MAISIE'S HEROINE IS PREGNANT FOR FOURTEEN MONTHS

Timelines that keep ages, seasons and history in order

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The first person to notice was Maisie Collard's sister, who was reading the draft on the train.

"Lovely book," she texted. "Quick question. How long is Violet pregnant for?"

Maisie, who worked in a garden centre and was writing a dual-timeline romance in her evenings, checked. Violet discovered she was expecting in the snow of chapter four. She gave birth in chapter nineteen, during a heatwave, the following summer but one.

Fourteen months, near enough.

Maisie went out to the shed, found a roll of brown parcel paper left over from Christmas and unrolled it along the hallway floor.

Why a timeline matters

Every novel takes place across time, and time is easy to lose track of while you're writing. A character's age drifts. A season changes twice in a week. A letter arrives before it was sent. A child is three in one chapter and starting school two weeks later.

Readers notice more of these slips than writers expect. And the more complex the book, the more there are to notice. Maisie's novel had two storylines, one in wartime Kent and one in the present day, linked by a bundle of letters found in a biscuit tin. That meant two timelines, plus the forty-odd years connecting them.

A visual timeline lets you see the whole span of the story at once, and spot problems that are almost invisible on the page.

Draw a line and mark it

The simplest timeline is a long horizontal line, with time running from left to right. Mark the years, months or days, depending on the span of your story. Then add each significant event at the right point.

A roll of paper works well, because you can see the whole thing at once and add notes underneath. A long strip of sticky notes on a wall is another option. Spreadsheets and dedicated timeline software suit some writers, especially for complex books, though they can be harder to take in at a glance.

Maisie drew one line for 1943 to 1946 and another, further along the hall, for the present-day story. Then she began filling them in.

Track the things that change

Once the main events are marked, add the details that tend to drift.

Ages. Note each important character's date of birth, or at least their age at the start, and work out their age at each key event. Maisie discovered that Violet's mother was apparently forty-two in 1943 and fifty-eight in 1945.

Seasons and weather. If it snowed in chapter four, it was winter. Plants, light, school terms and holidays all follow the calendar, and a reader who gardens will be the first to notice if roses bloom in February. Maisie, of all people, should have known better.

Travel and messages. How long does it take a letter to arrive, or a person to travel between places? In a historical setting, the answer may be very different from today.

Pregnancies, injuries and recoveries. These follow their own timescales. A full-term pregnancy is about nine months; a broken leg doesn't heal by the following Tuesday.

Fix historical events in place

When a story touches real history, the timeline is where you anchor it.

Maisie's wartime chapters included the celebrations at the end of the war in Europe. VE Day was 8 May 1945. Once she placed that date on the timeline, she could see that Violet's reunion with her sweetheart, which she had written as "a few weeks later" in autumn, was actually several months later. That gave her a long, anxious summer to fill, which turned out to be some of the best material in the book.

For any real event you use, check the date against a reliable source and note where you found it. It takes minutes, and it protects you from a reader who knows the date better than you do.

Line up the two stories

For dual-timeline novels, or books with several viewpoints, a timeline also shows how the strands relate.

Maisie's present-day heroine finds the letters in chapter one and reads them gradually. The reader learns Violet's story in roughly the order the letters were written. But laying both lines on the floor showed that one crucial letter, written in 1946, was being read in chapter six, before letters from 1944. That was either a mistake or a deliberate choice. Maisie decided to make it deliberate: the letter was misfiled in the tin, and its early reading planted a mystery the rest of the book could solve.

Keep the timeline and the draft talking

A timeline is a reference, not a sculpture. Every time you change a date in the manuscript, change it on the timeline too. Every time you add an event, place it.

Some writers note the date at the top of each chapter in their draft, even if it never appears in the final book. It makes checking much easier.

Violet's pregnancy now begins in the autumn of 1944 and ends in early summer. She's still in labour during a heatwave, because Maisie liked that scene and saw no reason to give it up. June, after all, can be warm.

The parcel paper stayed in the hallway for most of the winter. Visitors learned to step over 1945.

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