

## Word Count for Novels and Children's Books

*Courtesy of Chuck Sambuchino's blog*

Word count is something I don't think about too often until I travel to a writers' conference, and then someone asks a simple, innocent question and a firestorm follows. With that in mind, I've tried to put together the definitive post on word count for fiction (novels, young adult, middle grade and even memoir).

The most important thing here is to realize that there are always exceptions to these rules. And man, people love to point out exceptions—and they always will. However, if there is one thing I remember from when my wife dragged me kicking and screaming to He's Just Not That Into You, it's that you cannot count on being the exception; you must count on being the rule. Aiming to be the exception is setting yourself up for disappointment. What writers fail to see is that for every successful exception to the rule (e.g., a first-time 150,000-word novel), there are at least 100 failures if not 300.

Almost always, high word count means that the writer simply did not edit their work down enough. Or—it means they have two or more books combined into one.

“But what about J K Rowling???” asks that man in the back of the room, putting his palms up the air. Well—remember the first Harry Potter book? It wasn't that long. After JK made the publishing house oodles and oodles of money, she could do whatever she wanted. And since most writers haven't earned oodles, they need to stick to the rules and make sure their work gets read. The other thing that will make you an exception is if your writing is absolutely brilliant. But let's face it. Most of our work does not classify as “absolutely brilliant” or we'd all have 16 novels at this point.

### **ADULT NOVELS: COMMERCIAL & LITERARY**

Between 80,000 and 89,999 words is a good range you should be aiming for. This is a 100% safe range for literary, romance, mystery, suspense, thriller and horror. Anything in this word count won't scare off any agent anywhere.

Now, speaking broadly, you can have as few as 71,000 words and as many as 109,000 words. That is the total range. When it dips below 80K, it might be perceived as too short—not giving the reader enough. It seems as though going over 100K is all right, but not by much. I suggest stopping at 109K because just the mental hurdle to jump concerning 110K is just another thing you don't want going against you. And, as agent Rachelle Gardner pointed out when discussing word count, over 110K is defined as “epic or saga.” Chances are your cozy mystery or literary novel is not an epic. Rachelle also mentions that passing 100K in word count means it's a more expensive book to produce—hence agents' and editors' aversion to such lengths.

#### **In short:**

80,000 – 89,999:	Totally cool
90,000 – 99,999:	Generally safe
70,000 – 79,999:	Might be too short; probably all right
100,000 – 109,999:	Might be too long; probably all right
Below 70,000:	Too short
110,000 or above	Too long

Chick lit falls into this realm, but chick lit books tend to be a bit shorter and faster. 70-75K is not bad at all.

### **SCI-FI AND FANTASY**

Science fiction and fantasy are the big exceptions because these categories tend to run long. It has to do with all the descriptions and world-building in the writing.

With these genres, I would say 100,000 to 115,000 is an excellent range. It's six-figures long, but not real long. The thing is: Writers tend to know that these categories run long so they make them run really long and hurt their chances. There's nothing wrong with keeping it short (say, 105K) in these areas. It shows that you can whittle your work down.

Outside of that, I would say 90K to 100K is most likely all right, and 115 to 124K is probably all right,

too. That said, try to keep it in the ideal range.

### **MIDDLE GRADE**

Middle grade is from 20,000 to 45,000, depending on the subject matter and age range. When writing a longer book that is aimed at 12-year-olds (and could maybe be considered “tween”), using the term “upper middle grade” is advisable. With upper middle grade, you can aim for 32,000 to 40,000 words. These are books that resemble young adult in matter and storytelling, but still tend to stick to MG themes and avoid hot-button, YA-acceptable themes such as sex, drugs and rock & roll. You can stray a little over here but not much.

With a simpler middle grade idea (Football Hero or Jenny Jones and the Cupcake Mystery), aim lower. Shoot for 20,000 to 30,000 words.

### **YOUNG ADULT**

Perhaps more than any other, YA is the one category where word count is very flexible. For starters, 55,000 to 69,999 is a great range.

The word round the agent blogosphere is that these books tend to trending longer, saying that you can top in the 80Ks. However, this progression is still in motion and, personally, I’m not sure about this. I would say you’re playing with fire the higher you go. When it gets into the 70s, you may be all right—but you have to have a reason for going that high. Again, higher word counts usually mean that the writer does not know how to edit themselves.

A good reason to have a longer YA novel that tops out at the high end of the scale is if it’s science fiction or fantasy. Once again, these categories are expected to be a little longer because of the world-building. Concerning the low end, below 55K could be all right but I wouldn’t drop much below about 47K.

### **PICTURE BOOKS**

The standard is text for 32 pages. That might mean one line per page, or more. 500-600 words is a good number to aim for. When it gets closer to 1,000, editors and agents may shy away.

### **WESTERNS**

I remember reading some Westerns in high school and, if I recall correctly, they weren’t terribly long. There wasn’t a whole about this on agent and editor sites, but from what I found, these can be anywhere from 50K to 80K. 60,000 is a solid number to aim for.

### **MEMOIR**

Memoir is the same as a novel and that means you’re aiming for 80,000 to 89,999. However, keep in mind when we talked about how people don’t know how to edit their work. This is specially true in memoir, I’ve found, because people tend to write everything about their life—because it all really happened.

Coming in a bit low (70-79K) is not a terrible thing, as it shows you know how to focus on the most interesting parts of your life and avoid a Bill-Clinton-esque, tome-length book. At the same time, you may want to consider the high end of memoir at 99,999. Again, it’s a mental thing seeing a six-figure length memoir.

### **SOME THOUGHTS**

You have agents like Nathan Bransford and Kristin Nelson who say that you shouldn’t think about word count, but rather you should think about pacing and telling the best story possible—and don’t worry about the length. Yes, they’re right, but the fact is: Not every agent feels that way and is willing to give a 129,000-word novel a shot. Agents have so many queries that they are looking for reasons to say no. They are looking for mistakes, chinks in the armor, to cut their query stack down by one. And if you adopt the mentality that your book has to be long, then you are giving them ammunition to reject you. Take your chances and hope that excellent writing will see your baby through no matter (and I hope it does indeed break through).

**But I believe that we cannot count on being the exception; we must count on being the rule. That’s the best way to give yourself your best shot at succeeding.**