

WRITER'S TOOLKIT

Genre Guide: Fiction for Adults



Genres are categories publishers use to help readers find the kind of books they like to read. Bookstores rely on the genre designation printed on the spine of every book to shelf them in the right section.

All genres have characteristics that define them, and all share the basics of good fiction: likeable characters, strong conflicts (internal and external), sharp, realistic dialogue, a solid plot with a clever twist, and great pacing.

You should include your story's genre in your query or cover letter to an agent or editor. That signals that you're a serious writer and that you know how the publishing business works.

Fiction has a genre that fits any type of story you can imagine. IFW offers this guide to help you determine which one best fits your novel.



MYSTERY FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 80,000 to 90,000

Reader Expectations: Don't tell me, let me guess!

Mystery fiction has a slew of subgenres. All of them revolve around a puzzle: who stole the Rembrandt, who robbed the bank, who kidnapped Susie—or did she disappear—and almost every mystery fan's favorite, who committed the murder? The fun for mystery readers is following the clues, real or red herring, and solving the puzzle ahead of the sleuth. Quirky characters abound in mystery. Pacing is determined by the subgenre. The most popular ones are professional detective or amateur sleuth, police procedural, cozy or domestic mystery, historical, or paranormal mystery.

Classic Examples: *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie; *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett

Modern Examples: *The Madness of Crowds* by Louise Penney; *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty

THRILLER FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 80,000 to 90,000

Reader Expectations: Keep me turning pages as fast as you can!

Once considered a subgenre of mystery, the thriller genre is large enough and profitable enough with chart-busting bestsellers and blockbuster movies, many of them based on those novels, to now have its own writers' organization, the International Thriller Writers. Thrillers are written to keep readers on the edge of their chairs with nonstop danger and suspense, twist and turn plotting, breathless pacing and larger than life characters. The fate of the world often hangs in the balance, most situations are life and death, and there's frequently a clock ticking toward midnight or zero on an atomic time bomb. Subgenres include spy or espionage novels, action-adventure stories, politics and high-tech conspiracies, legal thrillers, and psychological thrillers.

Classic Examples: *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith; *Casino Royale* by Ian Fleming

Modern Examples: *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn; *A Slow Fire Burning* by Paula Hawkins

ROMANCE FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 50,000 to 100,000

Reader Expectations: An emotionally satisfying ending

The heart of romance fiction is the developing relationship between two people who fall in love. It's that simple, and that difficult. The plot comes from the obstacles the couple must overcome to stay together; the obstacles arise from each partner's internal conflicts and the external conflicts of the plot, which should be stressors on the couple. Emotion and sensory detail are hallmarks of the genre. Likeable characters readers can root for are a must. Love scenes are mandatory in category romance, but not in sweet romance. Those are just two of romance fiction's many subgenres. Others include romantic suspense, paranormal romance, and romantic comedy.

Classic examples: *The Flame and the Flower* by Kathleen Woodiwiss; *Lightning That Lingers* by Sharon and Tom Curtis

Modern examples: *Cottage by the Sea* by Debbie Macomber; *The Best of Me* by Nicholas Sparks

HORROR FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 80,000 to 90,000

Reader Expectations: Don't open that door!

Horror fiction taps into one of the most basic human emotions—fear. Nothing is more frightening than fear of the unknown. Horror is a safe way for readers to confront zombies, vampires, demons, ghosts, body snatching aliens, monsters from other dimensions, creatures created in a mad scientist's lab, homicidal maniacs with axes and chain saws—and live to tell about it. Masters of the genre use mood and setting to create terror and horror. Creeping fear and a paralyzing sense of foreboding are other effective features of this genre.

Classic examples: *The Exorcist* by William Peter Blatty; *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson

Modern examples: *Doctor Sleep* by Stephen King; *You* by Caroline Kepnes

WESTERN FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 50,000 to 80,000

Reader Expectations: Saddle up!

Hallmarks of Western fiction are setting, theme, and archetypical characters: the cowboy, the gunslinger, the drifter, bandits, the saloon girl with a heart of gold, the town sheriff. Westerns are about wide-open spaces and the call of the wild, with themes like honor and courage, good vs. evil, man vs. nature, and conquest. Modern westerns rely less on archetypes. More often they reflect the aftermath of this tumultuous period in the sorrows of indigenous people and the immigrants that helped build the country. Setting and theme are paramount in both historical and modern Westerns.

Classic examples: *Hondo* by Louis L'Amour; *Lonesome Dove* by Larry McMurtry

Modern Examples: *No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy; *How Much of These Hills Is Gold* by C Pam Zhang

SCIENCE FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 80,000-90,000 words

Reader Expectations: To boldly go where no man or woman has gone before

Science Fiction, also called speculative fiction, focuses on ideas. Many modern conveniences were predicted by science fiction writers: television, microwave ovens, and cell phones, to name a few. Themes include extraterrestrials, either first contact or alien invasion; artificial intelligence and nanotechnology; interstellar travel and colonization, alternate or parallel universes—anything and everything that could impact the survival of the human race. Popular subgenres are military science fiction, space opera, steampunk, dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, and alternative history.

Classic examples: *Journey to the Center of the Earth* by Jules Verne; *Dune* by Frank Herbert

Modern examples: *The Android's Dream* by John Scalzi; *Remote Control* by Nnedi Okorafor

FANTASY FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 80,000 to 100,000

Reader Expectations: Enchant me!

Fantasy fiction leans heavily on myth, magic, and metaphor. Stories are mostly set outside the world we know, in places like Narnia, Westeros, or Middle Earth. Many settings are reminiscent of ancient civilizations or have medieval touches like castles and knights. Magic is a must. So are fantastical creatures: dragons, orcs, goblins, sorcerers, witches, elves, and fairies. Quests, prophecies, and enchanted swords abound, so do lots of characters with complex relationships. Many stories are told in series. Subgenres are epic fantasy, also called high fantasy, Arthurian legends, young adult fantasy, and modern fantasy, also called urban fantasy.

Classic examples: *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* by J.R.R. Tolkien; *The Earthsea Cycle* by Ursula K. Le Guin

Modern Examples: *A Court of Thorns and Roses series* by Sara J. Maas; *Game of Thrones* series by George R.R. Martin

LITERARY FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 80,000 to 110,000

Reader Expectations: Lofty themes and lofty language

Literary fiction deals with the human condition, "the state or condition of being human, especially regarded as being inherently problematic or flawed." That spot-on definition comes from [lexico.com](https://www.lexico.com). Character and theme are front and center in literary fiction; plot is optional. Unlike other genres, where reader expectations rule, anything goes in literary fiction. No topic is off limits. And here your writing can soar to new heights of allegory, metaphor, and symbolism. The only criteria is, does the story work?

Classic Examples: *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley; *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

Modern Examples: *Of Women and Salt* by Gabriella Garcia; *Klara and the Sun* by Kazou Ishiguro

MAINSTREAM FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 80,000-90,000

Reader Expectations: Keep Me Awake Reading Until 3 AM

Mainstream fiction is a smorgasbord of novels that don't fit into a particular genre. Nora Roberts, Stephen King, and James Patterson are mainstream authors—their name identifies the type of novel they write. Mainstream stories have strong plots, usually linear, and believable, three-dimensional characters. Name recognition is key to success in mainstream, where the goal is to entertain readers.

Classic Examples: *Hawaii* by James Michener; *Exodus* by Leon Uris

Modern Examples: *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman; *A Time to Kill* by John Grisham

WOMEN'S FICTION

Word Count: Fiction - 80,000 to 90,000

Reader Expectations: Girls rule!

Women's Fiction is an offshoot of mainstream and romance fiction, written by women and for women, who buy more books than any other demographic. Stories deal with topics women can relate to in their daily lives. They can be contemporary, historical, a generational saga, glitz, or chick lit. Plots and themes are larger than a genre can accommodate. Women are the main characters, and relationships of all kinds—friends, lovers, kids, coworkers—are center stage.

Classic Examples: *Bridget Jones Diary* by Helen Fielding; *Sex and the City* by Candace Bushnell

Modern Examples: *Legacy* by Nora Roberts; *Durable Goods* by Elizabeth Berg

