

# HOW TO START PLANNING A BOOK SERIES

*with Savannah Gilbo*





# Hi, I'm Savannah 🙌

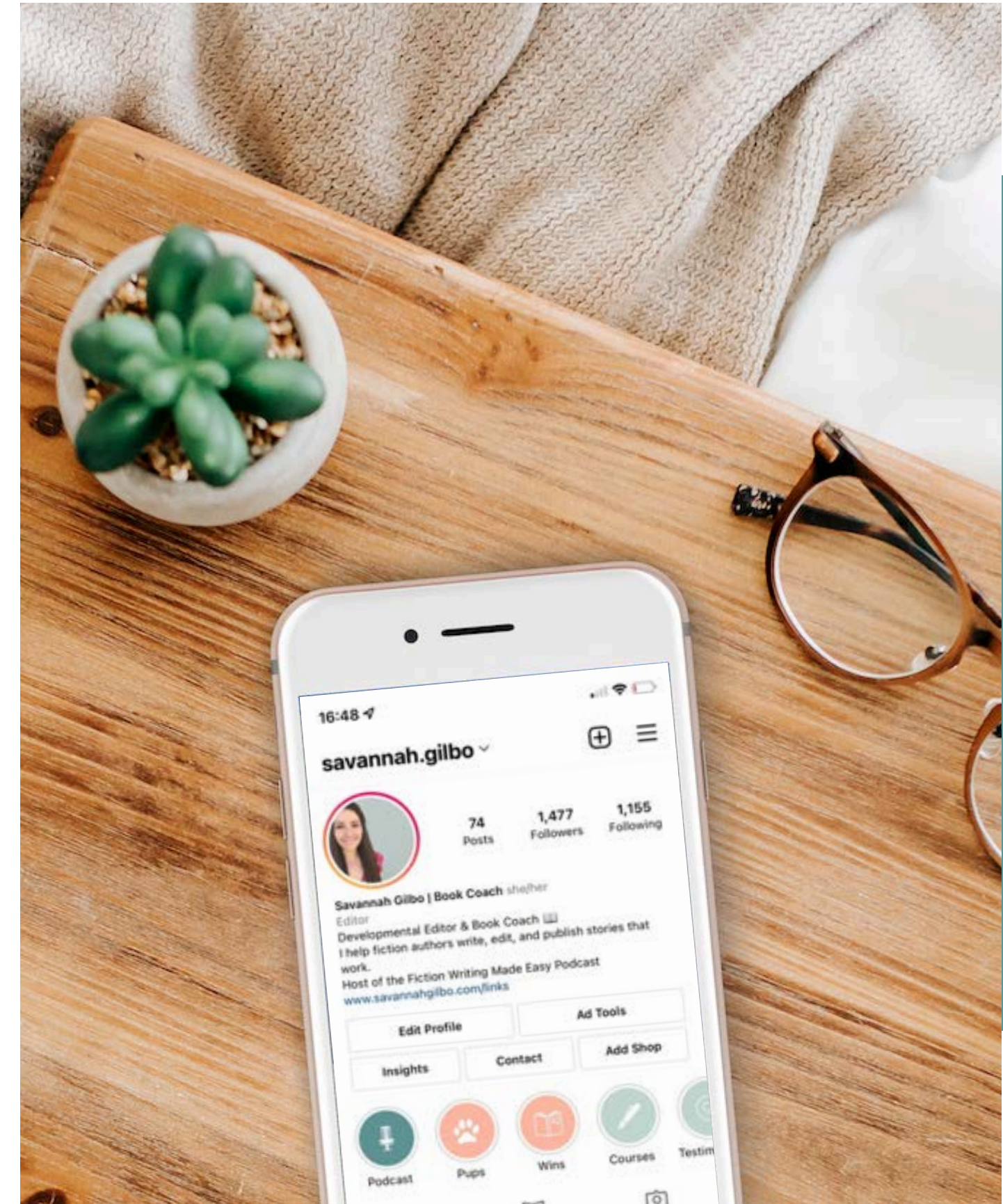
- Developmental Editor & Book Coach
- Host of the top-ranked Fiction Writing Made Easy Podcast (+2m downloads)
- I've helped hundreds of authors write engaging stories using the step-by-step, repeatable process I teach inside my Notes to Novel™ program



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Take photos during the training and share them on your Instagram stories! Make sure to tag me at **@savannah.gilbo** so I can re-share your post!



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## How To Start Planning Your Book Series

In this workbook, I'm going to walk you through 5 steps to start planning your book series. If you want to check out the podcast episode that goes along with this free workbook, [you can listen to that by clicking here](#).

Keep in mind that during the planning stage, you're doing just that—planning! Don't expect to have everything about your series figured out just yet. The answers will come as you get to know your story and your characters more. Trust the process!

### 5 Steps To Start Planning Your Series

Here are the steps I'm going to walk you through in this workbook:

- Step 1: Identify your series theme + story themes
- Step 2: Determine your series genre + story genres
- Step 3: Map your character arcs across your series
- Step 4: Develop the antagonist hierarchy for your series
- Step 5: Brainstorm the plot of your series + each story

#### Step 1: Identify Your Series Theme + Story Themes

**Your series theme is the message you want readers to take away from your series as a whole.** It's usually expressed in one sentence, and it's dependent on your series's content genre. The conflict in each one of your books—and how your character grows and changes because of that conflict—is what will help you express your series theme.

Use the space below to brainstorm your series theme and story themes:



# How to Start Planning A Book Series Worksheet

Download this free guide at  
[savannahgilbo.com/pwa](https://savannahgilbo.com/pwa)



# Here's Where We're Going...

What Makes  
A Series  
Work?



**2**  
Crafting A  
Cohesive Message  
Across Your Series

How To Start  
Mapping Out  
Character Arcs



**4**  
Creating An  
Antagonist Hierarchy  
For Your Series

Developing  
Your Story &  
Series Plots



**6**  
Live Q&A  
Time!

# **What Makes a Series Successful vs. Unsuccessful?**



# What Makes a Series Successful vs. Unsuccessful?

## A series **works** when it has:

- ✓ A cohesive message (theme)
- ✓ Consistent genre make up
- ✓ Characters with strong arcs
- ✓ A plot that logically progresses
- ✓ Conflict that escalates
- ✓ Starts small and builds narrative
- ✓ Has momentum that keeps going

## A series **doesn't work** when it has:

- ✗ Illogical and/or incohesive message
- ✗ A genre identity crisis
- ✗ Characters that stagnate
- ✗ Plot jumps randomly around
- ✗ Conflict that doesn't escalate
- ✗ Pacing and narrative build is wrong
- ✗ Momentum runs out but story continues





## What kind of series are you planning?

A series of **standalone books** within a series often take place in the same story world and/or follow the same character/s, but each book is more about an event vs. an overarching plot.

A **dynamic series** follows a character (or group of characters) across multiple books in which the plot problem grows, escalates, and complicates. Both plot and character must evolve over time.

An **anthology series** includes books that are linked by a defining element (like theme or setting) and often feature a different cast of characters per book (though not always).





## 5 Steps to Start Planning:

- **Step 1:** Identify your series theme + story theme
- **Step 2:** Determine your series genre + story genres
- **Step 3:** Map your character arcs across your series
- **Step 4:** Develop the antagonist hierarchy for your series
- **Step 5:** Brainstorm the plot of your series + each story

Plus, we're also going to briefly talk about **worldbuilding across your book series**, too!

## KEY POINT:

This isn't something you can knock out in one sitting. **This is something you'll need to start and massage over time** so *please* know that going in! However, today will give you a framework to build your series in, so let's go!



**Step 1: Identify  
Your Series Theme  
and Story Theme**



The stories that stick with us are those with strong points—**a specific message about how the world works.**

- **Harry Potter** (Action): It's better to die for those you love than live a life without love and friendship.
- **Bridgerton** (Love): Love can overcome the obstacles of class (and help heal your past traumas)
- **Sherlock Holmes** (Crime): Cunning, cleverness, and being observant brings about social order and justice.
- **A Game of Thrones** (Action): "When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground."







You need to know what your theme is before you can develop an impactful book series.

**Your series theme is the message you want readers to take away from your series as a whole.**

It's usually expressed in one sentence, and it's dependent on your series's content genre.

The conflict in each one of your books—and how your character grows and changes because of that conflict—is what will help you express your series theme.



A series works (and is successful) when its themes and messages are cohesive and coherent across all books.

- Your individual **story themes** are the core messages or key takeaways that each book will convey to readers
- Each individual story theme **will build on one another** to teach the character the reader your overarching **series theme** (the core message or key takeaway of your entire series)

It's okay if whatever you come up with sounds generic or cliché in the planning stage—nothing is set in stone so let this be fun!



For example, if your series theme speaks to **an individual's power and responsibility to stand up to evil**, you could start to map out your books like this:

Your individual book themes might look something like this:

- Book 1: Evil exists in the world, no matter how rich or poor you are.
- Book 2: Each individual can choose to stand up to evil (or not).
- Book 3: If your friends aren't willing to stand up to evil, you still can.

Notice how there's something the character (and reader) can learn from each of these books—and how it'll all add up/speak to the series theme. Each individual story's theme builds on the one before it to form the final takeaway.



**The Bridgerton Books  
by Julia Quinn**

In every book, love wins. But each book tackles a different (and sometimes similar) topic as the books that came before it.

- **The Duke and I:** Love can heal past trauma and overcome the pressure of societal norms.
- **The Viscount Who Loved Me:** Love can heal past trauma and help you find your identity after a big loss.
- **An Offer From a Gentleman:** Love can heal past trauma and overcome the gap/differences in social class.
- **Romancing Mr. Bridgerton:** Love can heal past trauma and guard you from judgement or damaging secrets.





**The Bridgerton Books  
by Julia Quinn**

- **To Sir Phillip, With Love:** Love will find you in the most unexpected places, and if you look past first impressions, can help you overcome grief. (Trope: Opposites Attract)
- **When He Was Wicked:** Love will find you in the most unexpected places, look past first impressions, can help you overcome grief. (Trope: Friends to Lovers)
- **It's In His Kiss:** Giving unexpected love a chance can give you the sense of belonging and family you yearn for.
- **On the Way to the Wedding:** Love will find you in the most unexpected places, no matter your plans (or who might be trying to blackmail you in the background).



## RECOMMENDED EXERCISE:

Take out a piece of paper (or open a new document on your computer) and start thinking about the point of your series and each story.

**Ask yourself:** What advice would I give others to make the world a better place? What do I have *to say* about life, love, human nature, etc.? **What point am I trying to make or prove?**

Consider your protagonist too. What advice would you give them? What do they need to learn?



**Step 2: Determine  
Your Series Genre  
& Story Genres**



A quick note on content vs. commercial genres...

- **Commercial genres** are sales categories that describe how your book is sold in the market or where it would go on a bookshelf (for example: Young Adult Fantasy, Cozy Cat Mysteries, Paranormal Romance)
- **Content genres** describe what kind of book you're writing within that sales category (for example: mystery, action, thriller, romance, etc.)
  - They give you insight into the character roles, settings, and events readers will expect to see



In most cases, the external and internal genre of each individual story **will match** that of your series.

- **Harry Potter:** Action + Worldview
- **Bridgerton:** Love + Worldview
- **Sherlock Holmes:** Crime + Status/Worldview
- **A Game of Thrones:** Action + Status/Worldview

You can definitely have multiple genres at play in your stories and in your series (you will), but **there will always be two primary ones.**

**Don't overcomplicate this**—especially in the planning stage!



All you need in the planning stage is a framework to contain your ideas/plans—you'll gain more clarity over time.

As fun as mixing up your genres sounds, isn't actually a good idea because **it messes with what readers expect.**

- Example: A Discovery of Witches (Book 2)

When in doubt, **default to what's at stake to determine your genre** and look at books in the market like yours.



## KEY POINT:

The key to making books within a series work is **escalating the conflict and stakes** from book to book, not mixing up the genres.

**Step 3: Map Your  
Character Arcs  
Across Your Series**







A character arc is how your character changes over the course of the series *because of* the external conflict they face from book to book.

**Who your character is at the beginning of your series must be in direct conflict with who they are at the end of the series (and each story).**

So, you need to know two things:

- How does your character start the series?
- How does your character end the series?



**Your character will end the series believing your overarching series theme.**

That means they should start the series believing the opposite of your series theme to be true.

Which means we need to define your character's internal obstacle at the very beginning of book one (and then again at the start of each book).

Your character's **internal obstacle** is the lie, misbelief, or worldview that they need to *unlearn* in order to accept the series theme and achieve their goals.





**HARRY POTTER  
(BOOK 1)**

**Story Point: You are unconditionally loved, and it's your differences that make you special (and help you survive).**

Harry Potter starts the story believing that his differences make him weird. And that weird/ different is a bad thing.

Throughout the middle of book 1, **he must *unlearn* this and embrace his gifts (the things that make him "different") and love himself, essentially, to survive.**

He ends book by accepting and proving the story point that "You are unconditionally loved, and it's your differences that make you special (and help you survive)."



**As your characters make internal obstacle-fueled decisions in each book, they'll experience the negative consequences of their wrong choices.**

Those consequences add up until the character is finally forced to confront their internal obstacle *within each book* to create their overarching (series) arc.

Yes, your character will have gone through an “upgrade” in the previous book, but there’s always more to learn and experience!

Think... *“Because of that (book 1), now what?”*





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## HARRY POTTER (SERIES)

### But what is the *series point* of the Harry Potter books?

It's probably something like this: *"It's better to die for those you love than live a life without love and friendship."*

- **Book 1:** You're unconditionally loved and worthy. Your differences are what make you special (and help you survive).
- **Book 2:** You're never alone, there's always help if you ask for it. Be open to and rely on your friends and allies for survival.
- **Book 3:** Survival sometimes requires having the courage to seek (and accept) the whole truth about someone you love.



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## HARRY POTTER (SERIES)

- **Book 4:** “Constant vigilance!” Evil grows in the shadows (and threatens your survival) when you’re not paying attention and/or while you wait for others to act.
- **Book 5:** Distrusting one another endangers those we love.
- **Book 6:** To achieve your goals (and survive), you must believe in yourself and take action against evil, despite the consequences.
- **Book 7:** Protecting those you love may sometimes require a willingness to sacrifice yourself.

Can you see the point of the series? *“It’s better to die for those you love than live a life without love and friendship.”*





## RECOMMENDED EXERCISE:

Take out a piece of paper (or open a new document on your computer) and start asking:

- What is the opposite of your series point?
- What are smaller lessons your character can learn in each individual book?
- What flaws are holding your protagonist back from being a better version of themselves and/or accomplishing their goals?
- How do new inner obstacles rise up from succeeding or failing in the previous book?



**Step 4: Develop the  
Antagonist Hierarchy  
For Your Series**





**Understanding your antagonist's goals, motivations, and plans is KEY to planning your book series!**

Your antagonist's goal and the actions they take to accomplish that goal will help you form the plot of each book in your series.

**The misguided way your protagonist reacts to whatever your antagonist is doing will create consequences for them to deal with until they finally learn the lesson (your theme).**

Therefore, the plot of each book in your series should be designed to confront your main character with the internal obstacle they're struggling with (in that book) again and again.





But it all starts with your antagonist, because without them, there would be nothing for your protagonist to react to.

**Your series antagonist provides the main conflict your protagonist will face—but there will be a hierarchy of antagonists across your individual books.**

For example, Voldemort is the series antagonist in the Harry Potter books, but in most of the earlier books, Harry faces multiple levels of antagonism before confronting Voldemort.

Consider why this ^ is... Both Harry and Voldemort are not *able* to confront each other *as is*. Both must grow and change until they can properly confront each other.





**VOLDEMORT  
(BACKSTORY)**

- **What does Voldemort ultimately want?** Immortality & Power
- **Why?** He fears death / views it as a mortal weakness
- **What kicks off the central conflict for Voldemort?** Professor Trewlaney makes a prophecy that refers to a boy who would be born at the end of July in 1980 who has the power to defeat Voldemort. Voldemort believes this is Harry Potter.
- **Before we meet Harry on page 1 of book 1, what has Voldemort already done to achieve his goal despite the central conflict?** He has amassed a following of Death Eaters to protect him, tried (and failed) to gain power (he *did* gain influence all over the world), created Horocruxes, tried to kill Harry when he was a baby.



**VOLDEMORT  
(SERIES)**

After Voldemort fails to kill Harry Potter, and loses his corporeal form, he *still takes action* on his quest for immortality and power.

**In every book, he has a specific goal / tries a new tactic to achieve his goal.** He will gain immortality and power by:

- **Book 1:** Acquiring (and using) the Sorcerer's Stone with Professor Quirrell's help. Harry isn't *actually* on his radar until he interferes.
- **Book 2:** Recuperating in the present, destroying "less than" witches and wizards (via Tom Riddle's diary and the Basilisk he summons in the past), destroy Harry Potter (via the TR also).





**VOLDEMORT  
(SERIES)**

- **Book 3:** Using Wormtail (Peter Pettigrew) to get to Harry so that he can kill him (if the dementors don't do it for him).
- **Book 4:** Helping Harry win the Triwizard Tournament so he can use "flesh of the enemy" to cast a spell to rebuild his body.
- **Book 5:** Thwarting the Order of the Phoenix, which will also allow him to get close to and kill Harry (while he has no protectors).
- **Book 6:** Declaring war on the Wizarding World and continue to pick off members of the Order, including his main target, Dumbledore.
- **Book 7:** Finding the Elder Wand so he can *finally* kill Harry. Prevent Harry from destroying the horocruxes, in the meantime.





**The Bridgerton Books  
by Julia Quinn**

## **What about a series of standalone books?**

The same guidelines apply, but there won't be a specific overarching antagonist. However, in most cases, there will be **a genre appropriate antagonist archetype.**

For example, the Bridgerton books focus on a different couple every book, so the antagonist is different. But the antagonist is *always* a love interest.

And like we saw earlier, the themes of each story speak directly to the series theme > love wins!



## **RECOMMENDED EXERCISE:**

Take out a piece of paper (or open a new document on your computer) and write your antagonist's series goal at the top of the page.

**List out the steps they might take to accomplish this goal and any possible consequences they might face (or wins they might have!).**

Do you see any natural start/stop points for your individual books?



**Step 5: Brainstorm  
the Plot of Your  
Series + Each Story**







We've already talked about:

- The **theme** of your series and stories
- The **genre** of your series and stories
- Your **character's arc** in the series and story
- Your **antagonist's goals**, motivations, and plans

This should *already* give you a ton to work with in terms of your plot. You should start to see natural start and end points for your books.

But if you haven't, you can use popular plotting methods to help you map out each book.



## **FAQ: Can I use “story math” to map out all the plot points across my whole series!?**

In theory, yes... But I don't *actually* recommend that.

You should already have a general idea of:

- The theme your series and stories explore
- What your character has to start off believing (aka the opposite of your point) to learn the theme
- What your antagonist wants, why they want it, and what they'll do to get it (aka the multiple tactics they'll try)
- *And* you have the key scenes of stories in your genre



## KEY POINT:

From this point, you can **map out your series and make sure that your'e escalating the conflict and stakes** from book to book. *Then* you can fact check with your favorite plotting method.



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## HARRY POTTER (SERIES)

**Consider how the danger, the amount of conflict, *and* the power of the antagonist escalates from book to book.**

- **Book 1:** Harry's an 11-yr-old boy and knows zero magic. Voldemort tries to steal the SS, Harry gets in the way.
- **Book 2:** Now 12, Harry still has a lot to learn about magic. Someone has a mysterious chamber underneath the school and has been sending a Basilisk to kill students.
- **Book 3:** Now 13, Harry has a little more magic under his belt, but the man who supposedly betrayed his parents is hunting him! Also, dementors are patrolling the school the grounds and one of his teachers is secretly an werewolf.





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## HARRY POTTER (SERIES)

- **Book 4:** Now 14, Harry somehow becomes a participant in the (very dangerous) Triwizard Tournament, where the “tasks” get more and more dangerous as they progress. The Death Eaters are an even bigger presence now, and unbeknownst to Harry, one of his teachers is a Death Eater in disguise.
- **Book 5:** Voldemort has regained his body! Dementors are appearing in the Muggle World (and attacking humans), the Ministry doesn’t believe Harry about Voldemort, and Harry learns about the prophecy (which he must prevent Voldemort from retrieving). The death count goes up. Harry’s only 15.



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## HARRY POTTER (SERIES)

- **Book 6:** Voldemort has declared war! Harry (still only 16) is grieving the loss of his godfather, Dumbledore appears to be injured, Draco may be a Death Eater, Snape is teaching DATDA, they're learning more dangerous magic, attacks are getting more personal... And the worst part—Harry learns about the Horcruxes, and Snape kills Dumbledore!
- **Book 7:** No longer under the protection of the school, Harry (now 17), is on the hunt for Horcruxes with his friends (and without his primary mentor). Re: Harry and Voldemort, "Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives."





To escalate the conflict and stakes in your series, you can:

- **Create conflict that is frequent and layered**—most stories have *at least* half a dozen conflicts the protagonist has to deal with. In commercial fiction, there could be upwards of 12.
- **Stack different types of conflicts** until their weight becomes unbearable. For example, not only does an investigator have to solve a crime, he might also be going through a divorce, and/or struggling w/ being called an absent parent or some backstory that's been continuing to haunt him.
- **Broaden the conflict by bringing in more**—antagonists, victims, suspects, lovers, clues, family, witnesses, etc.



- **Deepen the existing conflict.** For example, make characters fall even deeper in love, have your detective find another dead body, etc. This is a great way to raise the stakes!
- **Take away mentors, friends, resources, abilities, etc.** This also raises the stakes and puts pressure on your characters.
- **Play with different kind of arcs.** For example, can your character succeed in their plot goal, but lose something in the process? Or vice versa?
- **Consider the consequences of everything!** Even with a good outcome, what are the consequences of what happened?





## **RECOMMENDED EXERCISE:**

Take out a piece of paper (or open a new document on your computer) and start brainstorming what the plot of each book could look like. Remember:

- Use your genre framework as a guide
- Everything revolves around your antagonist's plan and how your MC reacts to it
- Each book should have/prove a point
- Use consequences to help you escalate the stakes and raise the conflict for each book

# **Bonus Tips: Worldbuilding Across Your Book Series**

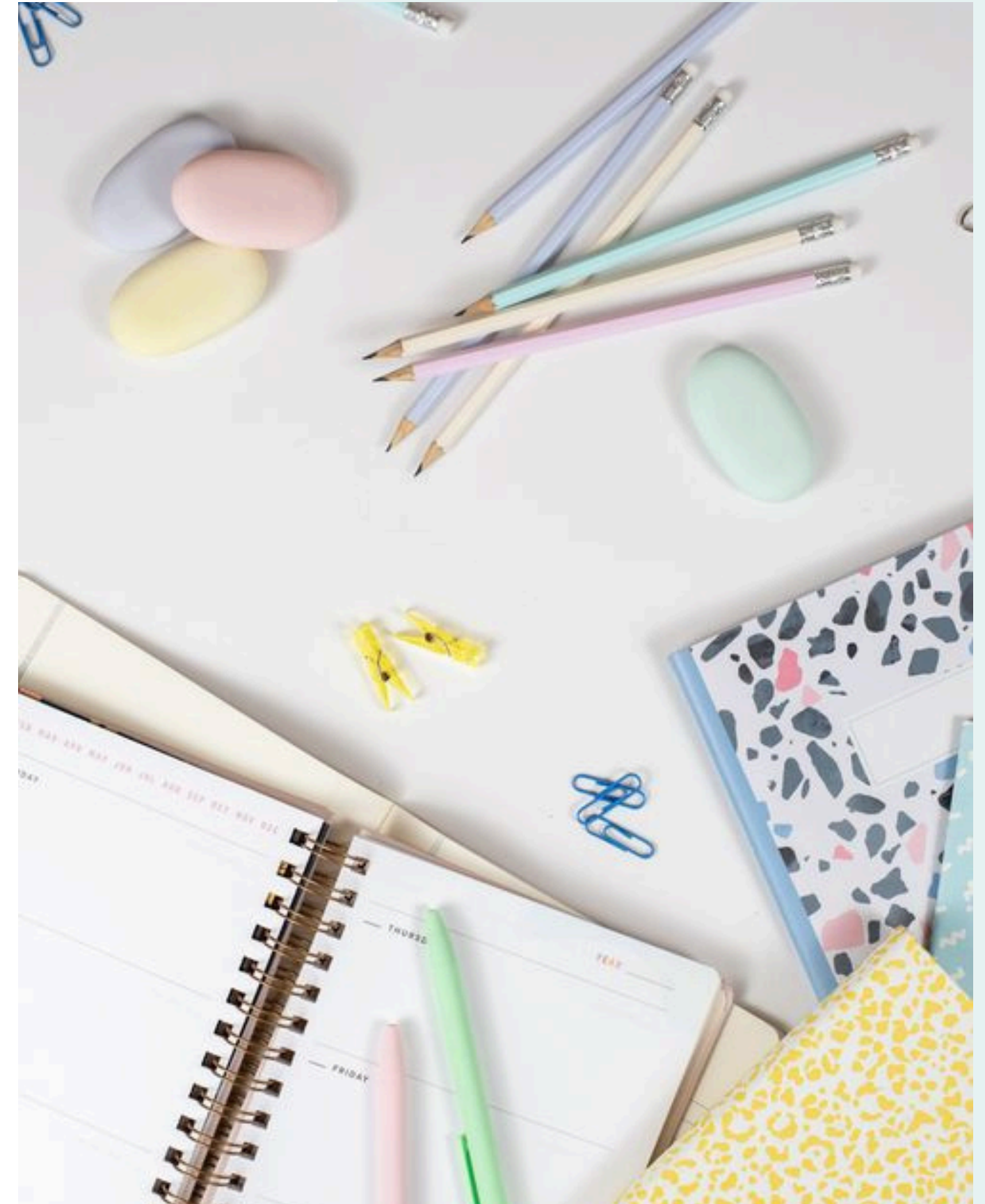
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Regardless of whether you write speculative or contemporary fiction, **your story's world still plays an extremely important role in tying your series together.**

Not only do we want to make sure the worldbuilding is consistent across all books, we also want to build a world that plays into our story's themes and impacts the central conflict or arc of change.





Keep in mind that:

- Your world has influenced your character's beliefs and flaws
- Its physical aspects can create roadblocks or obstacles
- Its cultures (and their values and beliefs) can interact and potentially create tension or conflict
- Its political landscape greatly impacts your characters

**Understanding the high level implications of your world—and designing a world to create conflict that will put pressure on your protagonist's inner obstacle— will help you create a vivid and immersive world that also serves an important purpose in each book of your series.**






## **RECOMMENDED EXERCISE:**

Take out a piece of paper (or open a new document on your computer) and consider:

- What conflict already exist in your story world (between cultures, over resources, etc.)?
- How do these existing conflicts speak to your series point? Or how could they?
- As your character changes, how does their interpretation/view of their world change?
- As your character changes, what ripple effects could they create in the world?



You now know **how to start planning a series of books.** This is (obviously) not a start to finish guide, but it should help you capture your ideas and start mapping out your series!





It's Q&A time!