

GUIDE A1

AuthorOS Writing Guides

## How Long Should My Book Be?

The complete genre guide to word counts, chapter ranges, and structure expectations. Includes practical advice on setting a target that is right for your story.

### INTRODUCTION

## The question every writer asks first

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Before you write a single word, you want to know: how long should this thing be? It is a perfectly sensible question. Word count shapes your timeline, your structure, your pacing, and your chances of being taken seriously by agents and publishers. Getting it roughly right from the start makes everything else easier.

The honest answer is that there is no single correct length for any book. But there are well-established ranges that reflect what readers expect, what publishers accept, and what the structure of each genre tends to demand. This guide covers every major genre and format in plain terms, and ends with practical advice on setting a target that works for your story.

*My first book is one of a trilogy. By the time I realised how hard it would be to complete even the first book, let alone the other two, it was too late to change tack. I tried to escape by starting something simpler, a story about a young lad named Barnabas Horace Leopold Crump who wanted to be bad but was spectacularly useless at it. It didn't work. The trilogy kept pulling me back and poor Barnabas never got his chance. The story had to be told and I had no choice but to go through with it. Don't make the same mistake. My sincere advice to any new writer: don't start with a trilogy. One book. One target. Everything else can wait.*

**A note on first drafts:** the word count targets in this guide are for finished manuscripts, not first drafts. First drafts are often 10–20% longer. Write freely. Cut later. Do not let a word count target slow down a first draft that isn't finished yet.

### FICTION

## Adult Fiction

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The ranges below reflect what literary agents and publishers expect to see. Stray significantly outside them as a debut author and you create an unnecessary obstacle before anyone has read a word.

Genre	Typical Range / Notes
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Literary Fiction	80,000–110,000 words. Character-driven. Longer is acceptable if the prose genuinely justifies it.
Commercial / General Fiction	80,000–100,000 words. The sweet spot. Agents rarely question books in this range.
Thriller / Crime	70,000–90,000 words. Pace matters above all. Shorter is fine if the tension never drops.
Mystery (cosy)	60,000–80,000 words. Reader expectation is for a brisk, satisfying puzzle.
Fantasy (standalone)	90,000–120,000 words. World-building earns the extra words. Over 120k is harder to sell as a debut.
Epic / High Fantasy	100,000–150,000 words. Series books can run longer. Debut novels above 150k face significant resistance.
Science Fiction	90,000–120,000 words. Concept density can justify length. Keep exposition tight.
Romance	70,000–90,000 words. Sub-genres vary. Category romance (Harlequin-style) runs 50–60k.
Historical Fiction	90,000–120,000 words. Research-heavy setting earns the extra words.
Horror	70,000–90,000 words. Dread needs space to build, but pacing must stay tight.

## Young Adult Fiction

YA has become one of the most commercially active categories in publishing. The word count expectations are lower than adult fiction, but the storytelling standards are just as high; often higher, given how competitive the market is.

Genre	Typical Range / Notes
YA Contemporary	60,000–80,000 words. Voice and pace are everything. Cut anything that slows either.
YA Fantasy / Sci-Fi	80,000–100,000 words. World-building adds words, but YA readers want momentum.
YA Thriller	60,000–80,000 words. Tight. Fast. No dead chapters.
YA Romance	60,000–80,000 words. Emotional intensity counts for more than length.
Middle Grade	25,000–50,000 words. Ages 8–12. Chapters are shorter. Sentences are tighter.

## Children's Books

Format	Word Count / Notes
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Picture Books (ages 3–5)	300–800 words. Illustration carries the story. Text supports; it does not describe.
Early Readers (ages 5–8)	1,000–5,000 words. Simple sentences. Short chapters. Controlled vocabulary.
Chapter Books (ages 6–10)	5,000–15,000 words. The first books children read independently.

## NON-FICTION

### Non-Fiction Books

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Non-fiction word counts are more flexible than fiction, because the subject matter genuinely dictates length. That said, there are still expectations. The most common mistake non-fiction writers make is writing too long. More words do not mean more value. Never pad things out because you think your book is too short.

Category	Typical Range / Notes
Business / Leadership	45,000–70,000 words. Readers want actionable insight, not padding. Cut the anecdotes that don't earn their place.
Self-Help	40,000–60,000 words. Clear framework, examples, application. Shorter often sells better.
Health / Wellness	50,000–80,000 words. Evidence-based content earns the longer word count.
History / Biography	80,000–120,000 words. Narrative non-fiction can carry significant length.
Memoir	60,000–90,000 words. Your story needs a beginning, middle, and transformation. No more.
True Crime	70,000–90,000 words. Readers are already gripped by the subject. Pace it like a thriller.
Popular Science	70,000–100,000 words. Concept depth earns extra words. Avoid over-explanation.
Travel / Narrative	60,000–80,000 words. One journey, one arc. Cut the days that had nothing to say.

**The reader test:** at every chapter, ask yourself: is the reader getting something new here? If the answer is no, that chapter is padding. Cut it.

## STRUCTURE

### Chapter length and chapter count

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Word count targets tell you how long the book should be. Chapter length tells you how to pace it. Here are the typical chapter length ranges by genre.

Genre	Avg Chapter Length	Implied Chapters (at target word count)
Thriller / Crime	2,000–3,000 words	27–40 chapters at 80k
Commercial Fiction	2,500–3,500 words	23–32 chapters at 80k
Fantasy / Sci-Fi	3,500–5,000 words	20–30 chapters at 100k
Romance	2,000–3,500 words	23–40 chapters at 80k
Non-Fiction	2,000–4,000 words	Structure-led: each chapter = one concept
YA	1,500–2,500 words	Shorter chapters keep young readers engaged

*I spent months agonising over chapter length. In the end my chapters varied from 2,000 to 5,000 words depending on what the story needed. The table above is guidance, not a contract. Write the chapter until it's done, then look at the number.*

## Setting your own target: five principles

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### 1 Start in the middle of the range

If your genre runs 80,000 to 100,000 words, target 90,000. You will have room to cut in editing without falling short, and room to expand without going over.

### 2 Underwriting is easier to fix than overwriting

A 70,000-word draft that needs fleshing out is a manageable editing task. A 130,000-word draft that needs cutting by a third is a different problem entirely. When in doubt, write lean.

### 3 Genre expectations exist for a reason

Readers of cosy mysteries expect a satisfying puzzle resolved in 60–80k words. Readers of epic fantasy expect a world to get lost in. Defying those expectations requires a very good reason, and as a debut author, you probably don't have it yet.

### 4 Your first book is not the place to break the rules

If you are a debut author, submitting a 160,000-word fantasy to a literary agent is harder than submitting a 110,000-word one. Prove you can tell a complete story at conventional length first. Then break the rules.

### 5 A target is not a cage

Set a target and write toward it. If the story demands more, give it more. If it resolves at less, let it. The target is a planning tool, not a contract with the reader. Treat it like a compass, not a word counter ticking down.

*I had no specific target, just a concept and a rough idea of how long my book should be. I thought if I could write something every day, even just two hours, that would get me to the end eventually. This hampered my progress. I should have been more methodical, more focused, more disciplined. I should have set a target and stuck to it. I would have finished the first draft in eight months, not eighteen. Learn from my mistake. One book. Set your target. Finish it. Then decide what comes next. My lack of discipline is what inspired me to create AuthorOS, to help other writers reach a finished book far more efficiently than I did.*

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## NEXT STEPS

### **Ready to turn your target into a writing plan?**

Knowing your word count is the first step. The next is working out how you are actually going to get there: how many words a day, how many days a week, and what a realistic finish date looks like given your life.

If you haven't done that yet, the Word Plan Builder will do it for you in under three minutes. Put in your genre, your target, and your writing pace. It builds your schedule and sends it to you by email. No account required.

**[Word Plan Builder → authoros.app/word-plan/](https://authoros.app/word-plan/)**

If you already have your writing plan and you're ready to start tracking your progress, WordTracker takes it one step further. It logs your daily sessions, recalculates your forecast completion date as you go, and keeps you accountable when the motivation dips, which it will. Every writer has weeks where the words don't come. WordTracker makes sure a bad week doesn't become a bad month.

**[WordTracker Beta → authoros.app/wordtracker-beta/](https://authoros.app/wordtracker-beta/)**

*WordTracker is currently in beta. Early access is available for you to explore while we refine the experience.*