YOUR FIRST DRAFT NEEDS A MAP

Finding the shape of the book you actually wrote

Published 31 October 2026 · 4 min read

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The first draft had everything a novel could possibly need. There was a determined heroine, a suspicious neighbour, and a small coastal town with an impressive number of secrets. There was even a dog.

There was only one problem: the story didn't really start until chapter seven.

Discovering this can make a writer consider something restful, like competitive furniture moving. Fortunately, it is exactly the kind of discovery structural revision can turn into a better book.

Before polishing sentences, find out where those sentences are taking the reader.

READ FOR THE JOURNEY

If your schedule permits, leave the manuscript alone for a while. There is no compulsory waiting period. The aim is enough distance to notice what is on the page instead of supplying what you remember intending to put there.

Then read from beginning to end. Keep brief notes about where interest rises, where you become confused and where your attention goes off in search of biscuits. Resist fixing every sentence. You are looking for the shape of the experience.

At the end, write two short descriptions: what you intended the book to do, and what this draft actually does. The difference is useful information. Perhaps your planned mystery has become a family drama with an occasional burglary. You can strengthen the mystery or embrace the drama. First, notice the choice.

BUILD A MAP OF WHAT EXISTS

A chapter map is a compact record of the manuscript as written, sometimes called a reverse outline. Use paper, index cards or a simple document. You do not need software with a training course and a very enthusiastic welcome email.

For each chapter, record:

- Chapter number, viewpoint and approximate length.
- Where and when events happen.
- The character's immediate objective.
- The main obstacle, discovery or decision.
- What changes, and what this causes next.

If a chapter contains several scenes, give each scene a separate row. If a chapter mostly supplies background, say so. Writing "explains the harbour's history" is more useful than pretending it contains a turning point.

A sample entry might read: "Chapter 4. Rosa, Tuesday evening, harbour office. Wants the departure log. Clerk refuses; Rosa steals a photograph of it. Learns her sister sailed under another name. Her theft brings the harbourmaster to her door."

That row shows purpose, information and consequence. "Rosa goes to the harbour" tells you considerably less.

LOOK ALONG THE ROWS

Read the map without opening the manuscript. Where do several chapters deliver the same information? Where does an important decision happen off the page? Does the protagonist spend a long stretch waiting politely for someone to deliver the plot?

Waiting may be excellent behaviour at a bus stop. In a thriller, it needs a reason to hold our attention.

Length can flag something to inspect, but it is not a verdict. A long chapter may earn every page. A short one may repeat a conversation we understood yesterday. Look at what the space achieves.

Track subplots too. If a friendship vanishes for half the book, ask whether readers will retain its emotional importance. It can return changed, resolve earlier, or be removed. It need not appear according to a mathematical timetable.

CHECK THE PROMISES AND CONNECTIONS

An opening invites expectations. A disappearance suggests that finding out what happened will matter. A growing attraction suggests that the relationship will develop. Check whether the ending gives the central struggle a meaningful result, even if smaller questions remain open.

Then examine the links between events. Does Rosa confront the captain because of what she found, or simply because the outline says it is time? Could his confession happen unchanged without her investigation? If so, her choices may need more influence.

A nonlinear novel can pass this test. Readers need not receive events chronologically, but they need enough orientation to understand the connections when you intend them to.

Also check preparation. If the ending depends on Rosa reading nautical shorthand, establish that ability earlier. A decisive skill should not arrive with the emergency supplies.

TURN THE MAP INTO A REVISION PLAN

Choose a few major priorities rather than repairing everything at once. For the coastal mystery: begin closer to the disappearance, give Rosa an active investigative choice, and prepare the final discovery.

Duplicate your map and try a proposed order before moving large sections. Beside each change, note its consequences. Moving a discovery affects later conversations, suspense and what characters know. Deleting an introductory chapter may require relocating one essential fact, not preserving all its furniture.

Revise the largest dependencies first. Then reread the altered sequence for logic and emotional development. A clever arrangement of cards is only a proposal; the revised pages must make it work.

USE THE MAP WHEN SEEKING HELP

This is structural self-editing. A professional developmental editor brings an outside assessment of the manuscript; the map helps you ask focused questions but does not replace that reader's experience.

If funds are limited, a critique partner or an assessment with a clearly defined scope may help test the structure before detailed editing. Share the manuscript as well as a summary when the service calls for it. A tidy outline can conceal a slow reading experience.

Finish with a revised draft and a short list of unresolved concerns. Your novel does not need somebody else's exact route. It does need a route readers can follow, with discoveries worth making along the way.

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