

The Act 1 Overload Checklist

Six steps to fix reader overload in your fantasy first chapter.



01 Mark Every Capitalised Thing

Go through your first 20 pages and flag every:

- Character names
- Place names — cities, kingdoms, regions, landmarks
- Institutions — schools, courts, temples, orders, archives
- Groups & factions — houses, clans, guilds, councils
- Titles & ranks — Lord X, High Priestess of Y, Captain of Z
- Magic terms — system names, power types, artefacts, rituals
- Gods, saints, monsters, species, magical beings
- Wars, prophecies, curses, or named historical events

If it looks invented, important, or capitalised for flavour — it gets marked.

02 Sort Into Four Buckets

Place every marked item into one of these four buckets:

- PEOPLE — characters, families, factions
- PLACES — cities, kingdoms, locations, institutions
- POWER — magic, gods, titles, orders, wars, prophecies
- PROBLEM — whatever is immediately wrong for your protagonist

Aim for one short sentence per bucket. Can you tie all four together into a single, clear description of your opening? That's your target.

03 Functional Description Check

For names that don't fit neatly into your buckets, ask: can this be a functional description instead — at least for now?

- "Her brother" instead of a name he won't need for three chapters
- "The academy" instead of its full invented title on page one
- "The border city" instead of a place name with no immediate stakes
- "The queen's spy" instead of a title plus a name plus a faction

Borrowed engagement. The reader fills in the blank with something familiar. Save the formal name for when it earns its space.

04 Run The Too Many Names Questions

For your first chapter only — answer each honestly:

- Does the reader know who the MC is before names start stacking?
- Does the reader know what the MC wants, fears, or needs right now?
- Does the reader understand what is immediately wrong in the scene?
- Are the first few names attached to emotion, action, threat, or desire?
- Are any names only there to prove the world exists?
- Are any named things introduced once and then dropped?
- Could some names wait until the next scene or chapter?
- Could some be temporarily replaced with functional descriptions?

05 Give Every Surviving Name a Reward

For every name that makes the cut, give the reader a reason to store it:

- EMOTION — does it arrive with a feeling attached? (dread, longing, shame, joy)
- CHANGE — does it alter what a character can do, say, or risk?
- MICRO-PAYOFF — does something happen with it in the same chapter?
- DESIRE LINK — is it clearly tied to the protagonist's central want?
- CLARITY CLICK — does it create one "oh, I get how this works" moment?

If a name can't earn at least one of these five, it can probably wait.

06 The Ultimate Test

Go back to your four buckets from Step 2. Now ask:

- Can you string all four buckets into one meaningful paragraph?
- Does that paragraph map the shape of your opening chapter?
- Is everything in your chapter pointing toward one clear problem?

If you can't do this without writing a page of caveats, you may have too many names not attached to your protagonist's problem — or too many separate problems introduced at once. The fix isn't deleting your lore. It's moving some to later scenes, rephrasing some as functional descriptions, and making sure what stays is tied to emotion and consequence.

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