

# Map the Outline

Create a Visual Map of Your Book Before You Begin

Have you ever heard the adage that “everyone has a book inside them”?

Well, I want to disagree with that a little. In my experience it’s true that everyone has a book *idea* inside them. However, it’s one thing to have an idea for a book. Turning that idea into 60K words that are cohesive and affecting is something else altogether.

As a professional ghostwriter, and as an author myself, I’ve guided numerous authors on this daunting journey. They often marvel at what I’m able to do, as if I possess a magic skill or secret incantation that allows me to make their books come to life.

The truth is much simpler. I’ve developed a strong process that allows me to pick up someone else’s vague idea and transform it into a clear, compelling outline. And here’s the best part: you don’t need any special tools or abilities to do this.

In this workbook you’ll find my five-step process for creating a visual map of your book. The kind of map that inspires you to write and gives you motivation on those days when writing is the last thing you want to do. If you complete all five steps, you’ll end up with a strong outline that serves as the skeletal structure of your book.

Why should you want an outline? I’ll give you two good reasons.

First, if you plan to shop your book to publishers, you’ll need to create a book proposal. The proposal isn’t complete without an outline. Unlike your readers, most book publishers don’t want to be surprised by your ending: they want to know what they’re buying before they pay to publish your material.

Second, your writing process will be significantly easier if you start by outlining your project. To some writers, this is deeply uncomfortable. They’d rather just start writing and see what happens. While that works for a select few, the truth is that most of us need the structure of a good outline. It keeps us on task. It guards against disappearing down unhelpful bunny trails. Most importantly, it keeps us accountable to what we’ve promised to give to our readers.

While this process could probably work for any type of book, the focus here is on nonfiction. Whether you’re writing a business memoir, a how-to guide, or even a manifesto, these simple steps will guide you down a tried-and-true path to the kind of clarity you need to get that book out of your head and into the hands of your readers.

## The Map to Your Goal

Step 1: Concept

Step 2: Capture Your Thoughts

Step 3: Gather

Step 4: Form Your Structure

Step 5: Outline

## Step 1: Concept

So, you want to write a book. “That’s great,” your spouse says. “What’s it about?”

Instantly, you freeze. You have a topic in mind, but as you open your mouth to answer, you realize that you’re not quite sure what you have to say about it. It’s something you care about. Something you have no problem talking about in casual conversations. Yet, as soon as you take on the mental pressure of distilling down the essence and putting it into one or two sentences, you realize that your vision is still pretty vague.

### Your unique concept = a sellable idea

Phase One is all about figuring out your unique concept. Specifically, it’ll help you gain a clear view of what you’re trying to sell. A one-line statement crystallizing your message that someone would PAY to hear (or read).

To some, that last sentence may sound crass or mercenary. But consider this: anyone who writes for others is trying to sell. If you want to write and publish a book, you have to convince a number of people that what you have to say is worth their time and money.

A publisher doesn’t just print books that sound interesting to them. They print books that they think will sell—and sell enough copies to turn a profit. Likewise, your readers are only willing to hand over their hard-earned cash and pick up your book if they believe that reading your book will be worth their while. A book is a promise to the reader. By reading this, you will: be happier, have more peace, improve yourself.

How do you know when you’ve landed on your unique concept? When you’ve got a compelling one-line statement that clearly explains what your book is about and who it’s for.

### What are you offering your reader?

Sometimes, I’m approached by would-be memoirists who want to turn their experiences into a book. When I ask them why, they say something like: “I lived through a challenging event” or “I had to pick up the pieces of my life and I want others to know it’s possible.” That’s a nice thought, and I do believe that everyone has a worthy story. The harsh reality is: that’s not enough.

Sure, certain people can sell their memoirs just on account of who they are. Prince Harry, for example, or one of the Trump children. They have such notoriety and such a wide audience that it’s not hard to sell their books. Yet most of us aren’t in that position.

That’s why one of the first questions we have to ask ourselves is, “What do I have to offer my reader?” You can also consider this from your reader’s perspective. If they walked past

your book in a bookstore, what would make them stop and crack open the cover? It has to be something that speaks to them, something that feels relevant to their lives. What could you offer that would make them pick up your book over the others?

### Tool #1: Journal

The first thing I recommend at this stage is to journal. Some experts suggest you write what comes to mind, but I want you to go a bit deeper and more specific. What do you encounter in your daily life that makes you stop and want to know more? Over the span of a week, I will pull out the notebook I keep in the driver's side door and jot a note when I hear, see, or think of an idea that I want to know more about, or think more about.

Examples of notes I've scribbled:

- Someone said that in Greek, the word "hypocrite" alludes to wearing a mask.
- Why does Jesus curse the fig tree?
- Buy wildflower seeds for the patches of dirt that won't grow grass in the yard.

Getting these ideas down is making a record of what captured your attention. In the break-neck speed of life today, we don't take time to slow down and think about what we think about. Yet, the object of our thoughts is what makes for great writing.

As we accumulate more entries in our journal, we can flip back and see concepts that are worth further exploration. The more you fill the page with words, you'll find you write yourself into clarity.

One of the glories of writing nonfiction is that you took the time to slow down and think your thoughts. Your book is the result and now people can purchase access to your thoughts because let's face it, they aren't taking the time to think their thoughts either.

How will you know when it's time to move forward? When you've got something interesting to talk about. Which leads us to:

### Tool #2: Share your idea with other writers you trust

As fruitful as journalling is, it's not enough. To really hone our concept, we need the conversational input of other people we trust.

This doesn't mean you should start sharing your idea with everyone you meet. That is the last thing you should do. Rather, find a safe space to share it with other writers. (You could share it with some non-writers, but that's often not very helpful at this stage and if you get one negative response, you might abandon the idea before its taken root.)

Notice that I said you're looking for "conversational" input. You don't need people to judge your idea or give an assessment. You're looking for curious listeners who know how to kindly interrogate vague ideas. They're not interested in competing with you or comparing themselves to you. Instead, they ask you sincere questions that make your path a bit clearer. They'll also give you confidence that your idea IS worth pursuing.

## Step 2: Capture Your Thoughts

Once you've hit on your unique concept, you might feel like it's time to start writing.

Here's the painful truth: Not yet.

You've only just begun to process your writing topic. Now that you have your concept, you can see and examine that topic in a whole new light. Things that you initially thought were vitally important turn out to be dead ends. Conversely, small details you've been ignoring suddenly strike you as key points.

Phase 2 isn't the sexiest of the phases because, to an outsider, it looks like you're not really doing anything. They don't understand that what you do *here* is sometimes the most important work you'll do on the entire project.

### Tool #1: Take copious notes

Once you've settled on your book concept, you will discover you see hints of it everywhere. You'll be listening to an audiobook and suddenly realize that they're talking about your thing. An idle conversation with friends will take an intense turn when it dawns on you that what they're saying is extremely pertinent to your topic.

The key is to get these thoughts down on paper or record them in voice memos. First, to make sure you don't lose them. Second, because you need to be able to consider them away from the emotional impact they have when they first occur to you.

### Tool #2: Get someone to interview you

A helpful way to start filtering through your thoughts and collected resources is to ask a trusted friend to interview you.

In case that sounds intimidating, it doesn't have to be overly formal or complicated. You simply need to have a conversation where you talk about your topic and they ask you whatever questions come to mind.

Ideally, this interviewer/conversation partner should be someone who cares about your topic and resonates with what you have to say on it. Someone who interacts with your material the same way an invested reader would.

This conversation will take you places you probably won't get to on your own. Partly because you're talking instead of writing, and partly because their questions and comments will spark your imagination and help you notice even more.

## Don't just collect quotes: make them your own

When you're in this phase, a lot of what you compile will be the words and thoughts of others. That's a great place to start, but it's not where you want to end up.

It's often easy for writers to lean on other people's thoughts and defer to their expertise. "My job is to filter through what the experts say and make it accessible for my readers," they say. But your readers don't actually want you to do that. They're going to pick up your book because they actually want to know what *you* think.

So: make sure you know what you think.

## It's okay to just listen

This stage can feel overwhelming. You're noticing new themes. You're fumbling your way through conversations. You're feverishly writing down quotes or recording haphazard voice memos. You're having more conversations, hopefully more specific and deeper ones.

At some point you find yourself just wanting to stop and listen. That's okay. In fact, that's more than okay. It's appropriate.

A lot of this work happens on the inside. While your fingers fly across the keyboard, your brain is making connections and rearranging the furniture. It stands to reason that you will benefit from some time sitting and reflecting.

Remember what I said at the beginning of this chapter: now is *not* the time to write your book. The material isn't ready yet. The stuff you're going to write needs to live in your mind before it's ready to show up on the page.

## Step 3: Gather

The work you do in Step 2 tends to be a little messy and all over the place. That's not a bad thing. That's actually essential to the process. As Austin Kleon writes in *Keep Going*, "New ideas are formed by interesting juxtapositions, and interesting juxtapositions happen when things are *out of place*."

Eventually, though, it's time to start gathering all these pieces into one, centralized place. This is how you discover what fits and what doesn't. This is how you prepare to sort the bones of your work into a recognizable skeleton.

### Tool #1: Make a list of your ideas

Once again, you have to fight the urge to just start writing. While you have more content at hand than you did before, you don't yet have an outline to follow. Remember that that's what we're working toward.

Instead of writing paragraphs, make a bullet list of all your ideas. You can comb through all your various resources, but I often find it's helpful to start with what's already in your head. Just sit down and start listing. It doesn't matter if some of them are repetitive. (That could even be a sign that everything is coming together.)

Once you've exhausted what comes to mind, start going through all of your resources: your scraps of paper, your other typed notes, your audio files, whatever you've been using to capture your thoughts.

After you go through your resources, it's time to revise your list. Weed out or combine repetitive items. Eliminate anything that feels unnecessary or out of place. The resulting list should feature only what is absolutely necessary for you to write your unique concept.

### Tool #2: Get crafty

When I encounter something I like, am awed by, or can't stop looking at, it's natural for me to want to engage with its sensory details. I want to touch it, smell it, immerse my senses in it. (Weird. I know.) It makes sense, then, that all the thoughts bouncing around about our concept should be made physical.

It is with this mindset that we enter into this stage of the outlining process.

Of all my tools, this one is probably the most fun. We get to engage with our inner kid and physically interact in our work.

Print out your list. Before you do, make sure that all of your ideas are on separate lines and that there's enough space between each line for you to cut the concepts into strips.

Why are we doing this? Because it's time to start looking for themes. By now, you've already noticed that there are patterns in your thoughts. You know there's overlap—overlap that doesn't need to be eliminated. Overlap that will eventually turn into chapters and sections within your manuscript.

Note: you could probably achieve this exercise in other ways. Magnetic sticky notes on a whiteboard, perhaps. Or some other method that comes to you. The specific medium doesn't really matter. What matters is that you do this away from your computer. Your brain will make different connections when you're not staring at a screen.

## Step 4: Form Your Structure

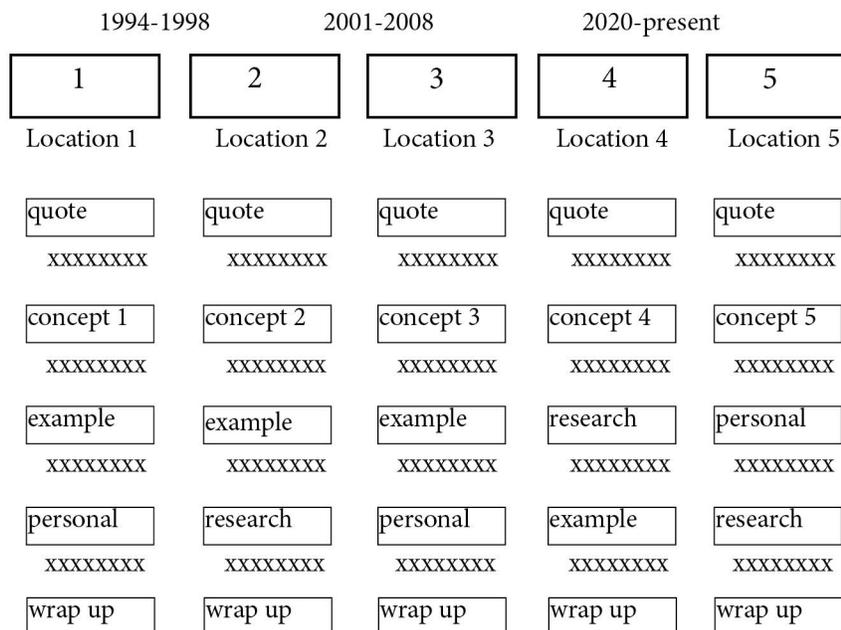
Technically, this step is an extension of the previous one. However, I’ve made it its own phase because your focus shifts. In the previous stage, you’re just preparing all the materials and identifying connections. Now it’s time to start writing—sort of.

### Tool #1: Name, label, and annotate

You’ve got your numbers. You’ve got your groups of ideas. You’ve got your sequence. This is all good! What’s missing are the words to sum up and define each grouping.

Sometimes, I accomplish this with questions. I may write down a big question that captures the key exploration of the book. Or I may write down questions that individual chapters will consider. Other times I capture a section in one word or a short phrase.

These annotations will eventually become tentative (or even permanent) chapter titles. Why is that important? Remember why you’re assembling this outline. On the one hand, a potential publisher will need clear, concise terms to understand what your book says. And on the other hand, you’ll rely on these annotations to keep you focused and avoid shiny distractions as you’re writing.



General Map of Nonfiction Outline

## Tool #2: Consider your chapter structure(s)

You've arranged the book as a whole, paying attention to its sequencing. Now give the same attention to each individual chapter. How should they be internally sequenced?

For some books, it's helpful to use a similar structure for each chapter. Repetitive arrangements that ebb and flow like music. For a reader, that can bring a sense of comfort: they feel at ease, knowing the highs and lows of your writing rhythms. For you, it can simplify the writing process: instead of racking your brain to figure out the arc of your chapter, you're freed to creatively play within the structure you give yourself.

However, that approach doesn't work for all books or all writers. If you feel creatively stifled by that, or if you worry that your reader will be lulled into boredom ("Oh, this again."), give yourself permission to be playful. Your book can still be engaging even if every chapter's flow is different.

As long as each chapter has a clear and easy-to-follow flow, your structural decisions are completely up to you.

## Phase 5: Outline

It is now time to return to your computer!

### Tool #1: Type up your outline

Do you remember the outlines you learned to make in school? That's exactly what you're going to do here.

List each chapter. You can use the themes from the previous step, or you can come up with snazzy phrases. Whatever works for you. (Just beware of the temptation to be too pretty, which can distract you from the task at hand.)

Under each chapter, list the subtopics that you'll cover in that chapter. You don't have to be wordy here. A bullet point list is just fine. (I'm partial to Roman numeral lists.)

At this point you are still not writing. You're simply toplining. It's like a series of directions that details how you're going to take the reader from point A to point B. Your job is to make sure those directions make sense. If you find yourself describing the scenery along the way, you're losing your way.

### Tool #2: Share your outline with trusted writers

Just like in the first phase, it's time to get some outside perspectives on all your hard work. This time, though, you get to ask the questions.

Questions like:

- After looking at this table of contents, do you get a sense of what this book is about and where it's going?
- Is it something you actually want to read?
- Does this flow?
- What am I missing?

You may need to adjust based on the feedback you get. That's okay! But when you've listened and tweaked and studied your outline and gotten it to the place where you feel good, now is the time to put together your proposal.

You probably thought I was going to say you could start writing. I'd hold off until you've cast the vision in the proposal so you can imagine the ideal and then write to it.

The good news is that once you have a proposal and sample chapter, you could actually shop this around to agents to see if you get any interest, before you invest hours writing.