae had ever told her the truth about any-
thing.

Two problems, both introduced after the copyedit:

- "the the": a doubled word, created when Ned made a late change during formatting. Writers' eyes skip doubled words because the brain expects only one.
- "any- / thing.": the layout has hyphenated the last word of the sentence across a line break, leaving one word alone on the next line. That's ugly, and in this case it's the last line of the page, a moment of tension broken by a dangling syllable. The proofreader marks it for the layout to be adjusted.

This is why proofreading happens on the final formatted proofs and not on the manuscript. Formatting creates its own errors: bad breaks, widows and orphans (single lines stranded at the top or bottom of a page), missing italics, wrong running heads. And every late change risks introducing a new typo.

Self-editing: the crutch-word hunt

Before paying anyone, there's a great deal you can do yourself, and Ned's search for "nodded" is a good start. Every writer has habits that are invisible to them and obvious to readers.

Common culprits:

- Repeated gestures. Nodding, shrugging, sighing, smiling, frowning, raising eyebrows, turning, looking. Characters in early drafts are often extraordinarily busy with their faces. Some gesture is natural; 212 nods is a medical condition.
- Filter words. "She saw", she heard, she felt, she noticed, she realised, she wondered. They put a filter between the reader and the experience. "She heard a car alarm start up below" is usually weaker than "Below, a car alarm started up."
- Throat-clearing. "Started to", began to, managed to, decided to. "She started to run" is rarely better than "she ran".
- Intensifiers that weaken. "Very", really, quite, just, rather, extremely. They often make the word they modify sound less certain.
- Stock phrases. The breath she didn't know she was holding. A smile that didn't reach her eyes. A jaw that clenched. Hearts that hammered. They're not wrong. They're just so familiar that readers slide over them without feeling anything.
- Over-tagged dialogue. "Get out," she hissed angrily. "Said" is nearly invisible to readers and lets the dialogue do the work. Fancy tags and adverbs draw attention to themselves. Often, an action beat ("She put her hand flat on the rail.") works better than any tag.

A practical method: make a list of your own top ten habits, then use your word processor's search to find every instance. You don't have to remove them all; you just have to make each one a choice.

A caution: these are rules of thumb, not laws. Adverbs aren't evil. Filter words are sometimes exactly right, for instance when the noticing is the point. A stock phrase in dialogue can be perfect characterisation, because people talk in stock phrases. Self-editing advice is like ferry safety instructions: worth knowing thoroughly, so you know when you're deliberately ignoring them.

Ned spends three weeks on his crutch-word hunt. The nods fall from 212 to 41. The breaths that nobody knew they were holding are all released, permanently. The dog is given something better to do.

Style guides and style sheets

Copyeditors work from a style guide: a published reference that settles questions like when to write numbers as words, how to punctuate dialogue, and whether it's "realise" or "realize". The two most widely used for books are:

- "The Chicago Manual of Style" (University of Chicago Press), the standard reference for much of US book publishing. The 18th edition was published in September 2024.
- "New Hart's Rules" (Oxford University Press), the standard reference for much of British publishing.

You don't need to own either to self-edit, but you should know which conventions you're following. Most importantly, choose British or American spelling and stick to it. A book that alternates "colour" and "color" looks careless, even to readers who couldn't tell you which is which.

A style sheet is something different: a short document recording the decisions made for this particular book. Copyeditors create one as they work, and it's invaluable for you, your proofreader and any future books in a series.

Sample style sheet — "The Tide Tables" (extract)

Spelling: British (-ise endings: realise, organise).

Names: Isla Crane; Tess Crane; Callum Rae; Morag Lusk; Dr Euan Bell (no full stop after "Dr"); Neil Garvie.

Places: Skerrow; Haddon Quay; the harbour office (lower case); the harbour wall.

Boats: the "Marram", the "Kittiwake" (italicised; "the" not italicised).

Terms: harbourmaster (one word); car deck (two words); ticket scanner.

Numbers: spelled out up to one hundred; times as "9.14 p.m." in narration.

Timetable: winter service Monday–Saturday only; no Sunday sailings. Crossing time forty minutes.

Character details: Isla — 34, grey eyes. Tess — 38.

Dialogue: single quotation marks; double for quotes within quotes.

That entry for Isla's eyes settles a question from Ned's fix-later file back in Part 3. (Grey. It was always grey.)

Software and AI tools: useful assistants, unreliable judges

Writers now have a wide range of tools for checking their work: built-in spelling and grammar checkers, dedicated grammar and style software, readability analysers and, increasingly, general-purpose AI assistants.

They're genuinely useful for some jobs:

- Catching typos, doubled words, missing words and simple grammar slips.
- Flagging repeated words and phrases, overlong sentences and passive constructions.
- Spotting some inconsistencies (spellings, capitalisation) across a long text.
- Reading text aloud, which is one of the best proofreading tricks there is: your ear catches what your eye skips.

They're much less reliable at others:

- Voice. Tools tend to nudge prose towards a bland average. They don't know that a character speaks in fragments on purpose, or that a long sentence is long for a reason.
- Context. A tool may "correct" dialect, deliberate grammatical errors in dialogue, invented words or period language.
- Confidence. AI tools, in particular, can be fluently and confidently wrong: suggesting "corrections" that introduce errors, or offering facts that aren't true.
- The whole book. Most tools work on chunks of text and don't hold the entire manuscript, its timeline and its characters in mind the way a human copyeditor does.

Treat every suggestion as a suggestion. You're the author; the tool doesn't get a vote, only a voice.

There are also two practical questions to ask before using any AI tool on your manuscript:

1. What happens to your text? Check the tool's terms and privacy settings. Find out whether text you upload can be stored or used to train models, and whether you can opt out. It's your unpublished book.
2. Does it change how your book is classified? Retailers are starting to distinguish between AI assisting an author and AI generating content, and the difference matters when you publish.

Checked On: AI-assisted editing

Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing distinguishes AI-generated content (text, images or translations created by an AI tool, even if you later edited it substantially), which must be disclosed when you publish, from AI-assisted content (work you created yourself and then

used AI tools to edit, refine, error-check or otherwise improve), which need not be disclosed. — KDP Content Guidelines

(https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200672390) — checked 28 October 2026.

In practical terms, a tool that checks your grammar falls on the “assisted” side. A tool that rewrites your paragraphs for you edges towards “generated” for whatever it wrote. Other retailers’ rules differ; Part 10 compares them.

Hiring an editor

If you can afford only one editing service, there’s a good case for copyediting: errors and inconsistencies are the problems readers can see on the page, and they’re the hardest for an author to catch in their own work. But the right answer depends on your book and your skills. A writer with a strong ear and a weak grasp of commas needs a different editor from a meticulous writer whose prose is flat.

Finding one

- Professional directories. Editorial associations list members, often searchable by genre and service: the Editorial Freelancers Association (US), the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (UK), the Institute of Professional Editors (Australia) and Editors Canada.
- Recommendations from other authors in your genre.
- The acknowledgements pages of self-published books you admire.

Choosing one

- Ask for a sample edit. Many editors will edit a short sample (a few pages) free or for a small fee. It’s the best way to see whether their approach suits your writing.
- Check genre experience. An editor who works mainly on academic texts may not be the right fit for a crime novel.
- Ask for references or look for testimonials you can verify.
- Get a written agreement setting out exactly what’s included, the deadline, the fee and payment schedule, and how many rounds of queries are covered.

Checked On: editorial rates

Editorial Freelancers Association (US), 2026 rate chart, fiction:

- Line editing: about 2.7–3.5¢ per word (\$50–\$60 per hour)

- Copyediting: about 2.0–2.7¢ per word (\$40–\$50 per hour)
- Proofreading: about 1.2–2.0¢ per word (\$35–\$45 per hour)

Based on a survey of rates charged in 2025. — the-efa.org/rates (<https://www.the-efa.org/rates/>) — checked 28 October 2026.

CIEP (UK), suggested minimum hourly rates from 1 March 2026: proofreading £31.92, copyediting £37.11. These are minimums for an editor with core training and some experience; many charge more. — ciep.uk (<https://www.ciep.uk/resources/suggested-minimum-rates>) — checked 28 October 2026.

What that means for an 80,000-word novel at the EFA’s per-word ranges: copyediting roughly \$1,600–\$2,200; proofreading roughly \$960–\$1,600. Actual quotes vary with the state of the manuscript, the editor’s experience and the deadline.

Scam Watch: the editor who loves everything

Editing attracts its share of predators, because it’s expensive and hard for beginners to evaluate. Writer Beware, the watchdog sponsored by the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers Association, warns about services that solicit authors directly, require large upfront payments, and bundle “editing” into expensive publishing packages. Warning signs:

- Unsolicited contact praising your book before they’ve read it.
- No verifiable track record: no client list, no association membership, no sample edit.
- “Publishing packages” that bundle editing, cover, “marketing” and distribution for a large fee, often far more than buying the services separately, and sometimes with a contract that takes your rights.
- Guarantees: of bestseller status, of a traditional publishing deal, of sales.
- Pressure: “this price is only available until Friday”.

Check names against Writer Beware (<https://sfga.org/other-resources/writer-beware/>) and the Alliance of Independent Authors’ Watchdog Desk before paying anyone.

How do you know when it’s good enough?

This is the question every writer asks, and there’s no instrument that measures it. No software, checklist or editor can certify that a novel is good. But there are signs that a book is ready to leave you:

- The patterns in reader feedback have been addressed. Not every comment; the ones several readers agreed on.

- The reverse outline holds. Every scene changes something; every promise has a payoff.
- Your changes are getting smaller. You've moved from rewriting chapters to adjusting sentences to swapping individual words.
- You're changing things back. When you find yourself restoring a word you removed last week, you've reached the point of diminishing returns.
- It's been read cleanly by someone else. A copyedit or a careful reader has been through it after your final revision.

There's a line, usually traced to the French poet Paul Valéry, that a work is never finished, only abandoned. It's often quoted as consolation. A more practical version for novelists might be: a book is finished when further work would make it different rather than better.

That doesn't mean "good enough" is an excuse for "not good". It means that at some point you have to trust the work, and the people who've helped you with it, and let it go.

What Ned did next

Ned looks at his budget, the EFA rate chart and his own strengths, and makes his choices:

- Line editing: himself. Three weeks of crutch-word hunting, reading every chapter aloud, and cutting stock phrases. It's slow and unglamorous, and the prose is noticeably better for it.
- Copyediting: a professional. He finds a copyeditor through a professional directory who works mainly on crime fiction, pays for a sample edit of Chapter 1, likes what he sees, and books her for May. It's the single biggest expense of the project so far, and he never regrets it. Her style sheet runs to four pages. Her query about the dark window in the harbour office becomes one of his favourite moments in the book.
- Proofreading: Priya, plus himself on the printed proof, as a deliberate budget decision. He knows this is a compromise. A professional proofreader would almost certainly catch things they'll both miss. He makes a note to revisit it if the book does well enough to justify a second edition.

At the end of June, the manuscript is clean, consistent and copyedited. Isla's eyes are grey. Nobody lets out a breath they didn't know they were holding. The harbourmaster is one word.

Ned feels a satisfaction he hasn't felt since typing "THE END". He mentions to Jo that the next step is the cover, and that he's been thinking he could design it himself.

"I've always had an eye," he says.

Jo, who has seen Ned's Christmas cards, says nothing at all.

Try This

1. Find your crutch words. Make a list of ten words or gestures you suspect you overuse, and search your manuscript for each one. Write down the totals. Be brave.
2. Take one overwritten sentence from your draft and edit it three ways: for effect (line), for consistency (copy), and for errors (proof).
3. Start a style sheet for your book: spelling convention, names, places, numbers, invented terms, and any decisions you keep having to remake.
4. Read one chapter aloud, or use text-to-speech, and mark everything that makes you stumble.
5. If you're thinking of hiring an editor, write down which service you need most and why, and look up two members of a professional editorial association who work in your genre.

Next Time

The words are right. Now the book needs a face. Ned's homemade cover features a ferry, a lighthouse, a full moon, a seagull, a question mark and four different fonts, and he's very proud of all of them.

Part 8: Judging a Book by Its Cover (Everyone Does).

Judging a Book by Its Cover (Everyone Does)

Title, cover, blurb, categories, keywords and price: presenting the book to readers

Ned's Logbook

It takes Ned a long weekend in July and a free graphics app. By Monday morning, “The Tide Tables” has a cover.

It features, from top to bottom: a full moon; a seagull; a lighthouse; the island ferry, seen from slightly below, as if by a swimmer; a large question mark made of what Ned describes as “fog effect”; the title, in a font called something like “Mariner Script”; the subtitle “A Novel”, in a different font; and Ned’s name, in a third font, slightly larger than the title. A fourth font appears on the back cover, for reasons Ned can no longer remember.

He shows it to Jo, who studies it for a long time and says, “There isn’t a lighthouse in the book.”

He shows it to Priya at work. She looks at it on his phone and asks, kindly, whether it’s a children’s book.

He shows it to his brother, who sends back a single text: “Is the seagull the killer?”

(Ned is invented. The cover, give or take a moon, has been seen many times in real life.)

The shop window

Everything in Parts 1 to 7 was about making the book good. This instalment is about something different and, for many writers, uncomfortable: making the book look like what it is, so that the readers who’d love it can find it and recognise it.

Imagine a reader browsing for a new mystery. Very often today, they're on a phone. The screen shows a grid of book covers, each about the size of a postage stamp, with a title, an author's name, a star rating and a price. Their thumb moves fast. Each cover gets a glance.

In that glance, a cover has to answer three questions:

1. What kind of book is this? (Mystery? Romance? Fantasy? Literary?)
2. Is it professionally made? (Is this a book I can trust with my time and money?)
3. Is it for me? (Is it my kind of mystery: cosy, dark, historical, Nordic, coastal?)

If the answer to any of those is unclear, the thumb keeps moving. It doesn't matter how good Chapter 27 is. Nobody gets there.

This is why "don't judge a book by its cover" is excellent advice about people and useless advice about books. Everyone judges books by their covers. That's what covers are for.

So this instalment walks through the shop window piece by piece: the cover, the title, the blurb, the author bio, the categories and keywords that decide where the book is shelved, and the price.

A cover is a genre signal

The single most important job of a cover is to tell readers what kind of book it is. Not to illustrate a scene, summarise the plot, or show every important object in the story. To signal genre and mood.

Every genre has visual conventions, and readers have learned them, mostly without realising it. Romance, thrillers, cosy mysteries, epic fantasy, literary fiction and horror tend to look different from one another, through colour, typography, imagery and layout. The conventions change over time and between markets, which is why no article can give you a permanent list.

What you can do, and what professional designers do, is study the current shelf.

Build a cover wall

1. Go to an online retailer and open the bestseller and new-release lists for the specific category your book belongs in. Not "Mystery", but the narrower subcategory your comps (Part 1) sit in.
2. Take screenshots of twenty or thirty recent covers that are selling well.
3. Put them side by side, at thumbnail size.
4. Write down what most of them have in common: colour palette, type of image, how much of the cover the title takes up, whether the title or the author's name is bigger,

whether there are people on the cover, what the typography feels like.

When Ned does this for small-community and coastal mysteries, he finds patterns he'd never consciously noticed:

- Atmospheric landscapes or seascapes, usually with one strong focal point, not five.
- Large, clean, readable title type, often taking up a third of the cover or more.
- A restrained palette: deep blues, greys and a single warm accent.
- Few or no illustrated objects, and no question marks.
- Subtitles that say what kind of book it is, often a series name.

His own cover breaks almost every convention. It isn't that it's ugly (though Jo has views). It's that it signals the wrong genre. The bright moon, the cartoonish gull and the jaunty script font say children's adventure. The fog-effect question mark says amateur.

The thumbnail test

Shrink your cover to the size it'll appear in search results on a phone, roughly the size of a postage stamp, and ask:

- Can you read the title?
- Can you tell the genre?
- Is there one clear focal point?
- Does it look like it belongs on the cover wall?

At thumbnail size, Ned's title disappears completely. The script font, so elegant at full size, turns into a wiggly line. The five illustrated elements become one muddy grey shape with a white blob (the moon) in the corner.

Designer, premade or DIY?

There are three common routes to a cover, and none is always right.

A professional cover designer creates a custom cover for your book. A good genre designer knows the current conventions, has licensed fonts and images, and understands technical requirements for ebook and print. It's the route that gives you the most control and, usually, the most professional result, if you can afford it. The cost varies widely depending on the designer's experience and what's included. When choosing one:

- Look at portfolios in your genre. A designer who mainly does fantasy may not be the best person for a coastal mystery, however beautiful their dragons.
- Check what's included. Ebook cover only? Paperback wrap (front, spine and back)? Hardcover? Revisions? Source files?
- Get a written agreement covering fees, deadlines, number of revisions, which files

you'll receive, and the licence: what you're allowed to do with the cover (ebooks, print, advertising, merchandise) and who owns what.

A premade cover is a cover a designer has already made, which you buy and have customised with your title and name. Premades are cheaper and quicker, and good ones are made by genuine genre designers. Check that each premade is sold only once, and that the image fits your actual book.

Doing it yourself is possible, especially if you have design skills or are willing to learn them seriously. If you go this route, study the cover wall, use high-quality licensed images and fonts, keep it simple, and get blunt feedback from people who read your genre. Ideally that's people other than Jo, Priya and your brother, who have all now seen the seagull.

Writing a design brief

Whichever route you take, write a short brief. It forces you to think clearly, and it saves a designer from guessing. Ned's brief, after his cover-wall research, looks like this:

Cover brief: "The Tide Tables"

Genre: Contemporary mystery, small-island setting. Not cosy; not graphic. Adult readers.

Comps: (three recent coastal or small-community mysteries in his category)

Mood: Isolation, cold, secrecy. Winter evening.

Key image (one): The island ferry at dusk, small against a large sea. Perhaps a single lit window.

Avoid: Lighthouses (there isn't one). Moons. Gulls. Question marks.

Title: "The Tide Tables" — large, legible at thumbnail size.

Series line: "A Skerrow Mystery".

Author name: Ned Hollin.

Formats needed: Ebook cover; paperback wrap (trim size and page count to follow; see Part 9).

The legal small print on images and fonts

Covers involve other people's creative work, and that work comes with licences. This is one of the easiest places for a self-publisher to get into trouble without meaning to.

Images. Stock-photo and illustration sites sell licences, not ownership. Read the licence for the specific image. Points to check include whether book covers are permitted, whether there are limits on the number of copies (some standard licences cap print runs, with an “extended” licence for more), and whether the image includes identifiable people or property that needs releases. “I found it online” is not a licence.

Fonts. Fonts are software, and they’re licensed too. A font that’s “free for personal use” is not free to use on a book you’re selling. Fonts distributed through Google Fonts are released under open licences (mostly the SIL Open Font License) that permit commercial use, including in print. Other “free” fonts may not be. Keep a note of where each font came from and what its licence allows.

Designer contracts. If you hire a designer, the contract should state clearly what rights you’re receiving. You’ll want, at minimum, the right to use the cover on all editions of the book and in marketing.

What about AI-generated images?

Some authors use AI image generators for covers. If you’re considering it, know the rules before you do.

Checked On: AI images and covers

- KDP requires authors to disclose AI-generated images (along with text and translations) when publishing, and that includes cover images. — KDP Content Guidelines (https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200672390) — checked 28 October 2026.
- Copyright: the US Copyright Office concluded in January 2025 that material generated by AI without sufficient human creative control isn’t protected by copyright. In practice, an AI-generated cover image may be something you can’t stop others from copying. — copyright.gov/ai (<https://www.copyright.gov/ai/>) — checked 28 October 2026.
- Other retailers’ rules differ; Part 10 compares them.

There’s also a reader-relations question. Some readers and writing communities feel strongly about AI imagery on covers. That’s a judgement for each author, but it’s worth making with your eyes open.

The title

Ned has been calling his book “The Tide Tables” for eighteen months. In Part 1, we hinted that titles are rarely as settled as authors believe. Here’s how to test one.

Does it signal the genre? Mystery titles often hint at danger, secrets, death or place. “The Tide Tables” hints at the sea and at timing, which is good. It doesn’t, on its own, say “mystery”.

Is it searchable? Type your title into an online bookshop and a general search engine. What comes up? When we searched for “The Tide Tables” while writing this series, the results were dominated by actual tide tables: nautical reference books listing the times of high and low water. A reader who hears about Ned’s book and searches for it will find a lot of very useful information about the Humber estuary before they find Isla Crane.

Is it already taken? As Part 1 explained, titles generally aren’t protected by copyright, so several books can share a title. But being one of fifteen novels with the same name makes you harder to find. Check retailers for recent books in your genre with the same or similar title. (Series names and brand names are another matter, since they can sometimes be trademarked. If in doubt, take advice.)

Does it fit the cover and thumbnail? Long titles are hard to set large.

Ned considers renaming the book. He tries out “One Passenger Short” and “The Last Crossing” and searches for each. The second turns out to be a popular title. The first sounds, Jo says, “like a complaint to the ferry company”, which, given Ned’s job, is a sensitive area.

In the end he keeps “The Tide Tables” and solves both problems, genre and searchability, by adding a series line: “A Skerrow Mystery”. It tells readers what kind of book it is. It gives search engines something distinctive to find. And it promises, quietly, that if readers like this book, there could be more.

The blurb

The blurb (also called the book description, or back-cover copy) is the text on a retailer’s product page and on the back of the paperback. After the cover, it’s usually the next thing a browsing reader looks at. Its job isn’t to summarise the book. Its job is to make the reader want to find out what happens.

Fiction blurbs vary, but many follow a similar shape:

1. The hook: a short opening line with tension or intrigue.
2. The situation: the protagonist, the setting and the disruption.

3. The stakes: what she'll lose if she fails.
4. The complication: what makes it hard.
5. The open question: a final line that leaves the reader wanting the answer.

And some common mistakes:

- Summarising the whole plot, including the second half.
- Naming too many characters. Two or three names is plenty.
- Reviewing your own book. "A gripping, beautifully written masterpiece" is a claim readers know you're in no position to make.
- Being vague. "A story of secrets, lies and the power of the past" could describe ten thousand books.
- Leading with backstory instead of the present situation.

Before and after

Ned's first attempt:

The Tide Tables is a gripping and atmospheric mystery about secrets, lies and the power of the past. When Isla Crane returns to the remote island of Skerrow eleven years after her father's boatyard failed, she takes a job as relief skipper on the island ferry, the Marram. But when a passenger disappears, Isla must team up with harbourmaster Callum Rae, hotel owner Morag Lusk, Dr Euan Bell and her estranged sister Tess to uncover the truth, and discovers that nothing on Skerrow is quite what it seems. A beautifully written debut that will keep you guessing until the very last page.

And after a week of work:

Thirty-one passengers boarded the last ferry to Skerrow. Thirty walked off.

Isla Crane counted twice. She's been back on the island for six days, after eleven years away, and she knows what people here think of her. So when the ferry company tells her to write it up as a scanner fault, the sensible thing is to agree.

But nobody can tell her who the thirty-first passenger was. The car-deck camera has been "broken for weeks". And the man she trusted most on Skerrow wants her to leave it alone.

On an island where everyone knows everyone, somebody knows what happened on that crossing. Finding out could cost Isla her job, her sister and the last of her place on Skerrow, if it doesn't cost her more.

The revision cuts the self-praise, the cast list and the clichés. It opens with the hook, gives the reader one person to care about, and ends on a question. It's also, conveniently, the premise from Part 1, grown up.

The author bio

Debut authors often agonise over the bio because they have no previous books to list. Don't. A good fiction bio is short, written in the third person, and gives readers one or two human details that connect to the book, plus a way to find out more.

Ned's first draft listed his school, his degree and the fact that he enjoys "reading, walking and good food". His second draft:

Ned Hollin has spent more than twenty years writing ferry timetables, which has given him a professional interest in boats that don't arrive on time. He lives on the coast with his partner and a corkboard. The Tide Tables is his first novel.

His job, which he'd assumed was too boring to mention, turns out to be the most interesting thing about him, at least as far as a reader of island mysteries is concerned.

Include a link to your website or newsletter if you have one. That matters more than any degree. We'll come back to it in Part 10.

Categories and keywords: where your book is shelved

In a physical bookshop, a bookseller decides where your book goes. Online, you decide, using metadata: information about the book that retailers and libraries use to classify it, display it and show it to the right readers.

Subject categories

The book trade uses standard subject classification schemes:

- BISAC subject codes, maintained by the Book Industry Study Group (BISG), widely used in North America. The list is revised every year.
- Thema, an international, multilingual scheme maintained by EDItEUR and free to use, widely used in Europe and increasingly elsewhere.

When you publish through a distributor or aggregator, you'll usually be asked to choose BISAC codes (and sometimes Thema codes) for your book. The codes are hierarchical: "Fiction › Mystery & Detective › ..." and so on. Choose the most specific accurate codes, not the broadest.

Individual retailers also have their own browse categories, which may not map exactly onto BISAC or Thema. Amazon is the best-known example.

Keywords

Keywords are words and phrases you give a retailer to help it match your book to readers' searches. They're not the same as categories, and they shouldn't repeat your title, author name or categories, which the retailer already knows.

Good keywords describe what readers search for: setting, subgenre, tone, character types and themes. For Ned, things like island mystery, small community crime, female boat captain, winter ferry, coastal suspense. Each retailer has its own rules about what keywords may and may not include. Read them before you write yours.

Checked On: KDP categories and keywords

- KDP lets you choose up to three categories for each format of your book, from options that depend on your primary audience and marketplace. — KDP Help: categories (https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200652170) — checked 28 October 2026.
- KDP provides seven keyword fields per format. — reported consistently by KDP guidance and third-party guides; check the current form when you publish.
- BISAC is revised annually by BISG; Thema is maintained by EDItEUR. — [bisg.org](https://www.bisg.org/) (<https://www.bisg.org/>); [editeur.org](https://www.editeur.org/) (<https://www.editeur.org/>) — checked 28 October 2026.

A warning: categories and keywords attract a great deal of strategic advice, much of it from people selling courses. Some of it is useful. Much of it is speculation about how retailers' systems work, which retailers don't disclose. Start from accuracy: put your book where its readers will look for it. Choosing an irrelevant category to chase a "bestseller" badge disappoints the readers who find you there.

Price

Pricing is part craft, part arithmetic and part psychology. Three things to understand before choosing a number:

1. What readers expect

Look at your comps again. What do recent, successful books in your category cost as ebooks and paperbacks? Debut novels from unknown authors are usually priced to encourage risk-taking: high enough to signal a real book, low enough that a curious reader will take a chance.

2. *How royalties work*

Each retailer has its own royalty structure, and it affects which prices make sense. Amazon's is the most widely used, so here it is in summary.

Checked On: KDP royalties (Amazon.com)

Ebooks. KDP offers two royalty options.

- 70%, for list prices from \$2.99 to \$12.99 on Amazon.com. The upper limit rose from \$9.99 to \$12.99 effective 7 July 2026. Delivery costs, based on file size, are deducted, and the 70% rate only applies to sales in eligible countries. KDP's terms also require the ebook's list price to be at least 20% below the list price of any physical edition on Amazon.
- 35% for prices outside that band (with a minimum list price that depends on file size, starting at \$0.99, and a maximum of \$200).

Paperbacks. The royalty is the royalty rate multiplied by the list price, minus printing costs. On Amazon.com, the rate is 60% for list prices of \$9.99 or more and 50% for list prices of \$9.98 or less. Expanded Distribution to other retailers pays 40%.

Sources: KDP Digital Pricing Page

(https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200634560); KDP paperback royalty (<https://kdp.amazon.com/help/topic/G201834330>) — checked 28 October 2026. Other marketplaces have their own bands. Check every figure again before you set a price; these have changed more than once.

A worked example from KDP's own help page: a \$15 paperback with printing costs of \$5 earns $(0.60 \times \$15) - \$5 = \$4.00$ per copy sold on Amazon.com.

3. *What a low price is for*

A 99-cent (or equivalent) price can be a powerful tool for short promotions, for the first book in a series, or for building a readership. As a permanent price for a full-length debut, it often signals “not sure this is worth much”, and on KDP it also means the 35% royalty rate. Low prices are a strategy, not a default.

Ned prices his ebook within the 70% band, in line with his comps, and sets his paperback price after Part 9, when he knows his page count and printing cost.

Scam Watch: the cover and marketing “package”

As your publication date approaches, offers multiply: cover design bundled with “guaranteed” promotion, book trailers, press releases sent to thousands of journalists, placement in “exclusive” catalogues, and promises of film interest. Writer Beware and the Alliance of Independent Authors both warn about services that charge large sums for marketing with no measurable results, or that solicit authors directly. Before paying, ask: “What exactly will be done? How will I know it worked? Can I find independent reviews of this service from authors I can verify?” Check names on Writer Beware (<https://sfwa.org/other-resources/writer-beware/>).

What Ned did next

Ned builds his cover wall, writes his brief, and looks at portfolios for two weeks. He hires a designer whose recent work is almost entirely mysteries and thrillers, and whose contract spells out exactly what he’s getting: an ebook cover, a paperback wrap once he has his page count, three rounds of revisions, and the rights to use the cover on every edition and in marketing.

The first draft arrives in August. The “Marram” sits small and dark on a vast grey sea at dusk, with a single lit window on the bridge. The title runs large across the top in a clean, serious typeface. “A Skerrow Mystery” sits beneath it. Ned’s name is at the bottom, smaller than the title, which Ned finds painful and Jo finds correct.

There’s no moon, no lighthouse and no question mark. After a brief negotiation, the designer agrees to include a seagull, very small, very far away, in the top left corner. Ned insists it’s a matter of artistic continuity. Nobody else ever notices it.

He shrinks the cover to the size of a postage stamp. The title is still readable. The genre is obvious. It looks as if it belongs on the cover wall.

It looks, for the first time, like a real book.

Try This

1. Build a cover wall of twenty or more recent bestsellers in your exact subcategory, and list the conventions they share.
2. Do the thumbnail test on your current cover or mock-up. Be honest.
3. Write a one-page design brief, even if you plan to design the cover yourself.
4. Search your title on two retailers and one search engine, and note what comes up.

5. Write your blurb in five parts: hook, situation, stakes, complication, open question. Then cut every adjective that's praising the book.
6. List twenty phrases readers might search for to find a book like yours, then narrow them down to your strongest seven.

Next Time

Ned has a cover, a blurb and a price. He also has a manuscript in a word processor that uses seven different fonts, three heading styles and a lot of manual line breaks, and an ebook store that wants something called an EPUB.

Part 9: The Book Factory.

The Book Factory

Building the ebook and the print edition: formatting, files, ISBNs and production requirements

Ned's Logbook

Ned's manuscript looks fine on his screen. That's the problem with it.

Under the surface, the 290 pages of "The Tide Tables" are held together by habits accumulated over eighteen months. Chapter headings are typed in bold, at three different sizes. Paragraph indents are made with the Tab key, except in a run of middle chapters, where they're five spaces. New chapters start on a new page because Ned pressed Return until they did. Scene breaks are three asterisks, or a blank line, or occasionally both. And according to his word processor, the document uses seven fonts, two of which Ned doesn't recognise and one of which appears only in a single full stop on page 211.

He uploads it to an online ebook previewer, out of curiosity, and watches Chapter 1 begin halfway down a page, after forty blank lines.

Jo looks over his shoulder. "Is that meant to happen?"

"I think," says Ned, "it's time for the factory."

(Ned is invented. The full stop on page 211 is a tribute to every manuscript that has ever been through production.)

Welcome to the factory

This instalment is the most technical in the series, so we're going to take it as a guided tour. The manuscript is going to ride an assembly line, station by station, and come out the other end as two finished products: an ebook and a print book. Please keep to the walkway, mind the machinery, and don't let Ned wander off.

The stations:

1. Cleaning the manuscript

2. Choosing your tools
3. Building the ebook
4. Checking the ebook
5. Accessibility
6. Building the print interior
7. The cover wrap
8. ISBNs
9. Front and back matter
10. The proof copy

plus a short stop at the regulations office on the way out.

Station 1: Cleaning the manuscript

Everything downstream depends on this station. Ebook converters and layout tools don't see what you see on the screen. They read the structure underneath: which text is a heading, which is a paragraph, where a chapter begins. Manual formatting (tabs, spaces, repeated returns, bold text pretending to be a heading) confuses them, and the result is forty blank lines before Chapter 1.

The job here is to replace appearance with structure:

- Use styles, not manual formatting. Every chapter heading should use your word processor's "Heading" style. Every paragraph should use one body-text style. If you want headings bigger and bold, change the style, not each heading.
- Indent with the paragraph style, not with tabs or spaces. (Fiction convention is usually no indent on the first paragraph of a chapter or scene, and a small first-line indent on the rest.)
- Start chapters with a page break (or a "page break before" setting on the heading style), not with repeated returns.
- Choose one scene-break marker and use it consistently.
- Use one body font. It doesn't matter much which one at this stage, as your formatting tool will usually apply its own. What matters is that the document isn't a patchwork.
- Search and replace double spaces, stray tabs and manual line breaks.
- Check punctuation consistency: curly versus straight quotation marks, dashes versus hyphens, and ellipses.

Ned does this over two evenings. He finds the full stop on page 211 (it's in a font called "Wingdings 2", and he has no idea how). He ends up with a document that looks almost exactly the same on screen, and is completely different underneath.

Myth vs Reality: "If it looks right in Word, it'll look right as an ebook."

The myth: What you see on your screen is what readers will get.

The reality: Ebooks are reflowable: the text re-wraps to fit each reader's screen, font and text size. There are no fixed pages. Anything you achieved by pushing text around manually (blank lines, spaces, tabs) will land somewhere unpredictable. Structure travels. Appearance doesn't.

Station 2: Choosing your tools

There are many ways to turn a clean manuscript into ebook and print files. They fall into a few broad groups:

- Retailer tools. Amazon offers a free tool, Kindle Create, for preparing books for Kindle. It's convenient if you're publishing only on Amazon. Its own "KPF" format is Kindle-specific, so you'll need another route for other stores.
- Dedicated book-formatting software. Programs designed for authors that produce a styled ebook and a print-ready PDF from the same source, with ready-made design templates. Some are browser-based and free; some are paid; at least one well-known option runs only on Mac. Prices and features change, so compare current versions.
- Open-source ebook tools such as Calibre (a library manager with a conversion feature) and Sigil (an EPUB editor). Free, powerful, and best suited to people comfortable looking at the code inside an ebook.
- Professional layout software, the sort used by publishers' designers, for writers or designers with the skills.
- A professional formatter, who does it for you, for a fee.

There's no single right answer. The questions to ask are: "Which stores am I publishing to? Do I need print as well as ebook? How much control do I want? What's my budget, and what's my patience?"

Ned chooses a dedicated formatting program because it produces both an EPUB and a print PDF from the same source. That matters to him because, as he puts it, "I've now seen what happens when I have two versions of anything."

Station 3: Building the ebook

Reflowable or fixed?

Almost all novels are published as reflowable ebooks: the reader controls the font and text size, and the text re-flows to fit. Fixed-layout ebooks keep an exact page design, and are used for picture books, cookbooks, comics and heavily illustrated work. For a novel, reflowable is almost always correct. It's what readers expect, and it's what makes ebooks comfortable on a phone.

The format: EPUB

The standard format for ebooks is EPUB, an open standard published by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). Under the bonnet, an EPUB is essentially a small website in a zip file: text, styling, images, a table of contents and information about the book, all packaged together. The current version, EPUB 3.3, became a W3C Recommendation in May 2023.

Most ebook stores accept EPUB directly. Amazon's Kindle store accepts EPUB too, along with Word documents and its own KPF format, and has phased out the older MOBI format.

Checked On: ebook formats

- EPUB 3.3 became a W3C Recommendation on 25 May 2023; an updated edition was published in January 2025. — W3C news (<https://www.w3.org/news/2023/epub-3-3-becomes-a-w3c-recommendation/>) — checked 28 October 2026.
- KDP recommends EPUB, KPF or DOC/DOCX for reflowable ebooks. MOBI is no longer accepted: for reflowable books since 2021, and for fixed-layout books from 18 March 2025. — KDP Help: supported formats (https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/GULSQMHU5MNH4EZM) — checked 28 October 2026.

What goes into the ebook

- The cover image. Retailers usually ask for it separately as well. KDP's guidance gives an ideal size of 2,560 pixels high by 1,600 pixels wide, a height-to-width ratio of 1.6:1.
- A navigable table of contents, generated from your chapter headings. That's one reason Station 1 mattered.
- Metadata: title, author, language, and so on.
- Front matter, kept short. Retailers' free samples ("Look Inside") show the beginning

of the book. Pages of front matter (dedication, epigraph, praise, map, acknowledgements) can eat the sample before the story starts. Many authors keep the ebook's front matter minimal and move the rest to the back.

Station 4: Checking the ebook

An ebook that opens on your computer may still contain errors that a retailer will reject or that will misbehave on some devices. Two checks are worth doing every time:

1. Validate it. EPUBCheck is the official validator for EPUB files: a free tool, developed as a W3C project and maintained by the DAISY Consortium. Many formatting tools run it for you. If yours doesn't, run it yourself. Retailers and distributors use validation too, and an invalid file can be rejected.
2. Preview it on real screens. Amazon's free Kindle Previewer shows how a file will look on different Kindle devices and apps. Also check your EPUB in at least one other reading app, and on an actual phone.

What to look for:

- Does every table-of-contents link go to the right place?
- Do chapters start cleanly, without blank pages or stray spacing?
- Are scene breaks visible, including when a break falls at the bottom of a screen?
- Are italics where they should be? (Boat names, emphasis, thoughts.)
- Does the text look right at large and small font sizes, and in dark mode?

Ned's preview reveals that his scene breaks, three centred asterisks, are invisible in dark mode because his formatting tool has coloured them dark grey. It's a small thing that would have puzzled every night-time reader. It takes thirty seconds to fix.

Station 5: Accessibility

An accessible ebook is one that people with print disabilities, including blind and partially sighted readers and some readers with dyslexia, can read using assistive technology such as screen readers, braille displays or text-to-speech.

For a text-based novel, the basics are not hard, and most of them are a by-product of doing Station 1 properly:

- Real headings (structure, not bold text), so assistive technology can navigate by chapter.
- A logical reading order.

- Alternative text (“alt text”) for any meaningful images, such as a map, and empty alt text for purely decorative ones.
- No text inside images. A chapter heading made as a picture is invisible to a screen reader.
- The book’s language set correctly in the metadata, so text-to-speech pronounces it properly.
- Accessibility metadata: information in the file describing its accessibility features, which retailers can display. The W3C’s EPUB Accessibility specification sets out how.

Accessibility also has a legal dimension in Europe.

Checked On: the European Accessibility Act (EAA)

The EAA (Directive (EU) 2019/882) has applied since 28 June 2025. Among the services it covers are e-books and e-commerce. Under Article 4(5), microenterprises providing services are exempt from its accessibility requirements. The usual definition of a microenterprise is fewer than 10 employees and an annual turnover or balance sheet total of no more than €2 million. Many independent authors are likely to fall within that definition, though you should check your own situation.

Even exempt authors may be asked about accessibility. The W3C has published a way to declare a microenterprise exemption in EPUB metadata, and distributors increasingly ask about, or display, accessibility status.

Sources: Directive (EU) 2019/882, Article 4

(<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eudr/2019/882/article/4>); W3C: The EPUB

Accessibility exemption property (<https://www.w3.org/TR/epub-a11y-exemption>);

Alliance of Independent Authors on the EAA

(<https://selfpublishingadvice.org/accessibility-act/>) — checked 28 October 2026. “This is general information, not legal advice.”

Exemption or not, accessibility is worth doing for its own sake. It costs a novelist very little, and it means more people can read the book.

Station 6: Building the print interior

Print is where formatting becomes typesetting, and it’s the stage where the details multiply. The good news is that dedicated formatting tools handle most of it. The better news is that knowing the vocabulary lets you check their work.

Trim size. The finished size of the page. Common fiction sizes on print-on-demand platforms include 5×8 , 5.25×8 , 5.5×8.5 and 6×9 inches. Look at your comps: a mystery in an unusual size looks out of place on the shelf. Ned chooses 5.5×8.5 .

Paper. Print-on-demand services usually offer a choice of white or cream for black-and-white interiors. Cream is common for fiction; white is common for non-fiction. Paper choice also affects spine width (see Station 7).

Margins and the gutter. The gutter is the inside margin, next to the spine. It needs to be wider than the outside margin, and wider still as the book gets thicker, because more of the page curves into the binding. Every print platform publishes minimum margins by page count. Use the current table from your platform, not a figure from a blog post.

Bleed. If anything on the interior pages (an image, a background) runs right to the edge of the page, the file needs bleed: extra area beyond the trim that's cut off in printing. For KDP, a 6×9 book with bleed uses a PDF page of 6.125×9.25 inches (an extra 0.125 inch on the outside edge and 0.125 inch at the top and bottom). Most novels don't need interior bleed at all.

Typography. A readable book font, usually a serif, at a comfortable size, with sensible line spacing. Fiction readers notice cramped or oversized text even if they can't say why.

Running heads and folios. The book title, author name or chapter title at the top of the page, and page numbers. Conventions vary. Chapter-opening pages usually have neither.

Widows and orphans. A single line of a paragraph stranded at the top (widow) or bottom (orphan) of a page. Good layout tools reduce them automatically; a careful proofreader catches the rest.

The PDF. The print interior is delivered as a PDF with all fonts embedded. Some printers specify a particular PDF standard: IngramSpark's guidance, for example, has long recommended PDF/X-1a. Check the current file-creation guide for your printer.

Ned's layout comes to 312 pages.

Station 7: The cover wrap

The ebook cover is just the front. The print cover is a single wraparound file: back cover, spine and front cover in one image, plus bleed all round.

Spine width depends on page count and paper. A 312-page book on cream paper has a different spine width from a 312-page book on white, and a very different one from a 150-page book. That's why your designer can't finish the paperback cover until the interior is final. Change the page count, and the spine changes.

Use the platform's template. Print platforms provide calculators or templates that give exact dimensions for your trim size, page count and paper. KDP has a cover calculator. IngramSpark's cover template generator emails you a template with the barcode already in place. Different printers can produce slightly different dimensions, so if you're printing through more than one, you may need a version of the cover for each.

Spine text is only allowed above a minimum page count, because thin spines can't hold it reliably. Check your platform's threshold.

The barcode (on the back cover) encodes the ISBN and sometimes a price. Platforms either add it for you or tell you where it must go. Leave the space clear.

Ned sends his designer the trim size, paper, page count and template. The paperback wrap comes back in a week: the "Marram" at dusk continues round from the front onto the spine, and the blurb from Part 8 sits on the back.

Station 8: ISBNs

An ISBN (International Standard Book Number) is a unique identifier for a specific edition and format of a book. Booksellers, libraries and distributors use it to order, list and track books.

The key rule: each format needs its own ISBN. The paperback, the hardcover, the ebook and the audiobook are separate products with separate ISBNs. (A new edition with substantial changes usually needs a new one too.)

Do you need one at all? It depends on the format and the route:

- Ebooks: many ebook retailers don't require an ISBN. Amazon, for example, assigns its own identifier (an ASIN) to Kindle ebooks. Some distributors and library suppliers do require one, or offer one free.
- Print books: you need an ISBN for books sold through retailers. Print-on-demand platforms such as KDP will provide one free.

Free or your own?

A free ISBN from a platform is convenient and costs nothing. But it identifies the platform (or a generic "Independently published") as the publisher of record, and it generally can't be used to publish the same edition elsewhere. A KDP-assigned ISBN, for example, can only be used for distribution through KDP.

Buying your own makes you, or your imprint name, the publisher of record. It lets you publish the same edition through several platforms with one ISBN. ISBNs are sold by a national agency in each country, and prices vary enormously.

Checked On: buying ISBNs (indicative prices)

- United States (Bowker): about \$125 for one; \$295 for ten.
- United Kingdom and Ireland (Nielsen): about £93 for one; £174 for ten (including VAT). Available only to publishers based in the UK, Ireland or a British Overseas Territory.
- Australia (Thorpe-Bowker): much cheaper than the US per ISBN, plus a one-off account setup fee.
- Canada (Library and Archives Canada): free, though new accounts can take some time to set up.

These figures come from secondary sources checked on 28 October 2026 and haven't been confirmed against every agency's own price list. Always check the official agency in your country before buying. Buy only from your national agency or its authorised resellers.

Ned decides to buy his own ISBNs (a block of ten, because he can now see Book Two on the horizon), registered under a simple imprint name he's chosen: Timetable Press. He uses one for the paperback and one for the ebook, and keeps the other eight in a spreadsheet, labelled, because he has learned that much.

Station 9: Front and back matter

The pages before and after the story.

Front matter (in a typical novel):

- Half-title page: just the title (in print).
- Title page: title, subtitle or series line, author, imprint.
- Copyright page (see below).
- Dedication and epigraph, if any.
- Contents: always in the ebook (as navigation); optional in a print novel.

The copyright page usually includes:

- The copyright notice: © year and the author's name.
- A rights statement, such as "All rights reserved".
- For fiction, a statement that the characters and events are fictional.
- The ISBN for this format (and often for the others).
- Edition information, the publisher or imprint name, and credits (cover design, editing).

- For print, printer information. Some platforms add their own printing details to the last page automatically.

Back matter:

- Acknowledgements. (Ned thanks Jo, Priya, his brother, his copyeditor, his cover designer and, in a moment of honesty, “the full stop on page 211”.)
- About the author: the bio from Part 8.
- “Also by” page: empty for now. Ned leaves it out rather than listing nothing.
- Newsletter or website link: an invitation to readers who enjoyed the book to hear about the next one. More on this in Part 10.
- A short note to readers asking them to consider leaving an honest review. Brief and polite, not pleading.

Station 10: The proof copy

Before a print book goes on sale, order a physical proof. Always. A PDF on a screen and a book in your hands are different objects, and some problems only appear in the second.

KDP proof copies carry a “Not for Resale” marking and are intended purely for checking. Once the book is live, you can order author copies at print cost. Other platforms have similar options.

Things to check on the proof:

- The cover: colours (screens and printers differ), the spine text centred on the spine, nothing important too close to the edges.
- The gutter: can you read the inside of every line without breaking the spine?
- Page numbers and running heads: present, correct, absent on chapter openings.
- Chapter openings and scene breaks.
- Typos. This is where the proofreading from Part 7 happens. Read the proof slowly, ideally with a second reader.

Ned’s proof arrives on a Saturday morning in September. He holds it for a full minute before opening it. Then he and Priya spend two weekends reading it, each with a pencil.

They find:

- The spine text is slightly off-centre: about two millimetres towards the back cover. It’s fixed by re-checking the template’s spine width against the final page count.
- A chapter opening that falls on a left-hand page because of a stray blank page earlier.
- Eleven typos, including one “the the”, and “Kittiwake” missing its italics in Chapter

22.

- And, on page 147, a sentence that stops Ned cold:

Tess let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding.

He removed that sentence in April. He's sure of it.

It takes him an hour to work out what happened. His manuscript folder holds every draft since February, each sensibly dated, as Part 3 taught him, plus a scattering of older emailed copies with "FINAL" in their names. When he imported the text into his formatting tool, he picked tide-tables_draft2_14Feb.docx, the structural revision from Part 6, instead of the copyedited file from June. The two names sit next to each other in the folder. His formatting tool had cheerfully built a complete, beautifully typeset book from a manuscript that had never been line-edited or copyedited.

Dated filenames tell you which version a file is. They don't stop you picking the wrong one.

The proof copy, the ordinary cautious step he'd nearly skipped to save a week, has saved him from publishing the wrong book.

He moves every old draft into a folder called ARCHIVE, and deletes every file with "FINAL" in its name. He makes one folder called PUBLISHED EDITION, with one manuscript in it, and he labels it with the date.

The regulations office: EU product safety

One more stop before we leave the factory. Since 13 December 2024, the EU's General Product Safety Regulation (GPSR) has applied to consumer products sold in the European Union, and printed books count as products. Among other things, it requires products to carry information about the manufacturer and a responsible person based in the EU.

Checked On: GPSR and print books

- For KDP print books, sources including the Alliance of Independent Authors report that Amazon handles this, adding its own printing and EU contact details, and that authors don't need to take action. No official KDP help page on GPSR was found as of October 2026, so check your book's listing on an EU Amazon site to confirm.
- Draft2Digital states that its print partner will be listed as the responsible person, and warns authors who also use other printers to check with them.
- Authors who print and sell books themselves into the EU (or Northern Ireland) may

need to arrange their own EU responsible person.

Sources: ALLi on GPSR (<https://selfpublishingadvice.org/gpsr/>); Draft2Digital support (<https://draft2digital.freshdesk.com/support/solutions/articles/4000213248-what-is-the-general-product-safety-regulations-gpsr-and-how-might-it-apply-to-me->) — checked 28 October 2026. “General information, not legal advice.”

What Ned did next

By the end of September, the factory has delivered:

- A clean manuscript, one font, every heading a heading.
- An EPUB that passes EPUBCheck and looks right in dark mode.
- A print interior PDF, 312 pages, 5.5 × 8.5, cream paper, with a correct gutter and every chapter starting on the right-hand page.
- A paperback cover wrap with the spine text in the middle of the spine.
- Two ISBNs registered to Timetable Press, with eight spare.
- A proof copy covered in pencil marks, and a second, clean proof that arrives two weeks later with nothing wrong in it at all.

Ned puts the clean proof on the bookshelf in the living room, between two of his favourite mysteries. It looks as though it belongs there.

Jo notices it that evening. She doesn’t say anything. She takes a photograph of it on her phone, which Ned pretends not to see.

Try This

1. Clean your manuscript’s structure. Apply heading styles to every chapter title, remove tab and space indents, and replace repeated returns with page breaks. Check that your word processor’s navigation pane shows every chapter.
2. Count your fonts. If there’s more than one in the body text, find out why.
3. Make a test ebook with any tool, run it through EPUBCheck, and open it on a phone in dark mode.
4. Look up the margin and gutter table for your print platform and trim size, using the platform’s own help pages.
5. Decide your ISBN route using the flowchart questions: which formats, which platforms, free or your own?
6. Rename your files. One folder, one current manuscript, dates not adjectives.

Next Time

The files are ready. The proof is on the shelf. Now Ned has to decide where to sell the book: one store or many, exclusive or wide. He has to work out what a launch actually involves, and what happens on the day after it, when nothing much happens at all.

Part 10: Launch Day Is a Tuesday.

Launch Day Is a Tuesday

Publishing, distribution, launch, and life after the book is out

Ned's Logbook

It's October again, almost exactly a year since Ned wrote "THE END". There are two clean proof copies of "The Tide Tables" on the living-room shelf, and a spreadsheet on his laptop with fourteen tabs. They're labelled "Amazon", "Apple", "Kobo", "Google", "Aggregators", "Print", "Libraries", "Tax", "ISBNs", "AI rules", "Launch", "Reviews", "Newsletter" and, finally, "Questions". The last tab is the longest.

Jo reads the tab names over his shoulder.

"Where do people buy books?"

"Everywhere."

"So sell it everywhere."

"It isn't that simple."

"Why not?"

Ned opens his mouth, closes it, and adds a fifteenth tab: "Why not?"

(Ned is invented. The fifteenth tab is the one most real authors have open at this stage.)

Two halves

This final instalment comes in two halves, because publishing does.

The first half is mission control: a countdown from about three months before launch to launch day itself, covering the decisions, accounts, rules and preparations that have to be in place. It's busy, practical and occasionally nerve-wracking.

The second half is the morning after: what happens once the book is out, which is quieter, slower and, in the long run, more important. It's also where we'll look back at the whole series and at what Ned learned.

Part One: Mission Control

T-90 days: Where will you sell it?

This is the biggest decision in self-publishing, and it splits into two questions: ebooks, and print.

Ebooks: exclusive or wide?

Exclusive means enrolling the ebook in Amazon's KDP Select programme. In exchange for selling the ebook only through Amazon for each 90-day enrolment period, you get:

- Inclusion in Kindle Unlimited, Amazon's subscription service. Instead of a per-sale royalty, you're paid from a shared monthly fund according to the number of pages subscribers read (measured in Kindle Edition Normalized Pages, or KENP).
- Access to promotional tools, including Kindle Countdown Deals (time-limited discounts, available on Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk) and Free Book Promotions.
- The 70% royalty rate on sales in Brazil, Japan, Mexico and India, which are otherwise limited to 35%.

Exclusivity applies to the digital edition: your paperback can still be sold anywhere.

Wide means selling the ebook through many stores: Amazon, Apple Books, Kobo, Google Play Books, Barnes & Noble and others, plus library platforms. You can reach them in two ways:

- Direct: open an account with each store and upload separately. More work, more control, and no middleman's cut.
- Through an aggregator: services such as Draft2Digital distribute one upload to many stores and library platforms, in exchange for a share of each sale or a fee. Less work, slightly less income per sale, one dashboard. Fee structures change (Draft2Digital's did in 2026), so compare current terms.

Many wide authors mix the two: direct accounts with the largest stores, and an aggregator for everything else.

	Exclusive (KDP Select)	Wide
Where readers find the ebook	Amazon only	Amazon plus other stores and libraries
Subscription income	Kindle Unlimited page reads	None from Kindle Unlimited; some stores have their own subscription programmes
Promotions	Countdown Deals, free days	Each store's own tools; promotion sites
Admin	One dashboard	Several dashboards, or an aggregator
Risk	All your ebook income depends on one company's rules	Spread across companies
Can you switch?	Yes, at the end of a 90-day term (disable auto-renewal)	Yes, but you must remove the ebook from other stores before enrolling

There's no universally right answer. Some genres, such as many romance and fantasy subgenres with heavy Kindle Unlimited readerships, often do well exclusive. Others do well wide, especially with library reach and international readers. Many authors try one approach for a while and reassess.

Checked On: KDP Select

- KDP Select is a free 90-day programme for Kindle ebooks (and now audiobooks); Kindle Countdown Deals are available on Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk only. — KDP Select help (https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200798990) — checked 28 October 2026.
- For ebook sales to customers in Brazil, Japan, Mexico and India, the book must be in KDP Select to qualify for the 70% royalty. — KDP Digital Book Pricing Page (https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200634500) — checked 28 October 2026.

Print: one printer or two?

Most self-published print books are print-on-demand: each copy is printed when it's ordered, so there's no warehouse of unsold books in the spare room. The two most widely used services for English-language authors are:

- KDP Print, which sells your paperback (and hardcover) on Amazon, with an optional "Expanded Distribution" to other retailers at a lower royalty (Part 8).

- IngramSpark, which distributes print books through Ingram’s wholesale network, the route by which many bookshops and libraries order books.

Many authors use both: KDP for Amazon, IngramSpark for everywhere else. This is one reason Ned bought his own ISBNs in Part 9. A free KDP ISBN can’t be used at IngramSpark, but his own ISBN can go anywhere.

Checked On: IngramSpark fees

IngramSpark offers free title setup and, from 1 February 2026, free revisions; at the same time, its market access fee rose to 1.875% of list price. — IngramSpark help (<https://help.ingramspark.com/hc/en-us/articles/41657495062029-Changes-in-Print-Cost-Market-Access-Fee-and-More>); ALLi analysis (<https://allianceindependentauthors.substack.com/p/what-ingramsparks-2026-pricing-changes>) — checked 28 October 2026 (reported in secondary sources citing IngramSpark’s help page).

Platforms come and go

One more consideration: any platform can change its rules, its royalties or its existence. Amazon’s serial-fiction platform, Kindle Vella, stopped accepting new episodes in December 2024 and shut down on 26 February 2025. Authors who’d built their readership there had to republish elsewhere. It’s a good reason not to build your entire writing life on a single company’s land, and a good reason to have a way of reaching readers that you control (see T–14).

Ned’s choice

Ned goes wide: direct accounts with Amazon, Apple and Kobo, and an aggregator for Google Play, library platforms and the rest. For print, he uses KDP for Amazon and IngramSpark for bookshops and libraries.

His reasons are personal, and that’s how they should be. The island library on Skerrow, if it existed, would order through a library platform. Priya reads on a Kobo. And having spent twenty-two years watching what happens when a ferry service depends on one boat, he doesn’t like the idea of depending on one store. He notes, honestly, that many debut authors make the opposite choice for good reasons, and that he can change his mind later.

T-90: Accounts and tax

Every platform requires an account, payment details and tax information. This is the duller part of publishing and the one most likely to cause trouble later if it's rushed.

A note for authors outside the United States, because the biggest platforms are American companies: US platforms ask non-US authors to complete a tax interview, the online equivalent of the US W-8BEN form for individuals. It records your country of residence and any reduced withholding rate available under a tax treaty between your country and the US.

Checked On: KDP tax interview (non-US authors)

KDP states that royalties for non-US publishers are subject to 30% US tax withholding on certain sales unless a reduced treaty rate applies; claiming treaty benefits requires a tax identification number; and a W-8 form expires on the last day of the third calendar year after the year it's signed, after which withholding reverts to 30% until it's renewed. — KDP tax help (<https://kdp.amazon.com/help/topic/G200641090>) — checked 28 October 2026.

“General information, not tax advice.” Rules depend on your country and circumstances. Ask an accountant if in doubt, and remember that income from book sales is usually taxable where you live too.

Ned sets a calendar reminder to redo his tax interview in three years' time. He labels it “TAX – BOOK – DO NOT IGNORE”, which is the first time he's written anything in capitals since the BOOK drive in Part 3.

T-75: The AI rules, side by side

This series has mentioned AI policies several times. Here, as promised, they are together. Ned wrote, edited and designed his book without AI tools, so he has nothing to disclose. But every author should know where the lines are, because they differ, and they're changing quickly.

Checked On: platform AI policies (as of 28 October 2026)

Platform	What it says	Status of our check
Amazon KDP	You must disclose AI-generated text, images or translations when	Official page read, 28 Oct 2026

Platform	What it says	Status of our check
	publishing (even if you substantially edited them). AI-assisted work (your own work edited or checked with AI tools, or ideas brainstormed with them) needn't be disclosed.	
Apple Books	Content with a material AI-generated portion must be flagged with an "AI Generated by" contributor role; reported to require a note in the description too.	Official guidelines reported via secondary sources
Kobo Writing Life	Lists books that are "wholly or partially AI generated" among common reasons for rejection.	Reported via secondary sources citing Kobo's help pages
Draft2Digital	Accepts AI-assisted work; refuses content generated entirely by AI unless it has had extensive human editing; requires credentials for AI-produced non-fiction.	Reported via secondary sources quoting D2D's guidelines
IngramSpark	Rejects works created solely using generative AI; accepts AI use with substantial human editorial contribution and attribution, including an "Assisted By – Generative AI" credit.	Official content guidelines and help article (via search)
Google Play Books	No AI-specific rule for ebooks found; general content policies apply.	Absence of a rule is hard to prove; check current policies

Sources: KDP Content Guidelines

(https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200672390); Apple Books

formatting/store guidelines

(<https://help.apple.com/itc/applebooksstoreformatting/en.lproj/static.html>); Kobo

Writing Life help (<https://kobowritinglife.zendesk.com/hc/en-us>); Draft2Digital FAQ

(<https://www.draft2digital.com/faq>); IngramSpark Content Guidelines

(<https://www.ingramspark.com/content-guidelines>) and AI Disclosure and Attribution

(<https://help.ingramspark.com/hc/en-us/articles/46042242163597-AI-Disclosure-and-Attribution>); Google Play Books content policies

(<https://support.google.com/books/partner/answer/1067634>). Several of these were

read through secondary reports rather than directly; check every one yourself before publishing.

These policies aren't theoretical. In June 2026, Rakuten Kobo's chief executive, Michael Tamblyn, said that Kobo had rejected around 45% of the titles submitted to Kobo Writing Life in 2025, and attributed most of those rejections to books the company judged to be AI-generated, as reported by "The Next Web". Whatever you think of AI tools, the platforms are enforcing their rules at scale, and an honest disclosure is far better than an account suspension.

Copyright adds a final consideration. As Part 1 noted, the US Copyright Office concluded in January 2025 that material generated by AI without sufficient human authorship isn't protected by copyright. That affects what you can claim on your copyright page, and what you could do if someone copied the material.

T-60: Reviews and advance readers

Reviews help readers decide, and many promotional services require a minimum number before they'll feature a book. So authors naturally want reviews at launch. This is also where well-meaning authors most often break the rules.

Advance reader copies (ARCs) are copies given to readers before publication, in the hope (not the requirement) that they'll review. Legitimate routes include:

- Your own readers and newsletter subscribers (once you have them).
- Reader communities and genre groups that welcome ARCs.
- ARC distribution services that connect authors with readers who want early copies. Some are free and some charge authors a fee. Research each before using it.

Retailer review rules are strict, and they're enforced automatically. Amazon's are the best known. In general:

- Never pay for reviews, in money, gifts or services.
- Never make a free copy conditional on a review, and never ask for a positive one.
- Don't swap reviews with other authors.
- Don't review your own book, and expect reviews from close family and friends to be removed.
- Don't ask reviewers to change or remove reviews.

The exact wording of these rules changes, and so does how strictly they're applied. Read the current customer-review guidelines for every store you sell through. A book that collects suspicious reviews can lose all of them, and an author can lose their account.

Ned sends ARCs to twelve members of a mystery readers' group he joined in the spring, with a short note: "If you'd like to review it, I'd be grateful for an honest one, anywhere you like. If not, I hope you enjoy it."

T-45: Directories and profiles

Several free services help readers find authors and keep track of new books. Set them up before launch where you can.

- Amazon Author Central lets you create an author page on Amazon, with a bio, photo and all your books in one place.
- The Goodreads Author Program lets you claim an author profile once your book is in Goodreads' database with a publication date. You find your author page and use the "Is this you?" link; approval isn't automatic.
- BookBub offers a free author profile. Readers can follow you and receive alerts when you release new books. Profiles are available to authors with an ebook at a supported retailer, and BookBub verifies identity. A new book must be added to your profile on or before release (or up to seven days after) to trigger new-release alerts.
- BookBub Featured Deals are a different thing entirely: paid email promotions of discounted books. Submitting is free; being featured costs a fee; and BookBub says only around 10–20% of eligible deals are selected. They're usually used later in a book's life, not at launch.

Checked On: discovery profiles

- Goodreads Author Program: [goodreads.com/author/program](https://www.goodreads.com/author/program) (<https://www.goodreads.com/author/program>).
- BookBub Partners (author profiles; Featured Deal requirements): partners.bookbub.com (<https://partners.bookbub.com/>) and [bookbub.com/partners/requirements](https://www.bookbub.com/partners/requirements) (<https://www.bookbub.com/partners/requirements>).

Checked 28 October 2026. Programme rules change; check before relying on them.

T-30: Legal deposit and copyright registration

In many countries, publishers (including self-publishers) are legally required to send copies of new books to national libraries. This is legal deposit, and it's how national libraries preserve a country's published record. It's also free, and there's something satisfying about knowing your book will be kept.

Checked On: legal deposit (selected countries)

- United Kingdom: the Legal Deposit Libraries Act 2003 requires publishers to send one copy of each new print publication to the British Library within one month of publication. Five other legal deposit libraries may request copies. Ebooks can be deposited electronically. — British Library (<https://www.bl.uk/>) (see its legal deposit pages)
- Australia: published works, including self-published ones, must be deposited with the National Library of Australia and the relevant state or territory library. Electronic deposit through National edeposit (NED) satisfies most obligations at once. — NLA: legal deposit (<https://www.library.gov.au/services/publishers-and-self-publishers/legal-deposit>)
- Canada: Library and Archives Canada runs legal deposit for Canadian publications. — LAC (<https://library-archives.canada.ca/>)
- United States: registering copyright with the US Copyright Office is optional (copyright exists from creation), but registration brings significant legal advantages if you ever need to enforce your rights. — copyright.gov (<https://www.copyright.gov/>)

Checked 28 October 2026, partly through secondary sources; confirm requirements with the national library in your country. “General information, not legal advice.”

T-14: A way to reach readers that you own

Retailers own the relationship with their customers. If a store changes its rules, or closes a programme, as Kindle Vella’s authors discovered, you lose your connection to the readers you found there.

The most common remedy is an author website and an email newsletter:

- A simple website with your books, where to buy them, a short bio and a sign-up form. It doesn’t need to be elaborate. It needs to exist and be up to date.
- A newsletter that readers choose to join, typically through a link in the back of your book (Part 9) and on your website. Use a reputable mailing-list service, and follow data-protection law in your readers’ countries: consent, privacy notices, easy unsubscribing.

You don’t need thousands of subscribers. A few dozen readers who want to hear about Book Two are worth more than any number of social-media followers who don’t.

Ned builds a one-page website over a weekend. The newsletter sign-up form says: “Hear about the next Skerrow mystery. No more than four emails a year, and never on a Sunday.”

T-7: A realistic launch plan

There's a great deal of launch advice in circulation. Much of it is written by people with many books, large mailing lists and advertising budgets, and much of it is selling something. For a debut author with no backlist, a sensible launch is modest:

- Tell the people who already know you: friends, colleagues, communities you're genuinely part of. Once, clearly, with a link, and without pressure.
- Go local. Local bookshops, libraries, newspapers and radio are often interested in local authors, especially with a good angle. ("Ferry timetable writer pens island mystery" is the kind of headline local papers like.)
- Make the book easy to find: author pages live, profiles claimed, website up, every link tested.
- Be careful with advertising. Retailer and social-media ads can work, but they're a skill with a cost. Start small, measure, and stop anything that doesn't pay its way. Don't spend money you'd mind losing.
- Have a plan for the day after, which is the subject of Part Two.

Scam Watch: the launch "package"

Launch is when the most offers arrive: paid review schemes, "bestseller campaigns", fake book clubs, press-release blasts, "Hollywood scouts", and offers to republish your book "properly" for a fee. Writer Beware's Victoria Strauss has described re-publishing scams, marketing and PR scams, book-to-screen scams and impersonations of real publishers, agents and production companies as among the schemes that most target self-publishers. Before paying anyone: "Did they contact you first? Do they guarantee results? Can you verify their track record independently?" Check Writer Beware (<https://sfwa.org/other-resources/writer-beware/>) and ALLi's Watchdog Desk. When in doubt, don't.

Launch Day

Ned chooses a Tuesday.

He has a reason, which he explains to Jo at length: in US trade publishing, new books have traditionally been released on Tuesdays. Jo points out that he isn't a US trade publisher. Ned points out that the "Marram"s winter timetable runs a full service on Tuesdays. Jo concedes that this is unanswerable.

The book goes live overnight. Ned checks every store at 6.20 a.m., the time he used to write. Every link works. The cover looks right at thumbnail size, between two other island mysteries in the new-release list.

Then he goes to work, because it's a Tuesday.

By lunchtime, he has sold some copies, mostly to people he knows. Priya buys the paperback and the ebook "for the record". His brother sends a photo of the book on his kitchen table, next to a seagull-shaped salt cellar. Two of the ARC readers post reviews: one generous, one thoughtful, both honest. The local paper runs a short piece with a photo of Ned on the pier, holding the book and looking as if he'd rather be holding a timetable.

In the evening, Ned and Jo go to the pub. Someone he doesn't know, a woman at the next table, has the paperback in her bag. She doesn't recognise him. He doesn't say anything. He'll remember it for the rest of his life.

A note on numbers. We haven't given Ned a sales figure, and we won't give you a "typical" one either. Reliable public data on self-published sales is scarce, results vary enormously by genre, price and marketing, and averages hide almost everything that matters. If you see a confident claim about how many copies "most" self-published books sell, look for who measured it, how, and when. If the source can't tell you, treat the figure as a story, not a statistic.

Part Two: The Morning After

T+1: Nothing happens

On Wednesday, Ned checks his sales dashboard before breakfast, during breakfast, on the ferry terminal Wi-Fi, at lunch, twice in the afternoon and once before bed.

Nothing much has happened. A couple of sales. Then none.

This is normal, and it's the most important thing to understand about publishing. For almost every book, launch day is not the main event. It's a small spike at the start of a very long line. What happens to that line over the following months and years depends far more on what the author does next than on what happened on Tuesday.

Some advice for the morning after, earned the hard way by a great many authors:

- Stop refreshing the dashboard. Check sales weekly. Daily checking measures your anxiety, not your book.
- Don't respond to reviews. Not the lovely ones (beyond, perhaps, a quiet thank-you

where a platform allows it) and especially not the critical ones. Reviews are for readers, not for authors. Arguing with a reviewer is a fight you lose even if you win.

- Don't read every review if it's making you miserable. Some authors don't read them at all.
- Go back to writing.

T+7: The first stranger

A week after launch, a review appears from someone Ned has never heard of, in a country he's never visited. It's four stars. It says the island felt real, Isla was "prickly in the best way", and the solution was fair: "I should have got it, and I didn't." It also says the middle was "a little slow in places".

Ned reads it nine times. The first stranger who reads your book and understands what you were trying to do is a moment no sales figure can match.

A few days later, a three-star rating appears on Goodreads with a one-line review: "Decent mystery. Not enough storms."

Ned laughs for a full minute, and doesn't explain why.

T+30 and beyond: The long tail

A month after launch, the shape of things is clearer:

- Sales have settled into a slow, uneven trickle. A few in a good week, none in a quiet one.
- The library platforms show a handful of loans, including, to Ned's delight, a request from a library in a coastal town several hundred miles away.
- Eleven people have joined the newsletter. Ned writes to each of them personally to say thank you. (This doesn't scale. At eleven, it doesn't need to.)
- The ARC readers' reviews have been joined by a few from strangers.

Here's what tends to matter at this stage. It's practical reasoning rather than a statistic:

- The next book is the best marketing for the last one. A reader who finishes Book One and enjoys it has nowhere to go until Book Two exists. Series, in particular, let readers who like one book carry on.
- Your backlist keeps working. Books don't go off. A book that sells slowly can sell for years, and each new book can lead readers back to the earlier ones.
- Decisions can be revisited. Exclusive or wide, price, categories, keywords, even the

cover. Self-publishers can change things in a way traditionally published authors usually can't.

- Improvements are possible. Ned made a note in Part 7 that a professional proofread would be worth doing for a second edition. Readers have found three typos so far. He adds them to a file, ready.

Lessons from the journey

Ten instalments ago, Ned had a notebook with eleven ideas in it and no way of telling which one was the book. It's worth looking back at what went wrong along the way, because every one of his mistakes was an ordinary one, and every one had an ordinary fix.

Part	Ned's mistake	What fixed it
1	Eleven ideas, no way to choose	Turning ideas into premises and auditioning them
2	"I'll know who did it when I get there"; "Timetable: TBC"	A secret history; a story bible actually filled in
3	1,400 words on Day 1, nothing on Day 3; FINAL2.docx	A daily target he could keep; 3-2-1 backups
4	Characters discussing the plot; adding storms	Goal, conflict, disaster; "therefore" and "but"
5	Choosing the culprit three chapters from the end	Putting the endings on trial; the promise-payoff ledger
6	Fixing a structural problem with one word at 2 a.m.	Revising from the bottom of the pyramid; the reverse outline
7	212 nods; a breath nobody knew they were holding	Self-editing passes, a style sheet, a professional copyedit
8	A cover with a lighthouse that isn't in the book	A cover wall, a brief, a genre designer
9	Uploading the wrong file	A proof copy; one folder for the published edition
10	Refreshing the sales dashboard all day	Going back to writing

If there's one thread running through all ten, it's this: writing a book and publishing one are both made of decisions, and most bad decisions come from making them without information. Ned didn't need talent he didn't have. He needed to know what questions to ask, and when.

That's what this series has tried to give you.

A few things we'd add, at the end of the journey:

- Finishing matters more than anything. A finished imperfect book can be revised, edited, published and improved. An unfinished perfect one can't.
- Other readers are essential. Every one of Ned's biggest problems (the Sunday ferry, the slow middle, the orphaned clues, the wrong file) was found by somebody else, or by a process designed to make him see his book as somebody else would.
- Spend money where you can't substitute effort. Ned learned to line-edit himself; he couldn't learn to see his own typos, or design a professional genre cover overnight.
- Facts change, and rules change. Check them. This series has dated every volatile fact it gives you. Some will be out of date by the time you read this. The habit of checking is worth more than any individual figure.
- Be wary of anyone who promises a shortcut, especially if they charge for it.
- And enjoy it, where you can. Very few people who say they'll write a book ever do. If you finish one, you've done something rare.

What Ned did next

On a Saturday morning in November, a month after launch, Ned buys a new notebook. Hardback, ruled, pleasingly expensive.

He opens it at the kitchen table, writes the date, and underneath it:

Book Two. A Skerrow Mystery.

Below that, after a moment's thought, he writes a single line: "Somebody buys the old boatyard."

Jo puts a mug of tea down next to the notebook and reads it.

"Who did it?"

Ned smiles. "I'll know," he says, "before I start."

On the very last page of the notebook, in small letters, where nobody will see it, there's a second note: "Romance — rival ferry operators?"

Try This

1. Make your exclusive-or-wide decision on paper. List your genre, your readers' likely reading habits, and how much admin you're prepared to do. Then choose, with a date to review it.

2. Read the AI-content rules of every platform you plan to use, today, and note the date you read them.
3. Draft a launch plan that fits on one page: three things before launch, three on the day, three in the month after.
4. Set up one channel you own: a simple website or a newsletter sign-up.
5. Check your country's legal deposit rules and put the deadline in your diary.
6. Open a new notebook. Write "Book Two" at the top. You don't have to fill it yet.

The End (of the Series)

Thank you for travelling with Ned. If this series has been useful, the best thing you can do with it is the same thing Ned did: start, finish, ask for help, check your facts, and keep going.

And when you find yourself at 2 a.m. drawing eleven arrows on a sheet of paper, remember that everybody's ferry runs on a Sunday in Chapter 3 at some point. It's what revision is for.

Sources and Further Reading

Sources are listed alphabetically by author or organization. Repeated references from the ten chapters have been consolidated. Separate publications and guidance pages remain distinct. Links and bibliographic details are retained from the supplied research notes; they have not been independently fact-checked for this edition.

Alliance of Independent Authors. Website and self-publishing guidance.

<https://www.allianceindependentauthors.org/>

<https://selfpublishingadvice.org/>

— Guidance on the European Accessibility Act (EAA) and the General Product Safety Regulation (GPSR).

<https://selfpublishingadvice.org/>

Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP). Help and policies:

— Content Guidelines (including AI-content provisions).

https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200672390

— Digital Pricing Page / Digital Book Pricing Page (both links supplied in the research notes).

https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200634560

https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200634500

— Paperback Royalty.

<https://kdp.amazon.com/help/topic/G201834330>

— Categories.

https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/G200652170

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https://kdp.amazon.com/en_US/help/topic/GULSQMHU5MNH4EZM

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Editors Canada. Professional editorial association and resources.

<https://www.editors.ca/>

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