



The Novella.

*one clean arc,
no subplots.*

A complete working guide to the novella as a single-question arc: one protagonist, one line of action, and no subplots to hide in, carried from the question it opens to the answer it earns, with a worked example run through all seven beats and a printable arc sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

The novella is the middle length of prose fiction, longer than a short story and shorter than a novel, and it has a shape all its own. Where a novel can carry three plots and a dozen lives, a novella carries one. This guide treats it as a **single-question arc**: one protagonist, one line of action, and a single dramatic question asked at the start and answered at the end.

Two notes before you begin. First, the seven beats here are **proportions, not chapters**; the percentages mark where the load sits, not how to divide your pages. Second, the discipline is the point. A novella has no room for subplots, so the beats are less a scaffold to fill than a set of tests: does this scene serve the one question, or does it belong in a longer book?

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What a novella is.

one question, one protagonist, one line of action, given room to matter.

By the common convention, a novella runs roughly **17,500 to 40,000 words**, long enough to develop a character and a situation in full, short enough that a reader can finish it in a sitting or two. That length is not a compromise between the short story and the novel. It is a form with its own physics. The short story turns on a single moment; the novel braids many lives across time; the novella takes one life and one question and follows them the whole way down.

What holds a novella together is a **single dramatic question**. In Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, it is whether two men can hold on to a shared dream. In Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, it is whether one man can change before it is too late. Everything in those books, every scene and every character, bends toward the one question. Nothing is there to pass the time.

That is the novella's promise and its demand. You get room a short story never has, to let a character breathe and a decision ripen. You do not get the novel's license to wander. **Compression** is the craft: to write long enough to matter and short enough that every page still points at the ending.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A single protagonist is committed to one dramatic question, pursued along one clean line of action, and carried without detour from the moment it is asked to the moment it is decisively answered.

The discipline of one question.

no subplots to hide in; every scene serves the one question.

The rule that governs everything else is this: a novella has **no subplots**. A novel can hide a slow chapter behind a lively subplot, and the reader forgives the lull because another thread is moving. A novella has no second thread. If a scene is not advancing the one question, the reader feels the stall at once, because there is nowhere else for their attention to go. That exposure is not a weakness of the form. It is the form's discipline, and its power.

So the working test for every scene is the same, and it is merciless. Does this move the single question toward its answer, or deepen the reader's stake in it? If not, it belongs in a longer book. Keep the **cast small**, three or four people who touch the question directly. Keep the **timeframe tight**, so the pressure never leaks away. And keep **one line of action** in view, the through-line the protagonist walks from first page to last.

BUILD THE ARC IN FOUR LINES

- **The protagonist:** one person the question can happen to, drawn closely enough that their choice will carry the whole book.
- **The single question:** the one dramatic question the novella asks, phrased so it can be answered yes or no. Name it before you outline.
- **The one line of action:** the through-line the protagonist walks, the pursuit or the return or the reckoning, with no second thread beside it.
- **The answer:** how the question resolves, and what it costs. Decide it early; it is where the book is going.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET REN

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented novella, working title **The Far Field**. Ren Halloran, forty-five, lives alone on a hill farm at the end of a long dirt road, a life she arranged, after years of noise and loss, to hold no one but herself. The single question the book asks is total: when her estranged sister dies and leaves a silent nine-year-old with nowhere else to go, will Ren let the boy become her family, or sign him back to the world she left? One protagonist, one line of action, one question. No subplots.*

Seven beats, one arc.

a single-question three-act: open it, deepen it, answer it.

The seven beats fall into three movements, the tight three-act the novella wears under its skin. The first three **open the question**: they establish the protagonist, disturb the world, and commit them past retreat. The middle two **deepen it**: a reversal reframes the question and the cost comes due. The last two **answer it**: the question is decided, and the book lands. Percentages are targets, marking where the weight sits along one clean line of action.

THE QUESTION OPENS

1	Opening & Hook	~3%
2	Inciting Incident	~15%
3	First Turn	~30%

THE QUESTION DEEPENS

4	Midpoint Reversal	~50%
5	Complication & Low Point	~70%

THE QUESTION ANSWERED

6	Climax	~85%
7	Resolution	~95%

Note how early the question commits and how fast the ending lands. A novella front-loads its inciting incident, the disturbance arriving by the first sixth rather than the first third, and it resolves in a handful of pages. The long, luxurious runways of the novel are exactly what this form does without.

BEAT 01

TARGET ~3%

Opening & Hook.

voice and situation, fast, with the question in the air.

A novella cannot afford a slow build. The opening's job is to put the protagonist, their voice, and their world on the page in the first few pages, and to let the reader feel the single question forming before it is named. You are not laying pipe for chapters to come; you are establishing the one life the question will happen to, quickly and completely enough that when the disturbance lands, it lands on someone real.

The hook is not a gimmick but a promise. It tells the reader what kind of question this book will ask and makes them want the answer. Open on the protagonist in motion through their ordinary life, and let that life carry the fault the story will press: the loneliness, the wound, the certainty the question will test. Establish the normal in the same breath as the crack in it, because you will not have a hundred pages to get there.

ON THE PAGE

- Lead with voice and situation. A novella earns its reader in the first pages, not the first chapter.
- Show the ordinary life the question will overturn, and seat one fault inside it, the thing the book will test.
- Raise the question early, even before it is named; let the reader feel what is at stake in this particular life.

WATCH OUT

The novel's runway. The slow, scene-setting overture a novel can afford will sink a novella. If your first chapter is throat-clearing, cut to the page where the real life, and the coming question, first shows.

THE FAR FIELD • REN

We meet Ren at first light, walking the fence line of a farm she keeps alone on purpose, naming the chores the way other people name family. She likes the road long and the phone quiet. So when the phone rings before the coffee is poured, a county number she does not know, the reader already feels the shape of the thing before Ren does. A life built to hold no one is about to be asked to hold someone.

BEAT 02

TARGET ~15%

Inciting Incident.

early: the disturbance that commits her to the one problem.

The inciting incident is the disturbance that starts the story, and in a novella it comes early, by the first sixth or so. It is the event that takes the protagonist's settled life and makes the single question unavoidable. Where a novel can circle its inciting incident for fifty pages, a novella must strike it fast and clean, because everything after depends on the question being live. Until the disturbance lands, there is no book, only a situation.

What matters is that the incident **commit** the protagonist to the one problem, not merely interest them in it. The strongest inciting incidents close a door behind the character. Something is lost, arrives, breaks, or is asked that cannot be unasked. The protagonist may resist, and often should, but the question is now in the room, and the rest of the novella is the working-out of their answer.

ON THE PAGE

- Strike early. Land the disturbance by the first sixth; the form has no room for a long approach.
- Make it commit, not merely intrigue. The incident should ask the one question in a way the protagonist cannot ignore.
- Keep it clean. One clear event that starts one clear line of action, not a tangle of setups.

WATCH OUT

The delayed disturbance. If your inciting incident lands a third of the way in, as it might in a novel, the novella has no room left to run. Move it forward; the reader should know the question early.

THE FAR FIELD • REN

The county number is a caseworker, Ms. Odell. Ren's sister Marra, whom she has not spoken to in eleven years, is dead: a wet road, a bend taken too fast. There is a boy. Nico, nine, is named to Ren in the only papers Marra left. By afternoon Odell's car is coming up the long road, and a silent child is watching the farm approach from the back seat. Ren agrees to take him. Just for now, she says. Until something is arranged.

BEAT 03

TARGET ~30%

First Turn.

the point where retreat stops being an option.

The first turn is where the protagonist crosses fully into the problem. The inciting incident put the question in the room; the first turn is the moment the protagonist stops standing at the door and steps through, whether by choice or by circumstance closing behind them. After it, the easy exits are gone. The story can no longer resolve by the protagonist simply walking away, and both they and the reader know it.

In a single-question arc this turn is decisive, because it sets the **one line of action** the rest of the book will follow. It often looks like a commitment made concrete: a paper signed, a bag unpacked, an offer of escape refused. The protagonist may still want out, but wanting is no longer enough. They have taken on the question in a way that must now be answered, not avoided.

ON THE PAGE

- Close the exits. Make the easy way out disappear, so the story cannot end by retreat.
- Turn intent into action. A signed paper or a refused rescue commits harder than a private decision.
- Set the one line of action here; everything after should run along the through-line this turn lays down.

WATCH OUT

The revolving door. If the protagonist could still walk away unharmed after the first turn, they have not turned. Take away the retreat; a novella cannot afford a hero who keeps one foot out.

THE FAR FIELD • REN

The arranged thing does not arrive. When Coyle's wife offers, kindly, to take the boy off her hands and down to people who know how to raise one, Ren hears herself say no. She signs Odell's interim guardianship. She clears the back room that has been shut for years and carries Nico's one bag up the stairs. Nothing is settled between them, and he still has not spoken, but the door behind Ren has closed. She is in it now.

Midpoint Reversal.

a reversal that reframes the question; reactive becomes proactive.

The midpoint is the hinge of the novella. A reversal here deepens the stakes and **reframes the single question**, turning the protagonist from someone the story happens to into someone who acts on it. Before the midpoint the protagonist is largely reacting, enduring the problem, managing it. After it they are pursuing something, and the question is no longer the one they started with. It has been sharpened, or turned, or made personal in a way it was not before.

In a short form the midpoint keeps the middle from sagging, which is the novella's chief structural danger. Without a real turn at the center, the middle drifts and the single question goes stale from repetition. Give the protagonist new information, or a new desire, that changes what they are fighting for. The best midpoints do not raise the stakes by adding a threat; they raise them by revealing what the protagonist actually wants.

ON THE PAGE

- Turn reactive into proactive. Let the protagonist start driving the line of action instead of absorbing it.
- Reframe the question, do not just repeat it. What is asked at the midpoint should cut deeper than what was asked at the start.
- Raise the stakes through want, not only threat; reveal what the protagonist is truly fighting to keep.

WATCH OUT

The flat middle. If your midpoint reveals nothing and reverses nothing, the center of the novella will drift and the question will go stale. Put a genuine turn here, and make it personal.

THE FAR FIELD • REN

Ren finds the letter Marra left with the papers, meant for her. It is one line: "You, because you will not lie to him." Something turns. The question stops being how she survives until they take the boy, and becomes whether she wants to keep him. That night Ren does not wait Nico out; she teaches him to bank the stove, hand over hand, the way their mother taught her. He does not speak. But he watches her hands, and he stays.

BEAT 05

TARGET ~70%

Complication & Low Point.

pressure peaks, the cost comes due, and kept brief.

The low point is where the pressure reaches its height and the protagonist's hopes are furthest from reach. The plan fails, the cost of the pursuit comes due, or the thing they most feared arrives. In a novella this is the darkest stretch, and the discipline is to keep it **brief**. A novel can dwell in despair for chapters; a novella touches the bottom hard and moves, because the ending is close and the reader can feel it coming.

The low point earns the climax by making the answer cost something. Whatever the protagonist wants, this is where they seem certain to lose it, and often where their own flaw does the damage. Push them to the edge of giving up the single question, or of answering it the wrong way. The reader should not be sure which way it will fall. Then, out of that low place, the climax can turn.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the cost real. The pursuit should take something from the protagonist before the question is answered.
- Let the flaw bite. The strongest low points come from the protagonist's own hand, not from bad luck alone.
- Keep it brief. Touch the bottom hard and move; a novella cannot wallow with the ending this near.

WATCH OUT

The long dark. A low point that sprawls across many scenes drains the momentum a novella depends on. Land the worst blow in a scene or two, then turn toward the climax before the reader outpaces you.

THE FAR FIELD • REN

The hearing is set, and the state has found a couple, steady and kind, a house in town with a room already painted. Ren, certain she will fail the boy the way she failed everyone before him, tells Odell they are the better home. Nico is on the stairs. He hears it. That night he is gone, and his one bag with him, out into the cold field Ren spent her life learning to be alone in. She goes after him with a lantern, understanding at last what she has almost thrown away.

BEAT 06

TARGET ~85%

Climax.

the single question answered, decisively and economically.

The climax is where the single dramatic question is answered. After all the pressure, the protagonist acts, and the book's one question resolves yes or no. In a novella the climax is **decisive and economical**. There is one question, so there is one answer; one line of action, so there is one resolution. The sprawling, multi-front finale of a novel is not available here and is not wanted. The reader has come the whole way for this single decision, and it should land clean.

Let the answer come from the protagonist. The most satisfying climaxes are chosen, not handed over, and they draw on everything the book has built: the fault seated in the opening, the turn at the midpoint, the cost paid at the low point. The protagonist answers the question with an action, not a speech, and the action should be one only this character, changed by this story, could take. Then stop. The question is answered; the book is nearly done.

ON THE PAGE

- Answer the one question outright. Decisive, not hedged; the reader has earned a clear resolution.
- Keep it economical. One line of action resolves in one climax, not a cascade of finales.
- Let the protagonist choose. The answer should be an action only this changed character could take.

WATCH OUT

The novel-sized climax. A finale that opens new fronts and stages several showdowns belongs to a longer book. A novella answers its one question in a single decisive stroke, then ends soon after.

THE FAR FIELD • REN

She finds Nico at the far fence, the end of the field and the end of her solitude in one line of frost. She does not lecture him. She tells him the truth she told Odell was a lie, that she was afraid, and that she is asking him to stay, not until something is arranged, but for good. In the morning she stands in the hearing and says it plainly: the boy is hers, if he will have her. The question is answered. Yes.

BEAT 07

TARGET ~95%

Resolution.

a compact landing; resonance over tidiness.

The resolution is the landing, and in a novella it is short. The question has been answered; the resolution shows the small new world that answer makes, and then it lets go. Aim for **resonance over tidiness**. You do not need to knot every thread or narrate the years to come. A single image, a changed detail, an action that would have been impossible on page one: these say more than a chapter of accounting, and they trust the reader to carry the rest.

The surest close echoes the opening with one thing changed, so the reader can measure the whole arc at a glance. Imply the aftermath rather than spelling it out; the power of the form lives in what it leaves resonating past the last line. Honor the cost, too. The answer was expensive, and an ending that quietly refunds the price cheapens the question the whole book was built to ask. Land it, and lift the pen.

ON THE PAGE

- Keep it brief. The question is answered; every page after spends the reader's patience.
- Echo the opening with one thing changed, so the arc can be read in a single image.
- Imply the aftermath. Resonance outlasts tidiness; trust the reader to carry what you leave unsaid.

WATCH OUT

The spelled-out ending. A resolution that narrates every consequence and ties every knot trades the novella's resonance for a novel's bookkeeping. Land on one changed image and trust it.

THE FAR FIELD • REN

Winter. The long road is plowed now, because a school bus turns at the bottom of it on weekday mornings. Two cups wait by the stove Nico banks himself. He talks, some days. On the fence line Ren walks the chores and names them, and the naming is different now, because someone small is learning the words beside her. She built the place to hold no one. It holds two. That is all the ending says, and it is enough.

Seven ways novellas sprawl or stall.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The slow build.** Opening like a novel, taking chapters to start. Fix: state the situation and voice in the first pages, and let the reader feel the question before it is named.
- **2. The smuggled subplot.** A second thread added for depth. Fix: cut it. A novella has no room to hide; every scene must serve the one question or belong in a longer book.
- **3. The growing cast.** More characters than the length can hold. Fix: keep three or four who touch the question directly, combine roles, and drop anyone who does not.
- **4. The wandering middle.** A midpoint that reframes nothing, so the center drifts. Fix: put a real reversal at the center that turns reactive into proactive and sharpens the question.
- **5. The blurred question.** The reader cannot say what is being asked. Fix: write the single dramatic question on one line; if you cannot, the arc does not have one yet.
- **6. The novel-sized climax.** A sprawling, multi-front finale. Fix: answer the one question decisively and economically. One line of action means one resolution.
- **7. The over-tidy ending.** Every thread knotted, the aftermath spelled out. Fix: land compact, echo the opening with one thing changed, and imply the rest.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

State your single dramatic question in one sentence. Then walk your outline scene by scene and ask of each: does this move that question toward its answer? Every scene that cannot say yes is a subplot the novella has no room for. Cut it, or you are writing a novel.

Your novella arc sheet.

print this page. one line per beat is enough to start.

THE SINGLE QUESTION (NAME IT FIRST)

PROTAGONIST + ONE LINE OF ACTION

1 OPENING & HOOK 3%

2 INCITING INCIDENT 15%

3 FIRST TURN 30%

4 MIDPOINT REVERSAL 50%

5 COMPLICATION & LOW POINT 70%

6 CLIMAX 85%

7 RESOLUTION 95%

TARGET WORD COUNT

ONE-LINE PREMISE

Keep going.

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

This entire arc sheet exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft, with the same seven beats and a text box under each one that saves as you type. Read the beat, draft your novella's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a full single-question outline in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/novella

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor, industry-standard screenplay formatting, 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.

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ONE MORE DRAFT

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