

## Sample Developmental Assessment

*Anonymized client manuscript — contemporary upmarket fiction*

*The following is an excerpted and anonymized developmental assessment of a debut upmarket fiction manuscript. The writer submitted a query letter, opening scenes, and a full four-part outline for my evaluation. Names, locations, and identifying details have been changed. The editorial analysis and methodology are authentic.*

### **Structural Diagnosis: The Story Starts at 75%**

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The query letter describes a compelling novel: a man inherits a business from his estranged family member, is thrust into a community fighting for survival against a predatory corporation, and discovers that connection is worth the risk. That is a strong pitch.

The outline describes a different book. In it, the protagonist moves through a long list of varied experiences before reluctantly accepting a job from his estranged family member. Two-thirds of the way through Part 3, roughly 75% into the novel, the family member dies and leaves him the business. The story being pitched to agents begins at the 75% mark of the story outlined. Everything before the family member's death is setup. The novel's engine doesn't turn over until protagonist inherits the business and needs to decide what to do with it. That's your inciting incident. That's where the story begins.

Part 1 alone contains the protagonist's life living on the family property, a parent's death, a will dispute, a sibling's betrayal, a visit to prison, a military intake process, a federal interrogation, the military rejection, police encounters, homelessness, and a shelter stay. None of these have anything to do with the premise in the pitch. The protagonist hasn't even arrived at the central location of the novel.

The character-development method used in developing this outline involved writing extensive backstory scenes to help flesh out the protagonist's wound and worldview. Those scenes are meant to inform the novel, not necessarily appear in it. Knowing the backstory makes it easier to write fully formed characters. The protagonist's past isn't important to the story on paper. Their present and future are. Their past experiences frame their beliefs and shape the decisions they make.

### **Scene-Level Analysis of Protagonist: The Outline vs. the Page**

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*One of the most revealing exercises in a developmental assessment is comparing what the outline claims happens in a scene against what the prose delivers.*

Across the outline and opening scenes, the protagonist does not drive the story. Other characters make decisions and the protagonist follows along.

The internal arc chosen for this protagonist comes from the hard choices they make under pressure. Their worldview can't shift if others orchestrate every step for them. This problem shows up concretely in the first two scenes. Let's review what unfolds on the page versus what the outline plans for the story.

#### Scene One:

- Outline: The protagonist's sibling presents a calculated strategy to pressure their mother into selling the family property.  
Page: The sibling shoves an envelope at the protagonist and makes vague demands.
- Outline: The protagonist chooses to cooperate with the plan.  
Page: The protagonist says "whatever" and "fine" while being physically pushed around. The outline describes a choice. The pages show submission.
- Outline: The protagonist considers the reality of enlisting for the bonuses and benefits.  
Page: The protagonist dumps the enlistment materials on a bench and paces.

#### Scene Two:

- Outline: Mother convinces the protagonist to support her position.  
Page: The protagonist doesn't change his mind. Mother vetoes the sale, vetoes their suggestion to enlist, vetoes their suggestion to relocate, and assigns the protagonist new responsibilities.

While the outline details a character making decision, the protagonist lacks agency in both scenes. The character is acted upon. This gap exists because complex thought process are difficult to demonstrate solely through a character's actions and the reader doesn't have access to the protagonist's interior thoughts on the page.

### **Misbelief Architecture: Labeling vs. Execution**

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*The writer structured every crisis in the outline around a central thematic question: does the protagonist choose connection or isolation? While this is a solid technique for guiding character development the execution failed logically and struggled to reflect an authentic emotional arc.*

The instinct to filter every crisis through the protagonist's misbelief (connect or isolate) is the right structural idea. However, there are a few issues with the execution.

First, the protagonist's misbelief is often incorrectly identified. Cooperating with the sibling to pressure their mother to sell the family property isn't connection. It's two people conspiring to take something from someone for self-preservation. Lying to the FBI is labeled "connect." Lying to get what you want isn't connection; it's manipulation.

Neither of these involve vulnerability, trust, or genuine openness to another person.

Connection in this context would be built through the protagonist choosing vulnerability, asking for help without a transactional framework, or trusting someone with no guarantee of return. They need to stay when it is easier to leave. Those moments were rare in the outline. The protagonist is rarely the one initiating genuine connection. Instead, other characters engineer it for him.

Second, the application is too mechanical. Every crisis is labeled “connect” or “isolate,” and the pattern flips back and forth scene by scene. Real worldview shifts are messier. A character leans one way, gets pulled back, surprises themselves, and then regresses without realizing it. Treating the misbelief as a binary toggle will read as engineered rather than organic.

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*This assessment was accompanied by a full editorial letter with recommendations for revision, genre reclassification, and structural reorganization. The complete letter addressed the outline across all four parts, character agency, internal genre requirements, the role of internal monologue, and specific concerns with secondary characters, the resolution, and the ending.*

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