



The Young Adult Novel.

*the voice they
don't put down.*

A working field guide to the young adult novel: an immediate first-person voice, a teen protagonist with real agency, first-time stakes taken seriously, the craft of keeping adults offstage, the coming-of-age arc under every genre, the category conventions of the shelf, the mistakes that make young readers close the book, and a printable YA worksheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

Young adult is not a genre. It is a category defined by who stands at the center and how close the reader is allowed to stand. A teenager, a first defining experience, and a voice immediate enough that the reader lives it rather than remembers it.

This guide walks the craft that category demands: the voice, the agency, the first-time stakes, the offstage adults, and the coming-of-age arc under it all. A running example, an invented contemporary novel, carries through every page so you can watch the parts work together.

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What a young adult novel is.

a teenager at the center, and the world seen the way they see it.

Young adult is a category, not a genre. A YA novel can be a romance, a fantasy epic, a thriller, a quiet contemporary. What makes it YA is a teenage protagonist facing a first, defining experience, rendered in a point of view close enough that the reader feels it in real time. The category is written **for** teenagers, not merely about them.

That distinction is the whole game. A book can be about a teenager and still not be YA. If the emotional camera sits in an adult's retrospection, wiser and cooler than the character, you have written a literary novel about adolescence. YA keeps the camera inside the teenager, at the intensity a teenager actually feels, with no grown-up narrator softening the edges.

It also is not the shelves beside it. **Middle grade** runs younger protagonists and gentler stakes for readers roughly eight to twelve. So-called **new adult** follows characters who have already left home for college or work, with adult latitude. YA lives in the years between: still under a roof, still becoming, everything happening for the first time.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A young adult novel puts a teenager in the driver's seat of a first, defining experience and tells it in a voice immediate enough that the reader feels it happening, not being remembered.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • THE MERCY RULE

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented contemporary novel, working title **The Mercy Rule**. Frankie Osei, sixteen, is the catcher and reluctant captain of the softball team in Merritt, a mill town whose team has lost forty-one straight games and whose school board wants the program cut for good. A transfer arrives who can actually play, and Frankie is the only one who learns the paperwork that made her eligible was quietly bent by the one adult everyone trusts.*

Age bands and category conventions.

roughly thirteen to eighteen on the page. a shelf with real rules.

THE PROTAGONIST'S AGE

YA protagonists run roughly thirteen to eighteen, and readers tend to read up, choosing heroes a year or two older than themselves. That makes a sixteen or seventeen-year-old lead the commercial sweet spot. Drop much below thirteen and the book tilts toward middle grade. Graduate the character and send them off alone and it drifts toward adult fiction wearing a younger coat.

LENGTH

Word count follows genre. Contemporary and realistic YA commonly land between 50,000 and 80,000 words. YA fantasy and science fiction run longer, often 80,000 to 110,000, to pay for their worldbuilding. Debuts are safest near the lower end of their band. A first manuscript arriving at 130,000 words tells an agent, before page one, that it has not been cut.

CONTENT LATITUDE

YA can go dark. Grief, violence, sex, addiction, and abuse all live on these shelves. The line is never the subject; it is the vantage. YA handles hard material from inside the teenager's experience and its consequences, not for an adult reader's appetite. Older YA carries more explicitness than younger, but everything stays oriented to the protagonist's frame.

THE MERCY RULE • CATEGORY

The Mercy Rule is contemporary YA: a sixteen-year-old lead, a present-day small town, roughly 65,000 words. No magic to fund, no explicit content to justify, just a first moral test at full teenage volume. It shelves cleanly beside the realistic YA a bookseller already knows how to hand-sell.

The golden rule: respect the reader.

never write down. never preach. assume they are sharper than you were.

Every craft decision in this guide serves one law. Respect your reader. Teenage readers are the most sensitive condescension detectors in publishing, and they punish it by closing the book. There is no recovering a reader who has decided you think they are a child.

Condescension arrives in two costumes. The first is writing **down**: simplifying, sanitizing, over-explaining the obvious, refusing to let the story go anywhere real. The second is **preaching**: bending scenes to deliver a lesson, handing the protagonist a tidy realization to pass to the reader. Both say the same thing to a sharp sixteen-year-old, which is that you do not trust them.

Respect is not only manners. It is discipline that makes the book better. It forces you to earn an emotion instead of asserting it, to let a character be genuinely wrong, to leave a theme unspoken and trust the reader to find it, and to end on a true note rather than a tidy one. Write with a teenager, never at one.

THE WRITE-WITH TEST

Read any line and ask whether a smart, skeptical sixteen-year-old would feel talked down to. If a sentence exists to teach the reader rather than to serve the character in the scene, it is the first line cut.

THE MERCY RULE • THE UNSPOKEN THEME

The book is about pride, honesty, and knowing when a thing is worth finishing. Frankie never says any of that. The mercy rule, the softball rule that ends a hopeless game early to spare the losing side, carries the whole argument by itself. No character ever explains it. The reader gets there first, and gets to keep it.

The YA build order.

four systems, built in order. voice first, becoming last.

YA is not built beat by beat the way a screenplay is; plot that to your chosen structure, whether that is Save the Cat, Three-Act, or the Hero's Journey. What follows is the order in which the **category-specific** systems get built, the four things a YA novel has to get right no matter which plot skeleton carries them. Build them in this sequence and each one holds up the next.

VOICE

- | | | |
|----|--|-----------|
| 01 | The narrating self - first person, present, close | the I |
| 02 | The texture - slang, humor, blind spots, certainty | the sound |

AGENCY

- | | | |
|----|--|------------|
| 03 | The want - strong enough to make them choose badly | the engine |
| 04 | The driver's seat - the teen makes the hard call | the choice |

STAKES

- | | | |
|----|---|------------|
| 05 | The first time - love, loss, test, at full volume | the weight |
| 06 | The adult vacuum - why no grown-up can fix it | no rescue |

THE ARC (BECOMING)

- | | | |
|----|--|--------------|
| 07 | Identity - who am I when the call is mine | the question |
| 08 | The larger world - childhood ends, autonomy begins | the widening |

The next seven pages take these one at a time. Read them in order the first time. After that, keep the page open beside whatever draft you are in, because a YA novel fails on any one of the four, and the failures hide until a teenage reader finds them.

Voice, immediate and specific.

not a middle-aged narrator in a teenager's coat.

YA lives and dies on voice. The reader wants to sit inside this specific young person's head in real time, which is why the category leans so hard on **first person and present-tense immediacy**. The prose should sound like this teenager thinking, with their particular slang, blind spots, humor, and unearned certainty. It should not sound like a careful adult narrator looking back and knowing better.

Immediacy also sets the volume. A first heartbreak is genuinely enormous to the person living it, so the voice honors that scale instead of tempering it with grown-up perspective. The fastest way to spot a false YA voice is retrospective wisdom: any sentence that knows more than the character could yet know is the adult author leaking through. Strip those, and the voice snaps into the present.

ON THE PAGE

- Default to first person, present tense, until you have a specific reason not to; it is the category's native register.
- Delete retrospective knowledge. If the narrator understands a moment better than the character did, you are hearing the author.
- Build the voice from one head's particulars - what they notice, joke about, refuse to see - not from generic "teen speak."

WATCH OUT

The wise narrator. Lines like "I didn't know it yet, but that summer would change everything" are an adult remembering, not a teenager living. They cool the emotion exactly where YA needs it hot.

THE MERCY RULE • VOICE

Frankie opens the book behind the plate: Coach says leave it in the dirt. Every passed ball, every dropped third strike, every thing you can't fix, leave it in the dirt and set up for the next pitch. I've gotten real good at leaving things in the dirt. Present tense, one head, a want and a wound in four lines. No adult telling us what it will mean.

A protagonist with real agency.

the whole appeal is a young person discovering they can act.

The hero has to drive the story. The teenage protagonist makes the hard choices and faces the consequences, and the plot is the record of what they **do**, not what is done to them. A YA novel where a competent adult steps in and solves the problem has handed away its engine, because the category's deepest pleasure is watching a young person learn they can act on the world.

Agency starts with a want strong enough to make them choose badly. Give the protagonist something they need at full volume, then let them own the fallout of chasing it. Growth in YA almost always runs through choice: the character begins dependent, uncertain, or defined by others, and the story forces decision after decision until they discover who they are by what they were willing to do.

ON THE PAGE

- Audit your climax: is the decisive action the protagonist's alone? If an adult could make it, the scene belongs to the wrong person.
- Give the want enough force to justify a bad choice; a protagonist who only ever chooses wisely is a passenger with good manners.
- Charge the character for their choices. Consequence they own is the proof that the wheel was really in their hands.

WATCH OUT

The passenger. A hero who reacts, gets rescued, and is carried to the ending by luck or grown-ups. Test every turning point by asking who decided. If the answer is rarely the protagonist, the book has no engine.

THE MERCY RULE • AGENCY

Frankie finds the bent eligibility form herself, and no one else knows she has. The whole novel funnels to a choice only she can make: report it and forfeit the one winnable season, or bury it and win on a lie. She could hand the problem to an adult. The book's spine is that she doesn't.

First-time stakes, taken seriously.

smaller than a war. felt harder than one.

The emotional core of YA is the **first time**. First love, first loss, first real betrayal, the first time the world reveals it is not what a child was promised. These stakes feel smaller than the ones adult fiction trades in, and they land harder, because the protagonist has no prior experience to cushion the blow. Nothing has ever hurt like the first thing that hurt.

So treat them with the weight the character feels, not the weight a jaded adult would assign. The single deadliest instinct in a new YA writer is to signal, through tone, that a first heartbreak is survivable and minor. It is not minor to the person inside it. Scale the telling to the teenager's experience and the reader is with you completely; scale it to your own and you have written condescension.

ON THE PAGE

- Name the first: which door is opening for the very first time here? Build the stakes on the fact that there is no precedent.
- Refuse the safety valve. Do not let the narration reassure the reader that this will be fine; the character does not know that.
- Let the small thing carry real cost. A ruined friendship can outweigh a saved kingdom when it is the first one that ever mattered.

WATCH OUT

Minimizing from above. An adult's proportion sneaking into the prose, treating first love as a phase. Play the stake at the height the character feels it, or do not put it on the page at all.

THE MERCY RULE • THE FIRST-TIME STAKE

Three firsts collide in one form. Lux is Frankie's first real want, the first person who makes the losing season feel like something. Coach is the first adult Frankie ever fully trusted, and the form is his lie. And it is Frankie's first true moral test. The book never calls any of it small.

Keeping adults offstage.

empower the teenager by engineering the grown-ups out.

For the protagonist to drive, the adults have to be structurally unable to fix things. Absent, obstructive, compromised, or themselves the problem. This is not because YA hates parents; it is because a present, competent adult with the power to solve the plot ends the story on page ten. The craft is to build a premise where the teenager is genuinely the only one who can act.

Beware the trap readers name aloud: **why don't they just tell a parent?** If a single honest conversation with a capable grown-up would resolve the book, your plot has a hole, not a hero. The fix is never to make the teenager implausibly secretive. It is to build the situation so that telling an adult does not actually help. The adult is the cause, or is powerless, or telling costs more than staying silent.

ON THE PAGE

- Pressure-test the plot with “why not tell an adult?” If the honest answer is weak, redesign the situation, not the character.
- Make the adults specific and real, not cardboard obstacles; the best offstage grown-ups are loving and still unable to help.
- Put the decisive power in the teenager's hands by construction, so their action is necessity, not contrivance.

WATCH OUT

The idiot-adult shortcut. Weakening grown-ups into fools so the teen can shine. It reads as rigged. Strong, caring, genuinely constrained adults make the protagonist's solitude earned instead of arranged.

THE MERCY RULE • WHY ADULTS CAN'T FIX IT

Telling solves nothing, and Frankie knows it. The adult who bent the form is Coach, who did it “for the girls.” The athletic director would not investigate; he would just cut the program he already wants gone. Frankie's mother works two jobs and has no standing to intervene. The decision has nowhere to go but Frankie.

Theme and the coming-of-age arc.

the external story delivers the internal one.

Under almost every YA plot, regardless of genre, sits a **coming-of-age arc**: identity, autonomy, the world getting larger and more complicated than a child was told. The romance, the quest, the murder are the vehicle. The cargo is a young person understanding themselves or their world by the end in a way they could not at the start. Keep that identity question alive under the plot, because it is what young readers are really reading for.

Let the theme ride inside the story, never on top of it. The events carry the meaning; the character need not name it, and usually should not. A YA novel earns its theme the way a person earns a hard lesson, through choice and consequence, not through a closing speech. If the protagonist announces what they learned, you have converted an arc into a moral and lost the reader who wanted to feel it for themselves.

ON THE PAGE

- State the identity question the plot is secretly about, then make sure the external climax forces an answer to it.
- Deliver the theme through the ending's events, not a summary; the reader should draw the line, not read it.
- Track the widening world: what did the protagonist believe at the start that they can no longer believe at the end?

WATCH OUT

The graduation speech. A final chapter where the protagonist spells out the lesson. Trust the story you built. If the arc worked, the reader already has the theme, and being told it insults the arriving.

THE MERCY RULE • THE COMING-OF-AGE ARC

Start: Frankie keeps the peace and calls things early, leaving every hard thing in the dirt. End: she plays the honest game she cannot win cleanly, reports the form, and loses the season and maybe Lux to keep something truer. The world got larger, and she chose to meet it. She never once says so.

Pacing and hooks for a fast reader.

the YA reader is quick, willing, and easy to lose.

YA readers move fast and forgive little. They will follow a book anywhere, and they will set it down the moment a chapter sags without a reason to turn the page. That makes momentum a craft priority, not an afterthought. Enter scenes late, leave them early, and end chapters on a pull: a question opened, a decision looming, a line that makes stopping feel like a mistake.

Momentum is not speed for its own sake. The engine is **escalating stakes and forward-leaning scenes**, each one changing the character's situation so the next becomes necessary. Open on motion or tension, not throat-clearing. Cut the settling-in chapters new writers put first. The reader should feel, from the first page, that something is already in play and getting harder.

ON THE PAGE

- End chapters on a hook - a turn, a question, a threat - so stopping costs the reader something.
- Start the book in motion; delete the throat-clearing opening chapter and begin where the trouble does.
- Make every scene change the situation. If a scene ends where it began, it is describing, not driving.

WATCH OUT

The slow build. Trusting the reader to wait fifty pages for the story to start. In YA they will not. Whatever your inciting event is, it can almost always arrive sooner than your first draft placed it.

THE MERCY RULE • PACING

The book opens on the forty-first straight loss, not on a calm Tuesday. The eligibility form surfaces at the end of a chapter, mid-celebration, as Frankie is filing paperwork she was only skimming, and the chapter ends on the single word in the wrong handwriting. The reader turns the page because stopping there is unbearable.

Authenticity without cosplay.

slang ages. texture doesn't. research, don't impersonate.

The surface of teenage life dates faster than any other material a novelist works with. This year's exact slang, the specific app, the current meme, all curdle between your draft and the book's release, and a reader who catches you straining to sound current stops trusting the voice. The instinct to prove you know the lingo is the surest way to sound like an adult in a costume.

What ages slowly is **texture**: the rhythm and attitude of how teenagers actually talk, the boredom and intensity of the days, the shape of a group chat rather than its literal words, the weight of small social physics. Research current teenage life the way you would research any world you do not live in, with genuine attention and humility, and then render its truth rather than its trending vocabulary.

ON THE PAGE

- Capture rhythm and attitude over vocabulary; the cadence of teen speech outlives its specific words.
- Use brand-name and slang specifics sparingly, and never to prove you belong; one true detail beats ten trendy ones.
- Research honestly - listen, read current YA, ask - and write the texture you find, not the version you remember.

WATCH OUT

The try-hard. Dialogue stuffed with this quarter's slang to signal authenticity. It signals the opposite. When unsure, dial the specificity down and let the rhythm carry the age.

THE MERCY RULE • AUTHENTICITY

The team's group chat runs on rhythm, not buzzwords: read receipts left on purpose, a running bit about the concession-stand nachos, the particular silence after a loss. The softball detail is exact because it was researched. The slang is nearly absent, so the book will still sound true the year a reader finds it used.

Seven ways YA loses teen readers.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The nostalgic narrator.** A voice that sounds like an adult fondly remembering being young. Fix: write in the present of the character's knowledge and strip every line that knows more than the teenager could.
- **2. The passenger protagonist.** A hero things happen to, carried to the ending by luck or grown-ups. Fix: make the decisive choice the teen's alone; if an adult could make it, remove the adult or the solution.
- **3. Small stakes played small.** A first heartbreak treated as minor because an adult would call it minor. Fix: scale the telling to the character's experience; it is the biggest thing that has ever happened to them.
- **4. The sermon.** Message-fiction that bends scenes to teach and ends on a lesson. Fix: leave the theme unspoken, trust the reader to draw it, and cut any line that exists to instruct.
- **5. Last season's slang.** Dialogue nailed to this year's words, stale before the book ships. Fix: capture rhythm and attitude instead of vocabulary, and keep trendy specifics rare.
- **6. The rescue from above.** A parent, teacher, or officer who arrives and solves the plot. Fix: build the premise so adults structurally cannot help - absent, compromised, or the problem itself.
- **7. The diorama world.** A teen life either airbrushed clean or staged as a cautionary slum. Fix: render it specific and true, boredom and jobs and contradictions, neither romanticized nor sanitized.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels flat, ask two questions: is the teenager driving this, and does it cost them something real? A scene where an adult drives or nothing is risked is doing neither of YA's jobs, and it is the first page to cut.

Your YA worksheet.

print this page. voice and agency first, then the arc.

PROTAGONIST (AGE + WANT)

THE VOICE IN ONE LINE

THE FIRST-TIME STAKE

WHY ADULTS CAN'T FIX IT

THE HARD CHOICE ONLY THEY MAKE

THE COMING-OF-AGE ARC (START -> END)

THEME (NO LECTURE)

THE INCITING BREAK FROM CHILDHOOD

CATEGORY + WORD COUNT

ONE-LINE PREMISE

Keep going.

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

This guide is the category, not the plot. When you are ready to build the actual beats of your young adult novel, the free interactive planner we recommend is **Save the Cat! Writes a Novel**, the beat sheet behind countless commercial YA hits. It runs a clear arc from setup to transformation, with a text box under each beat that saves as you type, so you can read the beat and draft your novel's version of it right on the page.

onemoredraft.com/guides/save-the-cat-novel

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor, professional export for print and ebook, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, your resident story editor, 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! Writes a Novel · the beat sheet behind the hits
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic
- The Hero's Journey · the monomyth, demystified
- How to Outline a Novel · from idea to working plan
- How to Write a Fantasy Novel · worlds that hold together

All free, all fill-in-able, at **onemoredraft.com/guides**.



ONE MORE DRAFT

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