



The Novel Outline.

*plan the book
you'll actually finish.*

A working field guide to outlining a novel: choosing the depth of outline that fits how you write, building the spine from premise to ending, expanding it into a purposeful scene list, keeping the outline alive once the draft starts fighting it, and a printable planning sheet to lay out your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you plan.

An outline is not a cage and it is not a contract. It is the only view of the whole book you get while you are still inside it. The method here is simple: settle the premise and the ending first, place the turning points that connect them, then expand the stretches between into scenes only as far ahead as you need. Work from the outside in.

Outlining has no single inventor to credit, and this is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of the practice. It draws on ideas that belong to the craft at large - the three-act skeleton, the layered or Snowflake-style expansion, scene and sequel - and bends them to one job: helping you finish a book that holds together. A running example, an invented book-club novel titled **Northwater**, runs through every page so you can watch an outline get built.

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Why outline from the outside in.

chapter one is the worst place to start planning.

Most outlines are written forward. You start at chapter one, imagine the next good scene, then the next, and trust the book to arrive somewhere. It rarely does. Writing forward tends to produce a confident first act and a fog after the midpoint, because the early scenes had a clear cause behind them and the later ones have nothing ahead to aim at. Momentum without a destination curdles into meander, and the meander is where most novels quietly stop.

Outlining from the outside in reverses the order. You settle the two ends first - the premise and the ending - place the handful of turning points that connect them, and only then expand the stretches between into scenes. Each layer becomes a promise the next one has to keep. The middle stops being a void to improvise across and becomes a route between two fixed points, which is a far easier thing to write.

This is not about killing spontaneity. It is about spending it where it pays. When the destination is fixed, every scene you invent can be measured against it, and the discovery happens inside a shape instead of in place of one. The writers who finish books are rarely the ones with the most ideas. They are the ones who know which idea the book needs next.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

Decide where the book is going before you decide how it gets there. Settle the premise and the ending, place the turning points between them, then expand into scenes only as far as your own way of writing needs.

Plotter, pantsers, and your altitude.

the fight is fake. the real question is how deep.

The loudest debate in outlining is plotter versus pantsers: architects who plan everything against discovery writers who write to find out. It is a false binary. Almost every working novelist plans something and discovers something, and the only real question is where they draw the line. That line has a name. Call it **altitude** - how high above the book your outline flies.

A low-altitude outline is scene by scene: a hundred numbered beats, every turn known before a word of prose. A high-altitude outline is a single paragraph, the shape of the whole book and nothing else. Neither is more correct. The right altitude is the one that lets you sit down each morning knowing what the scene is *for* without knowing exactly how it will go.

Match it to your failure mode. If you lose interest in a story the moment you understand it, fly high: outline the turning points, leave the scenes open, and keep drafting a discovery. If you stall whenever the next move is unclear, fly low: write a one-line purpose for every scene before you draft, so momentum never has to wait for inspiration. Most writers land somewhere in between, and there is a shape built for exactly that.

NORTHWATER • TWO ALTITUDES

High: "An archivist comes home to move her mother into memory care, learns her mother once gave up a son, and races to reunite them before the truth is gone." Low, that same opening stretch: eleven numbered scenes, each with a point of view and a turn. One book. Two depths of plan. You choose which one you can write from.

The layered outline.

four layers. stop at whichever one lets you write.

The compromise most writers actually use is the layered outline, and it is worth naming because it dissolves the plotter-pantser fight entirely. You build the book in four layers, each an expansion of the one above it, and you stop expanding at whatever layer lets you start drafting.

THE FOUR LAYERS

- **The premise.** One sentence: a described protagonist, a concrete goal, the obstacle, the stakes. The whole book in a single breath.
- **The one-paragraph summary.** Five or six sentences that hit the opening, the major turns, and the ending. The premise with its joints showing.
- **The turning points.** One page: the five or six load-bearing turns, in order, each caused by the one before. The skeleton.
- **The scene list.** The working layer. One line per scene, filled in only as far ahead as you are about to draft.

Each layer is a promise the next one keeps, which lets you test the book cheaply at every level before committing pages. A premise that does not compel will not be rescued by a scene list, so fix it at one sentence. The Snowflake Method is a formal, staged version of this expansion, and the three-act structure is the usual skeleton for the turning-point layer. Borrow either. The layering itself is the point.

NORTHWATER • THE LAYERS

Premise: one sentence. Paragraph: adds the brother's refusal, the uncle who buried the secret, the mother's decline, the recording at the end. Turning points: six lines on one page. Scene list: act one drafted, acts two through four still blank. The plan is only ever as detailed as the drafting requires.

Three layers of an outline.

the whole method on one page.

An outline is not one document but three, stacked. First you decide how deep to go. Then you build the spine. Then you grow the scene list. Here is where each piece sits, and how much of it there should be.

ALTITUDE

01	Pick your depth	HOW YOU WRITE
02	The layered compromise	4 LAYERS

THE SPINE • ONE PAGE

03	Premise as a logline	1 SENTENCE
04	The ending, decided first	THE COST
05	The load-bearing turns	5 TO 6

THE SCENE LIST • THE WORKING LAYER

06	Expand one act ahead	JUST IN TIME
07	A stated purpose per scene	1 LINE
08	Keep it alive while drafting	HYPOTHESIS

You are never obligated to reach the bottom. A confident plotter fills the scene list to the last chapter; a discovery writer stops at the turns and drafts into the open. Build down only as far as you need to start writing tomorrow, and no further.

Build the spine before the scenes.

start at both ends. the middle is a bridge, not a road.

The spine is the premise and the ending with the turning points strung between them, and you build it before a single scene. Start with the two ends, because they are load-bearing and everything else hangs from them. Write the premise as a logline: a described protagonist, a concrete goal, a clear obstacle, and stakes that matter. If you cannot say the book in one sentence, the book does not yet know what it is about.

Then write the ending. Not vaguely (“she finds peace”) but concretely: the climax, the choice it turns on, and what it costs. Deciding the ending first feels backward, and it is the single highest-leverage move in outlining, because the entire middle exists to make that ending both inevitable and surprising at once. You cannot aim a book at a target you have not yet placed.

THE TWO ENDS

- **Premise:** protagonist, goal, obstacle, stakes, in one sentence. Rewrite it until it compels you.
- **Ending:** the climax, the decision inside it, and the price paid. Specific enough to picture.
- **The gap between them is the book.** If the ending does not answer the premise, one of the two is wrong.

NORTHWATER • BOTH ENDS

Premise: an archivist returns to move her mother into memory care, discovers her mother gave up a son before she was born, and races to reunite them before the one person who knows the whole story forgets it.

Ending: she stops forcing the reunion and simply hands her brother the truth with no demand attached. He comes on his own, and their mother, mistaking him for a boy from her girlhood, says the thing aloud at last. Del records it, and gives the recording to him.

Place the turning points.

five or six turns. three-act is the frame.

With both ends fixed, place the turns that carry the book from one to the other. The most reliable frame for these is the **three-act structure**, and it is worth naming rather than reinventing: setup, confrontation, resolution, with the major turns marked at the seams. You do not have to use it. You do have to have a skeleton, and this is the one most novels quietly wear.

THE LOAD-BEARING TURNS

- **Inciting incident:** the event that breaks the protagonist's normal and starts the story's clock.
- **The point of no return:** the end of act one, where the protagonist commits and cannot go back.
- **The midpoint:** a reversal that flips the situation, or the protagonist's understanding of it.
- **The low point:** the end of act two, where the plan collapses and the cost comes due.
- **The climax:** the final confrontation, and the choice the whole book was aimed at.

THE TWO TESTS

Causation: each turn should be caused by the one before, so the spine reads as “and therefore,” never “and then.”

Change: the protagonist can do something at the climax they could not at the start. That difference is the arc.

NORTHWATER • THE SPINE

Inciting: clearing the house, Del finds a hospital bracelet dated before her own birth. No return: her mother, on a good day, confirms it, and Del defers her Chicago life to search. Midpoint: she finds the brother alive and nearby, and he refuses her; the hunt flips from find him to earn him. Low point: her mother falls, the window narrows, and Del's overreach drives him away for good. Climax: she stops pushing, and offers only the truth.

Give every scene a job.

a scene changes something. otherwise it is a hallway.

The scene list is the outline's working layer, the one you actually draft from. Expand the stretch between two turning points into scenes, and for each scene write four things: whose point of view, what they want walking in, what stands in the way, and how the scene ends different from how it began. That last item is the test of whether it is a scene at all. If nothing changes, it is a transition, and it either earns a change or gets cut.

Keep it to one line per scene, not a paragraph. The scene list is a map, not the territory, and its whole value is that you can see the shape of an act at a glance: where the pressure clusters, where it sags, which subplot has gone silent. A paragraph per scene is just drafting in miniature, and it buries the shape you built the list to see.

FOUR THINGS PER SCENE

- **POV:** whose eyes we are behind. Deciding it on the outline saves a rewrite later.
- **Want:** what they are after in this scene, stated concretely.
- **Obstacle:** what stands in the way, from without or within.
- **Turn:** how it ends changed. No turn, no scene.

NORTHWATER • ONE STRETCH AS SCENES

Act one, inciting to the point of no return, in five lines. 1. Del sorts the attic (want: finish and leave; turn: finds the bracelet). 2. She asks the uncle, who lies (turn: she knows he is lying). 3. A good afternoon with her mother, derailed (turn: a name slips out). 4. Del cancels her flight home (turn: commitment). 5. She opens the first box of letters (turn: the search now has a thread).

The scene list, one act ahead.

plan just far enough to write tomorrow.

Do not outline all the scenes at once. Fill the scene list only about one act ahead of where you are drafting, because the draft will teach you things that make later scenes obsolete before you ever reach them. A fully detailed scene list for act four, written before act one exists, is work you will throw away - and worse, work you will then feel obligated to honor.

This is the just-in-time discipline, and it is how the layered outline stays alive. When you finish drafting an act, stop and plan the next one, now informed by everything the pages just taught you. The turning points keep you honest about the destination; the one-act-ahead scene list keeps you flexible about the route. You always know where the book is going, and you never pretend to know more about the road than you do.

THE RHYTHM WITHIN AN ACT

- Alternate pressure and reaction. All action reads as noise; all reflection reads as stalling.
- The scene-and-sequel beat (an event, its processing, then a new decision) scales from a chapter to an act.
- Tag the scenes that carry subplots, so a B story cannot vanish for sixty pages unnoticed.

NORTHWATER • ONE ACT AHEAD

Del drafts act one from the five-scene list, then stops. The drafting taught her the uncle is warmer than planned, so before outlining act two she reworks his role - and only then lists act two's scenes. Acts three and four stay a single line each until she gets there.

Outlining for discovery writers.

yes, even pantsers outline. just higher up.

If detailed plans kill your interest in a book, do not force one. But do not confuse a light outline with no outline. The discovery writers who finish are almost never flying blind; they are flying high, holding the two ends and a few turns, and letting everything between them stay genuinely unknown. The trick is to keep just enough structure that the freedom has somewhere to happen.

The minimum viable outline is short: a premise you believe in, an ending you are writing toward (even a provisional one), and two or three turns you can feel coming. That is enough to keep the book from wandering while leaving the scene level entirely open. Draft into the fog on purpose, and when you reach a turn, look up and check you are still aimed at the ending. If the draft has found a better ending, wonderful. Move the target and keep going.

KEEP IT LOOSE ON PURPOSE

A discovery writer's outline should fit on an index card. If yours is growing into a scene list you resent, you have out-planned your own process. Cut it back to the turns and get into the prose, where you think best.

NORTHWATER • THE LOOSE VERSION

The same book at pantser altitude: one premise, one decided ending, three felt turns (the bracelet, the refusal, the fall). No scene list at all. Del would draft each act to find out how it goes, checking only that every act still bends toward the recording at the end.

When the draft is right.

the outline is a hypothesis, not a contract.

The draft will contradict the outline, and it should. Scenes discover things a plan cannot, and a page written in the moment often knows more than the paragraph that predicted it. The mistake is treating either document as the master. The outline is a hypothesis about the book; the draft is the experiment. When they disagree, you investigate. You do not simply obey the plan.

So when a scene lands somewhere the outline did not predict, stop and make one decision: was the outline wrong, or did the scene wander? If the outline was wrong, update it forward, and check what the change does to the turning points still ahead. If the scene wandered off a sound plan, note what it discovered and steer back to the spine. Ten minutes of that judgment saves the week you would otherwise spend drafting into a corner.

A SECOND DOCUMENT

- Keep a running list of what the draft taught you: a promise made, a character who grew, an object that now wants a payoff.
- Do not interrupt drafting to re-outline. Park the discovery and keep writing.
- At each act boundary, fold the list into the scene list before you plan the next act.

NORTHWATER • A COURSE CORRECTION

Drafting the midpoint, Del's scene reveals the brother already knew she existed and chose silence - richer than the outline's clean refusal. That is the draft being right. She updates the spine forward: the low point is now a betrayal of a known bond, not a stranger's no. The ending still holds.

Three outlining tools.

same spine, three different desks.

The method is one thing; the tool you hold it in is another, and the right tool is the one you will actually keep open. Three have earned their place. Use whichever matches how your hands think.

INDEX CARDS

One scene per card, one line of purpose, spread across a table or a wall. Their whole virtue is rearrangement: you can reorder an act in ninety seconds and see the new shape at once. When a sequence feels wrong but you cannot say why, cards let the shape show itself.

THE BEAT SHEET

A single page of named turns, borrowed from screenwriting: the three-act frame, the fifteen-beat sheet, the seven-point structure. It lives at the turning-point layer and is the fastest way to test a spine before you own any scenes. Our site has free fill-in versions of each.

THE REVERSE OUTLINE

The one tool for a draft that already exists. Read what you wrote and note, one line per scene, what each scene actually does - not what you meant it to do. The gap between the two is your revision list, and nothing surfaces a saggy middle faster.

NORTHWATER • THREE DESKS

Del keeps the six turns on a beat sheet pinned above the desk, act two's scenes on index cards she reshuffles at night, and once a full draft exists she reverse-outlines it to find the sag she suspects sits right after the midpoint.

Seven ways outlines fail.

read this list again at the end of every outline.

- **1. Front-loaded detail.** Act one is planned to the minute and the book fogs after the midpoint. Fix: plan at even altitude across all acts, or decide the ending first and detail only one act ahead.
- **2. The embalmed outline.** The plan is so complete the book feels solved, and drafting is joyless transcription. Fix: leave the scene level open where you can; an outline should pose questions, not answer them all.
- **3. Scenes with no purpose.** A list of events with no stated reason each one exists. Fix: give every scene a one-line job (POV, want, obstacle, turn), and cut the ones that cannot earn it.
- **4. The outline as contract.** Honoring the plan after the draft has found something better. Fix: treat the outline as a hypothesis; when the draft is right, update the outline forward.
- **5. No ending decided.** Turns strung toward a blank, so the middle has nothing to aim at. Fix: decide the climax and its cost first, even provisionally; a movable target beats no target.
- **6. Skipping the turning-point layer.** Jumping from premise straight to a scene list, so scenes have sequence but no spine. Fix: place the five or six load-bearing turns before you list a single scene.
- **7. Someone else's method.** Forcing a scene-by-scene plan onto a discovery writer, or the reverse. Fix: match the altitude to your own failure mode, not to the writer you admire.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any outline that feels dead, ask two questions of the spine. Does each turn cause the next (and therefore, not and then)? Can the protagonist do something at the climax they could not at the start? A spine that fails either is the first thing to fix.

Your outline sheet.

print this page. both ends first, then the turns, then the scenes.

PREMISE (ONE SENTENCE)	LAYER 1	PLOT POINT 2 • LOW POINT	~75%
ONE-PARAGRAPH SUMMARY	5-6 LINES	CLIMAX	~90%
ENDING (DECIDED FIRST)	THE COST	RESOLUTION	100%
INCITING INCIDENT	~10%	ACT-BY-ACT SCENE COUNT	
PLOT POINT 1 • NO RETURN	~25%	NEXT ACT: SCENE LIST	ONE AHEAD
MIDPOINT	~50%	WHAT IS EACH SCENE FOR?	PER SCENE

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version doesn't.

The three-act skeleton this guide funnels into exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft, with the turning points laid out and a text box under each that saves as you type. Read the turn, write your book's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a spine you can hang scenes from. The layered scene list grows from there.

onemoredraft.com/guides/three-act

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, industry-standard screenplay formatting with professional PDF export, and Quill, your resident story editor, for when you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

MORE FREE FIELD GUIDES

- Save the Cat · the fifteen-beat sheet, adapted for novelists
- The Snowflake Method · the outline that grows by expansion
- Three-Act Structure · the skeleton most outlines hang from
- The Seven-Point Structure · ending-first plotting in seven turns
- Query Letter · the one-page pitch that sells the finished book
- Synopsis · the whole plot, told straight, on a single page

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ONE MORE DRAFT

This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary on general outlining craft, which has no single owner. It draws on structural ideas common to the tradition - the three-act frame, the layered or Snowflake-style outline, scene and sequel - that belong to writers at large. © 2026 One More Draft. You are welcome to share this PDF in its original, unmodified form.