



Where To Start – Non-Fiction

Non-fiction often begins with a question, a curiosity, or a subject you feel drawn to explore. Whether you're writing narrative history, memoir, true crime, or a topic-based book, the early steps are surprisingly similar: understand your angle, gather your material, and sketch the path your book might follow.

Start With Your Central Question

Most non-fiction works because it has a clear purpose. Ask yourself:

- What am I trying to explain
- What story am I trying to tell
- What question am I trying to answer

For narrative history, this might be:

“What was daily life really like in Edinburgh during the 18th century?”

A strong question gives your book direction.

Gather the Building Blocks

Before you write chapters, collect the raw material:

- key events
- important figures
- timelines
- locations
- primary sources
- interesting details or anecdotes

You don't need to organise everything yet, just gather what feels relevant. These pieces will become the backbone of your chapters. But you do need to read, research, and sometimes visit key places, depending on your genre. Walking the streets your subject once walked, standing in the landscape where events unfolded, or simply spending time with primary sources can give you details that no summary ever will. These small observations often become the moments that bring your narrative alive.

Sketch a Rough Structure

Non-fiction benefits from a sense of flow. Try mapping out:

- the opening chapter (where the reader enters the subject)
- the major turning points or themes
- the chronological or thematic order
- the likely ending or conclusion

For narrative history, this might be a timeline. For other subjects, it might be a list of themes or stages.

This isn't a strict outline; it's a guide to keep you moving.

Identify the Key Figures

Even in non-fiction, people carry the story. List the individuals who matter most to your subject:

- central historical figures
- eyewitnesses
- experts
- everyday people who illustrate the theme

Knowing who your "cast" is helps you shape chapters and choose which stories to highlight.

Leave Space for Discovery

Research always reveals surprises, a forgotten diary entry, a newspaper clipping, a detail that changes your angle. Make room for these discoveries. They often become the most memorable parts of the book.

Start With the Most Compelling Moment

You don't have to begin with Chapter One. If there's a vivid scene, a striking fact, or a powerful anecdote, write that first. It helps you find the tone and momentum of the book.

You might discover that the strongest opening isn't the earliest event at all. Many narrative histories begin with something much later, the crowning of a king, the execution of a traitor, a riot, a discovery, a moment of crisis. Starting with a vivid scene gives the reader an immediate sense of drama and direction.

This is also an opportunity to mix styles. You can use a more immersive, observer-style prose for that opening moment, as if the reader is standing in the crowd, watching events unfold, before stepping back into a more traditional narrative voice for the rest of the book.

A Quick Exercise to Get Moving

Choose one key figure or event from your subject. Write a short paragraph describing it as clearly as you can, not for publication, just to warm up. Then write a few hundred words expanding on it: what happened, why it mattered, what it reveals.

This simple exercise helps you find your voice and shows you how the book might breathe on the page.