THE WORDS DESK

Manuscript Critique

A sample critique of a novel opening
The Ashen Crown — adult fantasy, in progress

PREPARED BY

The Words Desk · Pretty Good Publishing

SCOPE OF THIS SAMPLE

The opening pages of the manuscript, as submitted

A FULL CRITIQUE COVERS

The complete manuscript — report in 5 business days · $249 to 60,000 words · $349 to 100,000

DATE

November 2026

Demonstration document — the manuscript below was written in-house, with its faults left in on purpose, so you can see exactly what a Words Desk critique looks like before you ever send us yours.

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About this sample

This is the real shape of our work — an example, at full length, of the critique format that our $25 sample delivers in a one-page version on your own opening (the sample's other half is a 1,000-word sample edit; the $25 is credited in full toward a full critique or any edit). Part 1 is a manuscript opening exactly as it reached us — strong bones, common faults. Part 2 is the critique we returned: a verdict, what is working (so the author protects it), the three fixes that matter most, a pacing map, line-level notes, and a fix list ranked in the order the author should actually do the work. A paid critique does this for a **complete manuscript**, and includes one round of follow-up questions by email. Nothing here predicts sales — no honest reader can. What it does is show the author precisely where the book stands and what to do next.

Part 1 — The opening, as submitted

The rain had been falling on the glass gardens of Vael Mor for three days straight, and the whole city smelled of wet stone and rust. Dark clouds hung low over the harbor like a bruise that would not heal, and the sea beyond the seawall was the color of old iron, churning and restless, tossing the fishing boats about like toys. It was the kind of morning that made a person want to stay in bed forever.

Sera Aldaine woke with the bell. She lay for a moment listening to the rain drum against the shutters of her small room above the old map shop, her heart beating very fast for no reason she could name. Something felt wrong, though she could not have said what. She sat up slowly and pushed her long dark hair out of her face, catching sight of herself in the cracked mirror above the washstand. At nineteen, she was tall for a girl of the harbor quarter, with dark hair that fell past her shoulders in waves and grey eyes that her mother used to say could see through walls, and a small scar through her left eyebrow from the winter she had fallen on the ice at the fish market.

The Kingdom of Vael had once been the greatest of the Nine Kingdoms, before the Sundering split the old empire into pieces that had never been put back together. King Aldous the Wise had ruled for forty years of peace, but his grandson, King Berric, was weak and superstitious, and under Berric the Guild of Cartographers had been stripped of its charter and its members scattered. The old maps were burned, because Berric believed the maps themselves were a kind of magic, and magic was what had broken the world. That was why a girl like Sera, who had been trained since she was nine years old to read the coastline the way other girls read letters, now earned her bread mending sails in a map shop that was not allowed to sell maps.

She dressed quickly and went down the narrow stairs, where Master Odo was already at his bench. Odo was a fat old man with a white beard and kind eyes.

"You're up early, girl," he said gruffly. "The bell hasn't even finished."

"I couldn't sleep," Sera said. "I kept dreaming about the ash."

"As you know," said Odo, "the ash hasn't fallen on Vael Mor in ninety years, not since your great-grandfather's time, when the Glass Gardens burned. If the ash ever falls again, girl, it means the old fires under the mountain are waking, and that would be very bad indeed for all of

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us."

Sera nodded sadly. She felt afraid, but she did not want Odo to see it, so she smiled bravely and set about her work, sweeping the floor of the shop very thoroughly and very quietly, and thinking about everything that had happened.

Odo watched her from his bench and thought to himself that the girl was troubled, and he wished he could tell her what he knew about the letter that had come for her in the night, sealed with black wax. But it was not his secret to tell, and besides, he was afraid of what would happen when she read it.

"Sera," her sister called from the doorway, "are you going to stand there dreaming all day? The harbormaster's wife wants her sail by noon, and as you very well know, sister, since Father died and left us this shop, we have exactly three customers who pay on time, and she is one of them."

"I know, Mira," Sera said. "I know."

Mira was twenty-three and beautiful, with golden hair she wore in a braid and a laugh that could fill a room. She was the practical one. She kept the accounts and haggled with the fishermen and remembered every debt owed to the shop, down to the last copper.

"The soldiers were at the harbor again this morning," Mira said, lowering her voice. "Asking questions. About maps. About who in this city can still read the old coastline charts." She looked at Sera meaningfully. "If the soldiers find out what you can do, sister, they will take you to the palace, and nobody who goes to the palace to be questioned ever comes back the same — if they come back at all."

Sera felt her stomach drop. She could see the whole thing in her mind: the palace, the questions, the grey room with no windows. She had hidden her gift for ten years, ever since she was a little girl and the burning times began. For a long moment neither of them said anything, and the rain kept falling on the glass gardens, and somewhere out in the harbor a bell was ringing, and Sera was very afraid but she tried to be brave.

By mid-morning the rain had thinned to a drizzle, and she carried the harbormaster's wife's sail down to the wharf herself, rolled in oilcloth under her arm, because Mira said a delivery made in person was a payment collected in person, and they needed the money.

The harbor was wrong that morning, and she knew it before she could have said why. The fish stalls were open but the fishwives were quiet. Two soldiers stood at the customs shed with a clerk between them, and the clerk had a board, and on the board was a list, and every boat that came in was being stopped and asked its business. She kept her head down and her bundle high and walked the long way around by the nets, the way the smugglers' children walked, out of old habit.

At the end of the wharf she stopped, the way she always stopped, although she had promised herself a hundred times that she would stop stopping. The water below the piles was the color of tea and rising with the tide, and she looked at it — and the looking did what it always did, the thing she could not explain to anyone, not even Mira, not in words. Under the brown water the harbor floor arranged itself in her mind the way a page arranges itself under a reader's eye: the drowned reef running out from the point like a line of script, the deep channel where the grain

ships came in, the wreck of the old Guild survey brig lying on her side in the mud with her masts gone, forty feet down and clear as print. She could read the whole harbor the way other people read a letter from home. She knew exactly where the water would take a boat that lost its rudder in the channel. She knew where a ship could hide that no chart in the King's possession admitted existed.

It was the most useful thing in the world, and it would get her hanged, and some mornings — this morning — she could not make herself be sorry for it.

A single grey flake landed on the back of her hand. She stared at it. It was not rain. It was not snow. It lay on her skin for a moment like a moth, like a word in a language she had been dreaming in, and then the drizzle took it, and it was gone, and she told herself she had imagined it, in the tone of voice she used for all the things she could not afford to believe.

She delivered the sail. She collected the money, all of it, in a leather purse that smelled of tar. On the way back up the hill she passed the sealed door of the old Guild house, the way she passed it every day, and did not look at it, the way she did not look at it every day, and her hand did not rise to touch the burned crest above the lintel, because there were soldiers on the corner now, and she was learning, at last, to be careful in the ways that counted.

Then the shop door opened, and the bell above it rang out sharply, and a man stood in the doorway with the rain behind him. He was tall and wore the black coat of the King's Inquisition, and under his arm he carried a flat case of the kind that map-makers use. He looked around the shop slowly, taking in the charts on the walls and the instruments on the shelf, and then his eyes found Sera, and he smiled a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"I'm looking for the cartographer," he said.

"There are no cartographers in Vael Mor," Mira said quickly. "Not anymore. The Guild was disbanded. As you know—"

"I know what the city says," the man said. "The King requires the reading of a chart that no living man can read." He set the flat case on the counter, and Sera saw that his hands were shaking. "Except, it seems, one."

He opened the case. The chart inside was old — older than the shop, older than the King, drawn on vellum the color of weak tea — and he unrolled it across the counter with the care of a man handling a corpse, weighting the corners with the brass compass from the shelf and a stone from the windowsill. "The coastline north of the Sundering Reach," he said. "The fleets sail in three weeks. The King's admirals say the Reach cannot be crossed since the world broke. The King's priests say it can, and that the charts lie." He looked at her over the vellum. "One of them is wrong. Read it."

"I can't," Sera said. "I mend sails."

But her eyes had already done it, the traitorous, wonderful thing they did: the coastline had arranged itself under her gaze like a sentence she had known by heart since childhood. The Reach was not impassable. The Reach had never been impassable. There was a channel through the drowned reef, deep and narrow and marked — here, in the old Guild hand, in faded brown ink — with the sounding marks her great-grandfather's generation had sailed by. Whoever crossed by that channel would come out behind the northern fleets' anchorage like a knife

coming out of a sleeve. The chart was not a navigation problem. The chart was a weapon, and the man across the counter knew exactly whose hand he was trying to put it in.

She made her face into the face of a girl who mended sails. She squinted. She tilted her head. "It's very old," she said. "The lines are all — I'm sorry. It's just lines to me."

For a moment she thought he believed her. For a moment the only sounds in the shop were the rain and the drip of the leak in the corner bucket and Mira, somewhere behind her, breathing like a person in a play who has forgotten every line she ever had.

Then the Inquisitor smiled his smile that did not reach his eyes, and rolled the chart up — slowly, and watching not the vellum but her hands, which had curled, all by themselves, into fists at her sides, the way a sailor's hands curl around a rope in a storm.

"Three weeks," he said. "Think about your answer, cartographer."

From the street outside came the sound she had been dreaming about for three nights: a soft hush, like snow beginning. Sera went to the door and looked up. Down through the rain, grey as grief, the ash had begun to fall on Vael Mor for the first time in ninety years. Little did she know that her life was about to change forever.

(End of the submitted opening.)

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Part 2 — The critique

The verdict in one paragraph

There is a real novel in here, and one genuinely striking image — ash falling like grey snow through the rain over a city of glass gardens — that a reader will remember for days. But the opening spends its first six pages on weather, sleep, and ninety years of history, and saves its actual story (soldiers hunting for a girl who can read the forbidden maps, and the Inquisitor walking in to find her) for the final pages. Everything a reader needs to fall in love with this book is present; it is simply in the wrong order, and a third of it is being told to us instead of shown. The fixes below are ranked: the first three will do more for this book than everything else combined.

What's working — keep these

1. **The ash.** “Grey as grief,” falling through rain over glass gardens, dreamed of before it arrives — this is the book's signature image and its best idea. It should arrive *much* earlier (see Fix 1).
2. **Sera's gift is the right engine.** A girl who reads coastlines the way others read letters, in a kingdom that burned its maps, is a premise a reader can repeat to a friend in one sentence. Premises that easy to retell are marketing gold.
3. **The sisters.** Mira is alive on the page in a way nobody else is yet — practical, funny, frightened underneath. Their relationship is the emotional ground the palace plot will stand on.
4. **The Inquisitor's shaking hands.** One detail, and suddenly he is a person instead of a uniform. More of this instinct, please.
5. **The harbor scene shows the gift instead of explaining it.** When Sera “reads” the harbor floor — the drowned reef “like a line of script,” the wreck “clear as print” — the premise stops being a claim and becomes an experience. This is the best sustained writing in the opening, and it is currently buried in the middle of it (see Fix 1).

The three fixes that matter most

Fix 1 — Start where the story starts (structure)

Pages 1–6 contain no event. Sera wakes, dresses, sweeps, worries, and is told things the reader also doesn't need yet. The story's first true events — soldiers asking about coastline-readers, the ash beginning to fall, the Inquisitor's arrival — are stacked into the last three pages. Recommendation: open on the morning the ash falls. Specifically, consider opening with the Inquisitor's entrance or with Sera on the roof watching ash mix with rain, and let everything else (the bell, the shop, the sisters' debts) be discovered inside scenes that are already moving. You will lose nothing: every good line in the current opening can live inside a scene with stakes. A stronger option still: open at the harbor, with the gift working and the soldiers already at the customs shed — your best scene is currently hiding at pages 7–8.

Fix 2 — Move the history out of the narrator's mouth (exposition)

The paragraph beginning “The Kingdom of Vael had once been the greatest of the Nine Kingdoms…” is a history lecture parked on page 2, and the dialogue repeats the pattern twice

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more ("As you know, the ash hasn't fallen in ninety years…"; "as you very well know, sister, since Father died…"). Characters telling each other things both already know is the fastest way to make a reader feel the author's hand. The history itself is good — it just needs to arrive as *evidence inside scenes*: a burned chart used as a sail patch, the Guild's sealed door the sisters pass daily, the fine for an unlicensed map posted at the harbor office. Rule of thumb for the revision: no fact gets stated until a character needs it to make a decision.

Fix 3 — Stay inside Sera (point of view)

The opening is told from Sera's point of view — until one paragraph suddenly steps inside Odo's head ("he wished he could tell her what he knew about the letter…"). In a close third-person novel this breaks the spell and also wastes a good secret: the letter is far more powerful when the *reader* learns of it as Sera does. Cut the head-hop; if the letter matters, let Odo's behavior (over-quick denials, watching the door) make the reader suspect it.

Pacing, page by page

Pages	What happens — and the reading experience
1–2	Rain, waking, mirror, history of the kingdom — skim territory; nothing is at risk.
3–4	Odo conversation; the letter (in Odo's head) — warm but static; one real secret, given to the wrong person.
5–6	Mira's warning: soldiers are asking about map-readers — the pulse quickens; this is the book waking up.
7–8	The harbor: the gift in action, one grey flake — the best writing in the opening, buried mid-chapter.
9–10	The Inquisitor arrives; the ash begins in earnest — the climax these pages deserved to build to sooner.

Line-level notes (samples — a full critique annotates throughout)

Line as written	Note
"Dark clouds hung low over the harbor like a bruise that would not heal"	Fine image, wrong job: it's the fourth weather sentence in a row. One image, then people.
"catching sight of herself in the cracked mirror…" (full self-description)	The mirror-description is the most parodied move in fantasy openings. Her scar is good — deliver it through Mira teasing her about the fish-market fall instead.
"She felt afraid, but she did not want Odo to see it, so she smiled bravely"	Named emotion + filter + adverb. Show the fear in the body: what do her hands do? (Later, the Inquisitor's shaking hands prove you can do this.)
"I know, Mira," Sera said. "I know."	Repetition that adds nothing. Give her a deflection with character in it — humor, a deflection, a lie.

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Line as written	Note
"Little did she know that her life was about to change forever."	Delete. The ash, the Inquisitor, and the chart have already told us. End the chapter on the ash: it's the image readers will carry into chapter two.

Polish-tier notes (after the big three)

- Filter words ("she could see," "she felt," "she saw that") appear 11 times in these pages; each one puts a pane of glass between reader and scene. A copyedit pass will catch most.
- Adverb clusters ("very thoroughly and very quietly," "smiled bravely") — one adverb is a choice; two is a habit.
- The waking-up opening (bell, bed, mirror, dressing) is a sequence agents and readers have seen thousands of times; combined with Fix 1 it disappears on its own.

Market note (brief, and honest)

Adult fantasy currently rewards a hook inside the first chapter and manuscripts in the 90,000–120,000-word range from debut authors. Your premise and image are squarely commercial. Nothing in this critique is a prediction about sales — no honest reader can make one — but the distance between this draft and a query-ready opening is unusually short: it's an ordering problem, not a talent problem.

Your fix list, in order

1. Reorder the opening: ash first, history as scene-evidence, Inquisitor by page 3 at the latest. *(Structural — do before anything else.)*
2. Cut the Odo head-hop; let the letter surface through Sera's eyes.
3. Rewrite the two "as you know" conversations so each sister wants something from the other in the scene.
4. Delete the final line; end on the ash.
5. Full-draft pass hunting filter words and doubled adverbs.
6. Then — and only then — line-level polish.

Questions on any of this? One round of follow-up questions by email is included with every critique. When you're ready for the fix to be made with you, our editing rates are published on the site (developmental 1.8¢/word, copyedit 1.4¢/word, proofread 1.0¢/word). If you'd like to see our editing on your own pages first, the $25 sample pairs a one-page critique of your first 10 pages with a 1,000-word sample edit — credited in full toward any critique or edit.

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