

TOOLS FOR STORYTELLERS

A WRITER'S GUIDE TO
GENRE

Find where your story belongs.



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KEEPWRITE

A Writer's Guide to Genre

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Set in Georgia.



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INTRODUCTION

Before you write, know where your book lives.

If you've ever described your book idea and watched someone's eyes go blank trying to place it, this book is for you. Genre isn't a box your story gets shoved into after the fact. It's a set of promises you make to a reader before they turn the first page, and the publishing industry runs on those promises.

An agent reading your query needs to know what shelf your book goes on. A reader browsing Amazon needs to know what experience they're buying. Genre answers both, and getting it wrong means the right readers never find your book.

HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

Every book exists at the intersection of two things: an age category and a genre. Age category tells the industry who your reader is. Genre tells them what kind of experience your book delivers. Understanding both is the first step to positioning your work.

This book starts with age categories, since they come first in every query and product listing. Then it moves through the major commercial fiction genres in alphabetical order, with each genre's subgenres underneath. A flowchart at the back helps if you're still unsure.

Many books cross genre lines, and that's fine. But even a cross-genre book has a primary genre, the one that decides where it gets shelved. This book helps you make that blend intentional.

Age Categories

These are not genres.



Before you identify your genre, you need to know your age category. This is the single most common point of confusion for newer writers, because age categories look like genres from the outside. They aren't. An age category tells the industry who your primary reader is. Genre tells them what kind of story you're delivering. Your book is always both: a YA fantasy, an adult thriller, a middle grade mystery.

Getting the age category wrong has real consequences. If you query an agent with a manuscript labeled YA but the content reads as adult, that's an immediate pass. If you list a book as middle grade on KDP but it contains graphic violence, you've created a trust problem with readers and parents. The categories that follow aren't about limiting your story. They're about making sure the right people find it.

Middle Grade (MG)

Protagonist age: 8 to 12, and readers are roughly the same, though plenty of adults read MG too. The defining feature is the protagonist's relationship to the world around them. They're encountering larger systems, like school, society, and family structures, and learning to navigate them for the first time.

CONTENT BOUNDARIES

Middle grade can handle real danger, loss, and emotional weight, but graphic violence, explicit language, and sexual content are out. Romance stays at the level of first crushes and hand-holding. The emotional stakes are real; the content stays age-appropriate.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 30,000 to 55,000 words, though fantasy and adventure run higher and chapter-book-adjacent MG runs shorter. Genuinely shorter than an adult novel, and rightly so.

Young Adult (YA)

Protagonist age: 13 to 18, usually on the older end. The defining feature is the experience of growing up: first love, identity, independence, the shift from childhood toward adulthood. YA is enormously popular with adult readers too, but the protagonist and emotional core sit firmly in adolescence.

YA is a category, not a genre. There's YA fantasy, YA romance, YA thriller, and the rest. What unites them is the age of the protagonist and the coming-of-age lens, not any shared subject matter.

CONTENT BOUNDARIES

YA can go to darker and more mature places than middle grade: real violence, romance, difficult themes. But explicit, on-the-page sex is not part of YA; that's the bright line between YA and new adult. YA can acknowledge that sex exists and that characters have relationships, but the act itself stays off the page.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 50,000 to 90,000 words, with fantasy and science fiction running toward the higher end.

New Adult (NA)

Protagonist age: 18 to 25. New adult covers the years just past adolescence: college, first jobs, first serious relationships, the early independence of adulthood. It emerged as a category to fill the gap between YA and adult, and it's most established in romance, where it's a recognized and active market.

Outside romance, new adult is less established as a category, and some books that would fit it are simply marketed as adult. It's real, but narrower and less universal than the others.

CONTENT BOUNDARIES

New adult generally allows full adult content, including explicit romance and mature themes. The distinction from adult is the life stage and concerns of the characters rather than any content limit.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 60,000 to 90,000 words, in line with adult commercial fiction.

Adult

Protagonist age: adult, and the category a book falls into when it doesn't belong to one of the younger shelves. Adult fiction assumes a grown reader and places no limits on content, theme, or complexity. The concerns are adult concerns: career, marriage, parenthood, mortality, the full weight of adult life.

Adult fiction is the largest category by sales, so "adult" often goes unstated; a thriller or a literary novel is assumed to be adult unless marked otherwise. It's named explicitly mainly to distinguish a book from YA or new adult when the line might be unclear.

CONTENT BOUNDARIES

None inherent to the category. Explicit content is fully permitted; what a book includes is governed by genre conventions and the individual book rather than by the category.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Varies widely by genre, but most adult novels land between 70,000 and 100,000 words. See the note on length.

A Note on Length

Age category and genre tell people who your book is for and what kind of story it is. Length is a third structural fact, and it carries its own set of expectations. The same word count that makes a complete novella would be an unfinished novel, and submitting one labeled as the other signals that a writer doesn't know the market.

These ranges shift by genre. Fantasy and science fiction run longer because they carry worldbuilding. Romance and thrillers tend to run leaner. Treat these as orientation, not law.

THE ROUGH RANGES

Short story	<i>under 7,500 words. One core situation.</i>
Novelette	<i>7,500 to 17,500 words. A single arc.</i>
Novella	<i>17,500 to 40,000 words. Tightly scoped.</i>
Novel	<i>40,000+ words. Varies widely by genre.</i>

For most commercial adult fiction, the expected novel range lands between 70,000 and 100,000 words. Go much below 70k and the book reads as thin to an agent. Go much above 120k as a debut and it reads as unwieldy, since longer books cost more to print and are a bigger risk on an unproven author. Established writers and certain genres break these rules routinely, but a debut is safest landing inside them.

Literary, Upmarket, Commercial

Here is one more axis, and it trips up more writers than any other. Apart from genre, every novel sits somewhere on a spectrum that runs from literary to commercial, describing how it balances the craft of the writing against broad, page-turning appeal. This is separate from genre, and that's the part people miss.

Because it's a separate axis, it combines with genre rather than replacing it. You can write literary fantasy or commercial fantasy, a literary mystery or a commercial one. "Literary" is its own recognized category, the shelf a book lands on when it leads with craft and theme rather than a genre hook. But it also works as a quality that can layer onto another genre, which is what sets it apart from labels like "fantasy" or "romance."

THE SPECTRUM

Literary	<i>craft and theme lead; plot serves them.</i>
Upmarket	<i>literary craft plus a strong, pulling story.</i>
Book club	<i>upmarket built to spark discussion.</i>
Commercial	<i>the genre's promise leads; pace first.</i>

These aren't hard boxes; every book falls at its own point on the line, and the labels blur where they meet. Upmarket and book club overlap so heavily they're often used for the same book. What matters is knowing roughly where you sit, because it shapes how you pitch the book and which agents and readers are the right fit. The Literary Fiction chapter covers this spectrum in more detail.

Fantasy

A world that works by different rules.



Fantasy is fiction built on a world that operates outside the rules of our own. That might mean magic systems, mythical creatures, invented civilizations, or simply a reality where the impossible is ordinary. The defining feature isn't dragons or swords. It's that the world itself is fundamentally different from ours in ways that shape the story.

The core reader promise is transportation. Readers come to fantasy to be taken somewhere they couldn't go otherwise, and to experience that place with enough depth and internal logic that it feels real. Fantasy is also one of the broadest genres in commercial fiction, which is why naming your subgenre matters before you position the book.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Adult fantasy runs long, usually 90,000 to 120,000 words, because worldbuilding needs room. Cozy and YA fantasy tend to sit lower.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Science fiction, when speculative elements are involved. The simplest test: if the world's strangeness is explained through technology, it's likely science fiction. If through magic or myth, it's likely fantasy.

Epic / High Fantasy

Epic fantasy, sometimes called high fantasy, takes place in a fully invented secondary world and deals with large-scale conflict. Think wars, quests, the fate of civilizations. The scope is wide, the cast is usually large, and the stakes extend well beyond the personal.

The reader promise here is immersion in a world with deep history, complex politics, and a sense that the story's outcome will reshape that world. Readers expect maps, multiple POVs, and a commitment to worldbuilding that rewards attention.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story involves a quest or conflict that spans nations or realms. Your world has its own history and cultures that you've built from the ground up. The protagonist's journey is entangled with the fate of something much larger than themselves.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Sword and sorcery, which shares the secondary-world setting but operates at a much smaller, more personal scale. If your story is about one person's survival and adventure rather than the fate of a kingdom, you're probably closer to sword and sorcery.

TYPICAL LENGTH

The longest fantasy lane. Often 100,000 to 150,000 words, and series installments can run higher. Debuts are safest staying under 120,000.

Sword and Sorcery

Sword and sorcery shares epic fantasy's invented world but stays close to the ground. It follows individual adventurers, the mercenaries and rogues at the edges of a world, through personal quests and the pursuit of fortune or escape. The scope is tight, the cast is small, and the danger is immediate rather than world-ending.

The reader promise is adventure at human scale. Readers want fast pacing, vivid action, and a hero whose stakes stay personal: staying alive, getting paid, getting clear. The pull is momentum and danger rather than the slow sweep of worldbuilding.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your protagonist is an adventurer or outsider chasing a personal goal, your conflicts are immediate and physical, and the fate of the wider world is someone else's problem. The story moves fast and stays close to one or two characters.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Epic fantasy, which shares the secondary world but plays for much higher stakes. If the outcome reshapes a kingdom or a world, it's epic. If it stays with one person's survival and adventure, it's sword and sorcery.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Leaner than epic fantasy, usually 70,000 to 100,000 words, with a long tradition of shorter, fast-moving tales and linked adventures.

Cozy Fantasy

Cozy fantasy is a newer subgenre that's grown rapidly, particularly in the indie and self-published space. It takes place in a fantasy world but deliberately avoids high stakes, graphic violence, and intense conflict. The focus is on everyday life, community, relationships, and small personal goals within a magical setting.

The reader promise is comfort. Someone picking up a cozy fantasy wants to spend time in a pleasant world with likeable characters. Think running a bakery in a village full of magical creatures, or finding your place in a small enchanted town. The tension comes from personal growth and social dynamics, not existential threats.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story is set in a fantasy world but the main conflict is personal rather than world-threatening. The tone is warm and the pacing is gentle. Readers would describe the experience as relaxing rather than thrilling.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Low fantasy, which also tends toward smaller-scale stories but doesn't necessarily prioritize comfort or warmth. A low fantasy can be gritty or melancholy. Cozy fantasy is defined by its emotional register as much as its scope.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Shorter than most fantasy, often 70,000 to 90,000 words. The gentle pacing rewards a tighter book rather than a sprawling one.

Low Fantasy

Low fantasy keeps the magic scarce. The setting may be our own world or an invented one, but the supernatural is rare, marginal, or quietly intruding on an otherwise grounded reality rather than saturating it. Where high fantasy builds a world that runs on magic, low fantasy lets only a little of the impossible bleed into a world that mostly does not.

The reader promise is the grounded made strange. Readers want a believable, hard-edged world where magic stays precious or dangerous because it's uncommon. The scale tends to be small and the mood can run from melancholy to brutal, since comfort is no part of the contract.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Magic in your story is rare, costly, or half-believed, and the world feels grounded rather than wondrous. The supernatural is an intrusion into ordinary life rather than the air your characters breathe.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Cozy fantasy, which also works at a small scale but commits to warmth. Low fantasy shares the modest scope without the gentle register, and can be grim, melancholy, or harsh. If the magic is scarce and the mood stays grounded, it's low fantasy.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words. With no full magical world to build, low fantasy often runs leaner than epic, though it varies with how dark and dense the story gets.

Dark Fantasy

Dark fantasy is fantasy that incorporates horror elements, dark atmospheres, or unsettling themes. The world may be dangerous and frightening, the magic may have a cost, and the tone leans toward dread or unease. Gothic settings, morally complex characters, and a sense that the supernatural is threatening rather than wondrous are all hallmarks.

The line between dark fantasy and horror is about intent. Horror is built to frighten you; the fear is the point. Dark fantasy uses fear as texture, but it's still telling a fantasy story underneath, with a plot, a world, and stakes beyond mere survival. The dread serves the story rather than being the whole of it.

Common territory: cursed bloodlines, bargains struck with dark powers, a magic that corrupts whoever uses it, monsters that were once human. The wonder of ordinary fantasy is still here, but it casts a longer shadow.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story uses horror-adjacent imagery and atmosphere but still has identifiable heroes or a sense that good can prevail. The darkness is in the tone and the world, not necessarily in the moral framework.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Similar to mainstream fantasy, around 90,000 to 110,000 words, though darker standalones can run leaner.

Grimdark

Grimdark is defined by moral bleakness. The world isn't just dark in atmosphere; it's cynical in philosophy. Heroes are flawed or absent, violence has consequences that aren't glossed over, and the narrative resists clean resolutions or clear moral victories. The reader promise is unflinching realism within a fantasy frame.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your characters operate in moral grey areas. Institutions are corrupt or self-serving. The story doesn't offer easy answers about who's right, and wielding power well doesn't guarantee a good outcome.

TELLING THEM APART

Dark fantasy and grimdark get used interchangeably, but they're doing different things. Dark fantasy makes the reader uneasy. Grimdark makes the reader question whether "good guys" exist at all. Dark fantasy borrows from horror's atmosphere; grimdark borrows from literary fiction's moral ambiguity. A book can lean both ways, but most settle into one.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Runs with the longer fantasy lanes, roughly 100,000 to 130,000 words. The large casts and political scope tend to demand the room.

Historical Fiction

The past, made real on the page.



Historical fiction is set in a real time and place from the past, with the period rendered accurately enough that the world itself feels different from our own. The most common industry line is roughly fifty years before the writing, though the threshold is debated and some bodies set it nearer thirty. The story and often its characters are invented, but the setting is grounded in research rather than imagined freely.

That line reaches more recent than people tend to assume. The genre isn't only corsets and carriages; a novel set during a World War, or even a few decades before it was written, can qualify. What unites the range is that the period is reconstructed with care, so the reader sees a real past from the inside. The history can't feel like a costume draped over modern people; the period has to shape who the characters are and what they can do.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 90,000 to 120,000 words. The research-heavy texture and often sweeping scope tend toward the longer end of commercial fiction.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Period romance and historical mystery, which use historical settings but answer to their own genres first. If the love story or the puzzle drives the book, the genre is romance or mystery in historical dress. Historical fiction proper is driven by character and period.

Historical Literary

Historical literary fiction brings literary craft to a past setting. The prose is careful, the characters are interior and complex, and the book is as interested in language and theme as in plot. The period isn't a backdrop for adventure; it's a lens for examining how people lived, thought, and suffered under the conditions of their time.

The reader promise is depth. Someone reaching for this expects a book that rewards slow reading, that uses the distance of history to say something about being human. These are the historical novels that win literary prizes and anchor book club discussions.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your sentences matter as much as your plot. Your protagonist's inner life carries the book, and you're using the past to explore a theme that still resonates. Pacing is deliberate rather than driven.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Upmarket and book club fiction, which share the literary sensibility but aren't necessarily historical. If the past is essential to what your book is doing, it's historical literary. If the setting could shift to the present without losing the story, it's closer to upmarket.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Often 90,000 to 110,000 words, though literary fiction tolerates more variance than most genres.

Historical Adventure

Historical adventure puts plot and momentum first. There's a quest, a war, a voyage, an escape, a survival story set against a real historical moment. The research still matters, but it serves a propulsive, event-driven narrative rather than quiet character study. Think seafaring epics, wartime missions, frontier survival.

The reader promise is excitement grounded in a real past. Readers want the thrill of adventure with the added weight of history's stakes: real battles, real dangers, real consequences. The pace is faster and the external action larger than in historical literary fiction.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story is driven by external events and physical stakes. The plot moves quickly, the danger is concrete, and the historical setting raises the tension rather than slowing it down.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Historical thrillers, which share the momentum but are built around suspense and a ticking clock. If dread and the question of what happens next drive the book, it leans thriller. If it's the sweep of the journey or the campaign, it's adventure.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 90,000 to 120,000 words, with epic sagas running longer.

Alternate History

Alternate history asks what if the past had gone differently. A single changed event, a battle won by the other side, a leader who lived or died, an invention that came early, branches into a world that never was. The book then explores the consequences of that divergence with the same rigor a straight historical novel brings to the real past.

The reader promise is plausible counterfactual. Readers want the change to feel earned and its ripples to follow logically, not a fantasy of convenience. The pleasure is in recognizing the real history underneath and watching it bend.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your premise hinges on a specific historical event going another way, and your story traces the consequences. The world is recognizably ours but altered at a definable point of departure.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Science fiction, when the divergence involves advanced or speculative technology. If the change is driven by invented science, it leans science fiction. If it's a plausible reordering of real historical forces, it stays alternate history.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Typically 90,000 to 120,000 words, matching the historical and science-fiction shelves it sits between.

Horror

Fiction built to frighten.



Horror is fiction whose primary purpose is to frighten, unsettle, or disturb. Where other genres may use fear as one tool among many, horror makes the emotional response the point. The threat might be supernatural or entirely human, the dread slow or the shock sudden, but the book is built to make the reader afraid.

The core reader promise is fear, delivered safely. Readers come to horror to feel dread, tension, and the thrill of the frightening from the safety of the page. The subgenres differ enormously in how they get there, from the slow gothic chill to the visceral shock of body horror, but the promise underneath is the same.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words, shorter than fantasy. Horror also has a strong novella tradition, where a tight, sustained dread does its work in far fewer pages.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Dark fantasy and thriller. Dark fantasy uses frightening atmosphere but tells a fantasy story underneath; horror's aim is the fear itself. Thrillers generate tension and dread too, but they promise resolution and survival, where horror is willing to leave the reader genuinely shaken.

Gothic

Gothic horror is the genre's oldest strand, built on atmosphere, decay, and dread rather than shock. Crumbling houses, family secrets, isolation, and the weight of the past press down on the characters. The fear is slow and suffocating, more a mood than a jolt, and the setting itself often functions as a character.

The reader promise is immersive unease. Readers want to be enveloped in a brooding, oppressive world where something is deeply wrong beneath a decaying surface. The pleasure is atmospheric, the dread cumulative.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your setting is as important as your characters, the past haunts the present, and the horror builds through mood and atmosphere rather than sudden scares. Decay, isolation, and buried secrets drive the unease.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Dark fantasy, which can share the brooding atmosphere but tells a fantasy story. If the supernatural elements are wondrous as well as threatening and the plot is an adventure, it leans dark fantasy. If the atmosphere of dread is the point, it's gothic.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 100,000 words. The atmospheric build often supports a slightly longer book than other horror.

Cosmic / Lovecraftian

Cosmic horror locates its fear in the vast indifference of the universe. The threat isn't a monster you can fight but a truth too large for the human mind: that we are insignificant, that reality is unknowable, that forces beyond comprehension neither know nor care that we exist. Knowledge itself becomes dangerous, and understanding too much destroys the one who understands.

The reader promise is dread of the unknowable. Readers want the chill of confronting something so far beyond human scale that sanity can't survive the encounter. The horror is philosophical as much as visceral.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your threat can't be defeated, only survived or fled. The fear comes from scale and incomprehension rather than gore, and your characters' minds are as much at risk as their bodies.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Science fiction, when the vast forces are alien rather than supernatural. If the unknowable is explored with curiosity and a sense of wonder, it leans science fiction. If it's framed as dread and the knowing is a curse, it's cosmic horror.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Often 60,000 to 90,000 words, with a particularly strong short story and novella tradition reaching back to the pulps.

Psychological

Psychological horror locates the threat in the mind. The fear comes from paranoia, unreliable perception, guilt, or a slow unraveling of sanity, and the reader is often left unsure what is real. The monster may be a delusion, a memory, or the character's own deteriorating grip on reality. Little may happen externally while everything comes apart within.

The reader promise is destabilizing dread. Readers want the ground to shift under them, to doubt what they're being shown, to feel the vertigo of a mind that can't be trusted. The horror is intimate and internal.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your fear comes from inside a character's head rather than an external monster. Reality is uncertain, the narrator may be unreliable, and the real question is what's actually happening versus what's imagined.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Psychological thriller, which shares the unstable mind but promises a puzzle with an answer. If the book resolves into explanation and the protagonist regains control, it leans thriller. If the dread lingers and reality stays broken, it's horror.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words, matching mainstream horror.

Body Horror

Body horror locates fear in the violation of the physical body: transformation, infection, mutation, the body turning against its owner or becoming something monstrous. The dread is visceral and intimate, rooted in the fear of losing control of one's own flesh, of becoming unrecognizable to oneself.

The reader promise is visceral revulsion and unease. Readers want the deep discomfort of watching the body betray its boundaries. The horror is physical and immediate, working on the gut as much as the mind.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your horror centers on the body: its transformation, corruption, or loss of integrity. The fear is physical and intimate, about flesh rather than ghosts or the unknown.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Splatterpunk and extreme horror, which foreground graphic violence for shock. Body horror can be restrained and thematic, using transformation to explore identity or disease. If gore is the goal rather than the tool, it crosses into extreme horror.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Often 60,000 to 90,000 words, and well suited to the novella, where sustained discomfort can run intense and short.

Folk

Folk horror draws its unease from the old, the rural, and the communal: isolated settings, traditions and beliefs that predate the modern world, the land itself carrying weight and meaning. The dread tends to come from an outsider's dislocation, a protagonist who doesn't share the community's worldview and finds their own assumptions offer no footing. The fear is less about any belief being evil than about being the stranger who doesn't belong.

The reader promise is the uncanny pull of a world with its own logic, a place where modern certainties don't apply and something older sets the terms. The unease is atmospheric and communal.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your horror is rooted in landscape, folklore, and a close-knit community with its own traditions. The setting is rural and cut off, and the tension comes from an outsider who can't navigate rules they don't share.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Supernatural horror and fantasy. Supernatural horror also features forces beyond the everyday but isn't tied to folklore and place the way folk horror is. Fantasy may draw on the same folklore, but it builds a world to explore, where folk horror uses that tradition to unsettle.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words, with a strong tradition in shorter forms as well.

Supernatural

Supernatural horror features the explicitly paranormal: ghosts, demons, hauntings, possession, the restless dead. The threat is real within the story, an actual force from beyond the natural world, and the book's tension comes from the characters confronting something that shouldn't exist but undeniably does.

The reader promise is the thrill of the genuinely uncanny. Readers want to believe, within the book, that the dead can return and the unseen can reach into the world. The fear is direct: the haunting is real, and it means harm.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your horror comes from an explicitly paranormal threat that is real within the story. Ghosts, demons, or hauntings drive the fear, and they're not metaphor or delusion but actual forces.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Fantasy and paranormal romance. Fantasy uses the supernatural to build a world; in horror the ghost or demon is an intrusion into a world meant to run on normal rules, and the aim is fear rather than wonder. Paranormal romance uses the same elements but centers a love story with a satisfying ending.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words.

Quiet / Literary Horror

Quiet horror works through restraint, atmosphere, and dread rather than shock or gore. It often carries literary ambitions, using the tools of literary fiction (careful prose, deep character, thematic weight) to produce a slow, lingering unease. The scares are subtle, the horror implied as much as shown, and the effect stays with the reader long after.

The reader promise is dread that gets under the skin and stays. Readers want unease that builds quietly and lingers, horror that disturbs through suggestion and resonance rather than spectacle. The fear is patient and deep.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your horror works through restraint and suggestion rather than shock. The prose and characters carry literary weight, and the dread is slow, subtle, and lingering rather than loud.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Literary fiction with dark themes, which shares the craft but isn't built to frighten. If unease and dread are the intended effect, it's quiet horror. If the darkness serves a literary theme without aiming to scare, it's literary fiction.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words, though the literary lean tolerates more variance.

Literary Fiction

Where how it's written matters as much as what happens.



Literary fiction is fiction where craft, character, and theme carry as much weight as plot, sometimes more. The prose itself is part of the point, the characters are drawn with depth and interiority, and the book is usually after some insight into how people live. Plot still matters, but it serves the deeper aims rather than driving the book on its own.

The core reader promise is depth and resonance. Readers come for prose worth slowing down over, characters who feel real, and themes that linger after the last page. People sometimes call literary fiction the genre with no genre, but in the market it behaves like one, with its own shelves, awards, and reader expectations.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 100,000 words, though literary fiction tolerates more variance than almost any other category, in both directions.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Genre fiction generally. The line isn't quality; plenty of genre fiction is beautifully written. It's priority: literary fiction puts craft and theme first and lets plot serve them, where genre fiction leads with the promise of its category, the mystery solved or the romance fulfilled.

Literary

Pure literary fiction is the most craft-forward end of the category. Language, structure, and theme take precedence, and the book may resist conventional plot, clean resolution, or even a clear arc. The pleasure is in the writing itself and in what the book reveals, not in what happens next. This is the lane of literary prizes and MFA programs.

The reader promise is artistry and insight. Readers want prose that rewards close attention and a book that treats them as a thoughtful participant rather than a passenger. Ambiguity is welcome; tidy answers are not always the goal.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your sentences are doing as much work as your story. You're willing to trade pace and resolution for depth and resonance, and you trust the reader to sit with ambiguity rather than be handed conclusions.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Upmarket fiction, which keeps the literary sensibility but adds a stronger narrative pull and broader appeal. If your book leads with language and theme and lets plot come second, it's literary. If it balances both for a wider readership, it's upmarket.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 100,000 words, with wide tolerance for both shorter and longer work.

Upmarket

Upmarket fiction sits between literary and commercial, taking the craft, depth, and thematic ambition of literary fiction and pairing it with a stronger, more accessible narrative. The prose is polished and the characters are rich, but the story pulls the reader forward with the momentum of commercial fiction. It's the lane many bestsellers and award-adjacent titles occupy.

The reader promise is the best of both: a book that satisfies as a story and rewards as literature. Readers want to be moved and made to think without sacrificing the pleasure of a narrative that carries them along.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your book has literary craft and real thematic weight but also a clear, engaging plot that pulls a reader through. You want both the depth and the wide audience, and you're not willing to give up either.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Book club fiction, which overlaps heavily but is defined by its discussion-readiness rather than its literary-commercial balance. Much upmarket fiction is also book club fiction; the labels describe different things about the same kind of book.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words, in the comfortable commercial range.

Book Club

Book club fiction is accessible literary work built, deliberately or not, to spark discussion. It centers themes and moral questions people want to talk through: family, identity, ethical dilemmas, social issues. The writing is strong but not difficult, the emotional stakes are high, and the book tends to end on a note that invites debate rather than closing every question.

The reader promise is a book worth discussing. Readers, often reading alongside others, want characters and dilemmas they can argue about and themes that resonate beyond the page. Emotional resonance and conversation-starting questions are the draw.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your book raises questions people will want to talk about, centers relatable emotional or moral stakes, and is accessible enough for a wide readership while still carrying real thematic weight.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Upmarket fiction, with which it largely overlaps. Book club describes a book's discussion-readiness and broad emotional appeal; upmarket describes its blend of literary and commercial. A single book is often both at once.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words.

Magical Realism

Magical realism sets impossible elements inside an otherwise realistic world, and crucially, treats them as ordinary. A character might age backward or a town might share a single dream, and no one stops to marvel or explain. The magic isn't a system to be explored; it's woven into a real, grounded world as if it has always belonged there. The tradition has deep roots in Latin American literature and carries specific cultural weight.

The reader promise is the everyday made strange and the strange made everyday. Readers want reality gently bent in service of theme and emotion, the impossible used to illuminate something true about ordinary life.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your world is realistic but contains impossible elements no one treats as remarkable. The magic serves theme and feeling rather than plot, and you're letting the impossible quietly coexist with the real rather than building a system.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Fantasy, which builds its impossible elements into an explained, explorable system at the center of the story. In magical realism the magic is matter-of-fact and peripheral, serving a literary aim; in fantasy it's the engine. The terms aren't interchangeable, and using them precisely matters.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 100,000 words, following literary fiction's range.

Mystery

A puzzle the reader is invited to solve.



Mystery is fiction built around a question, usually a crime, that the reader works to answer alongside the detective. A wrong has been done, the truth is hidden, and the pleasure of the book is in piecing together what happened and who is responsible. The story moves backward from the crime, uncovering a past that's already occurred.

The core reader promise is the satisfaction of a solved puzzle. Readers want clues they could in principle assemble themselves, a fair contest between their wits and the detective's, and an ending where the pieces click into place. The investigation is the engine, and the reveal is the reward.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words, leaner than fantasy. Cozy mysteries often run shorter; police procedurals can run a little longer.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Thriller. The cleanest test is direction: mystery looks backward, solving a crime that has already happened, while a thriller races forward to stop a catastrophe before it lands. Mystery asks who did it; thriller asks whether they'll be stopped in time.

Cozy Mystery

Cozy mystery keeps the puzzle but strips out the grit. An amateur sleuth, often with a charming hobby or trade, solves crimes in a small, tight-knit community. Violence happens off the page, there's little gore or profanity, and the tone stays warm and often gently comic. The murder is a puzzle to enjoy, not a horror to endure.

The reader promise is comfort wrapped around a puzzle. Readers want the pleasure of solving a crime in a world that feels safe and welcoming, with likeable recurring characters and a setting they'd want to visit. The stakes are real but the experience is cozy.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your detective is an amateur, your setting is a close community, and the violence stays off the page. The tone is light, the cast is charming, and the reader is meant to feel at home even amid a murder.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Traditional mystery, which shares the puzzle focus but isn't bound to the cozy's light tone and offstage violence. A traditional whodunit can be darker and more graphic while still playing fair with clues; the cozy's defining trait is its gentle register.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 85,000 words, often on the shorter end, and very frequently written in series.

Traditional / Whodunit

The traditional mystery, sometimes called the whodunit or Golden Age mystery, puts the puzzle first. A crime is committed, a closed circle of suspects each has motive and opportunity, and the detective, along with the reader, must reason out the solution from fairly planted clues. The appeal is intellectual: a contest the reader can in principle win.

The reader promise is fair play. Every clue needed to solve the case is on the page, the solution is logical rather than arbitrary, and the reveal rewards careful attention. Readers want to match wits with the detective and feel the click of a puzzle solving cleanly.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your book is built around a solvable puzzle with a defined set of suspects. You plant fair clues, the detective reasons to the answer, and the satisfaction comes from the logic of the solution.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Cozy mystery, which is a lighter, gentler branch of the same tradition. If the tone is warm, the violence offstage, and the sleuth an amateur in a small community, it's cozy. If the puzzle stands on its own across any tone, it's traditional.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words.

Police Procedural

The police procedural follows professional investigators and takes the method seriously: forensics, interviews, warrants, the grind of real casework. Authenticity is the draw, and the detective is usually part of a team and a system rather than a lone genius. The realism of how crimes are actually solved is central to the appeal.

The reader promise is a credible window into real investigation. Readers want procedure that rings true, the texture of the job, and the slow accumulation of evidence that mirrors how cases are genuinely cracked. Competence and realism carry the book.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your detective is a working professional and your story leans on realistic method: evidence, procedure, teamwork, and the institutional machinery of an investigation. Authenticity matters more than a lone sleuth's brilliance.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Crime thrillers, which may use police characters but race toward stopping a threat rather than methodically solving a past crime. If the draw is realistic procedure working backward from a crime, it's a procedural; if it's forward momentum and danger, it's a thriller.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words, with the procedural detail supporting a slightly longer book.

Hardboiled / Noir

Hardboiled mystery follows a tough, often cynical investigator, usually a private eye, through a gritty, morally compromised world. The prose is lean, the violence is real and on the page, and the detective navigates corruption with a personal code that may be the only honest thing around. Noir pushes further into bleakness, where investigator and criminal blur and the ending offers little comfort.

The reader promise is unvarnished grit: moral ambiguity, a world that doesn't pretend to be clean, and a detective whose toughness is matched by a weary integrity. The atmosphere is as much the point as the puzzle.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your investigator is tough and your world is morally grey, with violence on the page and corruption everywhere. The mood is cynical and the detective's personal code carries the story.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Crime thrillers and grimdark generally. Hardboiled is still a mystery, built on investigating a crime, but its dark tone can read as thriller. If the spine is the investigation, it's hardboiled; if it's forward chase and escalating threat, it's a thriller.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words, and well suited to a lean, fast read.

Romance

The love story is the story.



Romance is fiction where the central love story is the book's primary arc and the ending is emotionally satisfying for the couple. Those two elements define the genre. The relationship drives the book from first meeting to resolution. Everything else serves that central arc; remove the love story and the book collapses.

The emotionally satisfying ending, usually called a happily ever after or happy for now, is the contract, not a spoiler. Romance readers come knowing the couple will end up together; the pleasure is in how they get there. A love story that ends in tragedy may be powerful fiction, but it is not romance. This is the genre's sharpest boundary, and the romance community is firm on it.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Varies by subgenre more than in most genres. Category romance runs 50,000 to 70,000 words. Single-title contemporary sits around 80,000 to 100,000, with historical a little higher at 90,000 to 110,000, since the period needs more room.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Women's fiction, which centers a protagonist's personal journey and may include a love story without making it the primary arc. If the relationship is the engine, it's romance. If the protagonist's growth drives the book and the romance serves it, it's women's fiction.

Contemporary Romance

Contemporary romance is set in the present day in a real-world setting. It's the largest lane in romance and the default most writers land in. The conflicts are realistic: careers, families, personal baggage, the ordinary difficulty of two people learning to fit their lives together. No magic, no historical setting, no external thriller plot. The setting is familiar and the story is the relationship.

The reader promise is emotional intimacy in a familiar world. Readers want characters who feel like people they might know, situations they can recognize, and love stories that feel earned. Romantic comedy is a tonal lane within contemporary rather than a separate subgenre, defined by lighter tone and central humor while keeping the same structural promises.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story is set in the present day and the central conflict comes from the characters' emotional lives rather than an external threat or a speculative setting.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

New adult romance, which shares the present-day setting but is an age category (protagonists 18 to 25) rather than a subgenre. A book can be both.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Category romance, built for monthly series lines, runs 50,000 to 70,000 words. Single-title contemporary sits higher, usually 80,000 to 100,000.

Historical Romance

Historical romance sets the love story in a past period, where social rules, class, and custom raise stakes that a contemporary setting wouldn't. The research has to land, but the romance leads. The history serves the love story, not the other way around.

Regency romance, set in early nineteenth-century England, is the dominant lane, with codified conventions of its own: the aristocratic social hierarchy, the London Season, formal courtship rituals, and a tone built on wit and verbal sparring. A writer in this period needs to know these conventions specifically. Beyond Regency, historical romance spans every era, but what unites the range is that the past creates obstacles that couldn't exist in the present.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your love story is set in a historical period and the era's social rules, class structures, or cultural norms create obstacles to the relationship that drive the plot.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Historical fiction, which shares the setting but is driven by character and period rather than the love story. If the romance is the engine, it's historical romance. If the relationship is secondary, it's historical fiction.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 90,000 to 110,000 words. The period setting needs more scene-building than contemporary, but the love story keeps it leaner than historical fiction proper.

Romantic Suspense

Romantic suspense combines a central love story with a suspense or thriller plot: a crime, a threat, a danger that puts the characters at risk. Both arcs carry real weight and reach resolution. The suspense isn't a backdrop for the romance, and the romance isn't a subplot in a thriller. Both are load-bearing, and the book fails if either collapses.

The reader promise is tension on two fronts. Readers want the thrill of danger alongside the pull of the relationship, and they want both to resolve satisfyingly. The external threat raises the stakes for the romance, and the romance gives the reader someone to root for through the danger.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your book has a love story and a suspense plot and neither could be removed without the book collapsing. The threat has genuine stakes, the romance is central, and both arcs reach resolution.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Thrillers with romantic elements, where the suspense drives the book and the romance is secondary. If the thriller plot could stand without the love story, it's a thriller with romantic elements. If both arcs are equally essential, it's romantic suspense.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words, matching the thriller end of the market.

Paranormal Romance

Paranormal romance sets the love story in a world where supernatural elements are real: vampires, shapeshifters, witches, fae. The setting is usually the contemporary world with the paranormal layered in rather than a fully built fantasy world. The supernatural shapes the relationship, creating bonds, barriers, or secrets that wouldn't exist in the ordinary world.

The reader promise is romance heightened by the extraordinary. Fated bonds, mismatched lifespans, powers that make vulnerability dangerous: the supernatural raises the emotional stakes. Readers want the love story to carry the same weight as any romance while the paranormal elements add intensity and scope.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your love story involves supernatural elements or characters, the setting is recognizably our world with the paranormal woven in, and the romance is the primary arc.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Romantasy, which builds a full secondary fantasy world rather than layering supernatural elements onto ours. If the world is invented from the ground up with its own geography, politics, and magic system, it's romantasy. If the world is recognizably ours with the supernatural added, it's paranormal romance.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 75,000 to 95,000 words.

Dark Romance

Dark romance centers relationships built on morally complex dynamics: power imbalances, obsessive attachment, morally grey or villainous love interests. The darkness lives in the relationship itself, not only in the setting or the external plot. The content places it firmly in adult and new adult territory. The genre still delivers an emotionally satisfying ending, but the path there is deliberately intense and transgressive.

The reader promise is emotional extremity. Readers come for relationships that conventional romance won't explore and characters who operate outside normal moral frameworks. Content warnings are standard practice and expected by readers.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your love interest is morally grey or villainous, the power dynamics are the point rather than the backdrop, and the darkness is integral to the romance.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Romantic suspense, which also involves danger but locates the threat externally. In romantic suspense, the couple faces a threat together. In dark romance, the tension often comes from the dynamics between the lovers themselves.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words, though series installments can run shorter.

Romantasy

Two arcs, neither optional.



Romantasy blends a central love story with a fully built fantasy world, and both arcs are essential. Remove the romance and the fantasy plot collapses; strip the worldbuilding and you have contemporary romance in costume. The blend goes back decades, but the term and the commercial scale behind it are recent, driven by online reading communities in the early 2020s.

Romantasy is a newer category than the genres it draws from, and its conventions are still codifying. The most consequential open question is whether the genre requires a happily ever after. If you are marketing to romance readers, deliver one: that is the contract they are buying. If you are writing fantasy-first with a central romance, you have more flexibility, but signal your intentions clearly. The mismatch between promise and delivery is the mistake to avoid.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 90,000 to 120,000 words for adult romantasy. Cozy romantasy runs shorter, around 60,000 to 85,000. Epic romantasy runs longer, though debuts are safest staying under 120,000.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Fantasy with a romantic subplot, where the love story could be removed without collapsing the book. In romantasy, both arcs are load-bearing. Also distinguished from paranormal romance, which layers supernatural elements onto our world rather than building a secondary one.

Cozy Romantasy

Cozy romantasy inherits its conventions from cozy fantasy: low stakes, warm tone, comfort-first storytelling in a gentle magical setting. The romance is central but the tension comes from personal growth and connection rather than mortal peril. The world is magical and inviting, and the love story unfolds without urgency.

The reader promise is comfort with romance at its heart. Readers want to settle into a pleasant world with likeable characters who find each other without being threatened by apocalypse or war. The gentle pacing and small scale distinguish it from epic romantasy the way cozy mystery distinguishes itself from police procedural.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story is set in a fantasy world with low stakes and a warm tone, the romance is central, and the reader is meant to feel comforted rather than thrilled.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Cozy fantasy, which shares the gentle tone and magical setting but does not necessarily center a love story. If the romance is the primary arc, it's cozy romantasy. If the protagonist's personal journey leads and the romance is secondary, it's cozy fantasy.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 60,000 to 85,000 words, shorter than most romantasy. The gentle pacing and small scope reward a tighter book.

Epic Romantasy

Epic romantasy sets the love story inside a large-scale fantasy world: wars, quests, court intrigue, deep worldbuilding, and stakes that extend beyond the personal. The romance is central, but it shares the stage with a fantasy plot of genuine scope. Multiple points of view, political systems, and consequential magic are all common.

The reader promise is immersion and intensity on both fronts. Readers want to be transported into a vast secondary world and to care deeply about the couple at its center. The fantasy raises the stakes for the romance, and the romance anchors the reader through the sweep of the world. This is the genre's commercial core.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story has a fully built fantasy world with large-scale conflict and a love story that is inseparable from the plot. Both the world and the relationship are essential.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Epic fantasy with romantic elements, where the romance is a subplot rather than a co-equal arc. If the love story could be removed and the book would still stand, it's epic fantasy with romantic elements.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 100,000 to 130,000 words. Established authors run longer, but debuts face production-cost pressure to stay under 120,000.

Dark Romantasy

Dark romantasy brings dark romance's morally complex relationship dynamics into a fantasy world. The love interest may be a villain, a captor, or a morally grey figure wielding power the protagonist cannot match. The fantasy setting intensifies these dynamics: magic can bind, compel, or create power imbalances that would not exist in a contemporary setting.

The reader promise is emotional extremity sharpened by a fantasy setting. Readers want dark romance's intensity in a world where the stakes are magical and the power dynamics are literal. Content warnings are standard practice. Like dark romance, this lane sits firmly in adult and new adult territory.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your love interest is morally grey or villainous, the fantasy setting intensifies the power dynamics, and the darkness is essential to both the romance and the world.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Dark romance, which centers the same relationship dynamics in a contemporary setting. Also confused with dark fantasy, which is not centered on a love story. Dark romantasy needs all three: dark tone, fantasy world, central romance.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 90,000 to 120,000 words, matching the adult romantasy range.

Science Fiction

A world reshaped by its own science.



Science fiction is fiction where the world's strangeness comes from science or technology rather than magic or myth. The speculative elements follow internal logic, grounded in what could plausibly develop from what we know, even when they reach far beyond current capability. The source of the wonder is always the science, and the story explores what happens when it reshapes the world.

The genre spans near-future thrillers set tomorrow to galaxy-spanning epics set millennia from now. The subgenres differ enormously in scope, tone, and what they ask of the reader, which is why naming yours matters before you position the book. SF also has a strong novella and short fiction tradition, with dedicated publishers and awards for shorter forms.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 120,000 words, depending on subgenre. Hard SF and dystopian tend leaner. Space opera and military SF run longer. Novellas have a more robust market in SF than in most genres.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Thriller, especially the techno-thriller, which uses near-future technology to generate suspense but is driven by pace and stakes rather than by speculation about what the science does to the world. If the technology is a plot device and the tension is the point, it leans thriller.

Space Opera

Space opera is science fiction at its largest scale: interstellar civilizations, faster-than-light travel, sprawling casts, and conflicts that span star systems. The science is present but serves the adventure rather than driving it. Space opera is about sweep, scope, and the drama of empires, wars, and voyages across a vast canvas.

The reader promise is grand adventure in deep space. Readers want to be carried across a galaxy with characters whose stakes match the setting's scale. The appeal is spectacle and politics and discovery, played out on a canvas no other subgenre can offer.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story spans star systems, involves large-scale conflict or exploration, and the science serves the adventure rather than being the point of the story.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Military SF, which shares the interstellar setting but centers combat, soldiers, and chain of command rather than the broader adventure. If the military structure drives the story, it leans military SF. Both run at similar lengths and often overlap.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 90,000 to 120,000 words. Ensemble casts and political worldbuilding push toward the higher end.

Hard Science Fiction

Hard SF is defined by scientific rigor. The speculative elements are grounded in real science or plausible extrapolation, and the story treats that science with care. The ideas are the draw: readers come for the problem-solving, the thought experiments, and the satisfaction of a world that holds up under scrutiny. The science shapes the plot rather than decorating it.

The reader promise is intellectual engagement with plausible speculation. Readers want to feel that the world could work, that the physics hold, that the author has done the thinking. Soft SF sits at the opposite end of the spectrum, prioritizing social sciences and human consequences over technical accuracy. Both are valid; the distinction matters for positioning.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your speculative elements are grounded in real science, the technical details drive the plot, and the story rewards readers who track how the world works.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Soft SF, which uses speculative settings to explore social or psychological questions rather than technical ones. If the science drives the plot, it's hard SF. If the human consequences drive it, it leans soft.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 90,000 to 110,000 words, shorter than space opera. The idea-driven narrative rewards a leaner book.

Soft Science Fiction

Soft science fiction puts people before physics. The speculative premise still matters, but the story cares more about its human and social consequences than about whether the technology would truly work. The social sciences, psychology, sociology, politics, carry the weight that engineering carries in hard SF.

The reader promise is speculation in service of meaning. Readers want a what-if that opens up something true about people and society, and they'll forgive loose technical detail when the human questions land. The premise is a lens, and what it reveals matters more than how it works.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your speculative premise exists to explore people and society rather than technology for its own sake. You're willing to wave a hand at the mechanics when it serves the human story, and the questions driving you are social or psychological rather than technical.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Hard SF, which sits at the other end of the same spectrum and treats scientific rigor as the point. If the plot turns on whether the science holds up, it's hard. If it turns on what the change does to people, it leans soft.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words, in line with most adult science fiction, though the character focus can support a leaner book than idea-dense hard SF.

Cyberpunk

Cyberpunk is near-future SF built on the collision of advanced technology with social decay. The hallmark is high tech and low life: a world of powerful AI, corporate dominance, body modification, and digital networks inhabited by marginalized people at the edges of a system that wasn't built for them.

The reader promise is a future that is technologically dazzling and socially broken. Readers want a world where the technology is seductive and the power structures are corrupt, and where the protagonists operate in the gaps between. The genre emerged in the 1980s and remains influential, though some of its predictions now read as present tense.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story is set in a near future where advanced technology coexists with social inequality, corporate power dominates, and your protagonist operates at the margins.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Dystopian, which also features oppressive societies but locates the oppression in political or social systems rather than in the collision of technology and power. Cyberpunk's focus is specifically technological.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words. The near-future setting requires less worldbuilding than space opera.

Dystopian

Dystopian fiction presents a society that functions through oppression, control, or the systematic stripping of individual freedom. The system is the antagonist: the government, the regime, the social order that has gone wrong in ways the characters must navigate, resist, or escape. The world may appear perfect on the surface, which makes the oppression harder to see and more dangerous to challenge.

The reader promise is a warning dressed as a story. Readers want to see a society pushed to an extreme and to follow characters who recognize what lies underneath.

Post-apocalyptic fiction is a related but distinct category: post-apocalyptic centers survival after collapse, while dystopian centers life under a functioning oppressive system.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story is set in a society controlled by an oppressive system and the protagonist's conflict is with that system.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Post-apocalyptic, which centers survival after societal collapse rather than resistance within a functioning system. A dystopia does not require an apocalypse, and an apocalypse does not require a dystopia.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 100,000 words. YA dystopian, which has a strong market presence, runs shorter.

Post-Apocalyptic

Post-apocalyptic fiction begins after the collapse. Some catastrophe, a plague, a war, a climate disaster, has already brought the old world down, and the story follows what survival looks like in the wreckage. The focus falls on endurance, scarcity, and what people become once the systems that held everything together are gone.

The reader promise is survival and what it costs. Readers want the texture of a world stripped to its foundations and characters tested against it, the danger of scarcity, the fragile rebuilding, the question of what's worth keeping when the rules are gone. The collapse is the setting; the human response is the story.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your story takes place after a world-ending event and centers on survival in the aftermath. The old order is gone, the stakes are immediate and physical, and the question is how your characters endure and what they hold onto.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Dystopian, which centers life under a functioning oppressive system rather than survival after collapse. A dystopia keeps its machinery running; a post-apocalypse has lost it. If your characters resist a regime, it's dystopian. If they're surviving the ruins, it's post-apocalyptic.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words. YA post-apocalyptic, a strong market in its own right, often runs shorter.

Thriller & Suspense

The stakes only go up.



Thriller is fiction driven by forward momentum toward a threat. Something dangerous is coming, the protagonist is racing to stop it or survive it, and the tension comes from the urgency of what hasn't happened yet. Where mystery looks backward to solve a crime already committed, thriller races forward to prevent or escape one still unfolding. The pace is the point.

Suspense describes how the tension is delivered, not a separate genre. All thrillers use suspense; what varies is the pacing. A fast-burn thriller races through external action. A slow-burn thriller builds dread through uncertainty and delayed revelation, which is where suspense shades into psychological thriller. The industry shelves them together, and most agents use the terms interchangeably.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words. Psychological and domestic thrillers tend toward the shorter end. Political and espionage thrillers can run slightly longer.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Mystery. The test is direction: mystery looks backward to solve what already happened; thriller races forward to stop what's coming. If the question is who did it, it's mystery. If the question is whether the threat will be stopped, it's thriller.

Psychological Thriller

Psychological thriller locates the tension inside the mind. The threat may come from another person's manipulation, from the protagonist's own unreliable perception, or from a situation where nothing is quite what it appears. The pace can be slower than an action-driven thriller because the dread is internal, built through doubt, paranoia, and the growing sense that something is deeply wrong.

The reader promise is destabilization. Readers want to be unsure what to believe, to question whether the narrator can be trusted, and to feel the ground shift under them as the story reveals what is actually happening.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

The tension comes from inside a character's head rather than from external action. The reader is meant to doubt what they are being told, and the reveal changes the meaning of everything that came before.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Psychological horror, which shares the unstable mind but aims to frighten rather than to generate suspense. If the book resolves into explanation, it leans thriller. If the dread lingers unresolved, it leans horror.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words. The internal focus and tight point of view reward a leaner book.

Crime Thriller

Crime thriller puts criminal activity at the center and drives it forward. The story may follow a detective racing to stop a killer, a civilian caught in a criminal conspiracy, or even the criminal themselves. What distinguishes it from crime fiction or mystery is the forward momentum: the book is built on escalation, not investigation.

The reader promise is pace and stakes in a world of criminals and law enforcement. Readers want urgency, the danger of violent people, and the question of whether justice or survival will win out. Legal and medical thrillers are related lanes that bring the same momentum to courtrooms and hospitals.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Criminal activity drives your plot forward, the stakes escalate through the book, and the question is whether the protagonist will stop the threat or survive it.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Mystery, which shares the criminal content but moves backward through investigation rather than forward through escalation. If the spine is the puzzle, it's mystery. If the spine is the chase, it's crime thriller.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words.

Domestic Thriller

Domestic thriller locates the danger inside the home, the family, or intimate relationships. The threat comes from someone close: a spouse, a neighbor, a friend, a parent. The setting is ordinary, which makes the menace more unsettling. Secrets, lies, and betrayals within relationships that should be safe are the engine.

The reader promise is the familiar made threatening. Readers want to see an ordinary life crack open and reveal something dangerous underneath, with the protagonist trapped inside a situation that looks normal from the outside. The subgenre has grown rapidly and is now one of the most commercially active thriller lanes.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

The danger comes from inside the protagonist's personal life, the setting is domestic, and the threat is someone the protagonist knows or lives with.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Psychological thriller. Most domestic thrillers are also psychological thrillers; the overlap is large. The distinction is scope: psychological thriller can happen anywhere, while domestic thriller is defined by where the danger lives, inside the home and the relationships that should be safe.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 70,000 to 90,000 words, similar to psychological thriller.

Political / Espionage

Political and espionage thrillers raise the stakes to the national or global level. The threat involves government corruption, intelligence operations, geopolitical maneuvering, or conspiracies with consequences far beyond the individual. The protagonist is often an operative, an insider, or someone who stumbles into a world they were never meant to see.

The reader promise is high-stakes intrigue at the level of nations. Readers want the tension of secrets that could topple governments, the moral complexity of espionage, and protagonists navigating a world where allies and enemies are hard to tell apart.

YOU MIGHT BE WRITING THIS IF

Your threat is political or governmental, the stakes extend beyond the personal, and the protagonist operates inside or against a power structure larger than themselves.

COMMONLY CONFUSED WITH

Political fiction, which uses the same settings but is driven by character and theme rather than by forward momentum and threat. If the pace and the danger drive the book, it's a political thriller. If the ideas do, it's political fiction.

TYPICAL LENGTH

Usually 80,000 to 100,000 words, with espionage series sometimes running slightly longer.

Common Tropes by Genre

Genre tells a reader what kind of experience your book delivers. Tropes are the ingredients inside.

A trope is a recurring story element that readers recognize: the chosen one, a locked-room mystery, a haunted house, enemies to lovers. Tropes are not clichés. They're patterns that readers actively seek out, and in many genres they're a primary reason someone picks up a book. A romance reader searching for "forced proximity" knows exactly what they want and will be disappointed if the book doesn't deliver it.

Tropes work differently from genres. A genre is a promise about the overall shape of the experience. A trope is a promise about what specific ingredients are inside. The same trope can appear across very different shelves: found family shows up in fantasy, science fiction, cozy mystery, and romance. Fish out of water drives portal fantasies, civilian-in-danger thrillers, and small-town romances alike. What changes is how the genre frames the trope and what the reader expects it to do.

The lists that follow aren't exhaustive. They're the tropes most associated with each genre, the ones that signal to a reader, an agent, or an algorithm that your book belongs on that shelf.

HOW TO USE THIS

These lists do more than label a finished draft. They're a positioning tool. Pick the three to five tropes closest to the center of your book, the ones a reader would feel cheated to miss, and let them anchor how you describe it.

Those are the same words readers type into a search bar. Put them where they'll be found: your blurb, your Amazon keywords and categories, the pitch you give a bookseller or post online. Name them plainly and the right reader finds the book instead of scrolling past.

+ *marks tropes most specific to this genre.*

FANTASY

- + **Chosen one:** Protagonist singled out by destiny to face the central threat.
- + **Quest narrative:** Story built around a journey toward a specific goal.
- + **Prophecy:** A foretelling that shapes or constrains the plot.
- + **Dark lord:** A singular, powerful antagonist embodying evil.
- + **Magical academy:** Protagonist trains at a school for magic.
- + **Hidden heir:** Protagonist's true lineage is concealed.
- + **Portal fantasy:** A character travels from our world into another.
- Found family:** Characters form deep bonds outside blood relations.
- Reluctant hero:** Protagonist resists the call to action.
- Forbidden power:** Magic or ability that carries a dangerous cost.
- Mentor and apprentice:** An experienced guide trains the protagonist.

HISTORICAL FICTION

+ **Dual timeline:** Story alternates between past and present.

+ **Hidden figures:** Centers people overlooked or erased by history.

+ **Wartime separation:** War forces characters apart.

+ **Life behind the front lines:** Focuses on civilians during conflict.

Secret identity: A character conceals who they truly are.

Cross-class relationship: Connection across social boundaries.

Forbidden love: A relationship opposed by society or circumstance.

Coming of age: Protagonist transitions from youth to maturity.

Family saga: Story spans generations of one family.

Fish out of water: Character thrust into an unfamiliar world.

H O R R O R

+ **Haunted house:** A location harbors a malevolent presence.

+ **Final girl:** The last survivor, usually female, faces the threat.

+ **Possession:** An entity takes control of a character's body.

+ **Ancient evil awakened:** A long-dormant threat returns.

+ **Isolation:** Characters are cut off from help or escape.

+ **The thing that follows:** A relentless, pursuing threat.

Unreliable narrator: The narrator's account cannot be trusted.

Body transformation: The body changes against the character's will.

Slow descent: A gradual slide into madness or corruption.

The outsider: A stranger enters a community with hidden rules.

L I T E R A R Y F I C T I O N

+ **The quiet revelation:** Meaning arrives through small, precise moments.

+ **Small-world microcosm:** A contained setting mirrors larger truths.

Non-linear timeline: Events are told out of chronological order.

Unreliable narrator: The narrator's account cannot be trusted.

Family saga: Story spans generations of one family.

Coming of age: Protagonist transitions from youth to maturity.

The outsider: A character navigates a world they don't belong to.

Identity and belonging: The central question is who the character is.

Epistolary: Story told through letters, documents, or records.

M Y S T E R Y

+ **Locked room:** A crime committed in a seemingly impossible setting.

+ **Whodunit:** The central puzzle is identifying the perpetrator.

+ **Red herring:** A clue designed to mislead the reader.

+ **Amateur sleuth:** A non-professional investigator solves the case.

+ **The detective's past:** The investigator's history connects to the crime.

+ **Cold case reopened:** An old, unsolved crime is re-investigated.

Ticking clock: A deadline raises urgency.

The least likely suspect: The culprit defies expectations.

Hidden identity: A character is not who they appear to be.

Fair-play clues: All evidence needed to solve the case is on the page.

ROMANCE

- + **Meet-cute:** The couple's first encounter is charming or memorable.
- + **Fake dating:** Characters pretend to be in a relationship.
- + **Marriage of convenience:** A practical union becomes romantic.
- + **Only one bed:** Forced physical proximity heightens tension.
- + **Love triangle:** A character is torn between two romantic interests.
- + **Small-town romance:** The setting is an intimate community.
- Enemies to lovers:** Characters who clash develop romantic feelings.
- Friends to lovers:** An existing friendship becomes romantic.
- Forced proximity:** Circumstances keep the characters close.
- Second chance:** Former lovers reconnect.
- Slow burn:** Romantic tension builds gradually.
- Forbidden love:** A relationship opposed by society or circumstance.

ROMANTASY

- + **Fated mates:** Characters are destined together by magical forces.
- + **Magical bond:** A supernatural connection ties the couple.
- + **Training arc romance:** Love develops during magical instruction.
- + **Court intrigue romance:** Romance set within political scheming.
- + **Power couple:** Both characters wield significant strength or influence.
- Enemies to lovers:** Characters who clash develop romantic feelings.
- Found family:** Characters form deep bonds outside blood relations.
- Hidden heir:** Protagonist's true lineage is concealed.
- Morally grey love interest:** The romantic lead operates in ethical ambiguity.
- Forced proximity:** Circumstances keep the characters close.
- Forbidden love:** A relationship opposed by society or circumstance.

SCIENCE FICTION

- + **First contact:** Humanity encounters an alien civilization.
- + **AI sentience:** An artificial intelligence gains consciousness.
- + **Generation ship:** A community lives aboard a long-voyage spacecraft.
- + **Time travel:** Characters move between different time periods.
- + **Terraforming:** Humans reshape a planet to sustain life.
- + **Uplift:** A species is elevated to higher intelligence.
- Dystopian resistance:** Characters fight an oppressive system.
- Found family:** Characters form deep bonds outside blood relations.
- Reluctant hero:** Protagonist resists the call to action.
- Corporate conspiracy:** A powerful organization conceals its agenda.
- Fish out of water:** Character thrust into an unfamiliar world.

THRILLER & SUSPENSE

- + **Ticking clock:** A deadline drives the plot forward.
- + **Man on the run:** Protagonist flees a threat while seeking answers.
- + **Double agent:** A character secretly serves two opposing sides.
- + **Gaslighting:** A character is manipulated into doubting their reality.
- + **The twist:** A late revelation reframes everything.
- + **Kidnapping:** A character is taken and must be rescued or escape.
- Unreliable narrator:** The narrator's account cannot be trusted.
- Conspiracy:** A hidden group manipulates events.
- Cat and mouse:** Pursuer and pursued trade advantages.
- Frame-up:** A character is set up to appear guilty.
- Secrets and lies:** Hidden truths drive the conflict.

When Your Book Crosses Lines

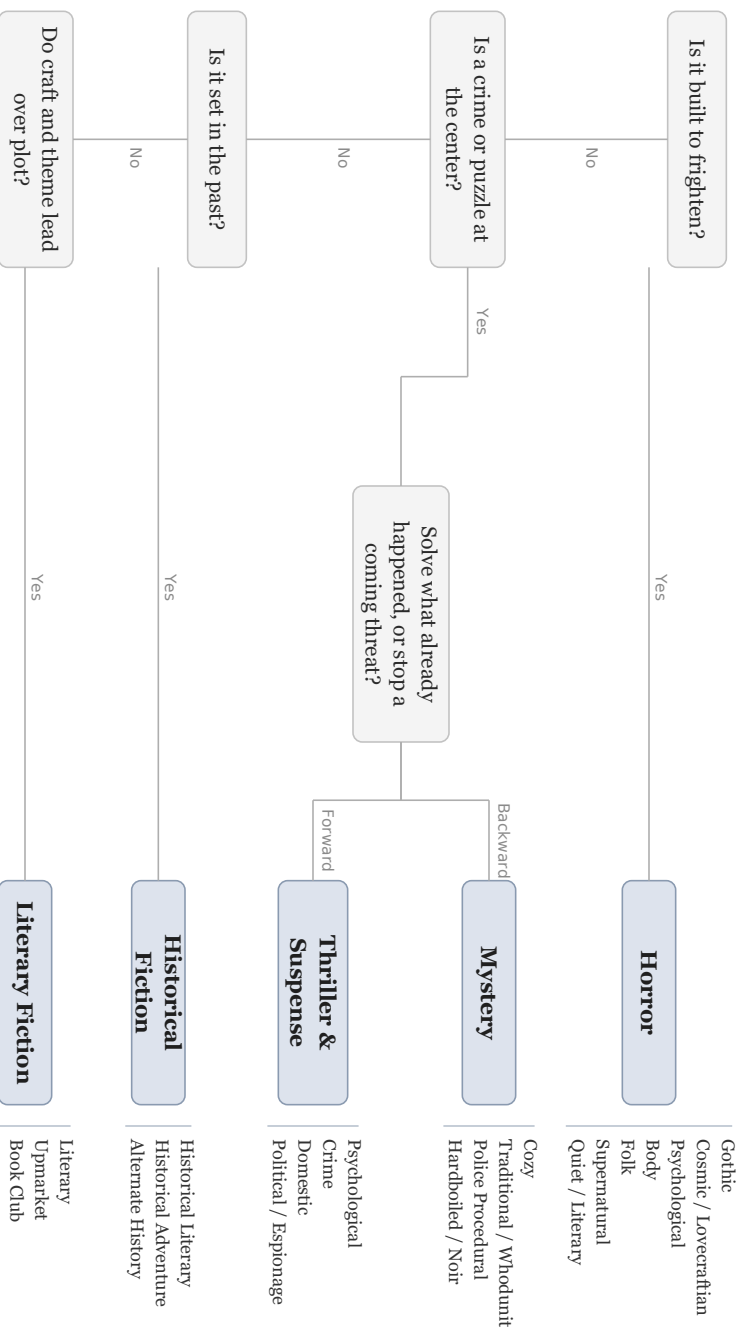
Most books touch more than one genre. A thriller borrows tropes from mystery. A romantasy draws from both romance and fantasy. A literary novel set in the past pulls from historical fiction. Crossing lines is normal, and often it's what makes a book interesting.

But even a cross-genre book has a primary genre. That primary genre decides where the book gets shelved, which agents to query, which categories to select on KDP, and which readers will find it. Getting this right doesn't mean forcing your book into a box. It means knowing which promise to lead with.

The test is simple: ask which genre's promise is strongest. If your book has a love story and a fantasy world but the romance could be removed and the plot would still stand, the primary genre is fantasy with romantic elements. If removing the romance collapses the book, it's romantasy. The same logic applies across every blend. Find the promise your reader is buying, and lead with that.

The flowchart on the following pages walks through this step by step. Start at the top, follow the questions, and let the branches guide you to your shelf.

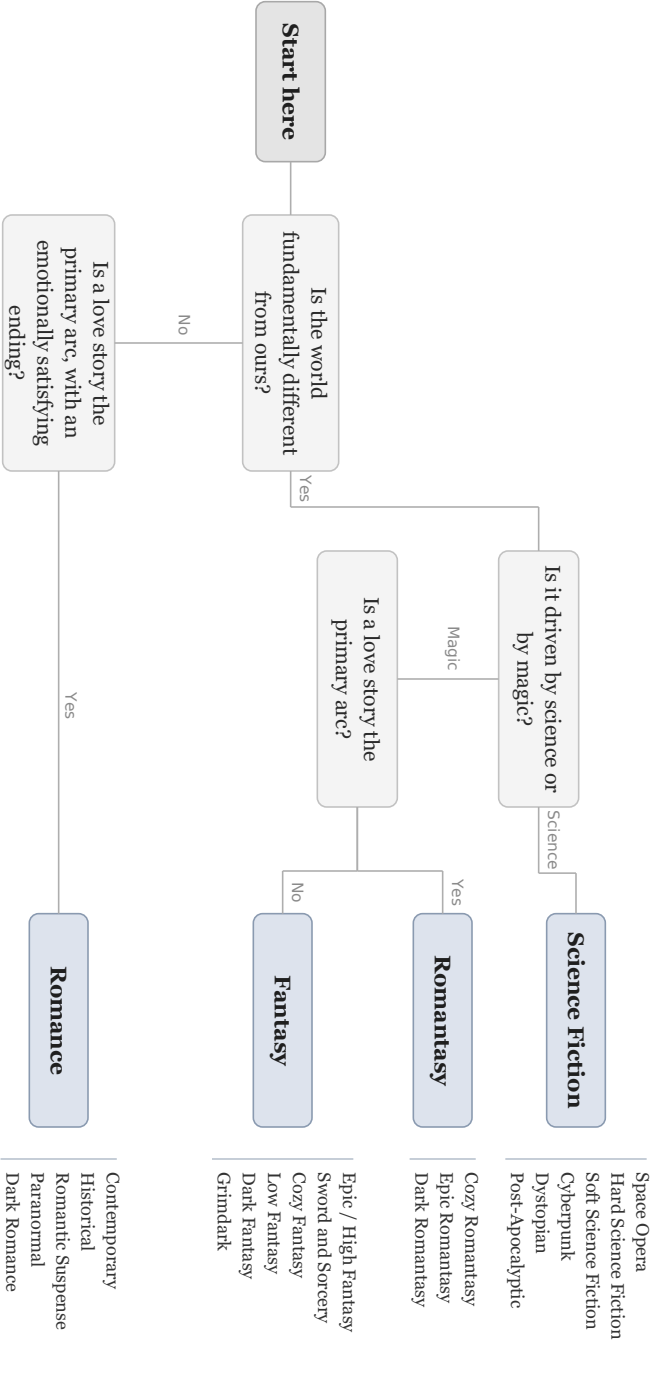
REALISTIC



Many books cross genre lines. Start with the genre that best matches your primary promise to the reader, then find your lane within it.

Genre Flowchart

Follow the tree to your genre, then find your lane.





A L A S T W O R D

Now you know where your book lives.

When you started, describing your book might have earned you a blank look. Now you can answer in a sentence: the age category, the genre, the one or two tropes that anchor it. That sentence is the most useful thing to carry out of here. It is how an agent files you, and how the right reader finds you.

Choosing one primary genre takes nothing away from the book. The blends are still there, the borrowed tropes still on the page. You are only deciding which promise leads, which door you want the right readers to come through first. A book that reaches for every shelf at once tends to land on none. Naming your shelf is how the rest of what you built gets seen.

So name your shelf, then go write the book that earns it. Somewhere out there is a reader who wants exactly what you made. Genre is how they find it.

Genre is the first promise you make.

Before a reader opens your book, its genre has already told them what to expect. Name it well and the right readers find you.

Name it wrong and they never get the chance.

This guide maps the whole territory: every major fiction genre, the subgenres inside them, the tropes readers look for, and the lengths the market expects. Use it to place what you're writing and pitch it with confidence.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- ✦ Nine major genres, clearly defined
- ✦ The subgenres inside each one
- ✦ Age categories and target word counts
- ✦ The tropes readers search for by name
- ✦ A flowchart to place any story

From one storyteller to another.



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