

Manuscript Structure for First-Time Authors

A practical guide to the shape your book should take before it ever lands on an editor's desk.

Why structure matters

Editors read thousands of pages a year. The first signal that separates an amateur manuscript from a submission-ready one is structure — not voice, not premise, but whether the writer has shaped the work in a form the industry recognizes. Structure is hospitality to the reader. It says: I respect your time enough to give this story the architecture it needs.

Structure by genre

Memoir & personal narrative — typically 70,000–95,000 words. Chapters usually run 2,500–5,000 words. Often organized around chronological turning points or thematic arcs. Each chapter should carry a single emotional gear shift.

Social-justice nonfiction — typically 65,000–90,000 words. Chapters tend to be longer (5,000–8,000 words). Structure follows an argument: the problem, the evidence, the lived experience, the call.

Literary fiction — 80,000–100,000 words. Chapters 3,000–6,000 words. Three-act or five-act underlying structure even when not visible on the page.

Poetry collection — typically 48–80 pages. Sequence matters as much as individual poems. Organize in sections of 8–15 poems each.

YA fiction — 50,000–80,000 words. Shorter chapters (1,500–3,500 words). Faster pacing than adult fiction.

The pieces every manuscript needs

Title page — Title, author name, contact information, approximate word count. Centered, no decoration.

Front matter — Dedication (optional), table of contents (for nonfiction), epigraph (optional). One page each.

The body — Numbered chapters with consistent break-points. Section breaks within chapters marked by a centered ornament (three asterisks or a single ornament).

Back matter — Acknowledgments, author's note, sources or bibliography (for nonfiction), about the author.

Standard formatting conventions

Use 12-point Times New Roman or Garamond. Double-space the body. One-inch margins on all sides. Indent first line of each paragraph 0.5 inch — do not also add a blank line between paragraphs. New chapters start one-third of the way down a fresh page. Header on every page: author surname / title / page

number.

What "submission-ready" actually means

It does not mean perfect. It means: the manuscript has been through at least two revisions after first draft; every chapter earns its place; the opening fifty pages can stand on their own; the closing chapter does not introduce new material; and a stranger could read it without you in the room explaining what you meant.

Five mistakes to avoid

- 1. Opening with backstory.** Start in the moment. Backstory comes in fragments, when the reader has earned them.
- 2. Inconsistent chapter lengths.** If chapter one is 1,200 words and chapter two is 8,000, the reader feels the imbalance even when they can't name it.
- 3. Over-explaining.** Trust the reader. Cut every line that tells the reader how to feel.
- 4. No clear chapter purpose.** Each chapter should answer: what changes by the end of these pages? If nothing changes, you have a scene, not a chapter.
- 5. Submitting before the close.** Editors can tell within twenty pages whether a writer knows how their book ends. Finish the manuscript before you query.

Where 1123 fits in

Our editorial desk reads memoir, social-justice nonfiction, fiction, poetry, essay, and YA. We work especially closely with authors restoring stories left out of the official record. If your manuscript meets the structural foundations above, submit it through 1123publishing.com/submit and we will respond within 6–8 weeks.