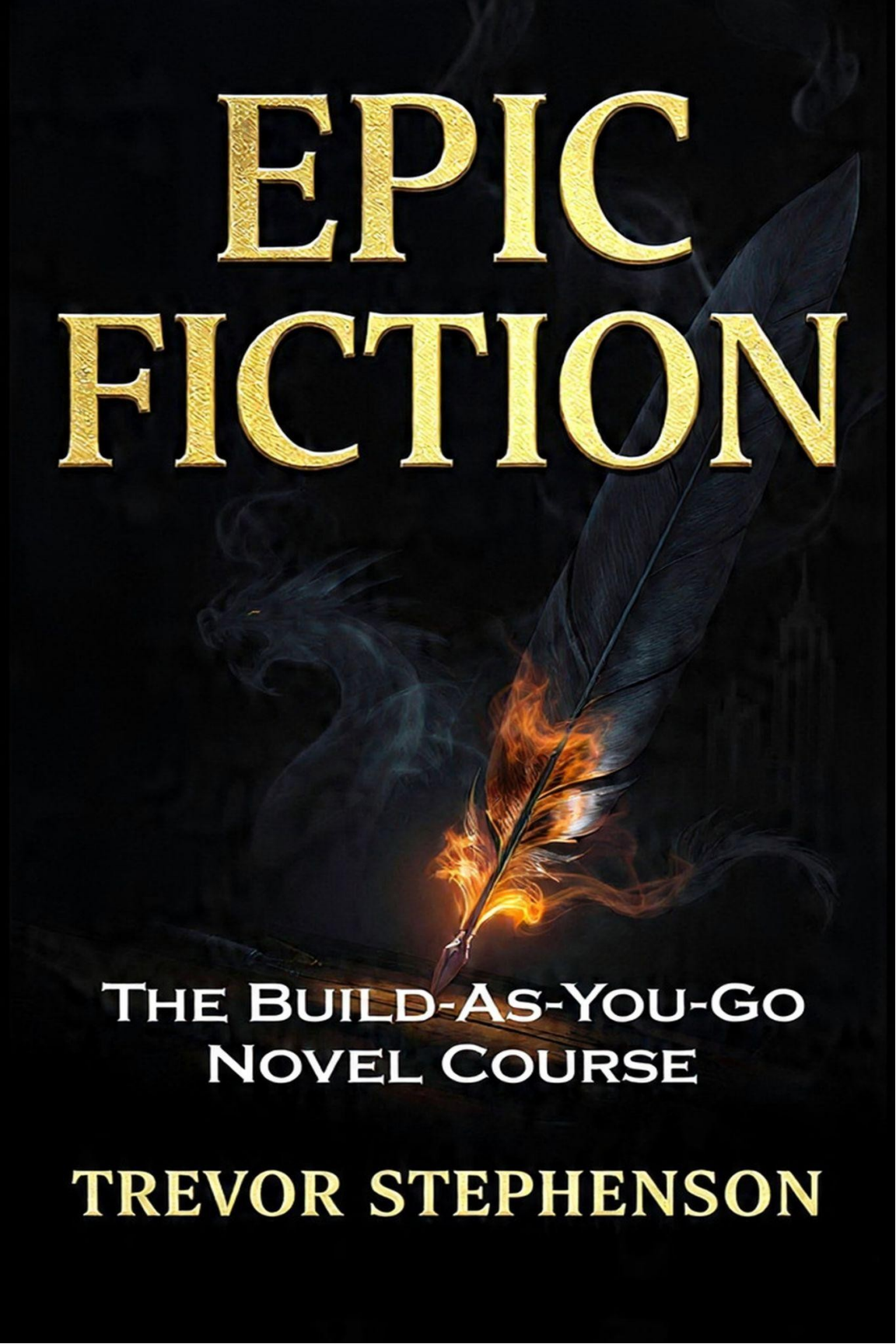
EPIC FICTION



The Build-As-You-Go Novel Course

TREVOR STEPHENSON

EPIC FICTION

EPIC FICTION

The Build-As-You-Go Novel Course

By

Trevor Stephenson

Copyright

Copyright © 2026 by Trevor Stephenson

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of instructional non-fiction. All novel examples are used for critical and educational purposes.

First Edition, June 2026

Published by Trevor Stephenson

London, United Kingdom

Dedication

For everyone who told me to just get on with it. I did it and so can you.

Contents

Chapter 1: Premise — The Engine

Chapter 2: Character — Want Vs Need

Chapter 3: World and Stakes Epic Fiction

Chapter 4 Structure — The 3-Act Spine Epic Fiction

Chapter 5 Scene Craft Epic Fiction

Chapter 6: Point of View and Voice

Chapter 7: Dialogue

Chapter 8: Tension on Every Page

Chapter 9: Plotting the Middle — No Sag

Chapter 10: Endings That Land

Chapter 11: Revision — The Real Writing

Chapter 12: Front Matter, Back Matter, and

Publishing Format

Appendix A: Your Build-As-You-Go Toolkit

Appendix B: When It Goes Wrong — The Troubleshooting FAQ

Appendix C: The "Visual Bible" Managing Assets for the Modern Novel

Appendix D: The "Author-to-Brand" Workflow: Scaling Your Fiction

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Also By Trevor Stephenson

Chapter 1: Premise — The Engine



A novel is not an idea. An idea is cheap. An idea is: a detective in London, a spaceship that is alive, a girl who can talk to crows. None of those are novels yet. A novel is a person who wants something very badly, for a reason that matters, and cannot have it because someone or something equally determined is in the way, and if they fail the cost is unbearable.

That is your premise engine, and if you get it right on page one, the next three hundred pages almost write themselves. If you get it wrong, you will have beautiful sentences that go nowhere, and you will abandon the draft at thirty thousand words, again.

I want to give you a machine you can bolt any story onto. It has four parts.

1. **Part One:** The Protagonist with a Sharp Edge.
2. **Part Two:** A Concrete Want.
3. **Part Three:** Active Opposition.
4. **Part Four:** Personal Stakes.

Protagonist + Want + Opposition + Stakes. PWOS. Remember that.

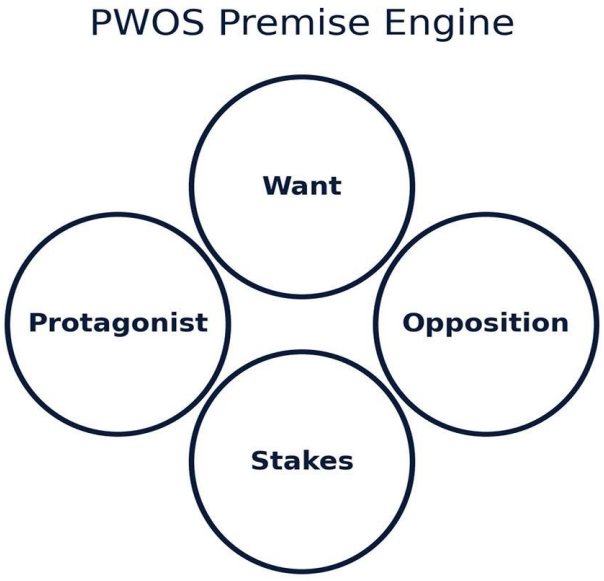


Figure 1.1 The PWOS Engine

Protagonist plus Want plus Opposition plus Stakes. If one bolt is missing, the engine stalls.

Let us take it apart slowly, with real books, because abstract craft talk is useless without a spine to hang it on.

1.1 The Protagonist



Your protagonist does not need to be likeable. They need to be interesting, active, and specific. Specificity is the whole game. A forty-two-year-old forensic cleaner in South London who survived a house fire that killed her brother is instantly more interesting than a brave hero. Why? Because she comes with a wound, a job that puts her in other people's worst days, and a city I can smell.

The mistake new writers make is starting with archetype instead of person. The Chosen One, The Detective, The Strong Female Lead. Throw that away. Start with a contradiction. A midwife who is terrified of

becoming a mother. A priest who has lost his faith the week before Easter. A con artist who cannot lie to children. Contradiction creates friction, friction creates scenes.

Give your protagonist three things on day one: a skill that will solve the climax, a flaw that will cause the midpoint disaster, and a secret they are keeping from themselves. That secret is usually the Need, which we will cover in Chapter 2, but plant it now.

Example 1

- **Thriller:** Jonah Park, 58, retiring Met detective, three days left.
- **Skill:** he can read a room in ten seconds, twenty-nine years on the job.
- **Flaw:** he stopped listening to his gut after his daughter vanished twenty years ago, he trusts procedure now, procedure is safe.
- **Secret:** he thinks his daughter ran away because of him. That secret will

make him blind to the obvious suspect in Act Two.

Example 2

- **Romance:** Amina Yusuf, 31, wedding cake designer in Birmingham.
- **Skill:** she can make anything beautiful and structurally sound.
- **Flaw:** she plans everything, including feelings, and bails the moment a plan wobbles.
- **Secret:** she believes love is a thing other people get to keep. Her cakes outlast most marriages she caters.

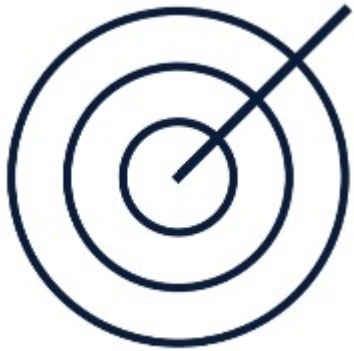
Example 3

- Fantasy: Ren Kaito, 17, junior archivist in a living library where books bite.
- **Skill:** perfect memory, eidetic recall
- **Flaw:** cowardice dressed up as caution.
- **Secret:** he shelved the wrong book five years ago and burned a wing down,

killed his mentor, and told no one. Now the library is waking up again.

See how fast a story starts to hum when the person is specific. You could write a scene for any of those three tomorrow morning.

1.2 The Concrete Want



A want must be something you can photograph. Keep my sister alive. Win the baking final. Find the missing girl before my

last shift ends. Get the letter back before my husband reads it.

A want is not: Find happiness, discover herself, learn to love again. Those are Needs, they are thematic, they are wonderful, they belong in Chapter 2. For premise purposes, give your protagonist a verb and a deadline.

Vague wants kill novels at page forty. If your protagonist wants to be free, what does free look like on Tuesday? Does it look like a passport, a divorce paper, a train ticket, a key? Make it a thing. The theme will attach itself later, I promise.

Test your want with two questions.

1. **One:** can a stranger tell if the protagonist got it or not by the end of the book. Yes or no, no maybe.

2. **Two:** does getting it cost something they do not want to pay? If the answer to both is yes, you have a working want.

Concrete wants across genres:

- **Thriller:** find the missing girl in seventy-two hours.
- **Romance:** win the Great British Bake Off without falling for the rival who sabotaged me last year, because if I lose the prize money my family's bakery closes.
- **Fantasy:** steal the emperor's true name from the living library before the solstice, because the name is the only thing that can put the library back to sleep.
- **Literary:** get my estranged mother to sign the care home papers before the council sells her house, without telling her she has dementia.

- **Science fiction:** grow four potatoes on Mars long enough to radio Earth.

That last one is The Martian, stripped to its bones. It sounds small. It is not small when the air is trying to kill you.

1.3 Active Opposition



Opposition must want the opposite thing, and must be good at getting it. A wall is not opposition. A storm is barely opposition. A person who is trying just as hard as your

protagonist, for reasons that make sense to them, that is opposition.

Your antagonist is the protagonist of their own novel. Write that sentence down. If your villain twirls a moustache, rewrite them until they could plausibly win an argument at a dinner party.

Opposition comes in three flavours, and the best books layer all three.

- **People:** A rival, a lover, a parent, a detective, a queen.
- **Institutions:** The Capitol, the court system, the church, the algorithm, the housing office.
- **Nature / Self:** Mars, the sea, addiction, grief, pride.

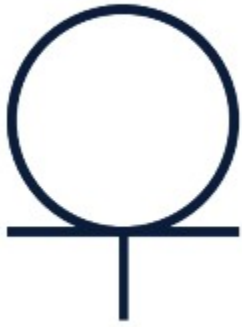
The Hunger Games works because it stacks all three. The other tributes are people opposition. The Capitol is institutional. Katniss's own instinct to survive alone, to

trust no one, is self opposition. When she offers the berries, she beats all three at once. That is why the ending lands.

If your opposition is weaker than your protagonist, raise them. Give them more resources, more moral authority, more charm. If your protagonist is a forensic cleaner, make the antagonist the detective running the case, handsome, respected, and completely wrong. Now your cleaner has to outthink the police without getting arrested. Good. That is a book.

Personalise the opposition. The best antagonist knows the protagonist's flaw and presses it. If your protagonist's flaw is running away, the antagonist offers them a clean exit. If the flaw is control, the antagonist creates chaos. This is not coincidence in the story world, it is design in your outline.

1.4 Stakes



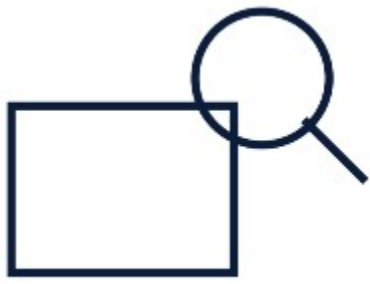
Stakes are what happens if the protagonist fails, and what happens if they succeed but pay the price. Death is the laziest stake, and often the least interesting. What else can you take?

Take love. Take identity. Take home. Take memory. Take dignity. Take faith. Take the story they tell themselves about who they are.

Good stakes are personal, irreversible, and escalating. Personal means only this protagonist would care this much.

Irreversible means you cannot just try again next week. Escalating means the cost gets higher the deeper they go.

1.5 Case Study: The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins.



Protagonist: Katniss Everdeen, sixteen, hunter, provider, poor, from District 12.

Sharp edge: she volunteers. She steps in front of death for her sister. In one action we know everything.

Want: keep Prim alive. Concrete, photographable. Later the want upgrades: survive the Games.

Later again: survive without becoming a monster the Capitol can use.

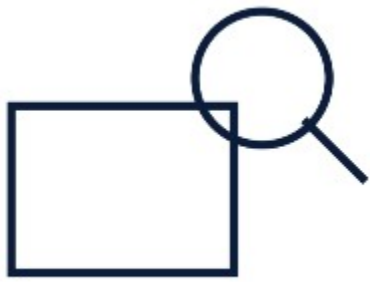
Opposition: people, Cato and the Careers. Institution, President Snow and the Gamemakers who can set the forest on fire with a button. Self, Katniss's refusal to perform, to play the love story, to trust Peeta.

Stakes: personal, Prim dies if Katniss fails. Irreversible, death is permanent, and worse, becoming a Capitol puppet is a spiritual death. Escalating, first it is one life, then twenty-four children, then the whole system notices her.

Notice how the premise question is clear: Will Katniss survive without losing herself? Every scene in the book answers that

question in miniature. That is what a good premise does, it generates scenes automatically.

1.6 Case Study: Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen.



Protagonist: Elizabeth Bennet, twenty, clever, poor-ish, second of five daughters, sharp tongue, blind spot the size of Hertfordshire.

Want: marry for love and respect, not money, in a society where women cannot

inherit and her family estate is entailed away to Mr Collins.

Concrete want disguised as a negative: Do not marry stupidly.

Opposition: people, Darcy is proud, Wickham lies beautifully, Lady Catherine is a brick wall in a bonnet, her own mother is actively trying to marry her off wrong. Institution, the entire Regency marriage market, primogeniture, class. Self, Elizabeth's prejudice, her pride in her own judgment.

Stakes: marry wrong and she is trapped for life, with no money, no divorce, no career, watching her sisters starve if her father dies. Marry right and she keeps her mind intact. Personal, irreversible, escalating. If Jane elopes badly, if Lydia runs off with Wickham, the whole Bennet family is ruined socially. The stakes climb every act.

Austen never kills anyone. The stakes are still suffocating, because they are real to Elizabeth. That is the lesson. Make the stakes real to your protagonist, and the reader will feel them.

Now let us build three more premise engines from scratch, so you see the machine working in different genres.

Worked Example 1

Cosy mystery:

Protagonist: Del Thomas, 67, retired postmaster in a Welsh seaside town, widowed, runs the community jigsaw library.

Want: prove the new age retreat owner did not kill the local councillor, because the police have arrested Del's granddaughter, who was caught on CCTV arguing with the victim an hour before.

Opposition: the actual retreat owner, who is charming and has an alibi, the DI who thinks Del is a nosy old man, and Del's own failing eyesight which means he cannot trust what he saw.

Stakes: granddaughter goes to prison for twenty years, Del loses the last family he has, the town loses its library if the retreat buys the high street. Personal, irreversible, escalating.

Worked Example 2

Science fiction:

- **Protagonist:** Dr. Yara Okoro, 39, exo-linguist, mother of a nonverbal eight-year-old.
- **Want:** decode the signal from Proxima b in fourteen days before the military fires a relativistic kill vehicle, because she is convinced the signal is a child speaking.

- **Opposition:** General Hobb, who thinks it is a weapon and has the launch codes, Yara's ex-husband who has filed for full custody while she is on the ice station, and Yara's own grief which makes her hear her son in static.
- **Stakes:** if she is wrong, Earth fires first and starts an interstellar war. If she is right and fails, a child dies alone, again. If she succeeds, she might lose her own son's custody hearing because she missed it.

Worked Example 3

Romance:

- **Protagonist:** Tom Ellis, 34, firefighter, dyslexic, reads at a Year 6 level and hides it.
- **Want:** win the regional chilli cook-off, £10,000 prize, so he can pay for his little

sister's university without her knowing he is paying.

- **Opposition:** Maya Chen, food critic, his old school bully, now judging the cook-off, gorgeous, sharp, and allergic to chillies. Also the fire station calendar shoot that keeps putting him in front of cameras reading cue cards.
- **Self opposition:** shame.
- **Stakes:** sister drops out, Tom's secret gets exposed in front of the whole town live on local radio, Maya finds out he is not stupid, he is terrified of that more than anything.

Each of those took five minutes once the machine is oiled. You can feel the scenes already queuing up.

1.7 Premise in the Wild — Three Modern Books

Right. You have Jonah, Amina, and Ren. Good, solid training wheels. Now let's bolt PWOS onto three books that were published in the last ten years, by writers who are not dead white blokes from your GCSE syllabus.

I am doing this because if you can see the engine humming in someone else's finished novel, you will stop doubting it in your own half-finished one.

Same four parts. Protagonist plus Want plus Opposition plus Stakes. No magic.

Worked Example 4

Contemporary Romance: Honey and Spice by Bolu Babalola

Protagonist: Kiki Banjo, 21, sharp-tongued radio host at a fictional Russell Group uni in

London. Runs an anonymous agony-aunt show called Brown Sugar.

Skill: she can read a man in ten seconds flat and tell the whole campus about it.

Flaw: she treats feelings like content. If it is messy, she broadcasts it.

Secret: she is terrified of actually needing anyone. It is easier to be the girl with the mic than the girl with her heart out.

Want: keep Brown Sugar anonymous and keep her reputation intact after she publicly calls campus golden boy Malakai Korede a "Wasteman" on air.

Opposition: Malakai himself. He needs her to publicly fix his reputation to land a research grant, so he blackmails his way into being her fake boyfriend.

Stakes: if she is exposed, she loses the show, her scholarship credibility, and, worse, the one person who actually sees past the act.

See that. Concrete want, photographable. Fix the mess before Freshers' Week ends. Active opposition who wants the opposite thing. Personal stakes that sting.

PWOS, clean as a whistle.

Worked Example 5

Fantasy: The Jasmine Throne by Tasha Suri

Protagonist: Malini, 27, imprisoned princess in the Hirana, a temple-prison rotting in the jungle. Burned for refusing to burn.

Skill: politics. She was raised to run an empire, even from a cell.

Flaw: she will burn the whole empire down to get out, including the people trying to help her.

Secret: she believes mercy is a weakness her brother beat into her.

Want: get out of the Hirana alive, and take the throne back from her brother before the next eclipse.

Opposition: her brother, Emperor Chandra, who is literally hunting the magic she needs to survive, plus the temple priestess who locked her up in the first place.

Stakes: fail, and she rots. Succeed the wrong way, and she becomes exactly the monster her brother is.

Again. Person, verb, deadline, cost. That is it.

Worked Example 6

Sci-Fi / Thriller: Rosewater by Tade Thompson

Protagonist: Kaaro, 35, sensitive in near-future Nigeria. He can read minds. Works as

a government thief, stealing secrets out of people's heads.

Skill: he is the best xenoform reader alive. Nothing hides from him.

Flaw: he is lazy, selfish, and deeply in denial about what the alien dome over Rosewater is actually doing.

Secret: he already knows the dome is waking up, and he has been ignoring it for years because looking means acting.

Want: find his missing girlfriend Aminat before the next Opening, when the dome kills anyone caught outside.

Opposition: the Nigerian government, a rogue American agent, and the dome itself, which is not a building, it is alive and it wants Kaaro back.

Stakes: lose Aminat, lose the city, lose his mind. Literally.

Three completely different genres. Three completely different continents. Same four bolts holding the engine together.

Your turn. Take your premise from Section 1.4 and run it through these three as a test. If Kiki Banjo, Malini, and Kaaro all make your PWOS look vague, sharpen it. Make the want photographable. Give the opposition a reason to win. Raise the cost until it hurts to say out loud.

Do that now, before you touch Chapter 2. I will wait.

1.8 Premise Testing

Before you write Chapter One, stress test your premise.

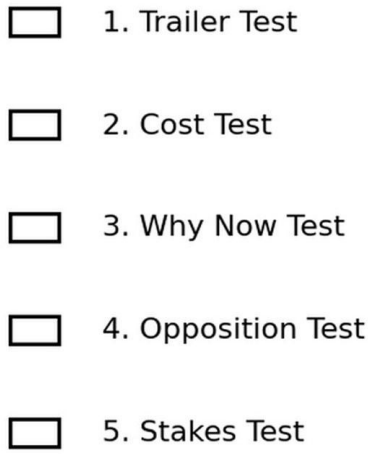


Figure 1.7

5-test checklist diagram

Test 1 - The Trailer Test:

Can you name three set piece scenes that only happen because of this exact premise. If you cannot, the premise is too generic.

Test 2 - The Cost Test

What does winning cost? If the answer is nothing, raise the price. Katniss wins and

becomes a symbol, which nearly gets her killed in Book Two. Elizabeth marries Darcy and has to live with the fact she was cruel to him, and with Lady Catherine at Christmas forever.

Test 3 - The Why Now Test

Why does this story start today and not last year? Something must have broken. Prim's name is drawn. Mr Bingley moves to Netherfield. The signal changes pitch. The girl goes missing. If you cannot answer why now, your inciting incident is weak.

Test 4 - The Opposition Test

Can you flip the premise and still have a book. Katniss volunteers for the Games, what if Prim volunteered for Katniss? That is a different book, interesting, which means the original has tension built in.

Test 5 - The Stakes Test:

Can you explain your premise to a stranger in thirty seconds without them glazing over. If you need five minutes of worldbuilding first, simplify.

1.9 Common Premise Traps

Trap one: the reactive protagonist. If your protagonist only responds to things happening to them for the whole first act, rewrite. Give them a choice at the inciting incident. Katniss volunteers. Elizabeth rejects Collins. Choice is character.

Trap two: stakes that are too big too soon. Save the world is boring in Chapter One because I do not know the world yet. Save your sister is immediate. The world can expand later.

Trap three: opposition that is evil for no reason. Give your antagonist a want that mirrors the protagonist's. Snow wants order. Darcy wants to protect his sister. The retreat owner wants to save the high street too, just differently.

Trap four: a want that resolves in one scene. If your protagonist can get what they want by making a phone call, the want is too small. Add a deadline, add a personal cost, add someone actively stopping them.

Trap five: premise without theme. You do not need to know your theme yet, but plant a question. What is the price of survival? Can pride coexist with love? Does being safe mean being alone? Your premise should let you argue both sides.

1.10 High Concept Vs Character Driven

High concept: you can pitch it in a lift. Snakes on a plane. Groundhog Day with a time-loop assassin. A bake-off where the judge is your childhood bully. High concept sells fast, but dies fast if the characters are cardboard.

Character driven: the premise is quiet, the people are loud. Normal People. Atonement. Olive Kitteridge. Character driven lasts longer, but needs exquisite voice to hook an agent on page one.

You want both. A clean high-concept hook that gets a reader to open the book, and a character deep enough that they stay up till two in the morning to finish it. The Hunger Games is high concept, children fighting to the death on TV. It endures because Katniss is real.

For your first novel, lean slightly high concept. It makes structure easier, because the external want is loud and clear. You can still do all the interior work, in fact you must, but the scaffolding will hold you up while you learn.

1.11 Your Premise Variations

Write three versions of your premise before you commit.

Version A: external, plot heavy. The girl must find the missing child in three days.

Version B: internal, character heavy. A grieving father must learn to ask for help before grief swallows him.

Version C: blended. A grieving father who cleans crime scenes must find a missing girl who looks like his daughter, and in doing so learn to stop running from the past.

Usually Version C is the book. If you only have **A**, add interiority. If you only have **B**, add a clock.

1.12 Build Exercise 1: The Logline And The Premise Sheet



You are going to build the foundation your entire novel sits on. Do not skip this. Thirty minutes now saves three months of wandering later.

Step 1: Write three loglines, each one sentence, each using **PWOS.**

- **Template:** When [inciting incident], a [specific protagonist with flaw] must [concrete want with deadline] or else [personal irreversible stakes], but [active opposition] stands in the way.
- **Example:** When a girl who looks exactly like his missing daughter vanishes in Welling, a retiring Met detective who trusts procedure over instinct must find her in seventy-two hours or lose his last chance at redemption, but his new partner, who is hiding something, is sabotaging the case.
- **Write three.** Different wants, different opposition, same protagonist if you like. Pick the one that makes your stomach flip a little. That is usually fear telling you it matters.

Step 2: Premise Sheet, one page.

- Protagonist name, age, job, one-sentence contradiction. Want,

concrete, with deadline. Opposition, person, institution, self, one line each. Stakes, personal, irreversible, escalating, one line each. Why now. What does winning cost.

Theme question, phrased as: Is it ever right to ___ if ___? Three set piece scenes only this premise can produce.

Step 3: The dinner party test.

- Read your logline out loud to a human or to your phone recorder. If you stumble, rewrite until it flows. If you feel embarrassed, good, that means you care. Keep the version that makes you want to write the next sentence immediately.

Save this sheet at the top of your StoryBible.docx. You will look at it every morning before you write. When you get lost

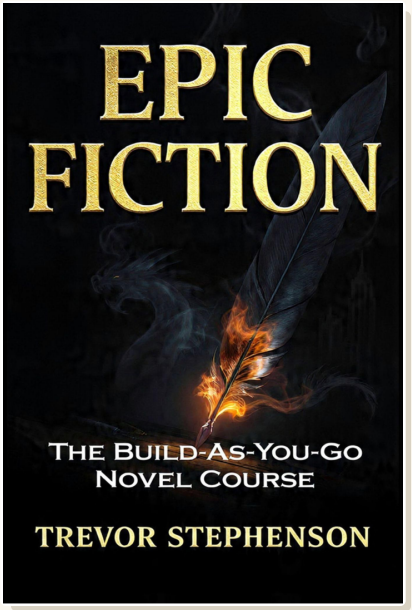
at page 140, and you will, this sheet pulls you back.

You now have: a premise engine that generates scenes, a protagonist with a sharp edge, opposition that can win, and stakes that hurt.

Photocopy the relevant card from Appendix A. Fill it in pencil. Do not type it first.

In Chapter 2 we bolt on the interior engine, Want vs Need, and your characters will start talking back to you.

End of Chapter 1.



Epic Fiction

The Build-As-You-Go Novel Course

Loved this sample?

Keep reading. Chapter 2 is where want meets need.

A novel is not an idea. An idea is cheap.

CONTINUE READING

On Spectrum Threadz Press • EPUB + PDF + MOBI

For educational purposes only.