

Structuring Your Nonfiction Manuscript

Workshop Worksheet · Alice Crider · 2026

1. Know Your Reader

Before you structure your book, you need to know who you're writing for and what they're desperately seeking. Spend a few minutes imagining your reader's world: What are they feeling? What are they concerned about? How might they object to your message?

What problem keeps your reader up at night?

In their own words, my reader would say...

2. Build Your Book Framework

A. List Your 10–12 Key Teaching Points or Takeaways

These will likely become your chapter themes (and possibly your chapter titles). Think of each one as a promise: *"By the time you finish this chapter, you will..."*

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 7. |
| 2. | 8. |
| 3. | 9. |
| 4. | 10. |
| 5. | 11. |
| 6. | 12. |

B. Create an Annotated Table of Contents

For each teaching point, write a working chapter title and 2–3 sentences about what it covers and what the reader will walk away with. (If you're writing a book proposal, this becomes your annotated TOC.)

Option: *Consider writing your introduction last. Once the full manuscript is done, you'll know exactly what to tell readers is coming.*

C. Arrange Chapters in a Logical Order

You're building a bridge, not just stacking blocks. Each chapter should feel like a stepping stone toward the transformation you're promising.

D. Plan Your Chapter Structure

Check the elements you plan to include in each chapter:

- ☐ Personal story or anecdote that illustrates the chapter theme
- ☐ Teaching section that addresses the reader's problem and your solution
- ☐ Speak directly to the reader; describe what's being lost to their problem
- ☐ Address misconceptions and objections
- ☐ Share an example to show how your message applies to the reader
- ☐ Show how others are experiencing the benefit you're proposing
- ☐ End-of-chapter call to action (journal prompts, discussion questions, action steps, etc.)
- ☐ Subheadings to differentiate sections within each chapter

3. Story → Principle → Application

One of the most effective ways to structure your chapters is to repeat this simple three-move pattern throughout:

STORY What happened — a brief story or anecdote that illustrates your chapter theme
PRINCIPLE What it means — the teaching truth the story reveals
APPLICATION What the reader should do — how this truth applies to their life right now

Example from a parenting book I edited:

Story: A mother chose to stay home rather than build a career, closely observed her children over the years, and influenced the outcomes as her children grew up.
Principle: Children are shaped most deeply by consistent, present influence.
Application: As a parent, you may not be able to stay home, but you can ask, "How can I be more intentionally present in my child's daily life?"

Now Practice with Your Book

Story:

Principle:

Application:

Two More Techniques to Layer In

Pause Moments: After a story or principle, give your reader a breath before moving on. A single sentence often works: “Maybe you’ve been there too.” These create emotional space and make your reader feel like a participant, not just an audience.

Strengthen Your Primary Theme: After each SPA cycle, ask: Does this bring my reader one step closer to the transformation I’m offering? If not, it may belong in another chapter or it could be cut.

4. Study a Book You Love

Find a bestselling or impactful book in your genre. Flip through it and study how the chapters are laid out, not to copy, but to spark inspiration for your own structure.

Book I chose to study:

Do the chapters follow a consistent pattern? What elements stand out?

What would I borrow, and what would I do differently?

5. Determine Your Chapter Length

Formula: *Target word count ÷ number of chapters = target words per chapter*

Example: 45,000 words ÷ 12 chapters = approximately 3,750 words per chapter

My target word count: _____ ÷ _____ chapters = _____ words per chapter

Note: *This is a guideline, not a rule. Some chapters will naturally be longer or shorter, and that’s perfectly okay.*

6. My Next Step

You don’t have to do everything at once. Choose ONE thing you’ll commit to this week to move your manuscript forward:

You don’t have to write it perfectly. You just need a structure to build on.