



10 steps to find more words in your story

You have finished the first draft of your book. Congratulations!

You check the word count and – despair! – you are 10,000, 20,000 or even more words short of the target for your genre.

So, you need more words for your story.

There is a way! Are you ready for some hard work?

Short word counts – why does it matter?

Cost of production

- Publishers buy manuscripts so they can sell them.
- It costs money to produce a book.
- It costs pretty nearly as much to produce a 45k word book as a 90k word book.
- But you can't charge as much for a really short book (under 60k words) as for a 'normal' one.
- The tipping point for profitability is around 75k words.

Reader expectations

Are based on genre. Highly generalised and opinions differ but roughly:

- Epic, fantasy and SciFi – 110k to 120k
- Literary Fiction, Commercial/mainstream Fiction, romance, suspense, and horror – 80k to 90k
- Mystery and thriller – 70k to 90k

Broadly, less than 70,000 words is not enough. But you can't cast this in stone – it depends on the agent or publishing house. A good, finished, complete story that satisfies is as good at 60k as 80k.

Above 90,000 may raise some red flags for agents.

10 steps to finding more words

You have finished your first draft and it's falling short. Maybe you have started editing and are getting really worried because you are cutting out even more words.



You have just read the expected word counts for your genre and your stomach has clenched.

Your story is not doomed!

Work through each of these steps and apply your new knowledge to your manuscript.

Step #1 Stop Editing!

If your manuscript is too short, it's too early to start editing line by line.

What we need to do is to check that you have said *everything* that needs to be said. We are going to do this, this way:

Step #2 Love your book

I want you to give yourself permission to stop counting words.

You are going to pretend you are your own favourite author. Pretend you have bought a copy of your most recent book (aka your manuscript) and plan to read it at a couple of sittings.

Step #3 Prepare the book for this binge read

I'm going to assume you are familiar with Word and are using a PC laptop. (The Apple-literate may be able to translate these instructions.)

Copy the manuscript over into a Word doc. Chose an attractive font (e.g., Century Gothic or Bookman Old Style – to your taste) and an easy-to-read font size.

Then, Auto-Hide the ribbon: click on this symbol at the top right of your screen to find the menu for this.



As if by magic, the automatic word count will disappear – that's a good thing – *and* you get more space on your screen.



Alternatively, if you know how to, send the document to your Kindle or e-reader. It comes to the same thing, because I want you to:

Step #4 Read your book as your own reader

Sit somewhere comfy and out of reach of pens and paper. You want to drink your book up, not to frown over it and jot notes. This is Reader You at work now, not Writer You.

Even so, you are going to be reading *intelligently*, so ...

Step #5 ... Is what you meant to say on the page?

As you read your book, notice where you lose the plot, or stop paying attention. It suggests the story has not unfolded clearly on the page.

Reader You doesn't know what Writer You was thinking when you wrote that scene. Have you put everything you know on the page?

Unfolding is clarity.

Think of the Reader like a child on your lap listening to you tell the story – the Reader is following your every word but can't be relied on to make connections and draw conclusions at the same rate that they flow through your Writer brain.

Sometimes things seem too obvious to explain when we are writing.

Repetitions are boring.

Confirmations are reassuring.

If you say something you think is obvious, but you haven't said it before, the reader will think, *Yes, good, I got that!* They won't think, *how boring.*

Step #6 Reflect on the story.

When you have finished, ask yourself these questions. Grab a sheet of paper so you can answer them while the story is fresh in your mind.

Get those ideas whizzing around:



1. What is the book about? (That's your Theme).
2. Does the main character 'carry' the Theme?
3. Is the reader invited to explore every angle of the Theme as the main character goes on their journey from start to finish of the book?
4. Does the narrative help you to feel their sense of loss/bewilderment/joy/fear/any other emotion? (Feeling a bit lacking in the vocabulary of emotion? Get yourself a copy of ***The Emotion Thesaurus*** by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi).
5. What is missing from the story? Are there plot complications that would add interest and support the overall story?
6. Did you give some lead to the reader and left them wondering about it? Not everything needs to be tied up in a neat bow by the end, but most things do.
7. Have you uncovered *everything* each character, even the secondary ones, has to offer? Either to serve the plot and/or to develop the main character's portrayal?

Step #7 Is the story logical?

It's important to test the narrative drive of the whole story: it's what makes for a page turner, and it's a way of checking for the sort of gap that would make a reader put the book down and never pick it up again.

So, give yourself two pages, three at the absolute outside. Think of the flow of your story as a series of scenes rather like the old fairy story formula:

- Once upon a time there was a ...
- One day, they ...
- And because of that they ...
- And because of that they ...
- [Go on repeating this bit]
- Until they felt/realised/managed to/decided/etc.

Start with the Main Character's story and avoid any sub-plots that aren't directly related to that story. State how the MC feels when they start.

Then work in what it is: *One day, they want to* do, change, find, etc, (whatever it is driving your story).



And work your way through the key scenes, sentence by sentence, separate lines, always being sure to show the narrative drive (what they do) and what their motivation is (why do they do it?) and what that naturally leads to in the next scene.

If you think you have nailed it, you can start to open things up. Take a hammer to test how rock-solid is the logic of the links between each scene.

Find out what might be concealed and bring it into the open. Break up each line into smaller sections so that it is easier to see what can be developed.

You are looking for ways to develop the story authentically, without slapping on random sub-plots or introducing extraneous characters just to pad things out.

Step #8 Learn from your heroes

Compare a few pages of your work, taken from different, random sections, against the pages of a book you admire in a similar genre.

Is the description/dialogue/character development/the unfolding of the scenes and pace showing you anything you could develop on your own pages?

Step #9 Start Building.

Note, I don't call this Editing, because editing might imply cutting things away and I want you only to *add* words just now.

Look at each page:

1. Can you put a question on every page? A big one (will the hero win this war?) or a little one (Sandra stood in front of the fridge, wondering what to give Bill to eat). Answer the little questions as soon as feels right to you (with your reader hat, remember) – the really big questions are the structural tentpoles of the book. Questions increase pace and maintain reader engagement.
2. Add a pink herring (that's an interesting diversion, not quite a red herring, but something that allows you to build interest, develop



character and move the story along but not in a perfectly straight line. A small plot complication, or an obstacle.

3. Do you have enough characters? Each character should carry an aspect of the major theme and as we develop our characters in the early stages, we sometimes overload them with jobs to support the story. Can you make a new character and give them one of the jobs? So, divide a character in two to carry different characteristics? Good opportunities lie among the secondary characters: see if you could make an interesting new character who is in opposition to an existing one.
4. Has the story (why) been over-taken by plot (what)? Sometimes the second half of the book can drop the promise of the first half in the race to the finish. It can become more plot-driven than story-driven: are the characters still in control? Check they aren't being driven purely by external events – Step #7 should help with that. Your characters should still be making their own decisions, facing the clearly articulated problems and be acting in their own right (the Writer, you, must not be seen to be pulling those strings).

Step #10 Can we solve this by Math?

If you are **still** searching for words after exploring all these avenues, and if:

- your story structure is solid,
- the reader can feel the stakes and the meaning of the story and
- each scene drives naturally and inevitably to the next on the page,

then reduce the problem to number mechanics.

Work out how many words, on average, you need to add to every page of your manuscript to reach the desired total.

Find the percentage increase you need, then express that as number of words.

I know, it sounds desperate, but it's astonishing how much good stuff you can come up with this way.

And I don't mean just adding in "*he said*"s and littering the text with junk like adverbs and using circumlocutions and so on. You might be able to add a line of description or flesh out dialogue to make it even more realistic or develop a character's internal thoughts.



You are going to take a systematic approach to reviewing every page using most of the Steps above.

The formula to work this out is:

$$\frac{[\text{number of new pages you need}]}{[\text{number of pages you have}]} \times [\text{total number of pages in finished book}]$$

Suppose you have a 56,000 word manuscript that needs a finished total of 65,000 words.

To find the number of pages you need to write, assume 250 words per page.

$$\frac{56,000 \text{ words}}{250} = 224 \text{ pages}$$

$$\frac{65,000 \text{ words}}{250} = 260 \text{ pages}$$

$$260 - 224 = 36 \text{ pages}$$

That's showing us you need 9000 words to get to 65,000.

Now divide:

$\frac{\text{the number of pages you need}}{\text{the number of pages you have}} \times \text{the number you want to end up with}$

$$\frac{36}{224} \times 260 = 41$$

So, you need to add an average of 41 words to each of your existing pages.



The last resort: Acceptance

Even after all your work to find more words, you may only have a novella. A perfect novella, but a novella. Accept it.

If you are convinced you have a strong and powerful story, and you haven't specifically been told by a publisher that your work is too short, there is nothing to stop you from submitting your 56k word novel to an agent.

Remember, the reason we worry about word counts is that the publisher calculates their likely return on sales of the book against production costs.

You might be lucky and find an agent who thinks they can make a good case for selling the MS to a publisher.

Or you have options. Polish it, get it proofread and publish it independently.

Your next steps

1. Read your book and reflect.
2. Make a plan to develop your book – use this the 10-step guide.
3. What's the biggest and most impactful step you can take first?

If you found this note useful, make sure you now [go to this page](#).

It's a list of resources for writers that I put together – and keep updated – to help you at every stage of your book's journey:

<https://ruthbullivant.com/resource-page-for-writers/>