

Indie Author Glossary

Writing & publishing terms, in plain English

STORY SISTERS WRITING RETREAT

October 6–10, 2026

Quick definitions for the shorthand you'll hear in writing groups, author forums, and publishing dashboards. Terms are alphabetical within each section.

1. Writing Terms

Craft, story structure & romance/fantasy shorthand

Antagonist The character or force working against your main character's goals.

Backstory Events from a character's past that shape who they are now, best revealed in small pieces.

Beat sheet An outline that lists the key story moments (beats) in order, such as the popular Save the Cat or Romancing the Beat structures.

Black moment The point near the end when all seems lost, and in romance it is often when the couple seems truly over (also called the dark moment).

Character arc The inner change a character goes through from the start of the story to the end.

Climax The story's biggest, most decisive confrontation, where the main conflict comes to a head.

Closed door A romance where intimate scenes happen off the page, with the door closing or the scene fading out before anything explicit.

Deep POV A very close form of third or first person that drops filter words like "she felt" or "he saw" so readers live inside the character's head.

Dual POV A story told from two viewpoint characters, often alternating between the two romantic leads chapter by chapter.

Enemies to lovers A trope where two characters start out as rivals or foes and gradually fall in love.

First-person POV Narration using "I," told directly by the viewpoint character.

FMC Female main character, usually the heroine of the story.

Forced proximity A trope that traps characters together, such as a snowed-in cabin, a road trip, or a shared quest.

Found family A trope where unrelated characters form a close, loyal bond that feels like family.

Grumpy / sunshine A trope pairing a gruff, guarded character with a cheerful, optimistic one.

HEA Happily Ever After, the satisfying, committed ending that romance readers expect.

Head-hopping Switching viewpoint between characters within the same scene without a clear break, which can confuse readers.

Heat level How much physical intimacy a romance shows on the page, from sweet (none) to explicit.

HFN Happy For Now, a hopeful ending where the couple is together but their long-term future is not fully settled.

Hook An opening line, scene, or chapter ending that grabs readers and makes them keep reading.

Inciting incident The event that disrupts the main character's normal life and kicks off the story.

Info dump A large chunk of background or worldbuilding delivered all at once, which slows the pace.

Logline A one- or two-sentence pitch that sums up the main character, the conflict, and the stakes.

Magic system The rules for how magic works in a fantasy world, including its limits and costs.

Meet-cute The charming, memorable first meeting between the romantic leads.

Midpoint The middle of the story, where a major twist or revelation changes the direction of the plot.

MMC Male main character, usually the hero of the story.

MS Manuscript, the full written draft of a book.

Omniscient POV An all-knowing narrator who can share any character's thoughts, which is different from careless head-hopping.

Open door A romance where intimate scenes are shown on the page.

Pacing How fast or slow a story feels to read, controlled by scene length, action, and detail.

Pantser A writer who drafts "by the seat of their pants," discovering the story as they go.

Plantser A writer who mixes both approaches, planning key points but leaving room to discover the rest.

Plot beat / story beat A single key moment in the story that moves the plot or a character forward.

Plotter A writer who outlines the story in detail before drafting.

POV Point of view, the character (or narrator) through whose eyes a scene is told.

Protagonist The main character whose goals drive the story.

Romantasy A blend of romance and fantasy where the love story and the fantasy plot matter equally.

Save the Cat A popular story-structure method, from Blake Snyder's book, that maps a story into 15 beats.

Show, don't tell Letting readers experience emotions through action, dialogue, and detail instead of simply naming them.

Slow burn A romance where attraction builds gradually over much of the book before the couple gets together.

Snowflake method A planning method that starts with a one-sentence summary and expands it step by step into a full outline.

Stakes What the character stands to lose if they fail, which gives the story its urgency.

Subgenre A narrower category within a genre, such as cozy fantasy, epic fantasy, or small-town romance.

Subplot A secondary storyline that supports or contrasts with the main plot.

Subtext The meaning beneath the words, when characters say one thing but feel or mean another.

Sweet / clean romance Romance with no on-page sex and usually little or no strong language, focused on emotion and connection.

Tension The sense of unease or anticipation that keeps readers turning pages, whether from conflict, danger, or attraction.

Third-person limited POV Narration using "he" or "she" that stays inside one character's head at a time.

Trope A familiar story pattern readers love and seek out, such as fake dating or chosen one.

Voice The distinct personality of the writing, shaped by word choice, rhythm, and attitude.

WIP Work in progress, the project you are currently writing.

Word count The total number of words in a manuscript, which helps set genre expectations and book length.

Worldbuilding Creating the setting, cultures, history, and rules of your story's world.

YA Young adult, fiction written for and about teens, usually with main characters ages 13 to 18.

2. Publishing Terms

Editing, platforms, marketing & the business side

ACOS Advertising cost of sale, the percentage of sales revenue spent on ads, where lower is generally better.

ACX Amazon's platform for producing audiobooks and distributing them to Audible, Amazon, and Apple Books.

Agent In traditional publishing, a professional who sells your book to publishers and negotiates contracts for a commission.

Alpha reader One of the first people to read a rough draft, giving big-picture reactions early on.

Also-boughts The "Customers also bought" row on an Amazon book page, which shows which books Amazon links to yours.

AMS / Amazon Ads Amazon's advertising platform (formerly Amazon Marketing Services) for promoting your book on Amazon.

ARC Advance reader copy, an early copy of a book given to readers before release in exchange for an honest review.

ARC team A group of readers who receive ARCs and agree to read and review around launch.

ASIN Amazon Standard Identification Number, the unique ID Amazon assigns to every product, including each book.

Atticus Book writing and formatting software that runs in a browser on Windows, Mac, or Chromebook.

Back matter The pages after the story ends, such as a newsletter invite, a sneak peek, or an also-by list.

Beta reader A reader who gives feedback on a fairly polished draft from a reader's point of view.

BISAC categories Standard subject codes used by retailers and libraries to sort books, such as Fiction / Romance / Fantasy.

Blurb The short sales description on the back cover or retailer page, meant to hook readers.

BookBub A popular book-deal site and email service that alerts readers to discounted and free books in their favorite genres.

BookBub Featured Deal BookBub's highly selective, editor-chosen promotion that emails a discounted book to large lists of genre readers.

BookFunnel A service that delivers ebook and audiobook files to readers, often used for ARCs, reader magnets, and direct sales.

Bowker The official agency that sells ISBNs in the United States.

BSR / rank Amazon's Best Sellers Rank, where a lower number means the book is selling better than others in that store.

Comps Comparable titles, recently published books similar to yours that show readers, agents, or advertisers where your book fits.

Content edit Another name for a developmental edit, focused on story, structure, character, and pacing.

Copy edit An edit focused on grammar, spelling, punctuation, consistency, and style.

Cover designer A professional who creates your book cover to signal its genre and attract the right readers.

Critique partner A fellow writer who swaps chapters with you so you both get regular, honest feedback.

CTR Click-through rate, the percentage of people who saw your ad and clicked it.

D2D (Draft2Digital) A distributor that sends your ebook (and print) to many stores, such as Apple Books, Kobo, and Barnes & Noble, from one dashboard.

Description The book's sales copy on a retailer page like Amazon, often the same as the blurb or a longer version of it.

Developmental edit A big-picture edit that looks at plot, structure, character, and pacing.

Direct sales Selling books from your own website or shop so readers buy directly from you.

EPUB The standard ebook file format, accepted by KDP and other major retailers (MOBI is no longer used for uploads).

Front matter The pages before the story begins, such as the title page, copyright page, and dedication.

Going wide Selling your ebook at many retailers instead of only on Amazon through KDP Select.

Hybrid author An author who publishes some books independently and others with a traditional publisher.

Imprint The publisher or brand name printed on a book, which can be an indie author's own business name.

Indie author An author who self-publishes, keeping creative control, rights, and responsibility for every step.

IngramSpark A print-on-demand and distribution service that makes books available to bookstores and libraries.

ISBN International Standard Book Number, a unique ID for each format and edition of a book.

KDP Kindle Direct Publishing, Amazon's free platform for self-publishing ebooks, paperbacks, and hardcovers.

KDP Select An optional program that enrolls your ebook in Kindle Unlimited for renewable 90-day terms in exchange for selling that ebook only on Amazon.

KENP / page reads Kindle Edition Normalized Pages, the measure of how many pages Kindle Unlimited readers read, which determines your KU payment.

Keywords Words and phrases you enter at upload (KDP allows seven slots) to help readers find your book in searches.

KU Kindle Unlimited, Amazon's ebook subscription service where members read enrolled books as part of their membership.

Launch The planned release period of a new book, coordinated with reviews, ads, and newsletter announcements.

Line edit A sentence-by-sentence edit that improves flow, clarity, word choice, and voice.

Metadata The information that describes your book to retailers, including title, author, description, categories, and keywords.

MOBI Amazon's older digital format for Kindle ebooks; KDP no longer accepts it for new uploads.

Newsletter An email list of readers who signed up to hear from you, the most reliable way to reach your fans.

Newsletter swap An arrangement where authors in similar genres promote each other's books to their email lists.

POD Print on demand, where each copy is printed only when someone orders it, so there is no stock to store.

Preorder A listing that lets readers order a book before release so it delivers automatically on launch day.

Proof copy A printed test copy of your paperback that you order to check for errors before publishing.

Proofread The final check for typos and formatting errors before publication.

Querying / query letter The process of pitching your book to literary agents, usually with a one-page letter that introduces you and your story.

Rapid release Publishing books in a series close together, often weeks apart, to build momentum.

Reader magnet A free story or book offered to readers in exchange for joining your newsletter.

Royalty (35% / 70%) The share of the sale price you earn, and KDP ebooks offer a 35% or 70% option, with 70% available only when your price and sales territory meet Amazon's rules.

Sensitivity reader A reader with lived experience who checks how a culture, identity, or experience is portrayed.

Series read-through The percentage of readers who continue from one book in a series to the next.

Street team A group of enthusiastic fans who help spread the word about your books.

Traditional publishing When a publishing house buys the rights to your book, pays you, and handles production and distribution (often called trad).

Trim size The physical page dimensions of a print book, such as 5 × 8 or 6 × 9 inches.

Vanity press A red flag company that charges authors to publish and profits from the author instead of from book sales.

Vellum Popular Mac-only software for formatting polished ebooks and print interiors.

Before you go...

- **Money flows to the author.** Legitimate publishers and distributors pay you; be cautious of any company that asks you to pay to be published.
- **Read before you sign.** Know which rights you are granting, for how long, and how you can get them back.
- **Pick one next step.** You don't need to master every term today; learn them as your book needs them.
- **Ask questions.** Every published author started out not knowing this vocabulary either.