Plot structure: Your story's archetype

Marlowe analyzed the narrative arc and major turning points of your novel. Below is a visual representation of your book's plot shape alongside the most similar narrative archetype.[1] This is a key graphic, showing your book's major plot arc at a glance. The graph is designed to make it easy for an author or editor to see the high-level "shape" of your narrative and how closely it matches one of the seven core archetypes.

The narrative arc provides a rough snapshot of your story and your characters' journey. Perhaps it's a story about your protagonist's gradual move from difficult times to happy times. Or the opposite. We've identified seven broad story archetypes that span much of popular fiction. And while it's interesting to know what kind of tale you've told—say, a Rags to Riches story or a Rebirth story or a Quest story—this information becomes actionable only when comparing your story to stories with a similar arc. The bottom line is that bestsellers come with all kinds of different plotlines. There is no optimal shape for the narrative arc (though if your narrative has no arc, that's a problem).

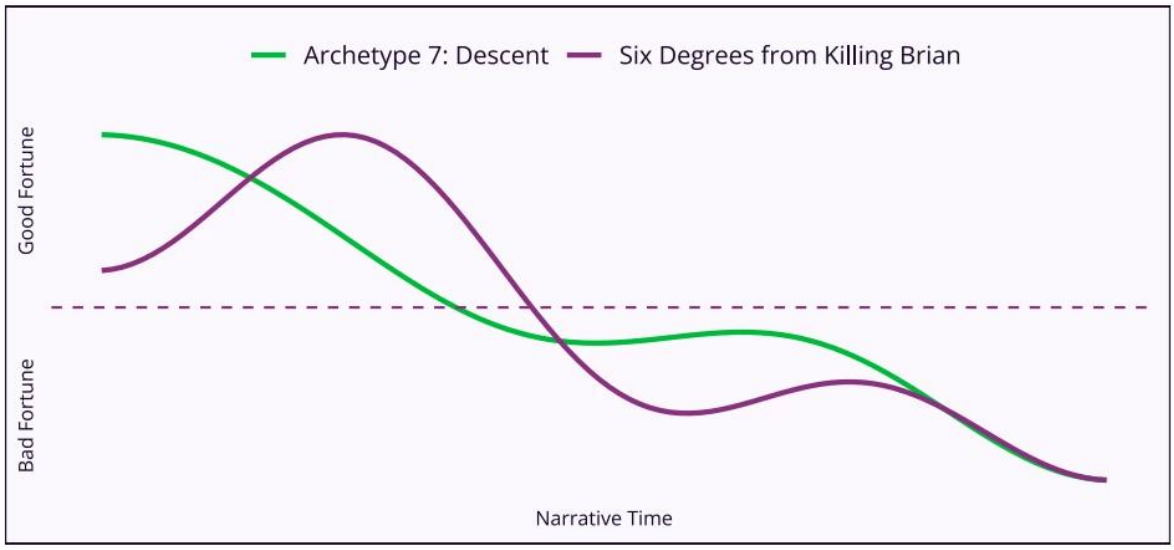


Figure 1: Plot and storyline in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Plot turns: Conflict and resolution

In addition to the overarching plotline, the beats that occur throughout the narrative are likely to be even more important to your readers.

Marlowe has marked the major plot turns in your manuscript in the graph below. The horizontal dashed line across the center of the graph denotes emotional neutrality. Upward slopes in the line mark moments of conflict resolution where the story takes a hopeful or positive turn, signified by joy, excitement, love, relief. Downward dips show the story taking a darker turn or the introduction of a progressive complication.

[1] For a detailed discussion of narrative archetypes, see Examples of narrative arcs in modern fiction

Additionally, this graph shows a well-known plot that is structured in a manner similar to yours. This does not necessarily mean that your book is at all similar in terms of subject matter or style, but it does suggest that the emotional experience of your readers will be similar. *The Da Vinci Code* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are very different books, but it turns out they have very similar plot trajectories. Readers consistently describe both books as page-turners. Knowing about other books with similar plotlines will help you understand the experience readers will have as they traverse your narrative.

In Marlowe's library, the book with the most similar plotline to *Six Degrees from Killing Brian* is *Wool* by Hugh Howey. Here is how that novel shapes up next to yours.

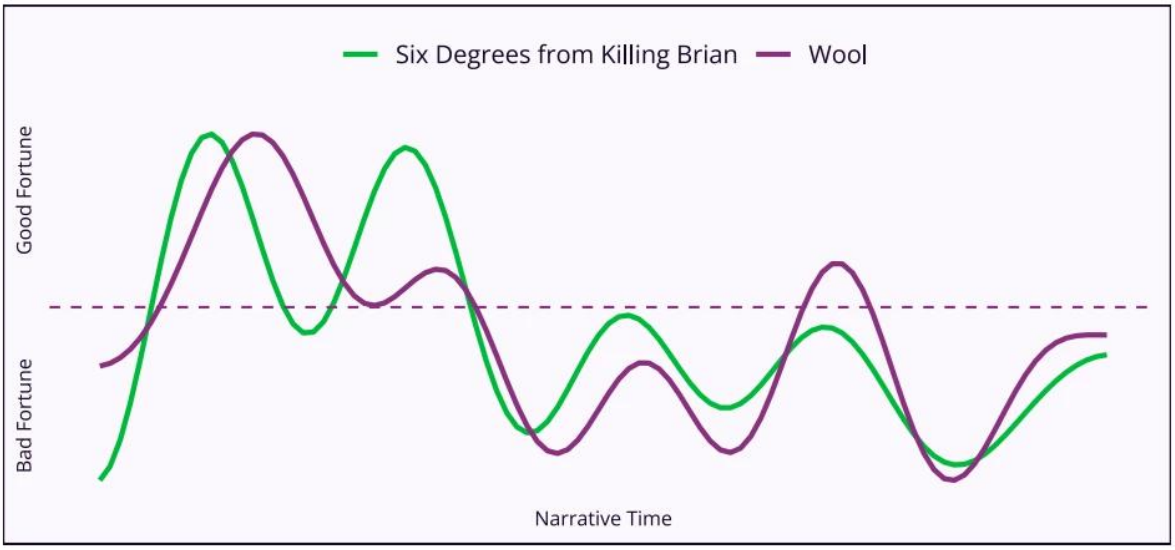


Figure 2: Plot twists in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian* and *Wool*

How to use these data

Consider the following:

1. The peaks and valleys roughly equate to moments of conflict and resolution. The more frequent the peaks and valleys, the more the story becomes an emotional roller coaster for the characters and for readers. The result is often a gripping page-turner.

2. A story that rarely veers from that center axis of emotional neutrality will not be a bestseller. A fair amount of your story should take place both above and below that dividing line. Good fiction is about hopes raised and hopes dashed. Henry James observed, "Plot is characters under stress." Does your protagonist face relentless attacks from a powerful adversary (negative valence) only to overcome them (positive valence)? The most popular novels have many of these turns or action beats.

3. Many beginners' novels bog down in the middle, from about the one-quarter to three-quarters mark. (Some call it Act Two of the three-act structure.) Make sure there are highs and lows throughout, not just with the

inciting incident in Act One and the climactic events of Act Three. Have you introduced formidable barriers for your hero to overcome in order to accomplish a specific, difficult goal? Does your protagonist encounter a dark night of the soul where all seems lost at the end of Act Two? Hollywood story consultant John Truby, author of *The Anatomy of Story*, advises authors to pepper their stories with dozens of action beats throughout their narrative to maximize narrative drive.

4. In romance novels, the dips in the graph might represent the moments when the lovers seem most star-crossed, when some external force or internal conflict threatens their relationship. Each genre has its own set of tropes and reader expectations.

5. Look at not just the number of plot turns but the height of the peaks or depth of the valleys. The higher or lower the point, the greater the emotional intensity. Do some of the highest or lowest points take place during the final third or climax of your work?

Narrative beats

Marlowe produced the following graphic as her takeaway of your novel's rhythm. Novels with a driving plot tend to have up and down beats that are fairly evenly spaced across narrative time. The peaks and valleys mark specific inflection points, which might take the form of action scenes, plot twists, reversals, betrayals, unexpected reveals, or major set pieces.

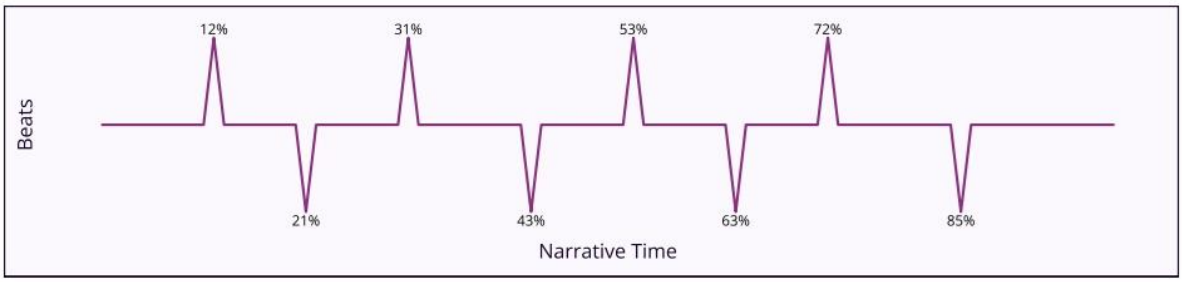


Figure 3: Narrative beats in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Page-turners tend to have steady "beats"—turning points that are regularly spaced across the narrative. These beats occur in places where significant points of conflict are resolved and normalcy is restored (positive beats) or where new conflict is introduced and characters are sent into new turmoil (conflict beats). Books such as *The Da Vinci Code* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* succeeded, in part, because of the way that Dan Brown and E.L. James manipulated conflict to create an almost rhythmic beat of conflict and conflict resolution. In their novels these beats are evenly spaced at intervals of about 10%.

We learn in *The Bestseller Code*: "Though bestsellers can take many shapes, a remarkably high number of the biggest hits from the last thirty years share a plot shape with a regular beating rhythm. The model showed . . . that a carefully manipulated emotional ride can lead to high global sales."

Tips:

1. Make sure you have an action beat with a peak or valley early in your novel. You need to hook your reader in the first twenty to thirty pages—and probably in the first or second chapter, given today's time-strapped reader. Have you infused your opening with enough emotion and drama? Have you raised the stakes for your characters and set the protagonist and antagonist(s) on a collision course in the first quarter of your story?

2. Many editors and successful authors recommend a major turning point or inciting event no later than the 25% mark, propelling your protagonist into the long middle build of your tale. Bestsellers often have a major peak or valley near the 50% mark. This midpoint shift is where the protagonist changes from reactive to proactive. And many stories unveil a final twist or big reveal toward the end—the ending payoff. Are your turns and action beats taking place at the right points for your genre? Are they well spaced out? You can tweak your story and submit the revised version for a fresh assessment by Marlowe.

Positive beats

Positive beats associated with conflict resolution in your narrative occur near the following sentences:

> Once we've taken care of the legal necessities, you can go. ... I'll have everything arranged then, and we can close probate." ... "Thanks for letting me know," I replied, grateful for his guidance. (~12%)

> Brian's letters and Marci... 's work convinced me that Theresa Seaver's current husband had been evil coming out of the womb. ... Yet Theresa had considered James Seaver enough of an upgrade to jump ship on her previous marriage, so the ex must have been even worse. (~30%)

> I had a little time because I was running early for our lunch meeting. ... Doug had called me on Tuesday to let me know he'd compiled a list of good stories with legs that the paper wasn't pursuing. ... He thought those might serve as great writing projects for me. (~52%)

> He found the pipe dropped on the bed. ... "Whoever built that thing meant it to do serious harm. ... I once tried being a plumber's apprentice and recognized it for what it was. (~72%)

Conflict beats

More conflict-oriented beats in your narrative occur near the following sentences:

> There was a memorial vase holder on the right side of the Pierce family monument, a thick iron ring welded to a steel stake driven into the ground. ... The vase was missing; the diameter of the iron circle was about eight inches. ... Now I had an idea how those letters began their trip. (~20%)

> It was through him ... I became intimately familiar with intimidation techniques. ... Now I can recognize them when I have to interview bullies." (~42%)

> I've applied butterfly bandages to your head wound. ... But you'll need further attention to manage any scarring; someone should look at that wrist. ... Is there a hospital you'd prefer we take you to?" (~62%)

> I ordered a soda and returned to the main seating area. ... Although I kept my distance, it wasn't hard to hear most of what the detective and Sheryl were saying to each other in the small room. ... Roe went through Sheryl's identifying information. (~84%)

The pacing of your story

Marlowe produced this Pacing Model, which simulates the experience readers have as they move through your narrative. The graph helps you see where your readers will be turning pages most quickly (peaks) as well as the slower moments (valleys) of foregrounding and scene setting. Key changes in pace are marked by dotted vertical lines and a percentage showing where in your story the change takes place.

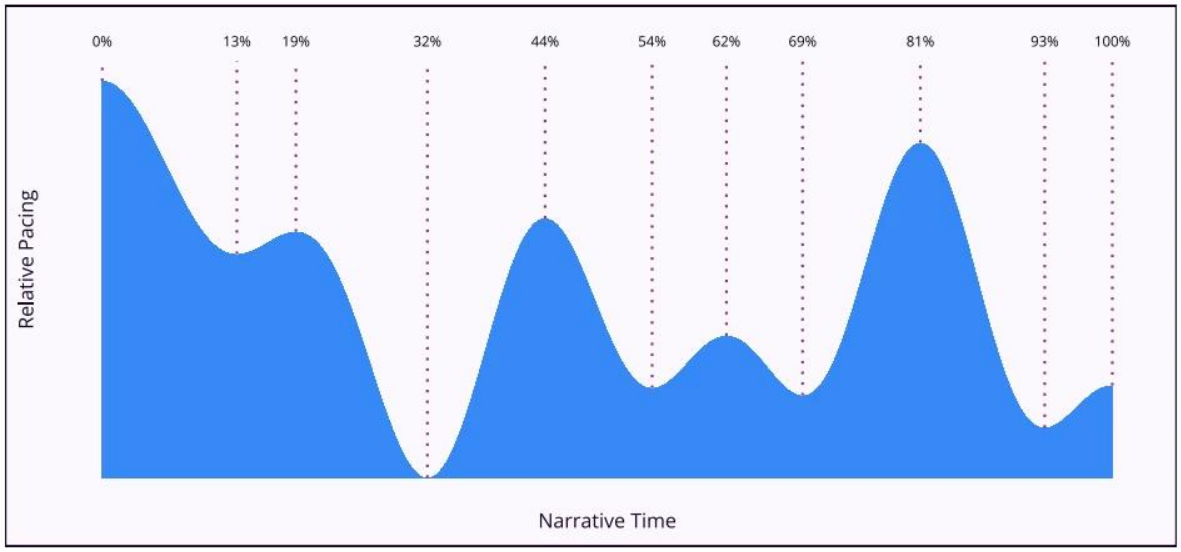


Figure 4: Pacing and action in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

How to use these data

Some authors like to open their novels with a languid pace to establish characters and setting before signaling the core conflict at the heart of the story. Others prefer jumping right into the action, *in media res*. While there's no single right way to begin a novel, the most successful writers vary the pace of their story to provide variety—and also to provide relief to the reader. No one wants to read a thriller with sixty chapters of nonstop action and no letup.

We've observed at least two major ways in which authors use pacing to great effect. One pacing technique is through the use of language. Shorter sentences read faster than longer ones. Active conflict, such as a kidnapping scene, will have fast pacing while a scene of intense suspense will typically move slower as the reader is prepared for some revelation.

A second technique comes when an author interposes a slower, reflective scene between higher-intensity action scenes. You can think of it as injecting a series of breathing spaces into your story. In 1965 author Dwight Swain coined the term "sequel" to refer to this unit of transition connecting two scenes, which can be as short as a paragraph or as long as a chapter.

In the *Major subjects* section of this report (below), we observe that bestsellers often touch on human connection and shared bonds. In *The Firm*, Grisham's young lawyer returns from his interview in Memphis, picks up Chinese

takeout and a bottle of wine, and takes it home to the woman he is closest to, his wife Abby. It's an exciting moment for Mitch, but Grisham slows down the pace with sips of wine and mouthfuls of noodles to let his readers latch onto these moments of casual intimacy and closeness. When the pace picks up later on, and our lawyer hero is on the run, we relate to him more deeply because we've seen him and Abby in these intimate moments.

Your pacing graph should show a variety of ups and downs, often corresponding with the turns or action beats noted in the previous section. Just make sure the valleys aren't too long or your readers may put down your book and turn on Netflix.

Fast pacing

The fastest-paced sections of your narrative occur near the following sentences:

> It was a perfect day for some exercise, and I knew where they kept the mowers and garden equipment in the back corner of the grounds, so I walked to the storage building. ... Behind a stack of bags of fertilizer stood a short, portly man with a ruddy complexion, a ready smile, and a friendly disposition. ... The name tag on his uniform shirt identified him as Gary "Gravy" Gilbert. (~20%)

> That mother in the mall's main hall towering over her four-year-old, going off on a raging rant because the tiny tyke lost his stuffed toy again. ... We might whisper, 'Wow, she must be having a bad day!' ... but then we avert our eyes and move on. (~44%)

> "I'm as big a proponent of wearing seatbelts as there is. ... Too many bad things happen when people don't wear them...." ... "But...," I protested. (~62%)

> "Got it. ... Can you tell me how it went?" ... "I was doing speed the day before, so I was crashing. (~80%)

Slow pacing

The slowest-paced sections of your narrative occur near the following sentences:

> "You don't know that..." ... Again, Dark didn't defend the accusation. ... "You've clarified that being a paid shill for those advertisers is not only your number one priority but your only priority. (~14%)

> Her husband claims that filing drove her to run off this time." ... "Okay, good, then you're both aware of Seaver's ... lawyers hamstringing the authorities. (~32%)

> They'll do anything if the price is right; rumors say they'll do wet work. ... Ex-CIA and ex-military primarily, some are retired spooks and ghosts from the clandestine services of several countries. ... Debra Ann, I can't stress this enough — those people pose grave threats to anyone who gets in their way." (~54%)

> "Understand that some of their clients aren't out yet. ... Even for those who are, getting caught with someone other than who they're supposed to be with stirs up jealousies that can turn ugly. ... The people here are comfortable with me but wouldn't be with you. (~70%)

The bleach rendered the blood in the cracks between the bedroom floorboards under the padding beyond use to us." ... "Unfortunate, but from what I know, Strike Response has had lots of practice." ... "It wasn't all bad. (~94%)

Your characters' personality traits

Marlowe is still figuring out people. She's just beginning to evaluate human interactions. Below is her attempt to extract information about how your characters act and their particular agency in your novel. In this graph, Marlowe ascribes personality traits to as many as four of your main characters.[2] Marlowe may not have enough data to draw definitive conclusions, but it's worth considering her high-level takeaway and asking yourself, Is my protagonist too reactive? Is my antagonist too agreeable or not physical enough?[3]

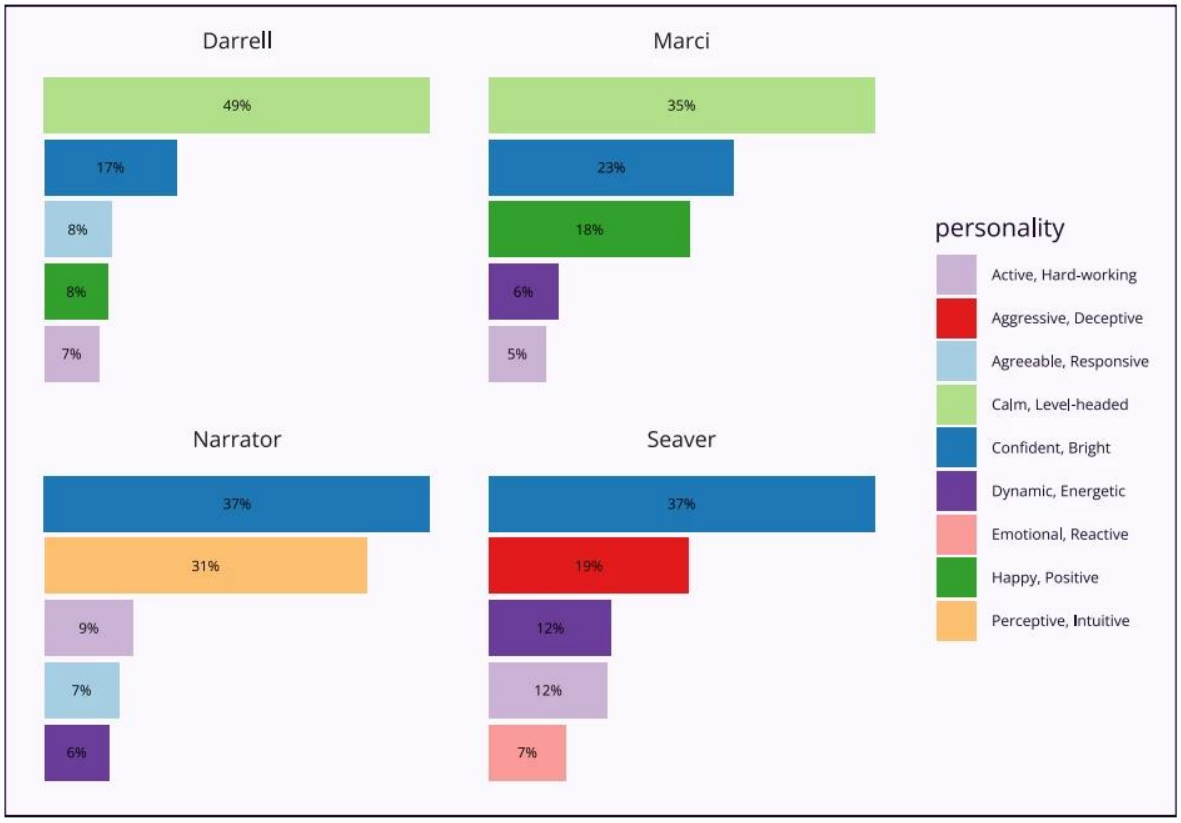


Figure 5: 4 major character(s) in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Remember, these are traits that Marlowe has assessed based on your characters' actions. "True character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure–the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation," writes Robert McKee, the author and story consultant. We concur.

How to use these data

Authors are well-advised to create some contrast in character temperaments in order to develop a gripping story. Marlowe's character traits snapshot shows a quick overview of four of your main characters based on the actions

[2]To qualify for inclusion, a character's name must appear often enough in the book that Marlowe can get to know her (or him). We're still teaching Marlowe about shifts between first, second, and third person POV.

[3]Note: Occasionally the same character can appear twice in a graph. This can happen when a character has a nickname ("Matt" instead of "Matthew"), but it can also occur when the character is referred to by first name, last name, or first and last name.

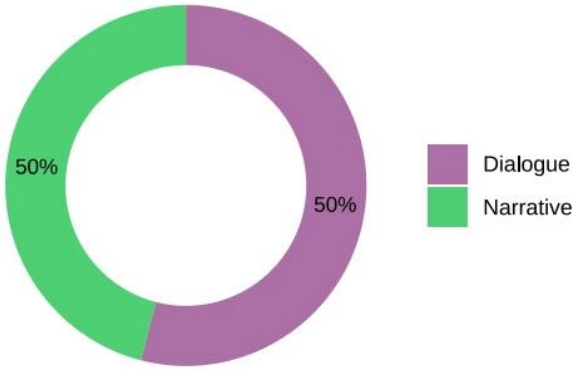
they're taking. If your antagonist is supposed to display physical prowess, make sure that characteristic shows up or you may need to beef up your bad guy.

A good tactic is to look at the personality graphs alongside the *Major subjects* graph we discuss below. Can you develop key qualities of a character with some further description, or perhaps dialogue, which centers on a key theme? Can you position those themes in the places along your plotline that our graphs have shown to be a bit too flat or perhaps too steep?

Readers and editors prefer characters who can drive a plot, appeal to our hearts and minds, and can make something happen within the conventions of the book's genre. Weaker characters are often passive, more likely to respond rather than initiate, more likely to hope rather than act. Make sure your main characters don't just think and desire but take decisive action! Make them three-dimensional. The strongest characters in fiction appeal to the emotions, the mind, and spirit of readers.

Dialogue vs. narrative

Marlowe examined the amount of dialogue in your novel and compared it to the narrative. At its most basic level, dialogue occurs when your characters are actually speaking[4], while narrative is the running commentary and storyline in a novel that tells the reader what is happening. Marlowe created the following donut chart to break down the ratio of dialogue versus narration as well as the specific percentage of each in your manuscript. The bar chart shows you how dialogue and narrative are distributed across your novel in narrative time.



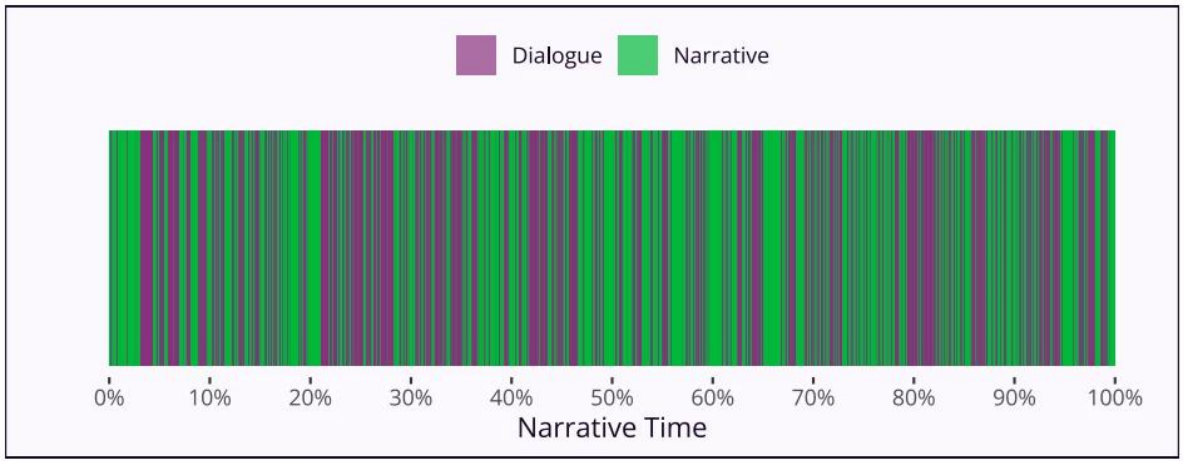


Figure 6: Narrative and dialogue in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

How to use these data

Narration and dialogue are both important ingredients of your story.

While narration can jump around, dialogue pinpoints the activity to the specific moment in time when that conversation is occurring. Dialogue can slow the pace of a novel. That's often necessary. Used effectively, dialogue

[4]Marlowe requires quotemarks to derive this. Note that in some stories, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, the author leaves out quotemarks, which presents a challenge that we're working to resolve.

provides texture and backstory to a scene and adds complexity and nuance to your characters' relationships. It can heighten emotional stakes and help the writer show rather than tell.

There is no magic formula for the right percentage of dialogue. While every novel differs in the amount of interaction between characters, most popular novels contain between **25% and 35% dialogue**. If your manuscript falls outside of that range, ask yourself if the story warrants that amount of dialogue. Look at the chart that shows the distribution of dialogue. Is it evenly spaced through the manuscript? Or is your beginning or end too heavy (or light) on dialogue? Compare the amount of dialogue in your novel to that of your favorite authors.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself as you look at this data.

1. How do my gaps in narrative beats (above) correspond with my dialogue graphs?
2. Do I have too many dialogue scenes in a row? If so, consider adding in some action or narrative scenes.
3. Are my characters constantly telling each other things that are mere info-dumps? Then replace that through action or interior monologue.
4. Is my dialogue too sparse? If so, consider turning your characters' inner thoughts into conversations that introduce conflict or raise the emotional stakes.

A color wheel for primary emotions

Robert Plutchik (1927-2006) was professor emeritus at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine and an adjunct professor at the University of South Florida. Plutchik proposed a psychoevolutionary classification approach for general emotional responses. He considered there to be eight primary emotions: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy. Plutchik also created a wheel of emotions to illustrate different emotions, and to describe how emotions are related.

He suggested eight primary emotions, each with its corresponding opposite: joy versus sadness; anger versus fear; trust versus disgust; and surprise versus anticipation. Like colors, primary emotions can be expressed at different intensities and can mix with one another to form different emotions.

In the plot below, Marlowe provides her assessment of the distribution of Plutchik's eight primary emotions in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*.

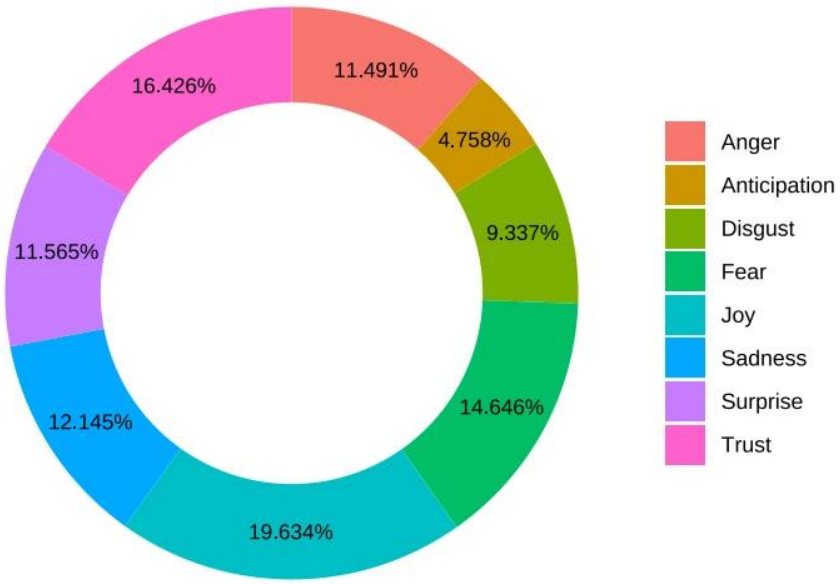


Figure 7: Fundamental emotions in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

How to use these data

Emotions in the graph above are labeled using Plutchik's classification scheme. But a label is just a label and emotions are far more nuanced than simply fear or joy. Here is a table to help you see some of that nuance:

Table 1: Nuance of emotion

Primary label	Related terms
Anger	rage, destruction, enemies
Anticipation	uncertainty, suspense, apprehension
Disgust	distrust, rejection, revulsion
Fear	terror, danger, threats
Joy	ecstasy, love, serenity
Sadness	grief, isolation, regret
Surprise	overcoming, excitement, amazement
Trust	friends, sharing, understanding

When you step back from your manuscript, do these classifications roughly correspond to what you expect to see in your story? Or are one or more emotions more pronounced than you anticipated? Perhaps you'll want to keep these high-level impressions in mind as you revisit your manuscript during the revision process. Or perhaps you can ask your editor or beta readers whether you need to dial back the negative or positive temperatures to a more balanced result.

Major subjects in your novel

The graph below identifies ten primary subjects in your narrative and estimates the percentage of your text (on the x axis) that deals with each. Your values are represented by the large purple dots. Alongside your top topics, Marlowe shows in blue the position of all of the top selling titles in her corpus. In this way you can easily see how your use of a given subject compares to the use of the same subject in a large collection of successful titles.

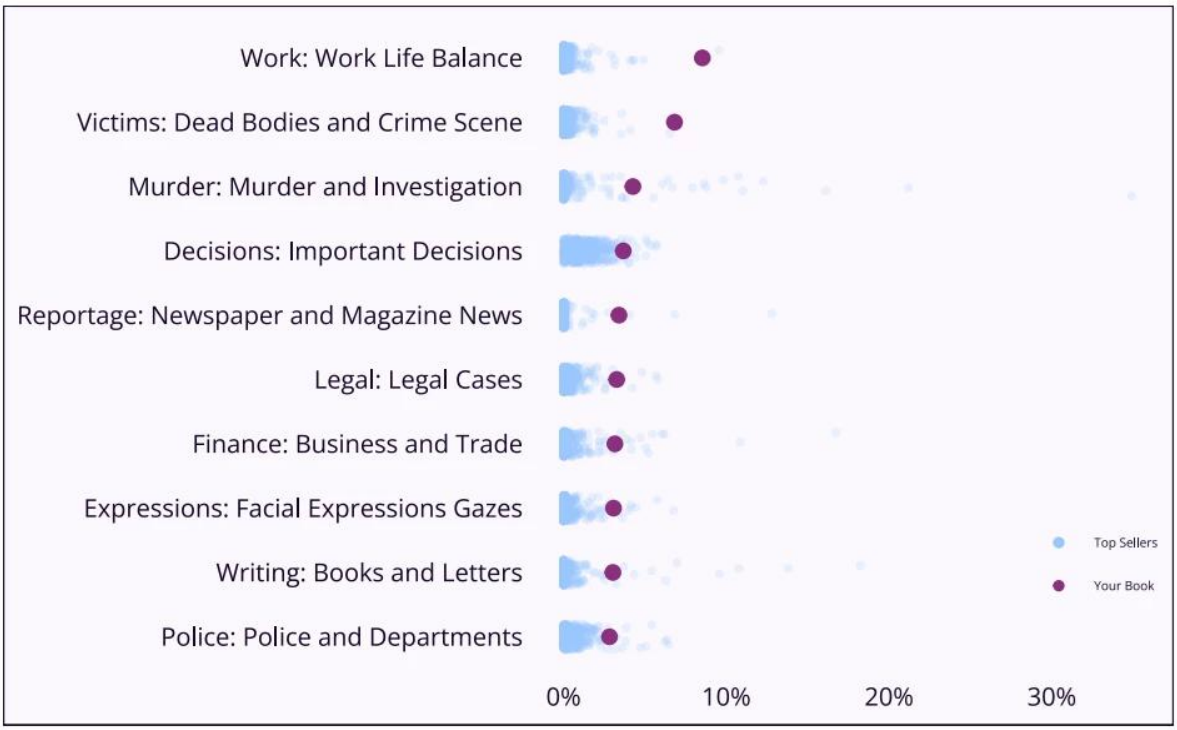


Figure 8: Dominant themes in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Keep in mind that Marlowe is still learning how to distill subject matter into discrete buckets. And some subjects may overlap and intersect. Successful fiction will also have subjects that naturally lead to conflict: love and war, drugs and law enforcement, etc.

How to use these data

Many authors, and beginners in particular, try to jam their novels with lots of wide-ranging subjects, giving nearly equal treatment to each topic. The result is a scattershot approach lacking clarity of focus and making it harder for an overarching theme to emerge. Our research has found that successful novels typically have one or two primary topics and one or two secondary topics that together account for something close to 30% of the overall topical makeup of the book.

For instance, in *The Firm*, John Grisham's most prevalent subject is lawyers and the law, followed by office life, spying, and money. The top topics in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* are Catholicism, God, and religion followed by terrorism and art. Taken together, these topics make up a quarter to a third of the subject matter in their books.

That shouldn't surprise us. After all, this is what people want to know when they ask, "What's your book about?"

We suggest the following:

1. Examine the subject groupings in the chart above. This is a rough sketch of how our A.I. interprets the subject matter in your manuscript.[5] Do you have one to three related topics that make up roughly 25-30% of your work? How many topics does it take to reach 40%? In *The Bestseller Code*, authors Jodie Archer and Matthew Jockers write, "To get to 40% of the average novel, a bestseller uses only four topics. A non-bestseller, on average, uses six. While this may sound like a lot of numbers, the effect on your reading experience and the cohesion of a satisfying narrative is quite significant. Telling the heart of a story with fewer topics implies focus [and] a more organized and precise writerly mind."

2. In *The Bestseller Code*, the authors showed that certain topics dominate in novels that consistently reach the topic of the charts: relationships, home life, work life. These need not be major flash points in your work, but you might consider weaving in these low-key, slice-of-life topics as texture along the way. Ask yourself if your novel devotes enough time to passages that speak to our shared humanity.

3. Subject matter is often driven by the genre in which you write. Fantasy and sci-fi authors must do a fair amount of world building as scaffolding for their narrative. Regardless of genre, a dominant topic informs the theme and provides the glue that runs throughout a novel's spine. A focused approach not only serves as the underlying linchpin for your story, it helps you establish a brand in the marketplace.

4. If you're just starting to write a new book, you may be wondering if there are certain topics all but guaranteed to propel your book to the top of the charts. Alas, no. But among bestsellers, winning topics that appear frequently include marriage, death, taxes (go figure), modern technologies (especially if they're foreboding), funerals, guns, doctors, work, schools, presidents, newspapers, kids, moms, and the media.

[5] Some topics can be properly grouped with closely related subjects. For instance, technology and video or media can count as one subject. We're still training our A.I., and she may not yet have the proper vocabulary to describe other subject categories.

Explicit language

Marlowe doesn't blush. She doesn't judge authors who write scenes with lots of explicit sex or graphic violence. She is also learning to flag words some readers might find offensive (depending on the context) or editors might use to determine age-appropriate content. For instance, such words might indicate whether a book should be pitched as New Adult, Young Adult, or Adult Fiction. Marlowe isn't telling you not to use these sometimes naughty words, but she does want to call them out and let you know how many times they appear in your story. In the end, you're the ultimate arbiter of what language your novel should contain.[6] Just keep in mind that you may encounter some false positives in the graph below.

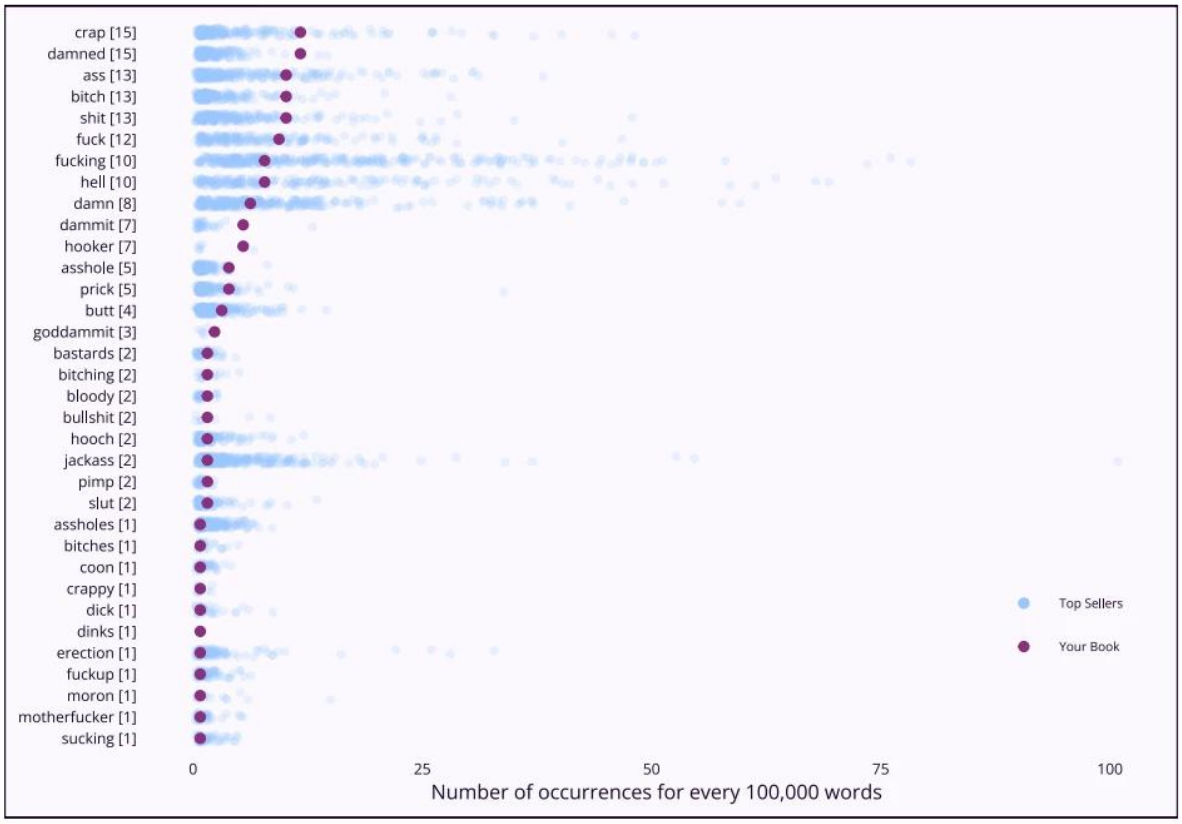


Figure 9: Flagged words in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Explicit content

While this is still a beta feature, Marlowe has also analyzed your manuscript for potential explicit sexual content. Readers in different fiction genres have different appetites for so-called adult sexual themes, so it's important to be aware of how much or little sexual content your novel contains. Mainstream bestsellers in non-romance genres typically contain less than 1% explicit sexual content, while some romance blockbusters like Fifty Shades of Grey

[6] Words can take on different meanings (some objectionable, some not) depending on the context. Our language also evolves. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for example, uses the term "queer" three times in ways that were entirely appropriate for 1902.

can contain up to 15%. Novels in the erotic genre will contain even more, as much as 30% or even 40%. The graphic below attempts to quantify the extent to which your manuscript includes material that many readers would consider adult in nature.

Figure 10: Explicit content in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Possible clichés

Overuse of clichés and stock phrases can be the *kiss of death*; you should avoid them *like the plague*! Here is a table of phrases that Marlowe found in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian* that are often associated with clichés. Don't think that you need to purge your manuscript of every cliché. Readers are comfortable with a familiar turn of phrase every now and then. Just don't overdo it or it may signal to the reader: lazy writing!

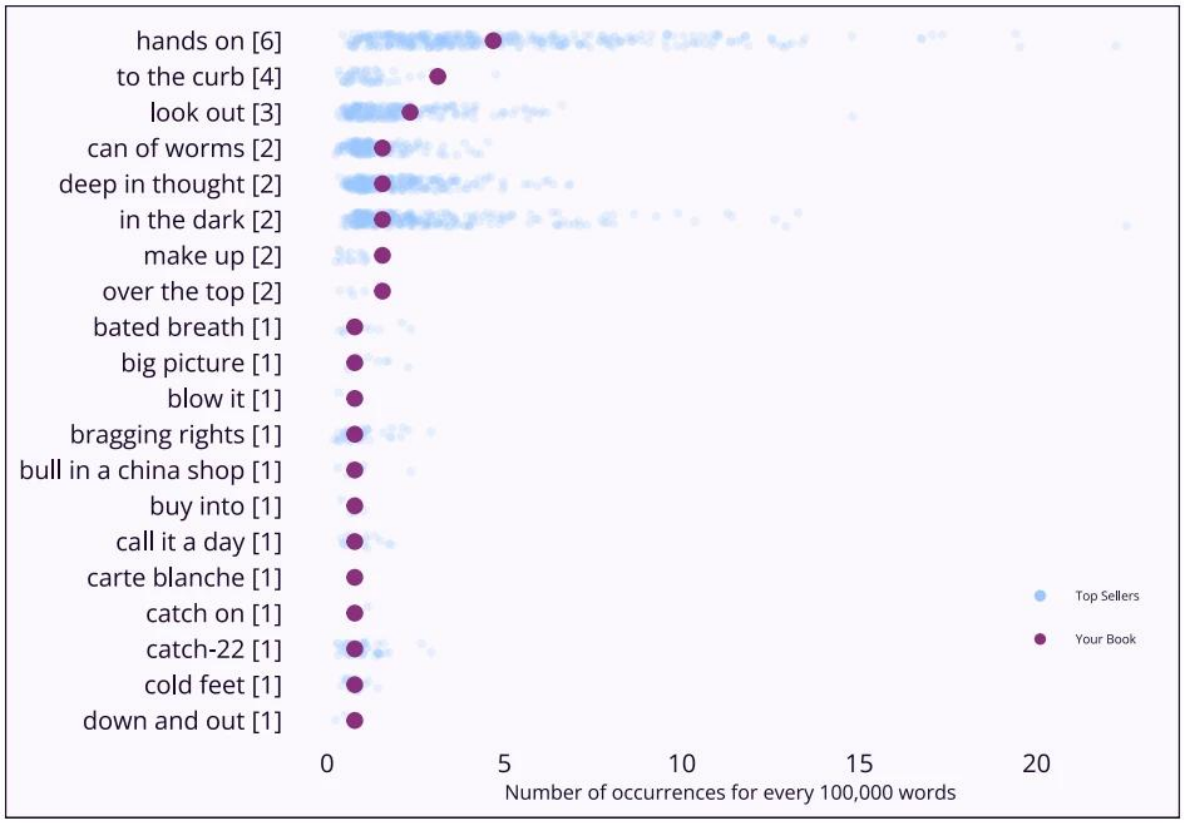


Figure 11: Use of clichés in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Repetitive phrases

Frequent phrases in your prose are not quite so nefarious as frequent clichés but they can signal a lack of imagination and control. Often we trot out familiar phrases as a crutch, and they become ingrained authorial tics. Most of the phrases below are innocuous, but you may spot some you'll want to reword to give your prose more spark and variety. Here is a list of the most common phrases found in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*.

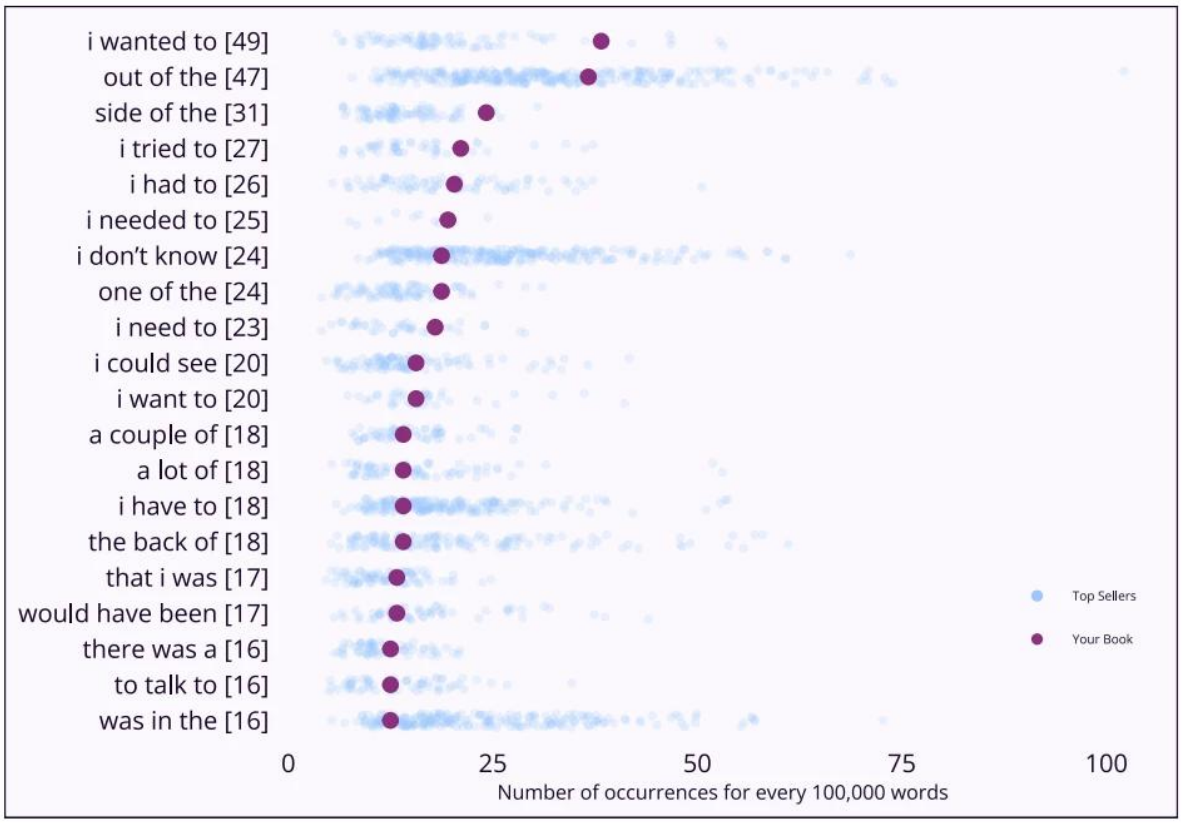


Figure 12: Frequent phrases in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Sentence stats and readability score

Six Degrees from Killing Brian contains roughly 9,513 sentences and approximately 128,111 words.[7] The average length of a sentence in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian* is **13.47 words**. The histogram below shows the distribution of sentence lengths in your novel.

While there is no such thing as an ideal sentence length, successful writers in the popular fiction market tend to have a distribution where the bulk of the sentences range between 2 and 10 words long. Marlowe highlighted this "sweet spot" in the graph below.

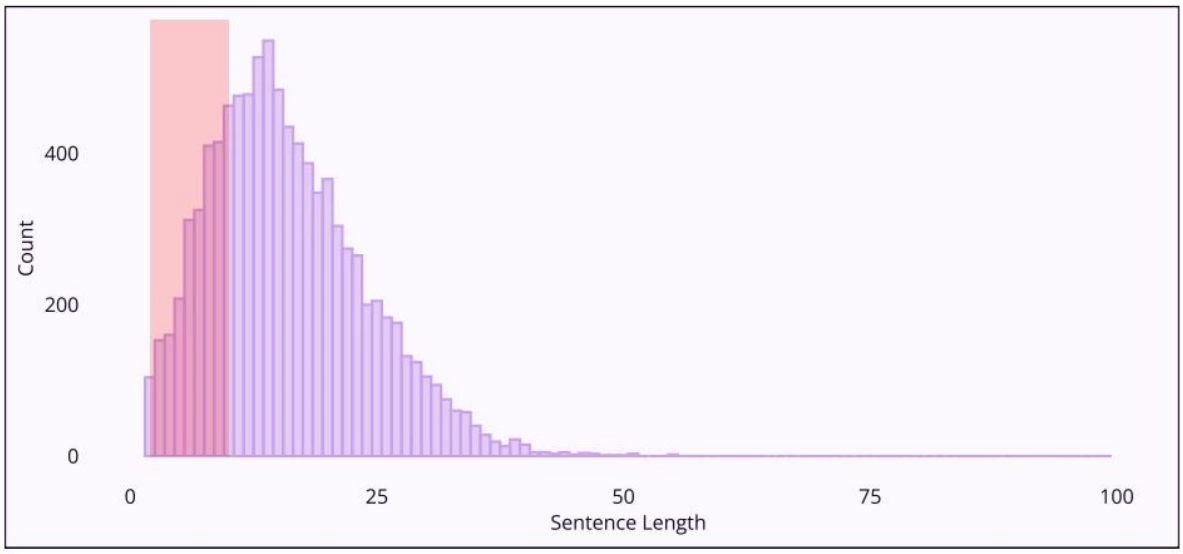


Figure 13: Sentence length distribution in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Reading grade level

Across five metrics, *Six Degrees from Killing Brian* recorded a reading grade level of *7.22* and higher. That means students at that grade level can read an average passage in the book and understand it. Note, however, that this is merely a rough yardstick of comprehension and it is not an indication that a book's subject matter is suitable for a reader of a given age. As a general rule, it's good to shoot for reading grade levels that would make your work appeal to wider audiences; bestsellers often register a reading level in the 4th, 5th or 6th grade range. Keep in mind that the average American reads at the 7th- to 8th-grade level, according to The Literacy Project.[8]

Complexity score

Because syntactic complexity is a factor of sentence length (after all, as sentences get longer they get more complex), there is no upward bound on the degree of complexity, but books in the popular fiction market tend to

[7] Invariably, your word count in software programs such as Microsoft Word will vary from our count because of differences in how different programs define what constitutes a word. For example, some programs will count contractions such as "can't" as two words: "can" and "not." Marlowe excludes cardinal numbers, punctuation, and other non-word symbols from word counts.

[8] Reading level varies by country depending on literacy and English language proficiency. For reference, in the US, sixth graders are about 11 years old. A final note: Our scores generally come in a couple of grades younger than the Flesch Kincaid grade, a widely used yardstick.

have an average complexity score between 2.0 and 3.0. Sentences in your manuscript averaged a complexity score of **2.81**. The most complex sentence in your book had a complexity score of **7.35**. These complexity scores are best understood in the context of other books in the market and in your specific genre.[9]

The longest sentences Marlowe found in your manuscript are located approximately 38% and 82% of the way into the story:

> *The venue held about two hundred people, and acts like Alanis Morissette, The Breeders, Ben Harper, The Cult, Blink-182, and Dinosaur Jr. had all played there in their careers — bands I knew from my formative years in the nineties and at the beginning of the millennium.*

> *But you could tell he was frustrated — he does this thing rubbing the top of his head, where he used to have hair, with the hand holding the cigarette. "'Chrissakes, man, take a Xanax; you're panting into the phone,' Doc said.*

[9] This information, along with market comps for all of Marlowe's other novel metrics, will be available in a future version of our A.I. reports.

Frequent use of adverbs

In *The Elements of Style*, Strunk and White observed that "qualifiers are the leeches that infest the pond of prose and suck the life from words." A qualifier is a word that changes how absolute, certain, or generalized a statement is. Some of the most needless words are adverbs. In *On Writing*, Stephen King reminds us that "the road to hell is paved with adverbs." Watch for adverbs that creep into your text such as "really," "very," "nearly," "quickly," and "suddenly," to name a few. Here is a graph showing some of your favorite adverbs and the number of times they occur:[10]

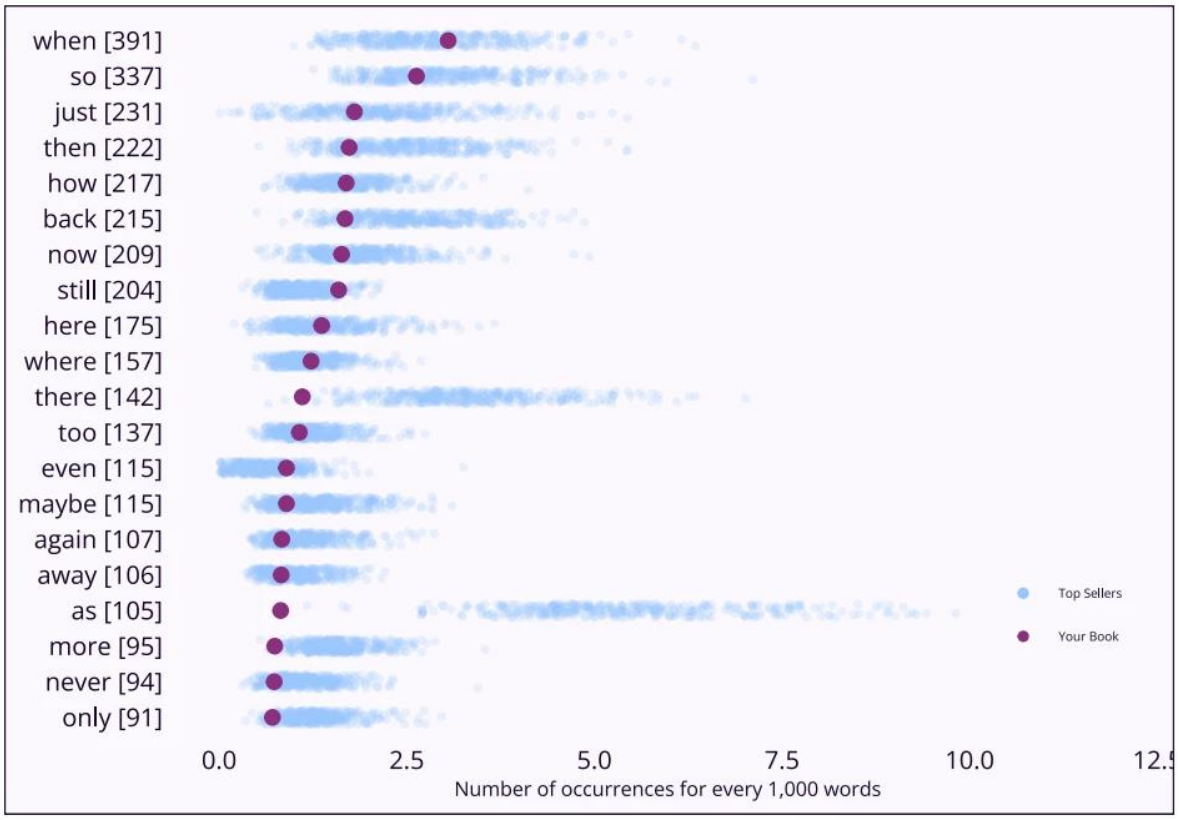


Figure 14: Use of adverbs in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

[10] Note that some adverbs, such as *only* and *pretty*, can also be adjectives, depending on use.

Frequent use of adjectives

Adjectives can, like adverbs, be abused. Too many adjectives, especially too many of the same old boring adjectives, can clutter your prose. In a letter to D. W. Bowser in 1880, Mark Twain advised: "When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice." Here are your 20 most frequently repeated adjectives and the number of times they occur.[11]

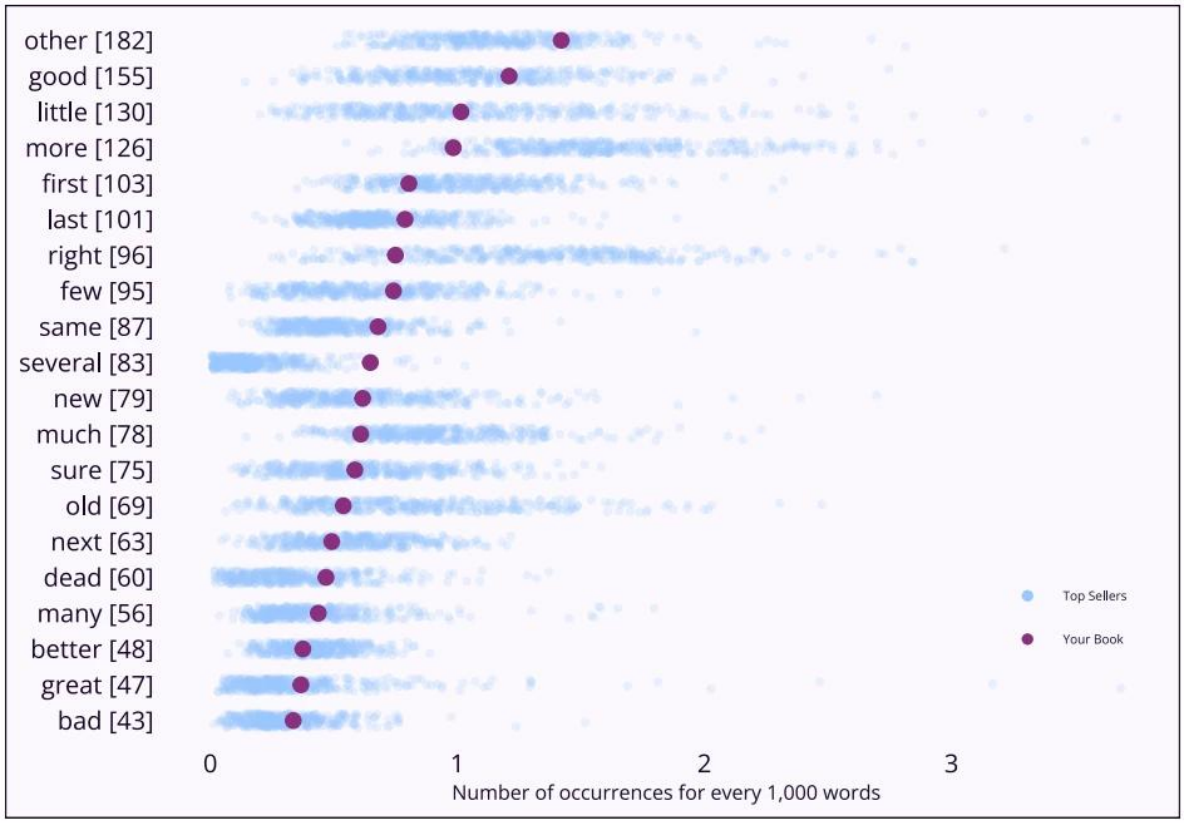


Figure 15: Use of adjectives in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

How to use this data

Authors, editors, and writing coaches may disagree about the wisdom of using certain adjectives repeatedly throughout a story. Some like the patter of familiarity; others see an author too lazy to search for a better term. The cheif purpose of this chart is to help you spot the adjectives you use most often. Do you have a writer's tic where you reach for old standbys when a fresher word would have more impact?

[11] Note that a word, such as "other," might be an adjective, adverb, noun, or pronoun, depending on its use.

Verb choices & passive voice

Great writers know that the power of their prose lies in their use of verbs. A reader senses that active verbs move the story along better than when a writer overuses so-called "helping verbs." Auxiliary verbs—for example, forms of *be*, *have*, and *do* as well as constructions such as *may*, *might*, and *would*—need to be used sparingly. They are often necessary, but overuse can result in lifeless prose. Take note of how many times you use certain words, such as "said," which are fine if not overused.

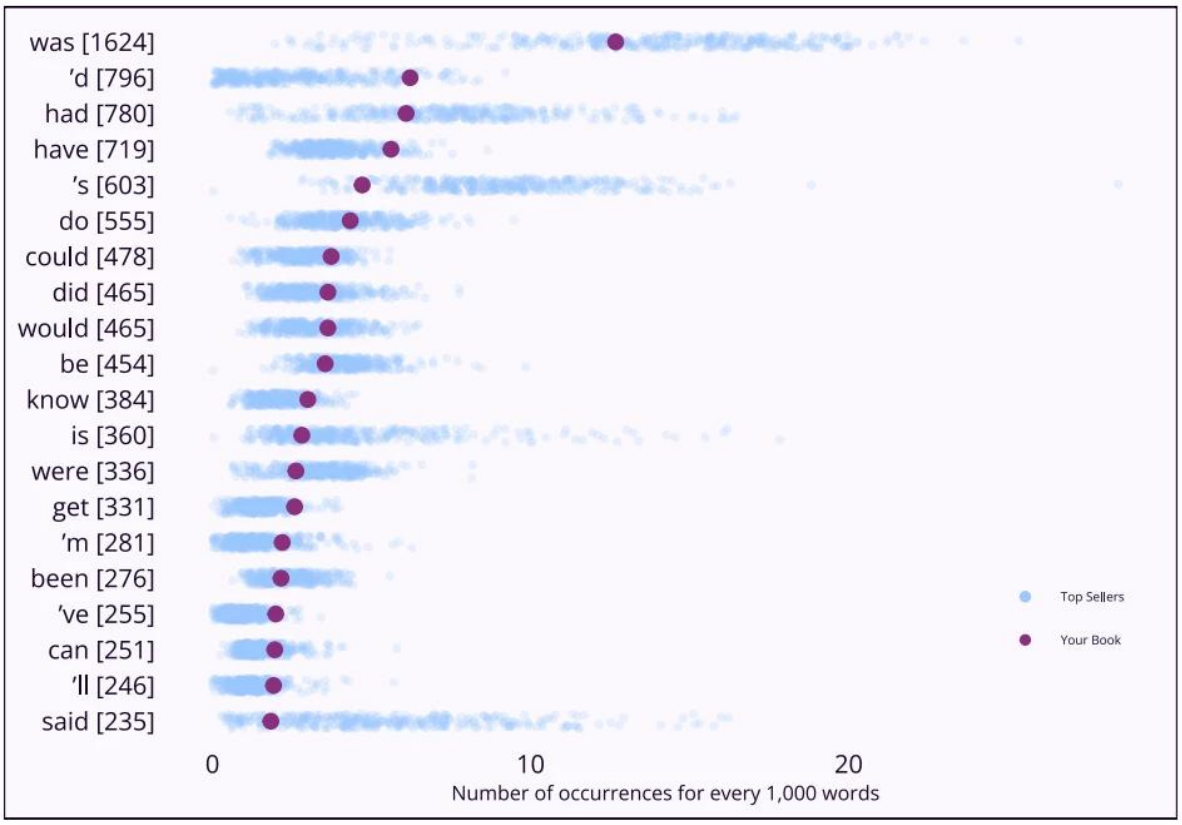


Figure 16: Use of verbs in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

Punctuation data

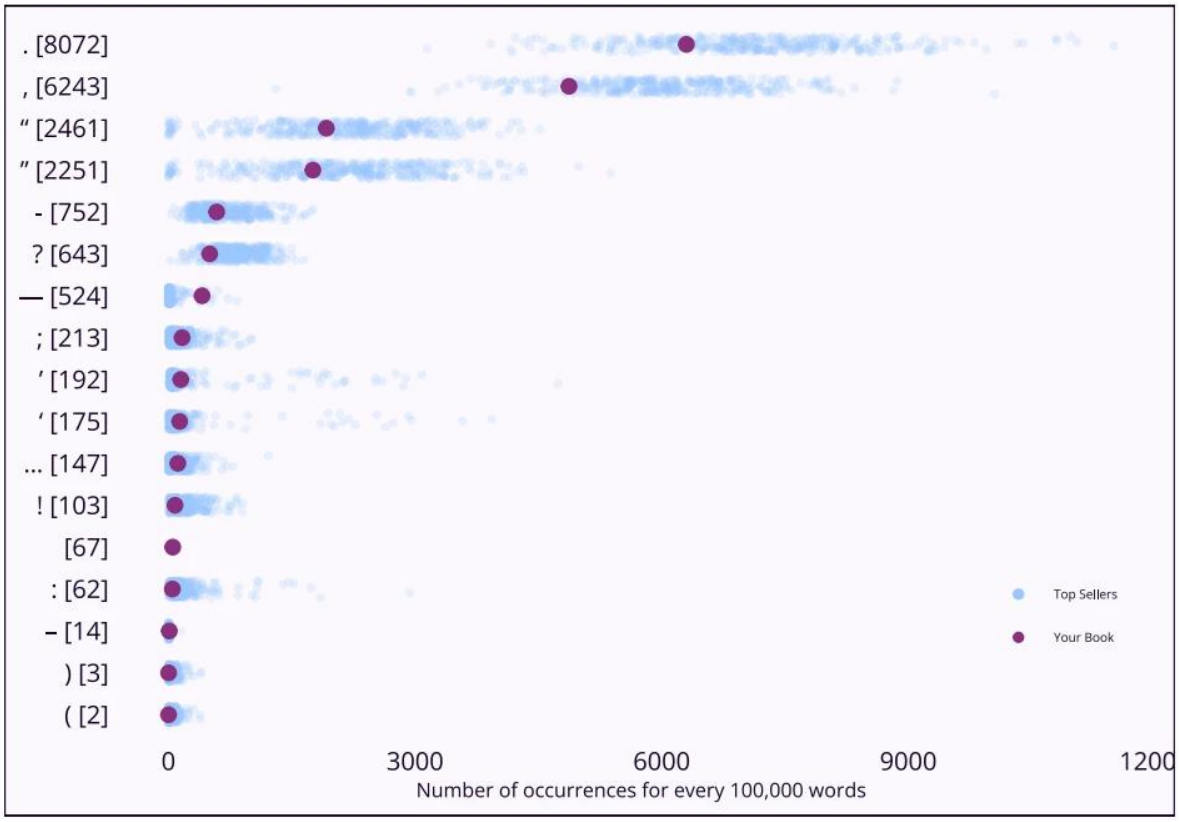


Figure 17: Use of punctuation in *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

How to use this data

Ah, punctuation! We can think of several ways this information can prove useful (besides giving you some inside trivia about how many periods your novel contains):[12]

1. Are your characters posing enough questions? (In *The Bestseller Code*, Archer and Jockers found that characters in bestsellers ask more questions than those found in books that missed the list.) Do you see a sufficient number of quotemarks, signaling dialogue rather than narrative? (This can vary by genre.)

2. Are you selective in your use of exclamation points, colons, and semicolons? We hope so! *The Bestseller Code* found that top novels use fewer exclamation points, colons, and semicolons as well as fewer adjectives and adverbs. Bestsellers are about shorter, cleaner sentences, without unneeded words or fussy punctuation.

3. Compare this against your other works to see if you’re using more quotes and dialogue in one book vs. another (factoring in the word count difference). Over the course of writing several novels, you may find

[12] In the table, the “Frequency” column shows the number of times the symbol appears for every one hundred words.

that you're using more (or less) dialogue, or you're freer with the use of ellipses...which editors hate but readers seem to like.

Possible misspellings

Every week we're expanding Marlowe's vocabulary. She's still learning, so she'll probably flag several words that are not misspelled at all. Still, it's worth checking this list to see if typos slipped into your manuscript:

acident [1], acomplish [1], aganst [1], airosol [1], allocuted [1], allredy [1], allways [3], apologism [1], arested [1], arond [1], atention [2], ballistically [1], bandmates [1], barbequing [2], bedew [1], beleive [3], beleived [1], benefitted [1], beter [1], biologics [1], bisness [1], bizzy [1], bodys [1], braincase [1], brickwall [1], cadaverine [1], cannoli [2], cauht [1], chauffer [1], clearcoat [1], cleated [1], computor [1], coud [9], coudnt [4], coverup [1], crepey [1], crosing [1], crossways [1], curtsey [1], del [3], diferent [1], diplommas [1], distanse [1], ditzy [3], docter [6], docters [2], doochebag [1], dosnt [1], douchenozzle [1], draging [1], duffle [1], enuff [3], evidentiary [1], exept [1], facemask [1], figgured [4], figguring [1], finaly [1], flagrante [1], flys [1], folowed [2], folowing [1], forsure [1], funerel [2], garbaje [1], gard [1], geting [4], girlfreind [2], glioblastoma [1], grabed [2], greenskeeper [5], hangaround [1], hapened [2], hapening [1], havnt [2], hiden [1], hypersonic [1], icemaker [1], influince [1], informaton [1], innosent [1], insurence [1], ittybitty [1], jim [2], jiuce [1], keyfob [1], keyscratch [1], kichen [1], ladys [1], landromat [1], lawyered [1], leest [1], leeve [3], leeving [1], lejend [1], lern [2], lites [2], litle [1], luv [1], ment [1], mercenarie [1], messige [1], messiges [1], microcassette [2], midle [1], minimart [1], mins [1], mising [1], mtn [2], mussleing [1], naber [2], naberhood [4], nite [2], nites [1], nocked [1], noir [2], nosey [1], obvius [1], ol' [1], oppo [1], optons [1], overstimulation [1], patern [1], peeple [5], perminent [1], phlebotomist [1], picturs [1], pincered [1], pitmaster [1], placks [1], plink [1], poped [1], popo [1], preprinted [1], probly [3], profesional [1], quik [1], rase [1], rasing [1], realtor [1], realy [1], reelize [1], regulr [1], regulrs [1], releesed [1], remembr [1], repurposing [1], revenje [1], reverser [2], rideshare [5], rideshares [1], righthand [1], righty [1], romescada [1], roofies [1], rookey [1], schtick [1], schwoosh [1], screwups [1], securety [2], seeled [1], serius [2], seriusly [1], sessons [1], sheilds [1], shoud [6], shoudnt [2], shuving [1], sistems [1], smaler [1], snarkily [1], snickerdoodle [1], sociopathy [1], specialy [1], speshallizes [1], speshialy [1], sposed [2], spred [1], spreds [1], standup [1], stollen [1], stomack [1], subwoofer [1], supposably [1], suspicius [1], swet [1], s'posed [1], tailer [1], tauht [1], telefone [1], texturizing [1], thouht [5], thretening [1], tipline [1], tomorow [1], tryed [2], tye [1], tyed [1], uber [40], uncompromised [1], uncrumpled [1], unleveraged [1], unloding [1], unpaying [1], unpermitted [1], unreceptive [1], unruptured [1], unstickered [1], unturned [1], upstares [1], utilety [1], vacumed [1], vandalising [1], varius [1], victimhood [1], vu [1], wached [1], waching [1], walkthrough [2], wierd [1], wingback [1], witnesed [1], worryed [1], woud [8], woudnt [12], wraped [1]

Subject matter book comps

A book comp, as we know, is a title that's comparable to yours in some significant way. The network graph below shows your manuscript within its immediate "galaxy" of published books that are similar to yours in terms of shared subject matter. Your book is highlighted in purple.

Following the connecting lines out from your book reveals which books are closest to yours. The shorter the connecting line, the more similar the book is to yours in terms of subject matter. (You should be able to find these titles on Bingebooks.com) If some of the comparisons seem curious, it may be that Marlowe is looking at your storyline on a different level or in a way that's not immediately apparent.

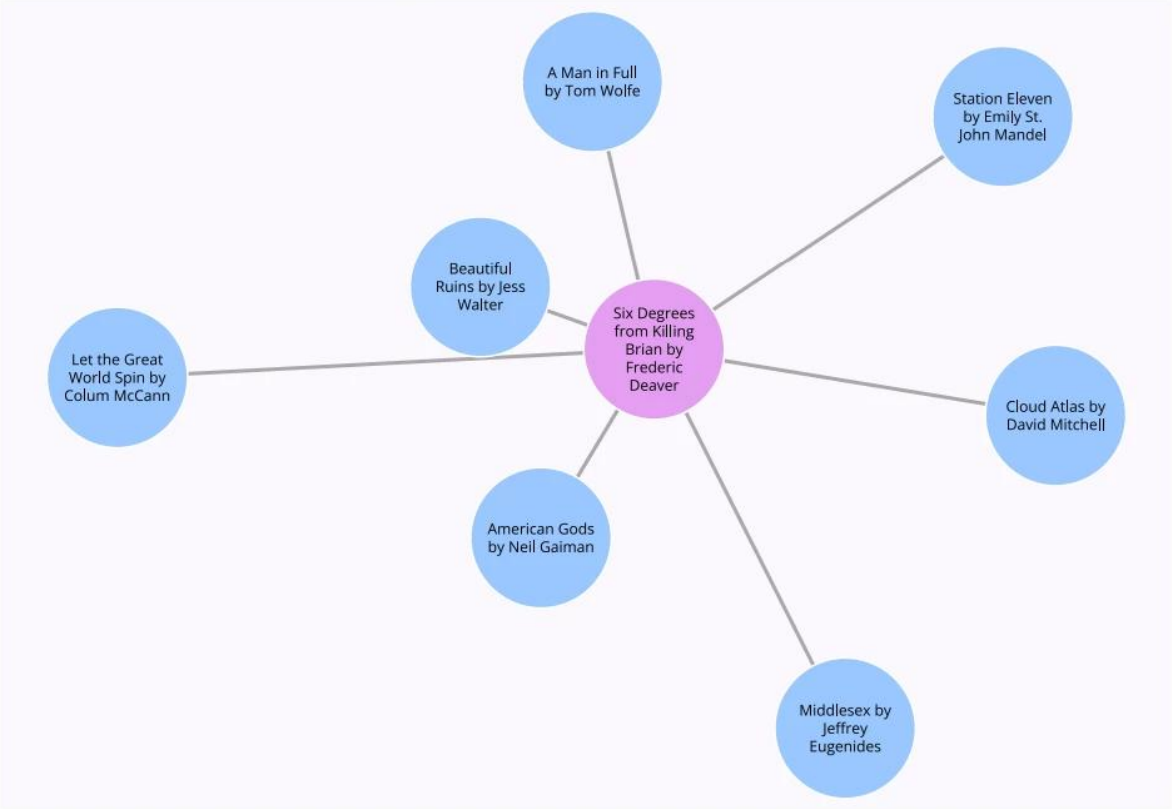


Figure 18: Titles with comparable subject matter to *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

How to use these data

The network of novels shown here is effectively a set of "comps" for your book. The graph shows you the titles of notable books that are similar to yours in terms of their subject matter. Knowing which published books your manuscript is like will help you pitch your book to agents and publishers, and it will also provide insight into how you market your book and assign its genre.

Linguistic style comps & your distinctive voice

Every author uses words in a distinct way, and these habits of usage define a writer's distinct linguistic style. Marlowe compares your linguistic patterns to those of hundreds of popular published authors. (Soon we'll have many thousands.) The network graph below shows a set of well-known books by authors who have a linguistic style similar to yours. Your book is highlighted in purple. Following the connecting lines out from your book you can see which other books are most similar to yours. The shorter the distance, the more similar that author's style is to your own.

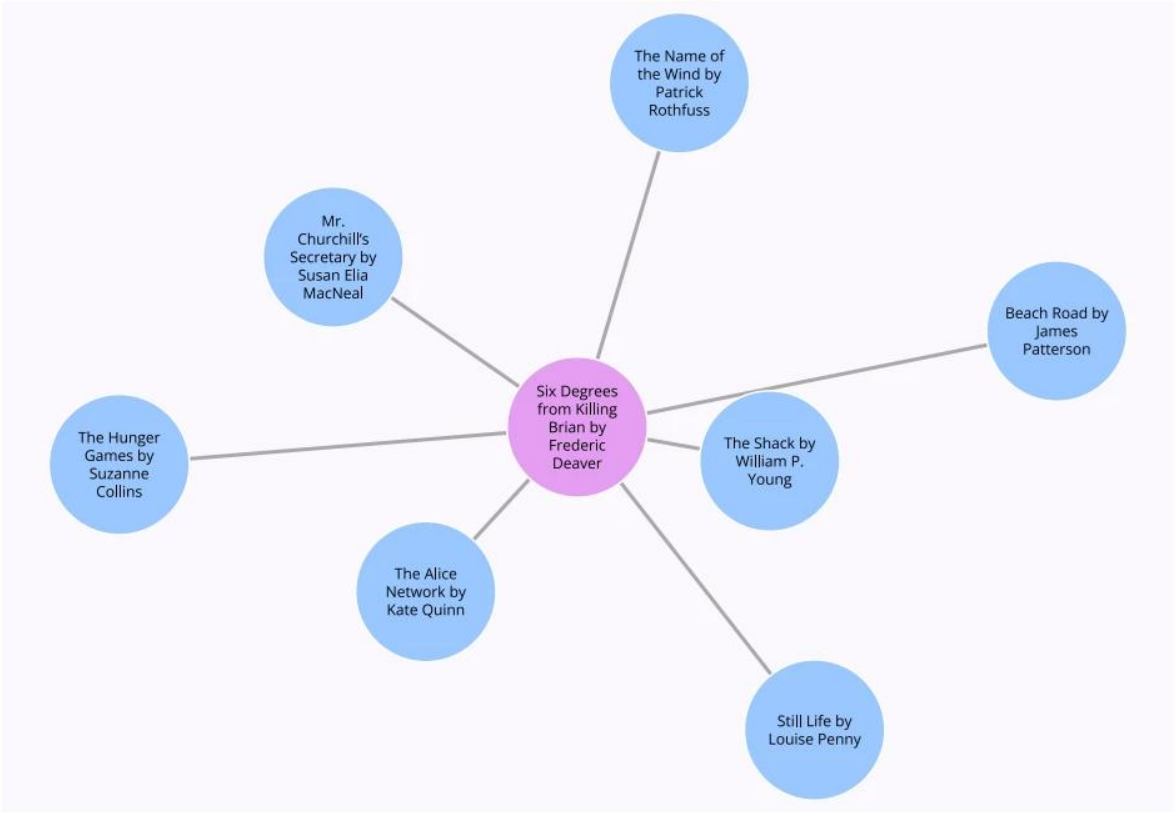


Figure 19: Titles comparable to *Six Degrees from Killing Brian*

How to use these data

Like the network graph above showing books that share similar subjects, this graph shows you books by authors who use language in a way that is similar to you. Knowing what published authors you write like will help you pitch your book to agents and publishers, and it will also provide insight into how you market your book and determine your most likely readership.

Use this information alongside the detailed information in this report showing how your use of common adverbs, adjective, verbs, clichés, phrases, and explicit language stack up against the trends seen in recent bestsellers.

Comparable titles

Marlowe has searched through her library of top-selling novels and identified four titles with features that mirror some of your own. You will be able to find all these titles on our sister site, Bingebooks.com. In the graphic below, the closer the purple dots are to the outer edges, the more your book has in common with that book on that axis.

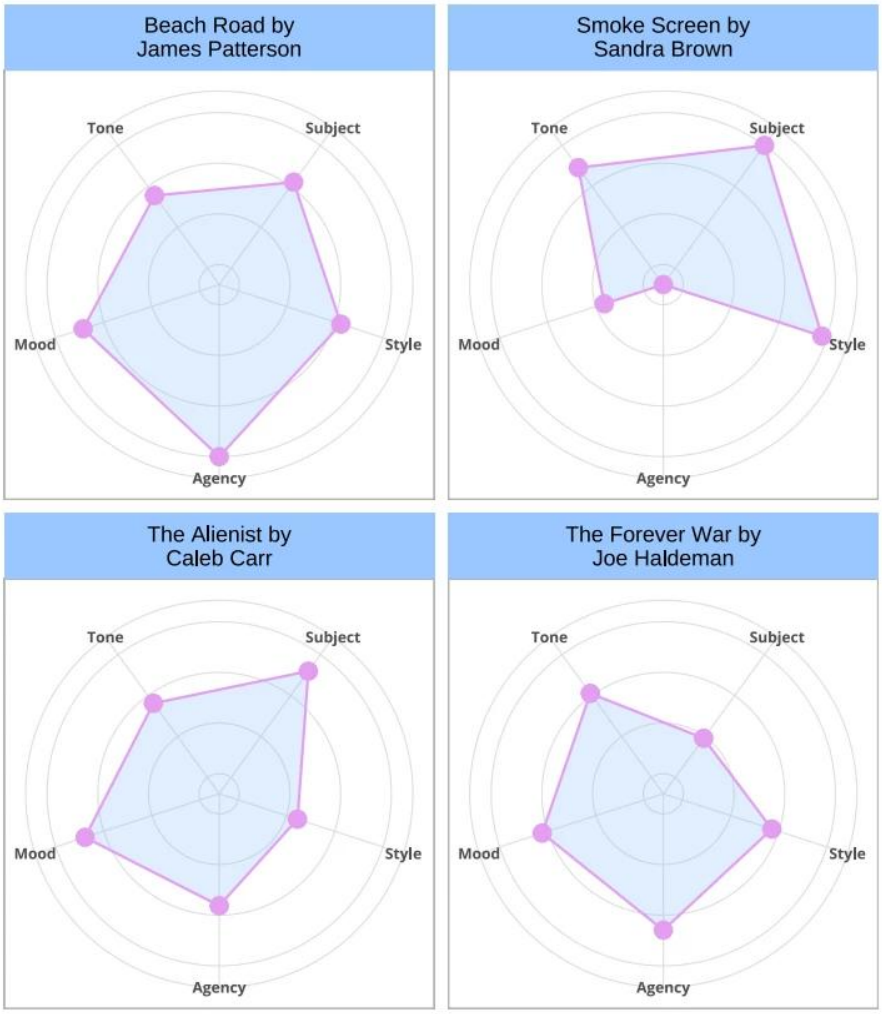


Figure 20: Your book comps across key metrics. Outer circle = more in common.

How to use these data

To identify comparable titles, Marlowe focuses on five key elements that are essential to any compelling narrative. These are subject matter, writing style, character agency, mood, and tone:

1. Subject: Quite simply, subject matter is what your book is about. But Marlowe understands subject matter in

a highly nuanced way. Subjects are not just the "things" or "objects" in your book but also the concepts that get represented by those objects. So, for example, Marlowe is able to recognize that a book such as *The Devil Wears Prada* is about both fashion and journalism. Here she identifies other books with similar content. Readers tend to first gravitate toward books with subjects of interest to them. Once their thematic taste has been satisfied, then things such as style and character become central.[13]

2. Style: Writing style is your unique way of communicating, and every writer has a distinctive style. Marlowe looks for other authors who use words in similar ways. To understand how important style is, consider that many authors write horror fiction. But when Stephen King writes horror, you know you are in the hands of a master stylist. Marlowe shows you other writers with a style similar to yours.

3. Agency: The way that your characters act and behave is a measure of their agency. Good characters—which is to say, characters with clear agency—drive a plot forward and keep readers engaged. On this measure, Marlowe looks for books with characters that are similar to yours in terms of the way they interact with other characters and with their environment.

4. Mood: Mood roughly translates into the feeling or emotional experience that you are trying to evoke in your readers. Mood determines whether your readers experience your novel as a place of calm reflection and contemplation or as an edge-of-the-seat anxiety-inducing thrill ride. Mood is about creating an emotional experience for your readers, and in the course of a novel, you may create a variety of different moods as the plot unfolds. Marlowe looks at the way you balance mood across your narrative and then identifies other books that evoke similar emotions in similar proportion.

5. Tone: Tone in fiction refers to the way in which you express your attitude and establish the overall flavor of your story through your writing. It's established by your word choice and by the attitude the story narrator or viewpoint character has toward the story's events and other characters. Tone is achieved through word choice (diction), sentence construction and word order (syntax), and by what the viewpoint character focuses on. The tone you set can evoke any number of emotions and reactions in your readers. Marlowe understands that different writers (and their narrators) have different attitudes toward their stories, and she looks for other books where the attitudes are most clearly aligned with your own.

[13]The subject matter comps graph shown above identifies books most similar in terms of subject matter alone. This graph identifies books that are most similar across five metrics, one of which is subject.