



The Science Fiction Novel.

*earn the idea,
ground the human.*

A working field guide to the science fiction novel: starting from one speculative what-if and following it honestly, grounding big concepts in human stakes, weaving exposition without info-dumps, hard versus soft science fiction, the mistakes that deflate the genre, and a printable what-if worksheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

Science fiction is the literature of the what-if. You change one thing about the world, make it true, and follow the consequences honestly through the people who have to live inside them. This guide keeps the idea and the human in balance, walking the pieces a science fiction novel is built from: one central change, its second-order effects, a character arc large enough to fill the altered world, and exposition that arrives without a lecture.

The genre belongs to no single author; it is a tradition of countless writers, and this is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of it. A running example, an invented novel with the working title **Day Certain**, is carried from its what-if to its worksheet. The three-act spine it leans on is a free fill-in outline on our site.

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The literature of the what-if.

one change to the world, followed all the way down.

Science fiction turns on a single speculative premise, not a pile of them. Critics call that one change the **novum**, the new thing: what if we could upload a mind, meet a truly alien intelligence, read the date of a person's death at birth. Pick one, make it true, and hold everything else about the world steady. The power of the genre is not the number of wonders on the page. It is the rigor with which you chase a single wonder to its honest end.

The interesting part is rarely the invention itself. It is what the invention does to law, love, work, and power, the ripple rather than the stone. A memory upload is a gadget. A memory upload that lets the rich outlive the poor by centuries is a novel. Choose the one change, then spend the book on its consequences, because the consequences are where the human drama lives and the gadget never was.

Follow the logic even when it turns against you. Readers of the genre are trained to spot a premise the author flinched from, the consequence too dark or too costly to face, quietly waved away. The payoff comes from consequences pursued to their honest end, including the ones that complicate your hero and deny you a tidy finish. You do not owe the reader a diagram of how the novum works. You owe them consistency about what it can and cannot do.

DAY CERTAIN • THE ONE CHANGE

Our running example changes exactly one thing about our world. Since a discovery two generations back, a single blood reading at birth yields the Count: the exact calendar date a person will die, registered by the state, and in all the years since, never once wrong. Everything else, the cars, the politics, the weather, is ours. One change, followed all the way down.

Grounding the idea in a person.

readers stay for a person, not the tech.

A dazzling concept is a premise, not a plot, and this is the failure mode the genre is most prone to: falling for the idea and forgetting the person. Readers do not bond with a novum. They bond with a character whose specific want collides with the world you have imagined, the miner who needs first contact to go right, the mother counting down her daughter's last year. The idea should press on an intimate stake, so the reader feels the future in one chest rather than admiring it from orbit.

The strongest science fiction uses its what-if to interrogate something already true about us: identity, mortality, freedom, what it means to be a person at all. The speculation then carries emotional weight instead of mere novelty, because it is asking a question the reader has, dressed in a situation they do not. Build the idea and the character to move together, so that when the climax resolves the plot it also answers the question the premise raised.

The test is the same one every genre answers in its own dialect. If your central idea vanished, would any character's deepest want survive it? If the want was only ever "explore the strange thing," there is no novel yet, only a brochure for a world. Give one person something to lose that the novum specifically threatens, and the idea stops being scenery and starts being the story.

DAY CERTAIN • THE PERSON IT COSTS

The Count could fuel a hundred pages of economics and law. None of it earns its place until it costs Della Voss something. Della works the intake desk at the County Reckoning Office, reading counts onto newborns all day. Her own daughter, Ren, carries a Count that lands on Ren's twentieth birthday, now eleven months away. We meet the mother and the countdown first. The world's machinery arrives only as she needs it.

Hard, soft, and the one big lie.

change one thing, then obey your own rules without mercy.

Science fiction runs on a spectrum. **Hard** SF prizes scientific rigor and works its speculation out to the decimal, the orbital mechanics correct, the biology plausible, the reader able to check the math. **Soft** SF cares less about the engineering and more about people and societies, treating the novum as a given and spending its attention on consequences. Neither is superior. Hard SF earns wonder through plausibility; soft SF earns it through insight. Most novels live between the two, hard about the one thing that matters and soft about the rest.

There is an old working rule for the genre, sometimes called the **one big lie**: you may ask the reader to accept one impossible thing, but having spent that credit, everything else must follow the rules of the real world, and the impossible thing must follow its own rules with iron consistency. Change little, then reason rigorously. A book that grants itself a fresh miracle every time the plot gets hard has no rules, and a world with no rules has no stakes, because anything can be undone by the next invention.

Consistency is the whole contract. The reader will follow you into any premise, however wild, if you never cheat the terms you set. Decide early what your novum can and cannot do, write the limits down, and honor them even when bending one would rescue a scene. The reader forgives a hero who fails inside the rules. They never forgive a rule that bends for the author's convenience, because the moment the rules are negotiable, nothing on the page can be trusted to matter.

DAY CERTAIN · ONE LIE, HELD HARD

Day Certain spends its one lie on the Count and asks for nothing else. The rules never bend: the reading happens once, at birth; it names the date and never the cause; it cannot be re-read, revised, or escaped. That last limit is the hardest and the most important. Della cannot save Ren by beating the Count, because the Count has never once been wrong, and the book would collapse the instant it let her.

The map: what-if, consequences, story.

build in three layers, and let the last one rule the first two.

A science fiction novel is built in three layers, and the order matters. The what-if and its rules set the terms. The consequences build the world those terms create. The story is a person changing inside that world, so build it last and let it pull rank on everything above. Here is the whole shape on one page.

THE WHAT-IF

01	The one change, stated in a single sentence	NOVUM
02	The rules it always obeys	RULES
03	The limits it can never exceed	LIMIT
04	One point of entry: a character living the change	DOOR

THE CONSEQUENCES

05	The first-order effect, the obvious one	RIPPLE
06	The second- and third-order effects no one intended	CASCADE
07	What it does to law, work, and power	WORLD
08	Who wins, who loses, who refuses	ORDER

THE STORY

09	The outward goal the plot chases	GOAL
10	The inner change the goal secretly mirrors	ARC
11	The personal stake the novum threatens	HEART
12	The spine: three-act structure, named and used	SHAPE

Top to bottom is the build order. Bottom to top is the priority: when a piece of world or invention does nothing for the person on line eleven, it comes out, however clever it was to devise.

Choosing and pressure-testing the what-if.

a premise is a question. interrogate it before you commit.

Before you write, choose your one change and pressure-test it, because you will live with its consequences for a whole book. The best novums are generative: a single premise that throws off a hundred story situations, not a one-shot gimmick that pays out once and goes quiet. Ask what a normal Tuesday looks like under this change, what it does to birth, money, marriage, death. If you cannot name a dozen ordinary lives it disrupts, the idea may be an image, not an engine.

PRESSURE-TEST THE PREMISE

- Ask “and then what?” five times. If the consequences run out, so will the novel.
- Find the losers. A change that costs no one anything generates no conflict; follow it to whoever it ruins.
- Cut the second miracle. If the story needs a new impossible thing to work, the first one was not strong enough.

Finally, test the premise for a question worth a reader’s time. The strongest what-ifs are not merely surprising; they put pressure on something we already argue about. A premise that only says “wouldn’t this be strange” wears thin by chapter five. A premise that asks “what would this do to how we love, or grieve, or judge each other” can carry four hundred pages, because the reader is answering it too.

DAY CERTAIN • THE PRESSURE TEST

“What if you knew your death date at birth” survives the interrogation. And then what: insurers reprice, employers re-sort, marriages are negotiated on numbers. The losers are obvious, the short-counts, steered from childhood toward the jobs that use them up. And the question underneath is one every reader already carries: would you rather know?

The world the idea makes.

the second-order effects are where the novel lives.

Amateur science fiction stops at the first-order effect: the car flies, the phone reads minds, the dead can be uploaded. Good science fiction lives in the second and third order, the consequences no one intended and no one can stop. The first order of the automobile is a faster horse. The second order is the suburb, the traffic death, the redrawn city, the teenager with somewhere private to go. The novum is only the stone. The novel is the ripple pattern it leaves across everything it touches.

So do not stop at the invention. Ask what it does to the institutions people actually live inside: the law, the market, the family, the church, the state. Every powerful change gets captured, priced, regulated, worshipped, and resisted, and each of those responses is a story. Follow your one change until it has reorganized daily life, then set your characters down in the middle of the reorganization, where the pressure is highest and the old rules and the new ones grind against each other.

The cascade has to reach all the way down to one kitchen table. Sweeping social consequences impress; a single altered relationship moves. Trace the change from the halls of power to the smallest human unit it deforms, a marriage negotiated differently, a child raised under a rule that did not exist a generation ago. When the vast consequence and the intimate one are the same event seen at two scales, the world feels real and the reader feels it.

DAY CERTAIN • THE CASCADE

First order: everyone knows their date. Second order: insurance, lending, and hiring reorganize around the Count, and a caste of long-counts and short-counts hardens into law. Third order: a black market in forged count-papers for those who want to marry above their number, and the Uncounted, families who refuse to read their children, now breaking the law to do it. All of it reaches Della's table, because Ren is a short-count, and the world decided what that meant for her before she could speak.

Exposition without the info-dump.

reveal just in time, through what the character needs.

The most common opening in an unpublished science fiction novel is a wall of explanation: the history of the technology, the politics of the colonies, the physics of the drive, all before the reader has met a person to care about. Cut it. This is the info-dump reflex, and it asks the reader to pass an exam as the price of admission. Almost no one pays. A strange world does not have to be explained to be entered; it has to be inhabited.

The alternative is a technique often called **includ**ing: seeding the world in small, load-bearing clues that the reader assembles while the story moves. Characters use the technology as ordinary and react to it as normal, and the reader infers the rules from that use, the way you learned this world, by living in it rather than being handed a manual at the door. Trust the reader to keep up. They are quicker than you think, and they enjoy the assembling.

When you must explain outright, hang it on need and conflict. Information lands when a character wants it, argues over it, or is endangered by it, never as a neutral pause. Spread the reveals across the book so understanding deepens as the stakes rise, and cut any passage that teaches the reader something while changing nothing for the character. A paragraph that informs and costs nothing is a lecture wearing a scene's clothes.

DAY CERTAIN • JUST IN TIME

We never open with the science of the Count. We learn the rules at Della's desk, when a young father refuses to look at his newborn's paper and Della, gently, does her job: the reader learns the reading is once, and final, and names only the day. Later, at home, Della catches herself scanning Ren for symptoms and stops cold, and the reader learns with her that the Count says when but never how. Each rule arrives at the instant it costs someone something.

Worldbuilding in service of the story.

build the iceberg. show only the tip.

Build far more than you will ever show, then show only what the story needs. This is the iceberg principle, and it is the art of worldbuilding compressed to a line. A future feels real not because the reader is told it is deep but because every detail on the page implies a hundred beneath it. The reader senses the mass under the water precisely because the author does not haul it up and label it.

A single lived-in detail does more work than a page of background. What people eat, what they queue for, what they are afraid to say, what the advertisements promise: these small concrete things carry a whole civilization faster than any timeline of its wars. Anchor every strange thing to a familiar one so the reader has a handhold, then let the extrapolation ride on the specific object rather than the general explanation. Show the ration card, not the theory of the economy.

SHOW A FUTURE WITHOUT A TOUR

- Trust the object over the essay. One artifact used casually implies the system that made it.
- Anchor the strange to the familiar, so every new thing has a known thing beside it.
- Meter the depth. Reveal each piece of the world the moment a character needs it, not a page before.

DAY CERTAIN • THE ICEBERG'S TIP

We never lecture on the Reckoning economy. We show Ren's school locker, papered like every short-count's with recruiting flyers for the tidal turbines and the ash crews, the dangerous trades that court the people the actuaries have already written off. One image, a teenager's locker, implies the whole machinery of a society sorting its children by a number.

Science and plausibility.

rigor is a promise, not a physics exam.

You do not need a doctorate to write science fiction, and you do not need every detail to be buildable. What you need is **plausibility**, the sense that the author knows where the edge of the possible is and is crossing it on purpose. Readers cheerfully accept one or two impossible technologies, the faster-than-light drive, the mind upload, as long as they are treated as load-bearing conveniences and not multiplied. The genre calls the unearned version **handwavium**: a magic substance or effect that does whatever the plot needs this chapter.

Internal consistency matters more than external accuracy. A wholly invented physics that never contradicts itself is more convincing than a real one the author keeps bending. So decide your rules, including the rules of your impossible things, and then treat them as fixed law. The reader is building a model of your world as they read, testing each new event against it, and a single unexplained violation tells them the model was never real and the outcomes were never earned.

Research the parts the story leans on, and only those. If your novel turns on orbital rescue, get orbits right, because the readers who care will be merciless and the ones who do not will still feel the confidence. If it turns on grief, the physics can stay in soft focus and no one will mind. Match your rigor to your subject: be hard about the one thing the book is actually about, and let the rest be plausible and quiet.

DAY CERTAIN • THE ONE UNEXPLAINED THING

The book never explains how a drop of newborn blood yields a death date, and it never tries; that is its one lie, granted and left alone. What it is rigorous about is consequence. Given a Count that is always right, the economics, the law, and the cruelty all follow with the cold logic of something real. The mechanism is handwaved. The aftermath is not.

The human stakes.

the idea must cost one specific person something.

An idea threatens humanity in the abstract, and the abstract is the one thing a reader cannot feel. The end of privacy, the death of a species, the collapse of a world: these are numbers too large to grieve. A speculative threat moves a reader only when it is carried through one person's stakes, a home, a child, a promise, a single face. Put the personal loss under the cosmic one, and let the small thing be what the character is really fighting for.

The mechanism is scale by anchoring. The larger the idea's consequences grow, the harder you press on the intimate stake underneath, so the reader always has one human thing to hold. When the change is remaking a civilization, show it remaking one family. When a thousand will be affected, make the reader afraid for the one they know by name. The big idea gives the story its weight; the small stake gives it a pulse, and only the pulse keeps a reader up past midnight.

Build the idea and the stake so they resolve in a single act. The climax of a science fiction novel should answer the plot and the human question at once, the choice that settles the outward crisis being the same choice that completes the person. When the two are welded, the speculation stops feeling like a lecture with a story attached and becomes a story that could only have happened in this world, to this person, because of this one change.

DAY CERTAIN • THE SMALL LOSS

The Count has priced every life in the county, which is a fact the size of a nation and impossible to feel. Then the sea takes the turbine crew's safety margin, and the posting Ren wants, the one her whole short-count life has steered her toward, would put her on the tower in her final month. The abstract law becomes one mother deciding whether to forbid her daughter the year she wants, or to be there on the day she cannot prevent.

Subgenre and scale.

decide how big the story is before you build the world.

Before you build, decide what kind of science fiction this is, because the subgenre is a promise to a particular reader. **Space opera** runs large and adventurous, whole galaxies and empires in play. **Hard SF** stays close to real science and its constraints. **Near-future SF** changes our own world by a single decade and a single technology. **Social SF** cares less about the machine than about what the machine does to a society. Dystopia, first contact, and post-apocalypse each name an experience, not a ranking. Know which promise you are making.

Scale is the other early decision, and it is really a budget. A standalone novel can afford one change understood deeply and one society drawn with care. A series can span centuries and star systems, but it pays in bookkeeping and in years, and it must hold its own rules across thousands of pages without contradiction. Bigger is not richer. A single near-future county, fully imagined, will move a reader more than a thin empire of a thousand worlds. Set your scale honestly, then build only as much world as it can carry.

MATCH THE BUILD TO THE SCALE

- Standalone: one novum, one society, one arc. Depth over breadth.
- Series: a wider future and a longer arc, but keep a story bible from day one, or the continuity will bury you.
- Either way: build only what the story will touch. The galaxy offstage can stay a rumor until a scene needs it.

DAY CERTAIN • THE SCALE

Day Certain is near-future social SF at domestic scale: one county, one bureau, one family, one year's countdown. No starships, no other worlds. A standalone, deliberately small, because the whole argument of the book fits inside a single kitchen. That scale sets the budget: one change built deeply, one town understood well, and no map of a future the story will never visit.

Seven ways science fiction deflates.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The opening info-dump.** A prologue of history, physics, or politics before the reader has anyone to care about. Fix: open on a person and a problem; let the world arrive in the story's wake, revealed as the character needs it.
- **2. A cool idea with no human stakes.** A brilliant novum admired from orbit, threatening no one in particular. Fix: give one nameable person something to lose that the idea specifically threatens, and make that loss the plot.
- **3. Inconsistent rules.** A novum that does whatever this chapter requires, its limits quietly forgotten. Fix: write the rules and limits down before you draft, and honor them even when bending one would rescue a scene.
- **4. The tech tour.** Chapters of gadgets and vistas with no story pulling through them. Fix: cut anything the plot does not need, and show every wonder while a character is trying to get something done.
- **5. The ignored novum.** A change that would remake everything, in a story that proceeds as if nothing changed. Fix: follow the idea to its second- and third-order effects and let them reshape the daily lives on the page.
- **6. "As you know" dialogue.** Characters explaining to each other things they both already know, for the reader's benefit. Fix: let a character say only what they would actually say; move real exposition into need, conflict, and consequence.
- **7. The rule-breaking twist.** An ending saved by a new power or a bent rule the reader had no way to see coming. Fix: resolve the climax with tools and rules established early; a hero who wins by cheating the science loses the reader.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels dead, ask two questions. What does this prove about the world, and what does it cost the character? A scene that answers neither is an idea admiring itself in the mirror. It is the first page you cut.

Your what-if worksheet.

print this page. the idea first, then the person who changes.

THE WHAT-IF (ONE SENTENCE)

THE HUMAN STAKES

THE NOVUM - ITS RULES

THREE GROUNDING DETAILS

THE NOVUM - ITS LIMITS

WHAT THE STORY ARGUES

SECOND-ORDER CONSEQUENCES

SUBGENRE + SCALE

WHO IS CHANGED, PERSONALLY

ONE-LINE PREMISE

Keep going.

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

The three-act spine this guide leans on exists as a **free interactive outline** at One More Draft, with every hinge of setup, confrontation, and resolution and a text box under each one that saves as you type. Read the beat, draft your novel's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a complete outline in an afternoon. It is the cleanest, most durable spine for a concept-driven story, and the fastest way to hang your what-if on a proven shape.

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One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor, story planning tools for characters, beats, and whole **worlds**, and professional export when the draft is done. Its world and character tools are built for exactly this kind of book, keeping your novum's rules and your future's details consistent from the first chapter to the last. There is a free desktop app for Windows, and Quill, your resident story editor, waits whenever you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free.

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- The Hero's Journey · the mythic quest, beat by beat
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