



How to Start Your Story

A guided workbook for
the book you haven't
started yet



“There is no greater
agony than bearing an
untold story inside you.”

Maya Angelou

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Hi. I'm Rachel, and I built Myra Create.

A few years ago I started writing my own book, and I found myself scattered across five different apps just to keep track of my characters, my world, and the manuscript itself. The process that was supposed to feel creative kept turning into admin. So I built the tool I actually needed.

This workbook is a small, paper version of that same idea. It won't write your book for you. Nothing can do that but you. This workbook will help you get the shape of it out of your head and onto the page, one honest question at a time.

You don't need to have it all figured out. You just need to start.

HOW THIS EDITION IS DIFFERENT

Every chapter now includes a worked example, so you can see the questions answered before you answer them yourself. All the examples follow the same imaginary book, so by the end you'll have watched an entire story get built from a single feeling, page by page, the same way yours will.

And before you turn the page, hear this. No book idea is stupid. Not the one that feels too big, not the one that feels too small, not the one you're embarrassed to say out loud yet. If it's living in you, it's worth putting on paper. Your work is meant to be shared, not perfected in secret and never shown to anyone.

Welcome home, storyteller.

- Rachel

LET'S GET YOU STARTED

Every book starts the same way, not with a perfect plot or a finished outline, but with a feeling you can't quite shake. A scene you keep replaying in your head. A character who won't stop talking to you at inconvenient times. A "what if" that showed up uninvited and refused to leave.

That feeling is not a coincidence. It's the actual beginning of your book, even if it doesn't look like one yet. Most people wait for it to arrive fully formed, with a title and three acts already sorted. It almost never works that way. It starts messy and a little embarrassing to say out loud. That's every writer, including the ones whose books you've loved.

Before you get into character or plot, be honest with yourself about why this particular story, and why now. Knowing your own reason is what carries you through the parts of writing that aren't fun: the middle, the self-doubt, the day you don't feel like it but sit down anyway.

WORKED EXAMPLE: A BOOK CALLED "THE LAST CORRESPONDENCE"

Why this story, why now? I keep thinking about my grandmother's handwriting disappearing along with her. I want to write about the strange grief of watching ordinary things disappear before you're ready for them to.

A book that made me want to write this way: The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, for the way small, ordinary letters carried enormous weight.

What scares me most: This is about the specific grief of losing something ordinary, someone's handwriting or their voice on the phone, before you're ready to lose it.

QUESTIONS TO SIT WITH BEFORE YOU START

Why this story? Why now?

What's one book that made you think "I want to write something that makes someone feel this way"?

What's scaring you most about starting?

What's one scene or image from this story you can already picture in full detail?

P.S. If those questions were hard to answer, that's alright, and it might even be useful information. Sometimes it means you haven't fallen in love with the people who are going to carry you through this story yet. That's completely fine. The next chapter is built to help with exactly that. Come back to these once your characters feel real to you, and they'll likely answer themselves.

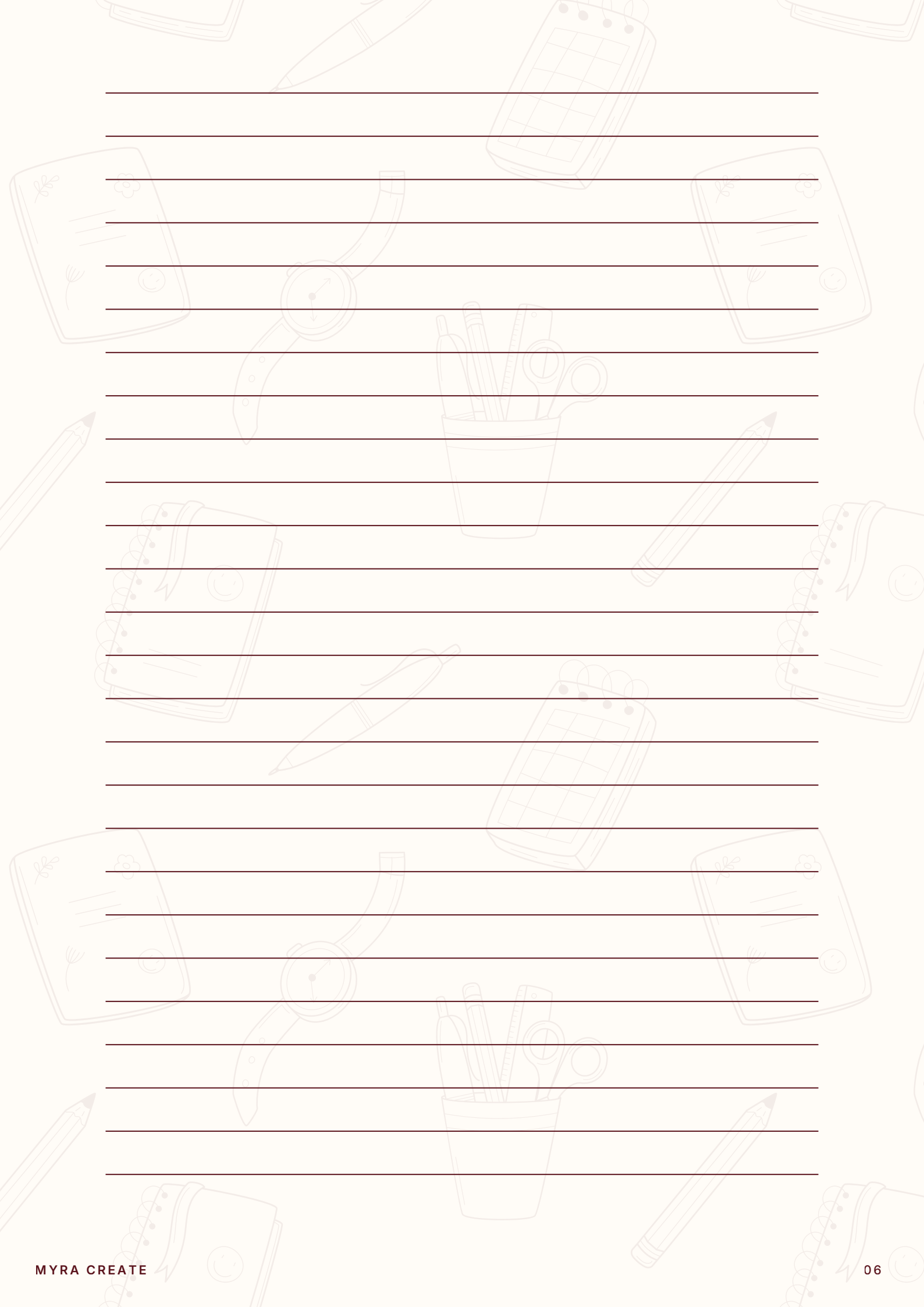
COMMON MISTAKES

Waiting for permission before you consider the idea legitimate: a certain word count, a finished outline, someone else telling you it's good. No one is going to hand you that permission. You grant it to yourself by starting.

TRY THIS

Set a timer for three minutes and free-write the answer to "why now" without stopping to edit. The real reason is usually the one you almost didn't write down.

Notes



Handwriting practice lines consisting of 18 horizontal lines. Each line set includes a solid top line, a dashed midline, and a solid bottom line, providing a guide for letter height and placement.

YOUR MAIN CHARACTER

Start with a person, not the plot. It's tempting to start with plot: the big twist, the dramatic ending, the world-shaking event. But readers don't fall in love with plots. They fall in love with people. A story can survive a loose plot far better than it can survive a character nobody cares about.

So start here instead. Not with everything about them. You don't need their whole backstory, their star sign, or a full physical description yet. Start with what they want, because want is what moves a character through a story. Then find what they need, which is often a different, quieter thing than what they want, and is usually the thing the story is actually about underneath the plot. Give them a flaw, too. Not a cute, marketable flaw like "works too hard," but an actual one. Something that makes them occasionally difficult to like, because that's what makes them feel human instead of a mouthpiece for your themes.

Go into as much detail as you can here, even the details that feel unimportant. Specific details, like the way someone drums their fingers when they lie or the childhood nickname they hate, are often what make a character feel real to a reader, far more than a tidy list of traits.

WORKED EXAMPLE:

Name & want: Mira Voss. She wants a transfer out of Halloway's Reach, the dying coastal town she grew up in.

What she needs: To let herself grieve and let the townspeople back in before she's allowed to leave it.

Flaw: She deflects every real conversation with a joke, including the ones that matter most.

Physical detail: She still wears her late father's watch. It runs two minutes fast. She's never reset it.

QUESTIONS TO BUILD YOUR CHARACTER

What's their name, and what do they want more than anything?

What do they need, even if they don't know it yet?

What are they afraid of?

One physical detail you can already picture clearly

A flaw that makes them human, not just likeable

What contradiction makes them interesting: brave in one area of life, quietly avoidant in another?

COMMON MISTAKES

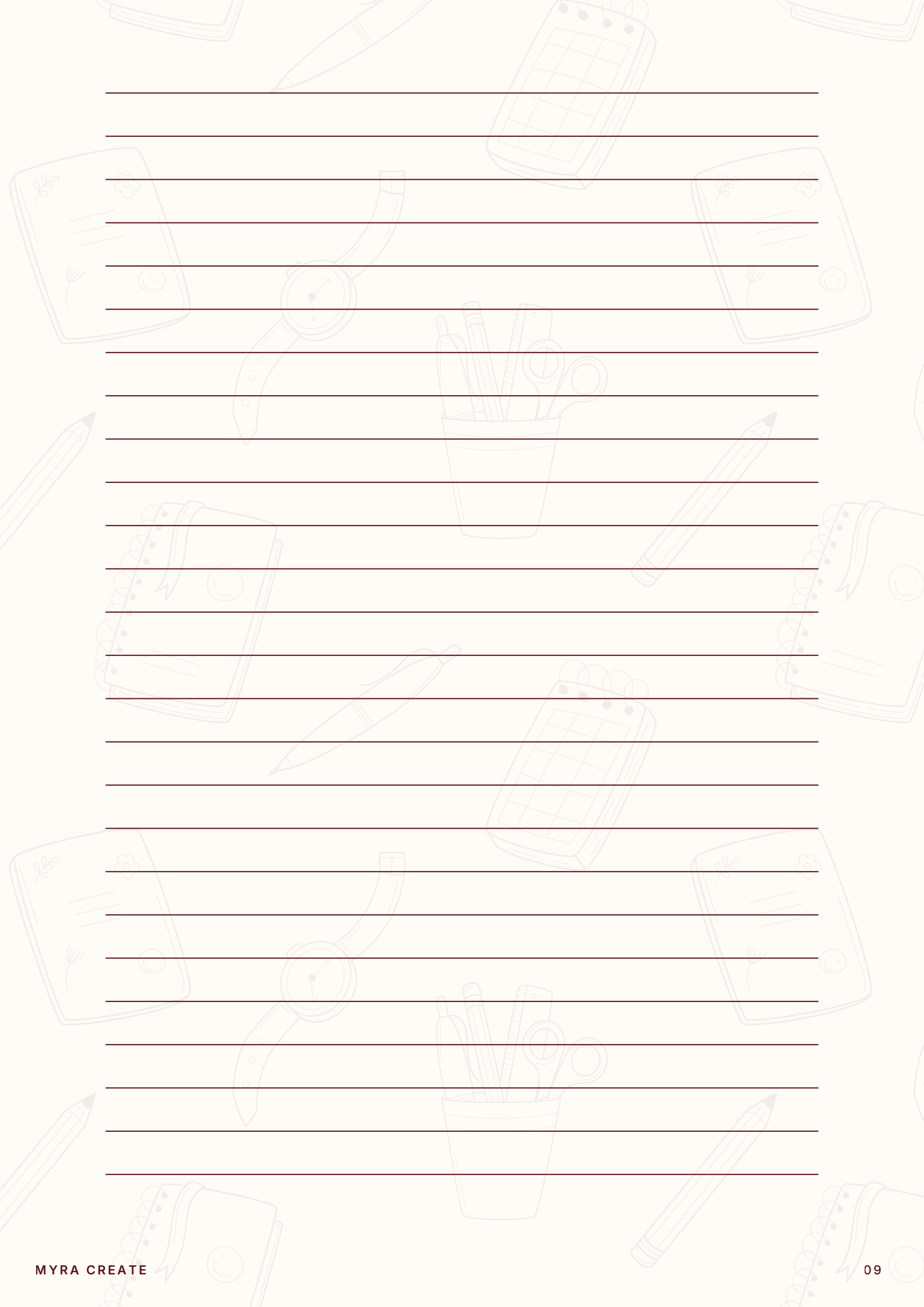
Making the flaw a virtue in disguise, "works too hard," "cares too much." If the flaw never actually costs the character anything on the page, it isn't a flaw. It's a compliment wearing a costume.

CHARACTER INTERVIEW

If your character still feels flat, try answering as them, in first person: "The thing people misunderstand about me is ____." "I'd never admit this, but ____." Voice reveals character faster than description does.

P.S. Don't underestimate visually developing your character too, whether that's sketching them yourself or generating a reference image with AI. Seeing them, not just describing them, can reveal things about who they are that words alone won't. And often, when you see the right face for them, you'll simply know.

Notes



Handwriting practice lines consisting of 16 horizontal rows. Each row is defined by two parallel lines, with a dashed midline for letter height guidance. The lines are evenly spaced across the page.

BUILD YOUR OWN WORLD

Whether you're writing epic fantasy or a story set in a town that looks exactly like the one you grew up in, your story still needs a world with texture, somewhere a reader can stand and look around. World-building isn't only for fantasy and sci-fi writers. Every story happens somewhere, and that somewhere shapes what's possible for your characters.

You don't need to map every kingdom or invent an entire history before you write a single scene. What actually matters is knowing your world well enough that it feels lived-in, even in the parts you never explicitly describe. **A good trick: pick one place in your story world you can already picture in real detail: the smell of it, the sound of it, who's usually there, and build outward from that single place rather than trying to build the whole map at once.**

It's also worth thinking early about power. Every world, real or invented, has people who hold power and people who want it. That tension, even in the background, is often where your plot's stakes quietly come from.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Where and when: Halloway's Reach, a fictional fishing town on the New England coast, present day but analog.

One vivid place: The sorting room at the post office, dust and glue, the particular groan the old sorting machine makes every fourth rotation.

What makes it different: The post office still delivers to a lighthouse address that, technically, doesn't exist anymore.

Power: The postmaster decides whose mail moves first, and in a town this small, mail is gossip currency.

History in one sentence: The town's fishing fleet left twenty years ago and never came back, and half the buildings are still waiting for people who won't return either.

QUESTIONS TO SHAPE YOUR WORLD

Where and when does your story take place?

What's one place in this world you can already see clearly?

What makes this world different from our own, even slightly?

Who holds power here, and who wants it?

What's this world's history in one sentence: the thing everyone here already knows and never explains?

COMMON MISTAKES

Front-loading exposition, spending page one explaining the rules of the world instead of dropping the reader into a moment and letting the rules emerge as they matter. Readers tolerate not-knowing far longer than writers assume.

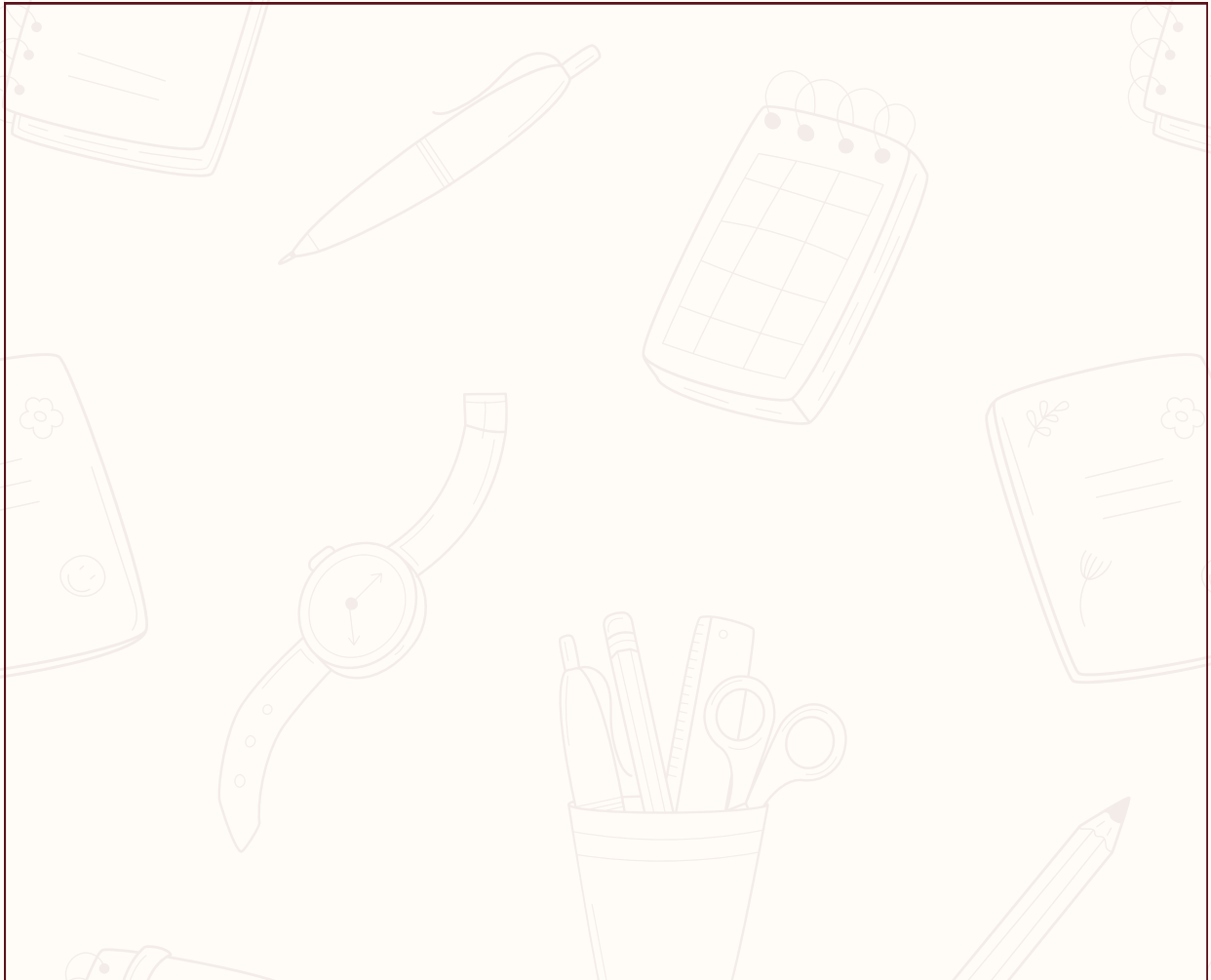
TRY THIS

Write one paragraph describing your key place using only what a blindfolded person would notice: sound, smell, temperature, texture. Sight is the last sense a reader actually needs from you; the other four are what make a place feel real.

Notes



If you have a visual in mind



MAGIC, TECHNOLOGY, OR SYSTEMS

SKIP THIS PAGE IF IT DOES NOT APPLY TO YOUR STORY.

If your story bends the rules of reality in any way, whether through magic, advanced technology, a power passed down through bloodlines, or anything else that doesn't exist in our world, it needs its own internal logic, even a loose one. Not because you owe your reader a scientific explanation, but because the moment a system can do anything, it stops creating stakes.

The most useful question to ask isn't "what can this power do?" It's "what can this power never do, no matter what?" Limits are what turn a magic system from a convenient plot device into a real source of tension. Just as important is cost. What does using this power take from the person using it, physically, emotionally, socially? A system with no cost rarely feels like it matters.

WORKED EXAMPLE

The system: Letters addressed to the dead sometimes still arrive at Mira's sorting office, and if she chooses to deliver them, they reach who they're meant for.

The cost: Every letter she delivers, she loses one of her own memories, always a small one, never one she gets to choose.

What it can never do: It never works for a letter she writes herself. She can't use it to reach her own dead.

QUESTIONS TO DEFINE YOUR SYSTEM

What system bends the rules of reality in your world?

What does it cost the person using it?

What can it never do, no matter what?

What does this system quietly reveal about your story's theme?

How did this system come to exist in the first place? Was it discovered, built, inherited, or created through some unexpected event?

Who else in this world knows this system exists, and what have they done with that knowledge?

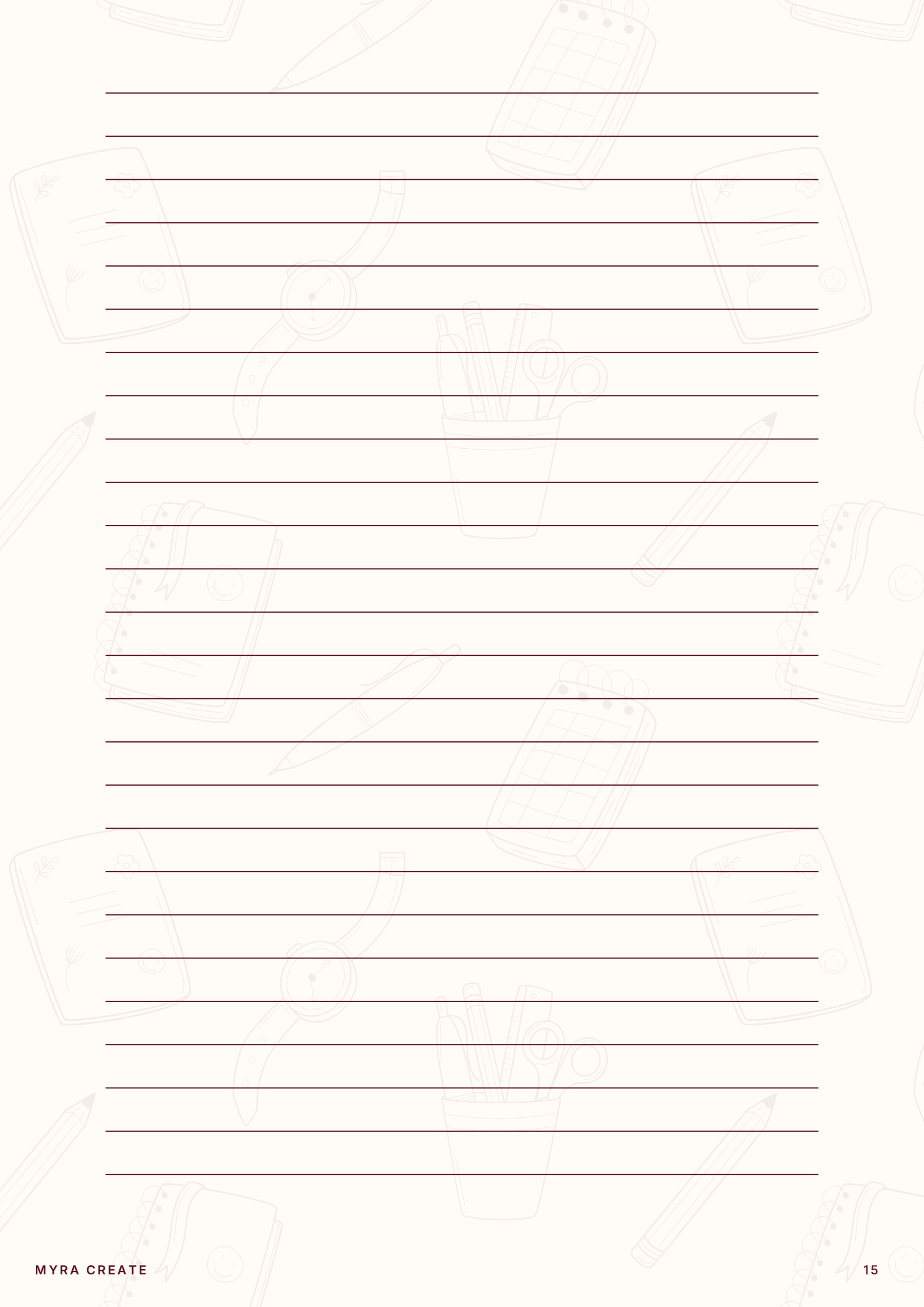
COMMON MISTAKES

A system flexible enough to solve any problem the plot creates. Readers stop worrying the moment they sense nothing is really at stake. If your character can always find a workaround, raise the cost instead of adding a new rule.

TRY THIS

Picture your character's worst possible moment in this story. Could this power get them out of it easily? If yes, the limit or cost isn't strong enough yet. The best systems make the climax harder, not easier.

Notes



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WHO ELSE IS ON THIS JOURNEY?

No character exists in isolation, and no story is carried by one person alone. The people around your protagonist do real work: they reveal who your main character is by how they act differently around each one, create relationships your reader ends up caring about just as much as the plot, and push back in ways that create friction and change.

Resist making your antagonist purely evil for the sake of being evil. The most memorable opposition usually believes, quite genuinely, that they're right. Give them their own reasons, their own version of the story where they're the hero.

And don't skip the people your character loves. Stakes are rarely just about what your character might lose in a physical sense. They're about who your character might lose, and what that would actually cost them.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Support: Denny, her coworker, who stays because he lost someone too and doesn't need her to explain that grief out loud.

Opposition, with real reasons: The postmaster wants to shut the branch down. He genuinely believes it's a mercy, that the town should stop pretending it isn't dying.

Who she loves, and the cost: Her father. Delivering his letter would mean losing a memory of him forever, the exact trade the story builds toward.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PEOPLE AROUND YOUR PROTAGONIST

Who supports your main character, and why do they stay?

Who stands in their way, with their own genuine reasons, not just because the plot needs a villain?

Is there someone your character loves, and what would it cost them to lose that person?

What's one secret someone close to your protagonist is keeping from them?

Who in this story knows your protagonist's flaw better than anyone, and calls it out instead of enabling it?

Is there a character who used to be close to your protagonist but isn't anymore? What happened?

What would your antagonist say your protagonist's flaw actually is?

Who's the one character who has nothing to gain or lose from how this story ends?

Which relationship in this story changes the most by the end, and which one, notably, doesn't change at all?

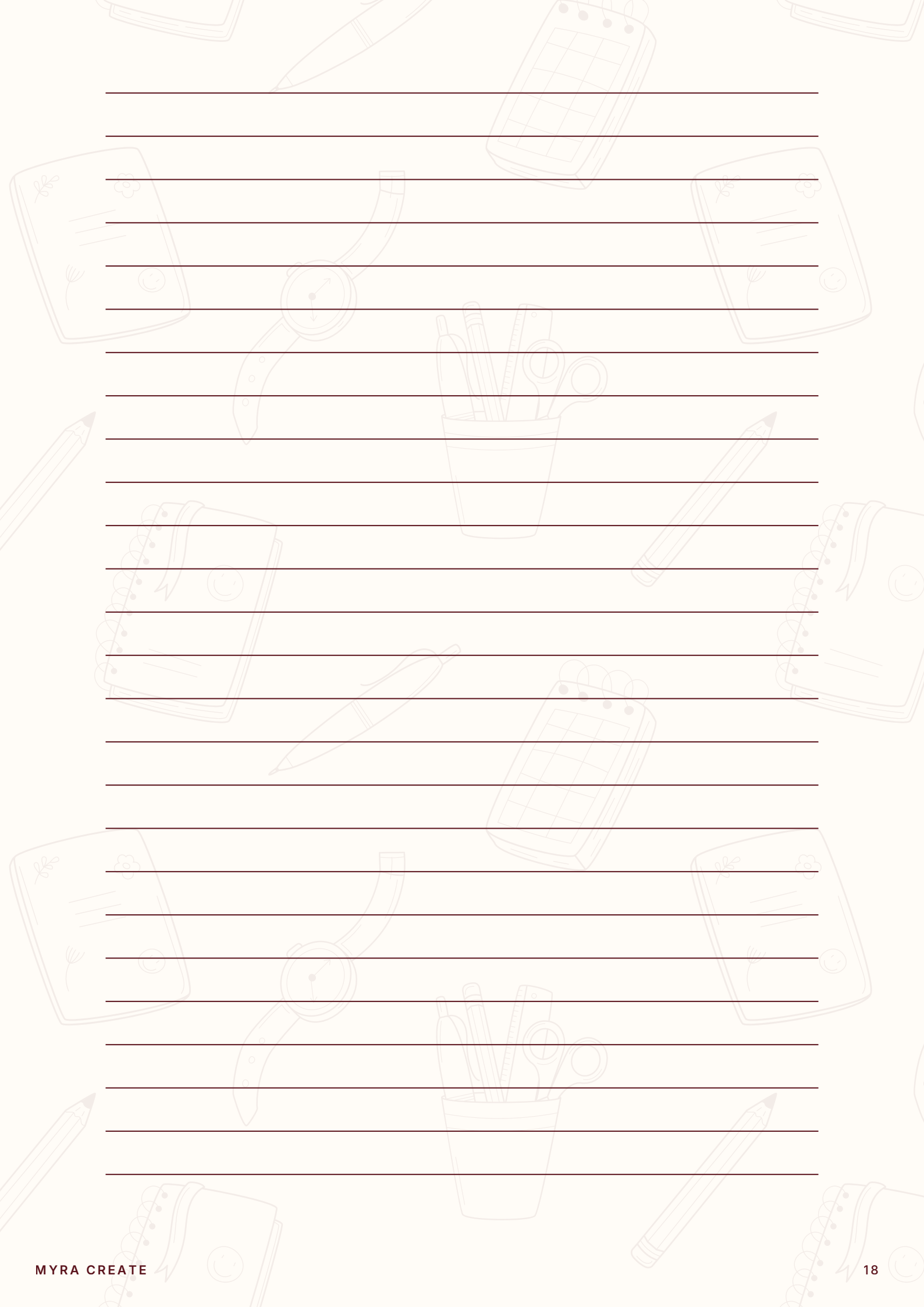
TRY THIS

Write two sentences from your antagonist's point of view about why the protagonist is the problem. If you can't write those sentences honestly, the opposition may need a rewrite before the plot does.

COMMON MISTAKES

An antagonist who exists only to be defeated, with no life or wants of their own outside opposing the hero. If you can't imagine a version of this story told from their side, they're a plot device, not a person yet.

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WHAT IS THIS STORY ABOUT?

Plot is what happens. Theme is why any of it matters. You don't need to know your theme with total clarity before you start writing. A lot of writers only fully understand what their book was really about once they've finished a first draft and can see the whole shape of it. But it helps to ask the question early, even loosely, because it quietly steers the choices you make along the way.

It also helps to think about voice before you dive into the manuscript itself. Is this a story told close, from inside one character's head, where the reader feels everything alongside them? Or is it told a little further back, more observational, letting the reader see things the character can't?

WORKED EXAMPLE

The one feeling: Bittersweet permission to let go.

The question it asks: What do we owe the dead versus what we owe the living?

Voice: Close third person, staying inside Mira's head so the reader loses the memories alongside her.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE HEART OF YOUR STORY

If a reader closed this book and only remembered one feeling, what would you want it to be?

What question does this story ask that you don't have to answer yet?

Whose voice is this written in, close and intimate, or pulled back and observing?

What's the emotional wound this story keeps circling back to, even underneath the plot?

COMMON MISTAKES

Having a character deliver the theme as a speech near the end. If you can state your theme outright without any embarrassment, that's usually a sign the story hasn't fully embodied it yet. Trust the reader to feel it without being told.

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The image features a repeating pattern of school-related items in a light gray, line-art style. The items include a wristwatch with a round face and a strap, a cup filled with various writing instruments like pens, pencils, and a ruler, a single pencil, a spiral-bound notebook, a pen, a small calculator, and a book with a flower on its cover. These items are scattered across the page, which is also filled with horizontal lines for writing.

THE SHAPE OF YOUR STORY

You don't need a rigid, beat-by-beat outline to start writing, and plenty of wonderful books were written by people who discovered the story as they went. But having a rough map of five key moments can save you from the specific kind of stuck that happens around the 30,000-word mark, when the opening excitement has worn off and the ending still feels impossibly far away.

Think of these five beats as loose landmarks, not a contract. Their real value isn't accuracy. You will deviate from them, probably a lot. Their real value is that they give you something to write toward on the days the story feels shapeless. A landmark you abandon halfway is still more useful than no landmark at all.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Opening image: Mira sorting mail alone at dawn, the town still asleep around her.

Inciting incident: The first "impossible" letter arrives, addressed to a man who died a decade ago.

Midpoint: She realizes delivering these letters is costing her memories of her own.

Climax: The final letter is addressed to her own father: deliver it and lose him completely, or keep it and lose the town's last piece of magic.

Ending: She keeps the branch open. She's made her peace, though not the one she expected to make.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE HEART OF YOUR STORY

Opening image: where do we meet your character?

Inciting incident: what changes everything?

Midpoint: what goes wrong, or what's revealed?

Climax: what's the final confrontation or choice?

Ending: where do we leave your character?

TRY THIS

Read your five beats back to back, ignoring everything in between. If they already sound like a story arc, you have a spine. If they sound like five unrelated events, your midpoint is usually the one doing too little work.

IF THIS HELPS

Act One: is your character's world before it breaks.

opening image → inciting incident

Act Two: is them trying the wrong solutions first, which is normal and necessary.

inciting incident → midpoint → climax

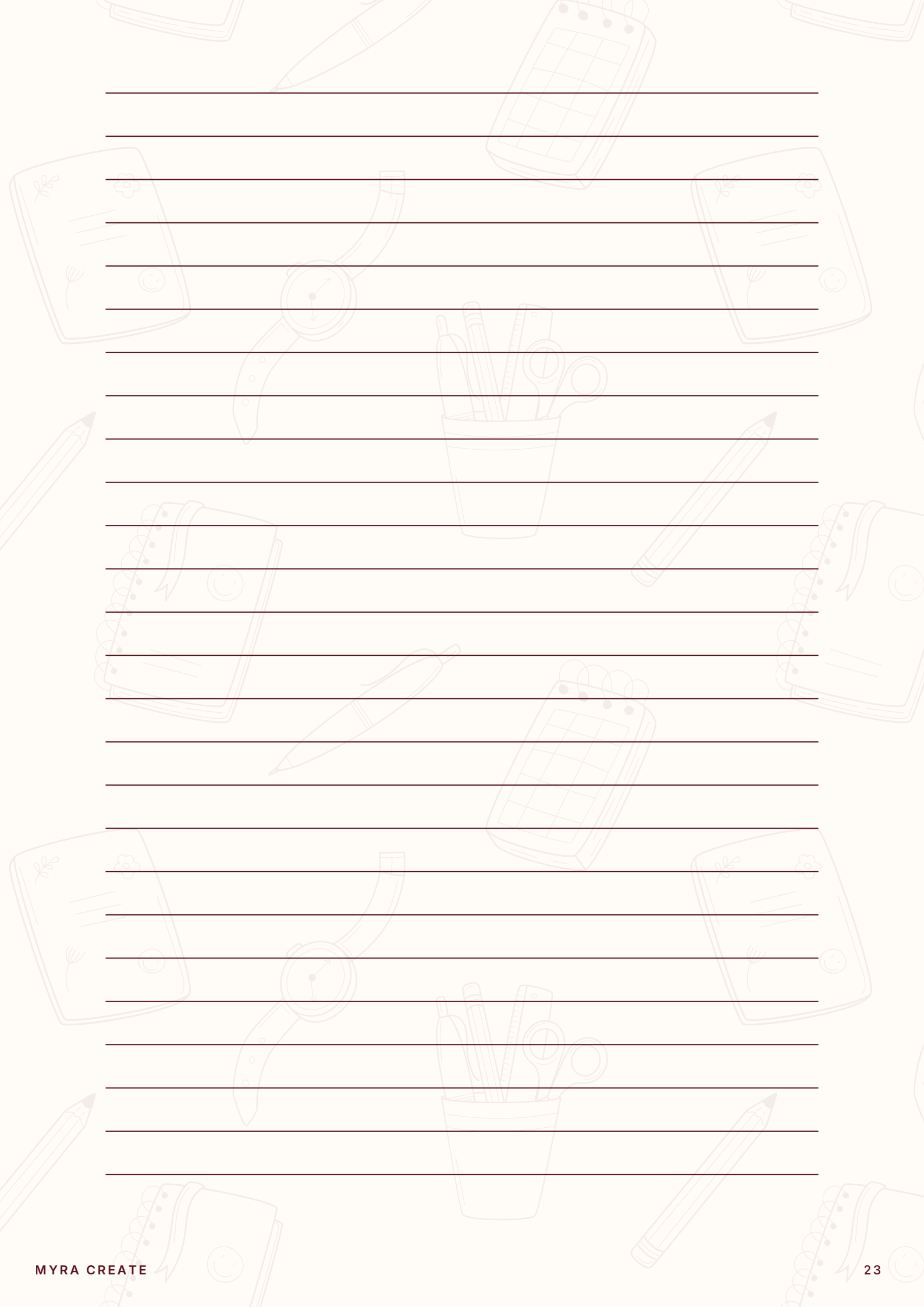
Act Three: is the cost of finally trying the right one. You don't need to hit any of this exactly. It's a compass, not a map.

climax → ending

COMMON MISTAKES

Treating the midpoint as just "more of the same" instead of a turn. A strong midpoint changes what your character is trying to do, not just how hard the thing they were already doing has gotten.

Notes



WRITING DIALOGUE THAT SOUNDS REAL

Dialogue is one of the fastest ways to reveal character, but it's also one of the easiest places for a manuscript to feel stiff. Real conversation is rarely direct. People deflect, interrupt, change the subject, say less than they mean.

Dialogue that's too on-the-nose, with characters stating exactly what they feel or explaining backstory to someone who already knows it, reads as false, even when it feels efficient on the page.

The trick is subtext: what's said versus what's actually meant. A character asking "Did you eat?" can be a whole conversation about whether someone is being taken care of, if you don't let them say that directly.

It also helps to give each major character a distinct rhythm, not an accent or a gimmick necessarily, but a pattern. Short sentences versus long ones. Someone who answers questions with questions. Someone who never quite finishes a sentence when it matters most.

WORKED EXAMPLE

"Long night?" Denny asked, not turning around.

"Long month." Mira dropped a bundle of catalogs into the bin.

He glanced at her then, quick and assessing, before looking away again.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Okay." He went back to the board. That was the thing about Denny. He always let her have the lie.

Neither character says "I'm exhausted from carrying grief," but that's what the exchange is actually about.

QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW YOUR CHARACTERS SPEAK

How does your protagonist speak differently from the people around them, word choice, sentence length, what they avoid saying?

Write a short exchange (4–6 lines) between two characters about something ordinary that's really about something else.

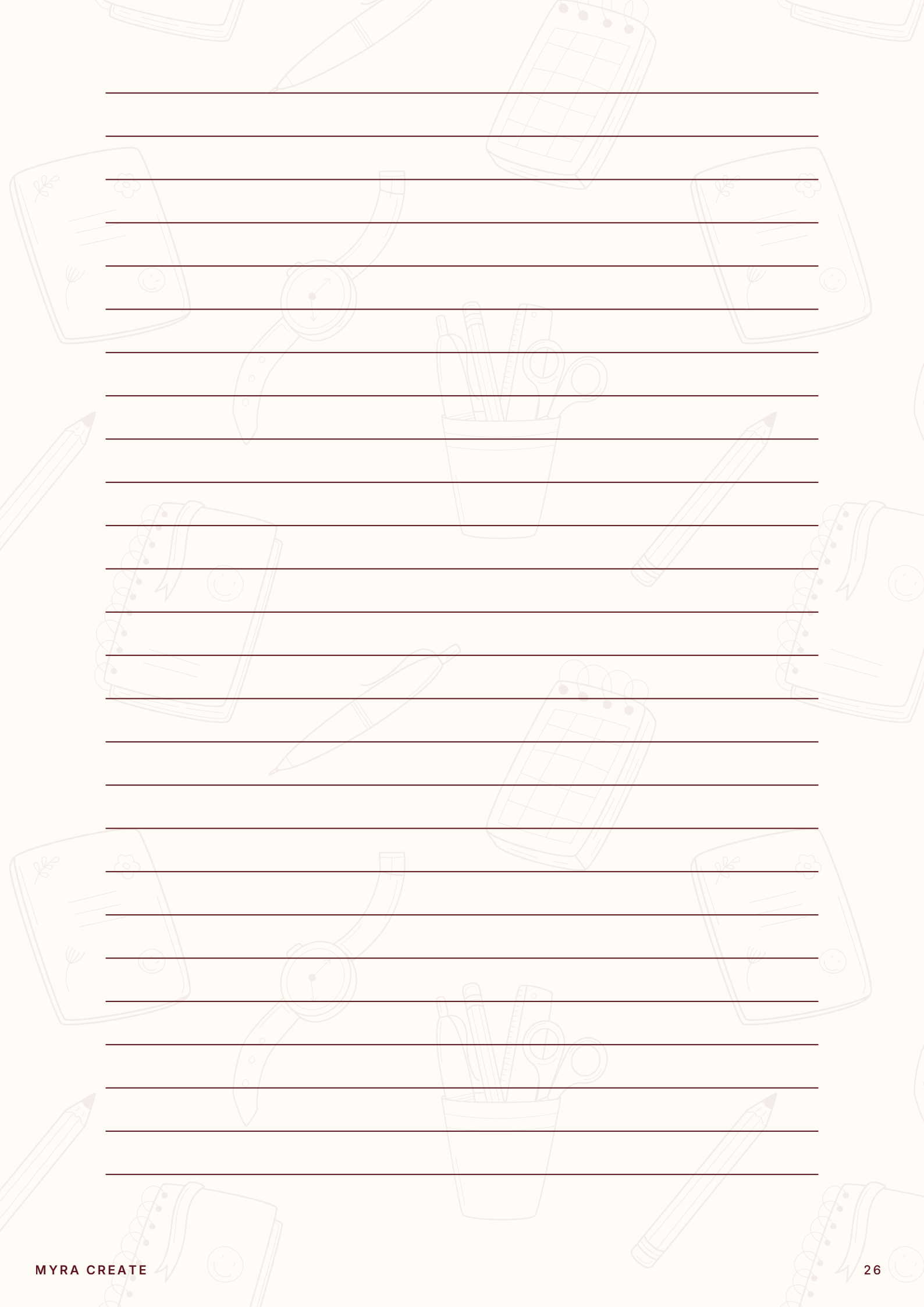
TRY THIS

Read your dialogue out loud. If you'd never actually say it to a person's face, your character probably wouldn't either.

COMMON MISTAKES

Using dialogue tags to do the emotional work instead of the words themselves. **"She said angrily."** instead of writing a line that actually sounds angry. If the tag is carrying the emotion, the dialogue underneath usually needs another pass.

Notes



Handwriting practice lines consisting of 18 horizontal lines. Each line is preceded by a small blue dot, serving as a starting point for letter formation. The lines are evenly spaced and span the width of the page.

GENRE AND THE PROMISES YOU'RE MAKING

Readers arrive at your book with expectations, whether you've set them deliberately or not, and those expectations are shaped by genre. A mystery reader expects the clues to be fair. A romance reader expects the central relationship to land in a way that feels earned. A literary fiction reader is often more forgiving of plot in exchange for voice. None of this is a cage. Plenty of great books blend or subvert genre, but it helps to know which promises you're making on page one, because readers will hold you to them by the end.

This is also where comp titles earn their keep beyond a query letter. Naming two books your story sits between isn't just marketing language. It's a way of being honest with yourself about the kind of experience you're building.

GENRE	THE CORE PROMISE TO YOUR READER
Mystery / thriller	Every clue was fairly available, and the tension keeps escalating.
Romance	The central relationship resolves with a happily-ever-after or happy-for-now ending.
Fantasy / sci-fi	The rules of the world stay consistent, even as they're revealed slowly.
Literary fiction	Voice and interiority carry the reader even where plot moves slowly.
Horror	The dread pays off, the threat is real, or the atmosphere alone justifies the ride
Crime / noir	The moral lines stay blurry on purpose, and no one gets out clean.

Historical fiction

The period detail is accurate enough to trust, even where the story invents freely.

Young adult

The protagonist's own choices drive the story, and they come out changed by the end.

Dystopian

The broken system is internally logical, and the ending reckons honestly with what it costs to fight it.

Comedy / satire

The absurdity has a target. It's laughing at something, not just being silly.

COMMON MISTAKES

Mixing genre signals without meaning to, a quiet, literary opening chapter attached to a plot that ultimately resolves like a thriller confuses readers about what kind of promise you're making. Blending genres on purpose is a choice; drifting between them by accident just reads as inconsistent.

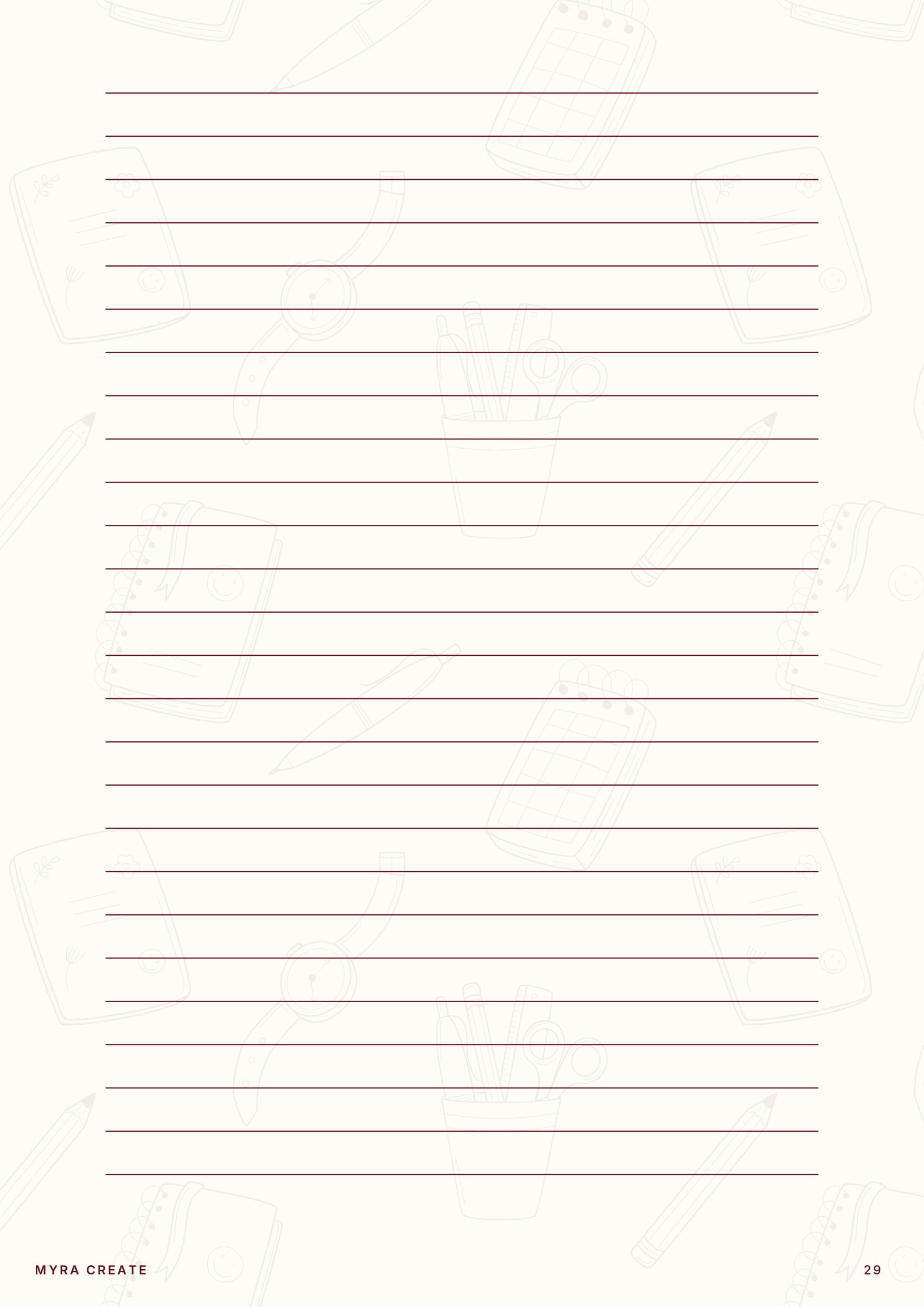
QUESTIONS ABOUT GENRE AND EXPECTATIONS

What genre are you writing, and what do readers of that genre expect from an ending?

What promise are you making on page one that you'll need to pay off by the last page?

If you broke this genre's central promise, what would readers say you got wrong?

Notes



Handwriting practice lines consisting of 18 horizontal ruling lines.

YOUR OPENING PAGE

Everything until now has been preparation. This is the first page a reader will actually judge you by. Not because it needs to be perfect. First pages get rewritten more than any other part of a book. **It has one job: make the reader want to turn to page two.**

A strong opening page does a few things at once. It plants your character in a specific moment, not a general one. It raises a question the reader wants answered, even a small one. **And it establishes voice: the reader should be able to tell, within a paragraph, roughly what kind of book they're holding.**

Avoid the openings that agents and editors see most often, because they tend to stall a reader before the story has a chance to grab them: characters waking up, characters describing themselves in a mirror, extended weather reports, or a prologue's worth of history before we've met anyone worth caring about. None of these are forbidden. Plenty of good books break these rules, but they're worth being deliberate about rather than falling into by default.

WORKED EXAMPLE : OPENING PARAGRAPH

“How do you deliver a letter to a dead man? Mira had never figured out the trick of it. She just knew that some mornings, the mail told her to try anyway. Today's envelope was addressed to Everett Cole, who'd been gone for eleven years, and underneath his name, in handwriting she didn't recognize.

Please. One more.”

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR OPENING PAGE

What's the very first image or moment you can already picture clearly?

What question should the first page plant in a reader's mind, even a small one?

What's a cliché opening you want to consciously avoid falling into?

TRY THIS

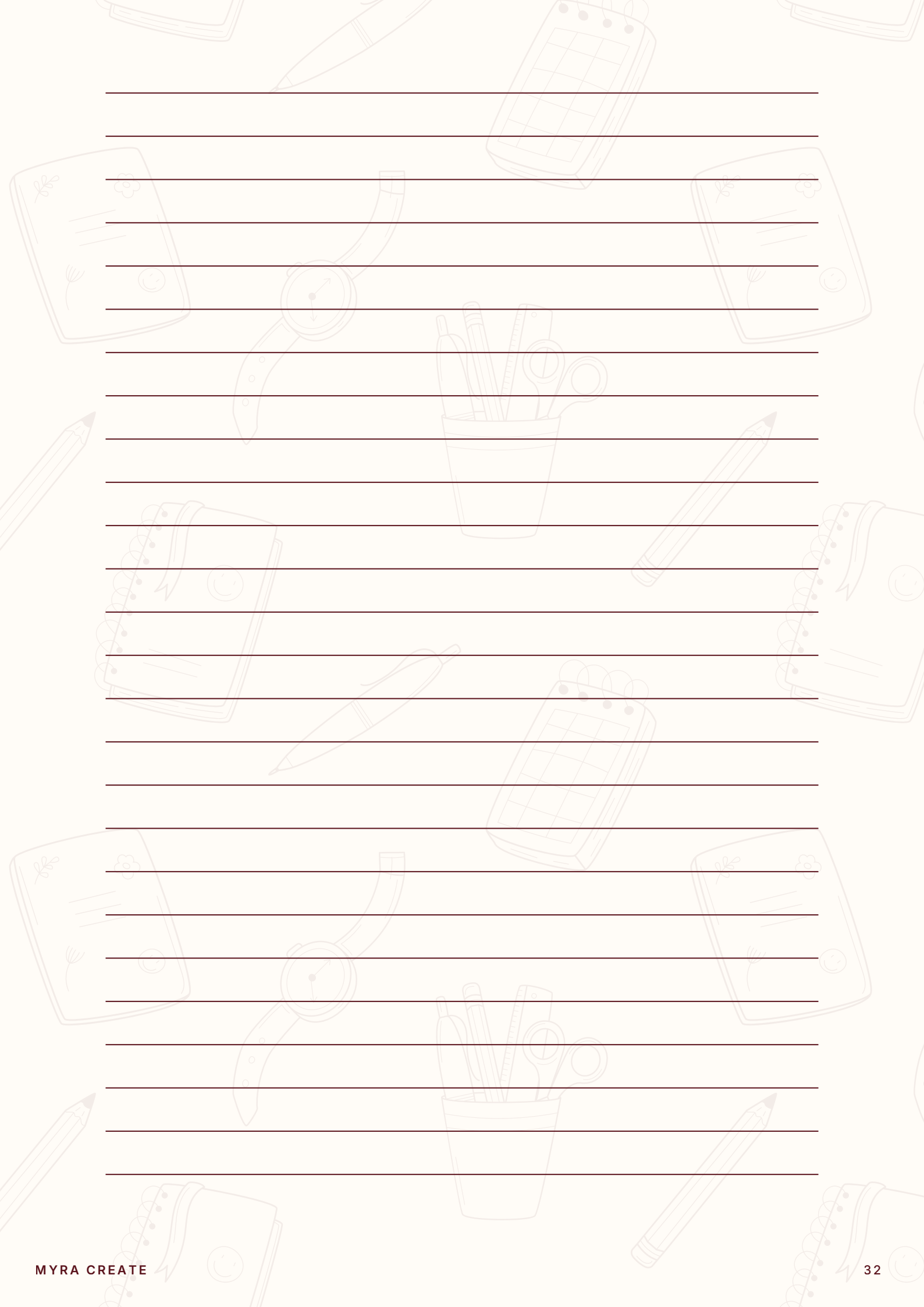
Write your opening line three different ways, from inside your character's thought, from a piece of action already in motion, and from a single concrete image. One of the three usually pulls harder than the other two.

COMMON MISTAKES

Opening with backstory the reader doesn't need yet, told to them directly, instead of forward motion. Curiosity is a better hook than information. You can always answer the question a page or two later than you think.

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BRING IT TOGETHER

Everything so far has lived in pieces. This page exists to make you say the whole thing out loud, in the compressed form you'd use if someone asked "so what's your book about?" at a party and you only had one breath to answer.

This isn't about being clever or market-ready. It's a gut check: if you can't compress your story yet, that's useful information, not a failure. It usually just means one of the earlier chapters needs another pass.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Logline: A grieving postal worker in a dying coastal town discovers she can deliver letters to the dead, at the cost of her own memories, and must decide how much of her father she's willing to forget to say goodbye.

Comparable books: The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society meets The Ocean at the End of the Lane.

One-paragraph pitch: Halloway's Reach is dying, and Mira Voss is trying to leave it before it finishes. But the post office has one last secret: letters addressed to the town's dead, which only Mira can deliver, and only by giving up a piece of herself for every one she sends. As the letters keep coming, Mira has to decide what she owes the people she's lost, and what she still owes herself.

COMMON MISTAKES

A logline that lists plot events instead of naming the central tension, "she works at the post office and things start happening" tells us nothing. A logline needs a want and an obstacle in direct conflict, not just a sequence.

NOW WRITE YOURS

Logline: one sentence, character + want + obstacle

Comparable books: "X meets Y"

One-paragraph pitch

MAKING IT REAL

Most books don't fail because the idea wasn't good enough. They stall because life got busy, motivation faded around week three, and there was never an actual plan for when that happens. This page isn't about your story at all. It's about you, and about being honest about how you'll actually get this written.

Vague intentions like "I'll write when I have time" rarely survive contact with a real week. Specific plans hold up much better. It also helps enormously to tell someone. Writing is usually a private act, but accountability, even from one person, has a way of keeping you honest on the days your own motivation isn't enough.

THE GRACE CLAUSE

You will miss a day. Decide right now what happens next, so a missed Tuesday doesn't quietly become a missed month. A good rule: missing one day changes nothing. Missing three in a row means you open this workbook again, not the manuscript, and ask why.

COMMON MISTAKES

Setting a goal so large, like "write every day for two hours," can make missing it once feel like failure instead of a normal week. Small, specific, and repeatable beats ambitious and abandoned by week two.

QUESTIONS TO MAKE THIS REAL

When will you actually write?

What's one thing that's derailed you before, and how will you handle it this time?

Who's one person you'll tell you're writing this book?

COMMON EXCUSE

WHAT ACTUALLY HELPS

"I don't have a full afternoon free"

20 focused minutes, four times a week, beat one long session you keep postponing.

"I lost momentum and don't know where I left off"

End every session mid-sentence, on purpose. It gives you a running start next time instead of a blank page.

"It's not good enough yet"

Nothing is good enough on a first draft. That's what second drafts are for.

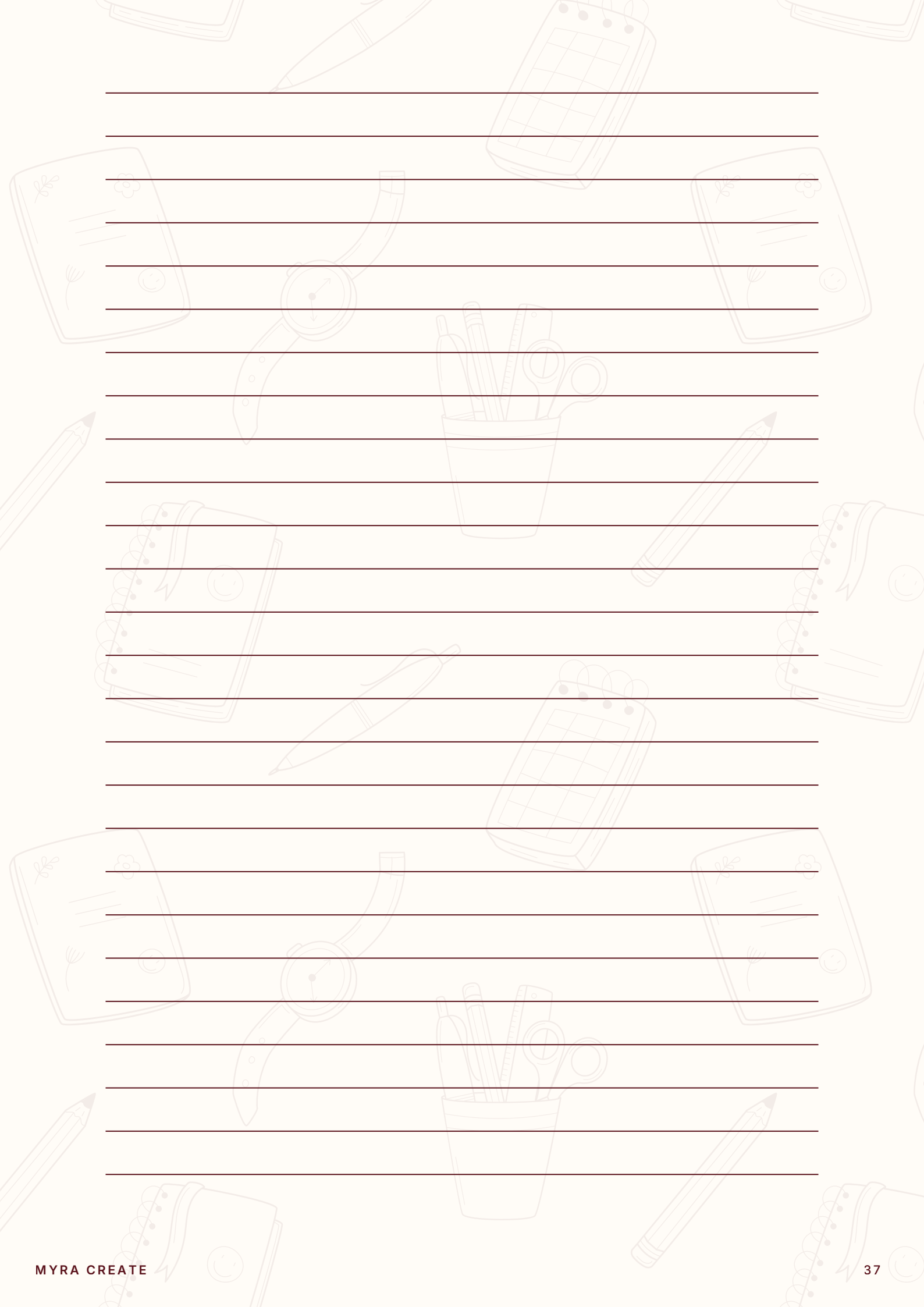
"Someone else already wrote something like this"

Not with your voice, your specifics, or your reasons for writing it. The idea was never the rare part.

"I don't know what happens after this scene"

Write the next thing your character would obviously do, even if it's wrong. You can always cut it later. You can't edit a blank page.

Notes



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WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

A gentle checklist, not a deadline

- ☐ Reread everything you've written in this workbook and circle the parts that made you feel something.
- ☐ Pick one character or one scene to develop further this week.
- ☐ Say your logline out loud to one other person.
- ☐ Tell one person you're writing this book.
- ☐ Set a small, specific writing time for the next 7 days.
- ☐ When you're ready, bring all of this into your Attic. It's built to hold everything you just started here and keep growing with you.

IF YOU GET STUCK

Almost every stall, whether it's plot, pacing, or motivation, traces back to not knowing your character as well as you thought you did. Reground in who they are, and the next scene usually reveals itself.

YOU'VE STARTED

Everything you just wrote down is the beginning of your Attic, the part of Myra Create built for exactly this. Characters, worlds, plot, magic systems, politics, all connected to the page where you'll actually write your manuscript.

As a thank you for starting here, this workbook comes with two free months of Myra Create Pro.

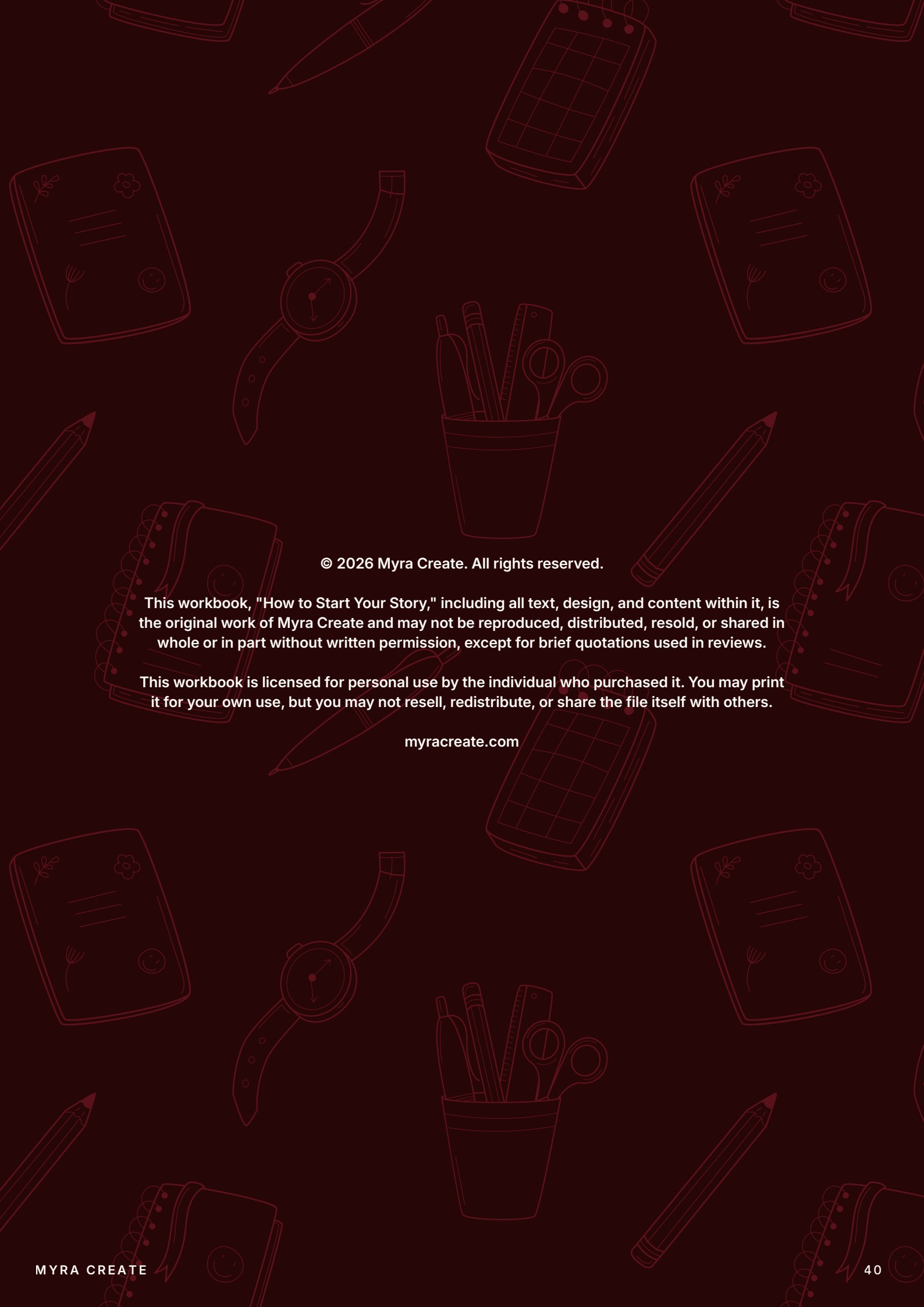
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I can't wait to see what you build.

- Rachel, founder of Myra Create



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