

The Quiet Hour

How a plain text file becomes a finished book

A sample book, set by bukpress



This file is the demo. Every page you're about to read started as Markdown — the same Markdown you'd write in any editor, with no layout software involved.

The typesetting is ours. The words are yours.

One — Why plain text wins

Every book starts as plain text. Somewhere between the first draft and the finished file, most people lose a week to layout software: dragging text boxes, fighting styles that won't inherit, re-exporting because a font didn't embed.

That week buys nothing a reader can see.

Plain text has three properties that make it the right source format for a book:

- **It survives.** A .md file opens in anything, forever. No version lock, no subscription needed to read your own work.
- **It separates content from design.** Change the whole look of the book without touching a word of it.
- **It diffs.** You can see exactly what changed between drafts, which matters more than you'd think once a book has more than one editor.

The format you write in should never be the format you fight in.

The tradeoff has always been that plain text looks like plain text. That's the part worth solving — not by giving up Markdown, but by making the render good enough that nobody can tell where the book came from.

What "properly typeset" actually means

Four things separate a real book file from a browser print-out:

1. **Real pagination.** Pages break on page rules, not on wherever the viewport happens to end.
2. **Embedded fonts.** The file carries its own type, so it looks identical on a machine that has never heard of your typeface.
3. **Running page numbers.** In the footer, consistent, correct after every reflow.
4. **Repeating table headers.** When a table crosses a page, the header comes with it.

Miss any one of them and the file reads as a document, not a book.

Two — Structure before style

The fastest way to make a short book feel long is to start designing before the outline holds together. Structure first. The design decisions get easier once you know how many kinds of page you actually have.

Most short non-fiction books only have five:

Page type	Purpose	Typical count
Cover	Recognition, first impression	1
Title	Sets typographic tone	1
Chapter opener	Signals a new idea	1 per chapter
Body	Carries the argument	60–80% of the book
Reference	Tables, checklists, worksheets	2–6

Design those five well and the book is done. Everything else is repetition.

Chapter length

There is no correct chapter length, but there is a useful one. A chapter that runs 900 to 1,600 words sits comfortably in a single sitting and, in an A4 body size, lands between three and six pages. Shorter than that and the book feels like a listicle. Longer and readers start skimming for the takeaway.

If a chapter passes 2,000 words, it usually contains two chapters that haven't been separated yet.

The rhythm that works

Open with a claim. Support it with one concrete thing — an example, a number, a story. Close with the implication.

That's it. It works for a workbook chapter and it works for a novel scene, because it's how attention actually moves: interest, evidence, consequence.

Three — Type, colour and restraint

A book needs fewer decisions than a website. Three typefaces at most, and two is usually better:

- **Title face.** High contrast, distinctive. It appears on the cover, the title page and chapter openers — maybe fifteen times in the whole book. It can be dramatic because you're not asking anyone to read paragraphs of it.
- **Subtitle face.** Often the same family in italic, or a quiet sans. Its only job is to sit under the title without competing.
- **Body face.** The one that matters. It carries 95% of the reading time, so it should be boring in the best sense: even colour on the page, generous x-height, no personality that survives more than a paragraph.

Sizes that survive print

For A4 with comfortable margins:

- Body: **11–12pt**, line height **1.5–1.65**
- H3: around **1.3×** body
- H2: around **1.8×** body
- H1: **2.5×** body or more — chapter openers can breathe

Anything under 10pt reads as fine print, and readers treat fine print as skippable.

Colour

One accent, used for headings or rules, and nothing else. Two accents is a brand system, not a book. If the book will ever be printed on paper, check the accent at 40% opacity — that's roughly what a cheap laser printer will give you.

Four — The parts people forget

A short checklist for the last hour before you export:

- [] Cover has the title at a size readable as a thumbnail
- [] Title page matches the cover typographically
- [] Chapter openers all start on the same relative position
- [] No heading sits alone at the bottom of a page
- [] Tables that cross pages repeat their header
- [] Page numbers start after the front matter, not on the cover
- [] Every link is written out or shortened to something typeable
- [] The last page is a back cover, not a stranded paragraph

The last one gets missed most. A book that ends mid-page reads as unfinished even when it isn't.

Five — Markdown that behaves

A short reference for the syntax used to set this book.

```
# Title           → H1, chapter opener
## Section        → H2
### Subsection    → H3

**bold**  *italic*  `inline code`

- bullet item
1. numbered item

> A pull quote

| Column | Column |
| --- | --- |
| Cell | Cell |

---           → hard page break
----         → printed divider rule
```

Two rules worth memorising:

- A line of --- forces a **page break**. Use it between chapters.
- A line of ---- prints a **visible divider**. Use it inside a chapter, to mark a shift without starting a new page.

A single Enter is a real line break, the way you'd expect it to be.

A worked example

Here's a complete chapter opener, start to finish:

```
# Three
## What the data actually said

The survey ran for six weeks and collected
**1,204 responses**. Three findings mattered.

<!--MDPDF-DIVIDER-->

### Finding one
```

Six lines of text. On the page: a chapter opener, a subtitle, a paragraph with emphasis, a divider and a subsection — all typeset, paginated and ready to print.

The point

The gap between a text file and a finished book was never about talent or taste. It was about tooling that demanded a week of your attention for an outcome no reader ever notices.

Write the words. Let something else set the pages.

Set from a single Markdown file. A4, embedded fonts, running page numbers — no layout software involved.

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