The Ten Point

Inside Outline Checklist

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nce you get your three-page Inside Outline done, you are going to step back and analyze it. This gives you perspective and allows you to approach the problems in a systematic way. As a book coach trained to see the patterns in stories—what writers tend to get right and what they tend to get wrong—I can look at an Inside Outline and immediately spot the holes and problems. I can flag the areas that are going to cause trouble once the writing starts. I can see where the middle is going to fall apart and where the ending makes no sense. You can do this kind of analysis, too, using the Ten Point Inside Outline Checklist. Share it with your critique partner, editor, or book coach when you share your Inside Outline.

 The Ten Point Inside Outline Checklist focuses on the biggest issues of the story. This is not the time or place to worry about anything small. We are trying to solve for major flaws that will be fatal to the story, that will stop readers from turning the next page and finishing the novel. You will know your Inside Outline is (temporarily) done when you can confidently say that it meets every criterion on the Ten Point Inside Outline Checklist. I say temporarily done because the Inside Outline is a living, breathing document that you will be using as you write forward, revise, and write a synopsis.

The Ten Point **inside Outline** Checklist

Check to be sure there is one clear point: Is the story about something? Does it say something? Can someone look at your Inside Outline and see it?

Check to be sure that the POV is consistent and clear throughout, whether you have one POV

character, two, or twelve. The point that goes with each scene should be about that POV character

and what they know and feel and believe.

Check for an arc of change: Does the ending resolve the problem of the beginning?

Check the character motivation and logic: Do the protagonist’s actions make sense? Would they actually behave this way based on who they are and what they want? There is logic to the way people behave, even when they behave in contradictory ways.

Check to make sure your protagonist has agency over their decisions. Are they making choices and decisions or are things just happening to them? We want a protagonist who is engaged in their own struggle and their own story, not a cardboard cutout who only reacts to whatever happens to

 them.

Check the consequences of every decision your protagonist makes. Is something at stake? Or, in other words, do they stand to lose something? Will something happen if they make one choice

 versus another?

Check the cause-and-effect trajectory: Do the actions the protagonist takes drive to the next thing that happens in every single chapter? This is where you will probably spend the bulk of your time and effort: thinking this through and locking it in. It’s hard, because changes you make will impact every other scene in the story. Don’t shy away from making those changes. Better now than when

 you have an entire manuscript.

 Check the force of opposition. Is it clear what is standing in the protagonist’s way on the inside (their beliefs about the world and their role in it) and the outside (their culture and society, the expectations people have of them, the circumstances they find themselves in, competitors and antagonists)? We want the protagonist to struggle as they make their choices and decisions. We

 want it to be hard so we can experience what it would feel like to struggle in this way without

 actually having to do it ourselves.

Check pacing and flow of the story: Is there tension throughout? Does it build and grow? Are there scenes that don’t drive the story forward? Can they be cut?

Check genre conventions: Does the story do what the genre needs it to do? Certain genres have clear expectations around word length, content, outcomes and conclusions, etc. Make sure your story meets them.