



# STORY SHAPING: 65 QUESTIONS TO FINE-TUNE YOUR NEXT OUTLINE

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I hate to break it, but there's no one-size-fits-all approach to outlining a novel. It's called a creative process for a reason, and what works for one person (or book!) might not work for the next. That said, the following questions aren't a checklist. Instead, think of them as a toolkit—designed to help you explore your story more deeply, uncover gaps, and spark new ideas. Not every question will apply to every project, and that's okay. Just use what resonates, skip what doesn't, and let the rest serve as jumping-off points to unpack that shiny new idea you can't stop thinking about. Happy writing!



## Initial Hook & Engagement

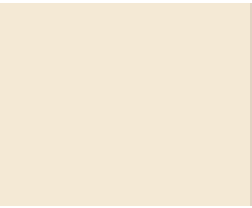
1. Does the first line introduce tension, or spark curiosity of what's to come?
2. How well does your opening scene illustrate the protagonist's voice, goals, and struggles?
3. What promise are you making to the reader in the first few pages re: mood, tone, genre, stakes, theme, etc...?
4. Are you raising compelling questions that the reader wants answered? Tip: Do not rely on ambiguity alone to create intrigue and suspense.
5. What emotional reaction do you want readers to have in the first chapter?
6. How quickly is the main conflict established?
7. Is the opening scene a microcosm (or mirror) of the story's themes?

## Conflict & Stakes

8. What is the central conflict driving the story? Is it internal, external, or both?
9. Is there a clear inciting incident that sets the conflict in motion?
10. Is the conflict driven by the character's choices, and not by mere coincidence?
11. What does the antagonist represent?
12. What are the stakes for the protagonist? What happens if they fail?
13. Are there ways to make the stakes even higher or more personal?
14. How does the conflict force the protagonist to grow or change?
15. Are there ways to make the cost of failure even worse than the reader might expect?

<b>Character &amp; Motivation</b>	<p><i>Use the questions in this section to unpack <u>all major players</u> in your story—not just the protagonist and antagonist.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>16. Who is your protagonist/antagonist, and what do they want most?</li> <li>17. Will readers understand and empathize with this character—even if they don’t agree with them?</li> <li>18. Are their motivations believable?</li> <li>19. What is stopping them from getting what they want?</li> <li>20. How does their biggest flaw hold them back?</li> <li>21. How does their greatest strength help them?</li> <li>22. How does their backstory shape their present decisions?</li> <li>23. What are they most afraid of?</li> <li>24. How do they evolve emotionally throughout the story?</li> <li>25. Are the relationships between the characters dynamic—i.e. do they change over time, deepen, fracture, heal, etc...?</li> <li>26. What do the characters misunderstand about each other?</li> </ol>
<b>Escalation &amp; Pacing</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>27. Does the story start at the right moment—or does it take a little too long to get going?</li> <li>28. Do chapters end in a way that tease/dare the reader to keep going?</li> <li>29. Is the exposition balanced throughout?</li> <li>30. Do the transitions between scenes feel natural, or do they feel forced?</li> <li>31. Are there moments of tension and levity to balance the pacing?</li> <li>32. Is there a midpoint revelation that shifts the story?</li> </ol>
<b>Plot Twists</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>33. Does your story include unexpected twists?</li> <li>34. Are there red herrings that mislead the reader?</li> <li>35. Do you foreshadow major twists?</li> <li>36. Do the surprises feel earned (rather than random)?</li> <li>37. How do the twists affect the character relationships?</li> </ol>

<b>Subplots</b>	<p>38. Do the subplots enhance/reinforce the themes of the novel?</p> <p>39. Do any of the subplots overshadow the main plot?</p> <p>40. Are there any subplots that could be combined or cut for clarity?</p> <p>41. Do all subplots tie up neatly by the end?</p> <p>42. Are any subplots left unresolved on purpose for potential sequels or intrigue?</p>
<b>Setting &amp; Worldbuilding</b>	<p>43. If you removed/changed the setting, would the story lose something essential?</p> <p>44. How does the setting enhance the mood of your novel?</p> <p>45. How does the setting shape the characters' lives, beliefs, or limitations?</p> <p>46. Does the setting reflect or contrast with the story's tone or themes?</p> <p>47. Is the world internally consistent, with rules that make sense?</p> <p>48. Does the setting affect the plot—create challenges, offer resources, or force decisions?</p> <p>49. How do the rules in your world (political, magical, etc.) magnify tension?</p> <p>50. Is the setting a metaphor?</p>
<b>Themes</b>	<p>51. What is the core theme of your novel?</p> <p>52. How does the protagonist's arc reflect that theme?</p> <p>53. How does the resolution reinforce/make a statement about the theme?</p> <p>54. Could the title hint at the central theme?</p>
<b>Climax</b>	<p>55. Have you pushed the emotional impact of the climax as far as possible?</p> <p>56. What does your protagonist sacrifice to succeed?</p> <p>57. Do the choices made in this moment feel consistent with the characters and their development?</p> <p>58. Does the climax resolve the novel's central conflict?</p> <p>59. Does the climax feel like the inevitable result of everything that came before it?</p>
<b>Falling Action &amp; Resolution</b>	<p>60. Are all major plot threads tied up?</p> <p>61. Does the ending reflect the protagonist's overall journey?</p> <p>62. Are there consequences—internal or external—for what happened in the climax?</p>

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63. Does the tension unwind after the climax, or does it drop off too abruptly?
  64. Does the resolution feel earned and not rushed or tacked on?
  65. What feeling do you want your readers to walk away with?

