

Preface – How We Tackle a Developmental Edit

Most developmental editors will hand you a quick sample: a few margin notes, maybe an editorial report, and that's it. Useful? Sure. But it doesn't really show you how they actually *work* through your book.

We like to be more open about the process. After all, you're paying for this—you deserve to know where the time (and your money) goes.

Now, don't worry. We don't just read your manuscript once, rip it apart, and throw criticism at you. That's not the point. What we do first is sit with your story. We read it properly. We start picking up details about the characters, the setting, the little descriptive touches that tell us something about your world.

You'll see in this sample how that works. We colour-code things—characters, relationships (family, love, rivals, you name it), settings, and descriptions that matter. For example, here the narrator doesn't get named until the end of the section, but in the meantime, we learn a ton: where they are, what the world looks like, who they're connected to, and how their mind ticks.

Whenever a new character pops up, we add them to what's often called a *character sheet*. Over time, these build into what we like to call the “Book Bible”—a reference guide full of character details, world-building notes, plot points, all the things that keep your story consistent. Because let's be honest: nobody wants Sophie turning into Sofie halfway through the book. Or her hair colour mysteriously changing unless she's been near a bottle of dye. Same goes for places and relationships. That first pass is where we lock down those details so we've got a clear picture of your world.

Once that's done, we've got a solid understanding of your plot, your characters, and your world. That's when we start asking questions. Does this subplot earn its place? Does the romance feel believable? Is the pacing working for the target market? That sort of thing.

When it comes to giving feedback, we mix two approaches:

- **In-line notes.** Quick comments in the margins (using Track Changes) so you can see exactly where and why we're flagging something.
- **Expanded notes.** To keep the manuscript itself readable, we keep margin notes short and then unpack them in more detail in the editorial report.

By the end of this read-through, we've got answers to our questions and a draft editorial report ready for you. You'll get both the marked-up manuscript and the letter, so you can see the “what,” the “where,” and the “why” behind our feedback.

And if you've got a particular way you like to work—or if this is your first rodeo—we'll adapt to you. Editing is a partnership, not a dictatorship.

What a Developmental Edit Doesn't Do

It's worth being clear here: a developmental edit isn't about typos, grammar slips, or fiddling

with commas. That's copy-editing territory. At this stage, we're looking at the *big picture*: story structure, pacing, character arcs, world-building, and how it all fits together. Think of it as the blueprint stage. Once the foundations are strong, the copy-edit comes in to polish the walls and fix the spelling on the street signs.

Here's an example of how we conduct the first read through:

Character Names – Highlighted at first mention	Descriptions – any details about characters and world-building.
Relationships – familial ties, romance, conflict	Place/Settings – Place names, descriptions relating to places and their settings

The gate had a simple design – at a glance it looked fairly plain, but on closer inspection one could see that the iron bars had been formed into the shape of trees, seven of them to be exact, their trunks making up the vertical lengths whilst their top branches and leaves intermingled at the top. As pretty as it was, it was apparently locked – at least I was not about to go heaving against such a gate in this heat and in my gloves. Looking through the bars all I could see was a very long driveway shaded by ash trees, unsurprisingly. It disappeared behind a bend and nought else of the estate could be seen. I did however see a small gravel path that joined onto the main drive that appeared to have its origin in the ivy hedge that lined the road either side of the fanciful gates. Curious, I walked back a little into the road and saw for the first time a cleverly disguised door. I use the word “disguised” but it might very well have just been unkempt, covered in ivy as it was. I tried the handle, and the door opened with ease.

I have to explain at this point, to whomever may be reading this, that it turns out I am not an adventurous sort. I had grown up in Eppington and not been more than ten miles from it's centre. Oh, I am not some village lass who would be overcome by seeing too much, reading too much, or meeting persons above my station. I like to think of myself as a modern woman, not afraid of progress or complex matters, but then I had never really been tested. These last few weeks have opened my eyes, and I can see now as I write this how embarrassing I must have been for my father over the last few years. I would often talk of women's liberties and equality, my independence and intelligence, and yet I confess on that morning, having been left alone outside the invisible estate, I was scared. So at that point I pulled out the piece of paper that had been my motivation for coming here, to give me strength.

“Dearest sister,

As you know, I am investigating a rather clandestine society that has sprung up in Eppington. If something happens to me, if you or father do not hear from me once every week, I wish for you to seek out the help of Lord Ashford, of Ashford Estate. He'll know what to do. I have enclosed his card, you will need to show it to him so that he knows he can trust you.

I do not mean to scare you, Sophia, but my life may depend upon you following these instructions.

Now that you've seen *how* we work through a first pass, you'll find below the in-line notes on the first chapter of an edited manuscript. These will give you a clear idea of what the process actually looks like in action.

The Extraordinary Detective
In the Company of Vampyres
by Rooke Matthews

20th July, 1880, on the events of the last month.

I am not sure how to start, or even if I desire to, but a good friend advised me that by writing down these frightful and extraordinary events I have been experiencing in the last few weeks will keep me from the hysterics that I feel on the verge of falling into, and I cannot have that. So, even though the futility of recording all of this frankly unbelievable, seeming nonsense is plain to me, as I imagine no one will ever read the words I put down, I shall continue, as I actually feel a little more myself already. I suppose the place to start is outside the wrought iron gates of Ashford Estate, for that is when I made the decision that has put me into my current state of affairs.

It was a fair morning as I recall, but the inside of the cab was oppressive, stifling. I was wearing my finest lace gloves, but all I could think about was how awfully scratchy they were against my palms. I think I was looking to be distracted by such things, because of the reason I was on my journey. As such I did not even realise the cab had pulled up and the next thing I knew the driver was exposing me to fresh air, sunshine and a helping hand. I paid him, and asked that if I paid a little more, would he stay until I was ready to leave? I remember his reply, and I wish I had taken it as the warning I now believe it was meant to be.

‘I’m sorry miss, there’s not enough coins in the county that could as make me stay outside of this place.’

‘But it is miles from town, are you sure you can’t stay?’ I thought that he may be a gentleman enough to be courteous to a woman in need, but he wasn’t having any of it.

‘There’s too many tales about what happens on this road, miss, please pardon me. If you like, I can come back for you, say in an hour’s time?’

‘That will have to do, though I can’t promise you I’ll be here, as Lord Ashford may provide transport for me.’ The cabbie looked far too relieved for my liking.

‘Yes, yes, not a problem, miss. Lord Ashford is likely for that. Yes.’

His words had barely set in my ears before he was gone in a cloud of dust. Some people, I remember thinking to myself, were without any sense of decency at all. I sincerely hoped that Lord Ashford was not one of those people.

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Commented [r1]: This is a nice gothic opening, but it’s quite long and meandering. Perhaps you could break it into two shorter or three sentences to give it more punch. Shorter beats sell the diary voice and reduce early fatigue.

Commented [r2]: Consider improving sentence flow by reducing word count and adding some punctuation. The reader will get that first sensory hit faster.

Commented [r3]: Great foreshadowing. If you want to lean into gothic dread, you might expand this just a little—hint at why she didn’t take it seriously (her pride? nerves?). That contrast between confidence and hindsight adds depth to Sophie’s voice.

Commented [r4]: Lovely description, but it slows the pace. If the gate doesn’t play a big role later, consider trimming to one striking image (“iron bars shaped like interlocking trees”) and move Sophie forward. The sooner she’s inside the estate, the stronger the momentum.

estate could be seen. I did however see a small gravel path that joined onto the main drive that appeared to have its origin in the ivy hedge that lined the road either side of the fanciful gates. Curious, I walked back a little into the road and saw for the first time a cleverly disguised door. I use the word “disguised” but it might very well have just been unkempt, covered in ivy as it was. I tried the handle, and the door opened with ease.

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I do not mean to scare you, Sophie, but my life may depend upon you following these instructions.

I do hope you do not need to do this,

Yours lovingly,

Adam”

Enclosed was the card the letter referred to. I had tried to make sense of it, beyond what was written, but to no avail:

Lord Ashford
Extraordinary Detective
Strange and unusual cases solved
Ashford Estate, Eppington

Commented [r5]: This section risks drifting into exposition. What if you slipped these details into action instead? For example, Sophie could compare the statues or Ashford's house to things she's *never* seen in Eppington. That way, her backstory comes out naturally without halting the scene. Consider moving this boast a paragraph later and show it through action (e.g., crossing despite fear). Show > tell. Keeps momentum.

Commented [r6]: Consider “*Extraordinary Phenomena—Strange & Unusual Cases*” and drop “solved” (feels on-the-nose). This keeps the card crisp and intriguing.

My father had not paid any attention to the letter, and had a poor opinion of Lord Ashford. It is true that rumours did circulate about him, but I had never seen him or his people in town. Not that I would in any way; I certainly was not anywhere near involved in his circles of society, however there were plenty of other rich and influential people in the area and I knew even less about them. So why the rumours spread about this particular lord I had no idea. At best they were not very flattering, at worst downright scandalous. But as I was saying, I had put myself forward as a bold woman, a woman of the eighties, to my father and many others - and now I found myself shaking in my boots. But it was the memory of my father, scoffing at my brother's obvious cry for help, that had put a real fire in me to at least get this far.

'Come along, Sophie. You can't very well turn back now.'

And that was the decision that has subsequently turned my world upside-down.

The walk was pleasant in the shade, and before long I came to a wide stream that was crossed by a low bridge and guarded either side by the most grotesque statues I had ever seen. They had wide, staring eyes that were practically popping out of their short-snouted faces, their mouths open in a snarl. Their heads were both turned slightly towards each other, so that for one moment as you went along the path you were caught in both of their petrifying gazes. Most curious was that they each had something in one of their front paws. The one on the right had a round object, intricately carved into. The creature on the left appeared to be pinning down a smaller version of itself. I thought they made excellent custodians of the bridge, and I passed them as quickly as I could. The manor house was just up ahead and I made my way to the enormous front door.

Positioning my hat, straightening my gloves, I went to pull the bell rope, but before my hand even touched the tassel the door swung open and a smartly dressed manservant stood expectantly. He elegantly gestured for me to enter into the cool and somewhat dark interior, and so I did, even though all the rumours about the place I had heard since I was a child were springing up in my mind like so many excited terriers.

The manservant closed the door, leaving us in a gloom where I could hardly make out any features. All I could discern was that I was in a large space, with an open grand doorway straight ahead where I could glimpse a staircase, and I suppose many closed, less grandiose, doors all around the rest of the room. The manservant continued to look at me with an expectant air. I confess I fumbled the letter as I pulled it out again and tried to find the card.

'I greatly wish to see Lord Ashford, it is a matter of... of life and death.'

'Indeed. And who shall I say is calling...?' his remarkably deep voice echoed in the empty hall.

Commented [r7]: Grotesque guardians crouched at the bridge—short-snouted, eyes bulging, mouths frozen in a snarl.

Commented [r8]: The right-hand creature clutched a carved orb.

The left pinned a smaller likeness beneath its paw.

Commented [r9]: I love the imagery this whole scene creates, but have a read through yourself and get a feel for the pacing. It slows right down. You can combine a lot of these sentences into more vivid pictures and keep the pace tight while preserving the mood. (See above suggestions)

Commented [r10]: Keep an eye on your pacing – perhaps we can use gothic wording, humour *and* tighten this up. You could use something along the lines of: "*I fumbled the letter and, mortifyingly, the card.*"

‘Miss Sophie Carrington... I believe Lord Ashford knows my brother, Adam.’ I eventually found the card and showed it to him.

The servant took the card and nodded smoothly – in the dull light streaming through high, narrow windows, his old, ragged face belied his graceful movements as he swept by me and made for a door to the left. I wasn’t sure whether to follow him, so I stood dumbly in the greyness, gripping my brother’s letter tightly. After a few moments I heard a throat being cleared, and nearly squealed in fright. I didn’t squeal however, I assure you. I made my way to the door the servant had gone to, and there he was, in the shadows – I could not see if his face was amused or annoyed. He opened the door as I arrived, and for the second time that morning I was awash with unexpected light from a doorway.

There was only one large window in the small room, and it was making a good job of lighting what I took to be a breakfasting room. At least, some delightful soft couches and winged armchairs all faced a low table that had the remains of food on it. All around the walls were mounted sketches of men standing with beasts, such as what might be preparatory drawings for portraits. Those were not, however, the most remarkable aspect of the room. Thinking back, I remember I was quite embarrassed, even though the fault must lie with him. That is, Lord Ashford was lounging on one of the settees, practically undressed – he wore only trousers, stockings, and a shirt that was unbuttoned at the top. The worst part was that he did not seem to care about his appearance in the presence of a stranger, and a woman! Trying not to look as affronted as I felt, I waited as he folded a newspaper and swung his legs to the floor. The manservant spoke next.

‘Miss Carrington, m’lord.’

The man stood up and held his hand out to me, stooping in some sort of half bow. I really did not know how to react, and I found myself taking his hand and shaking it! I suppose I had subconsciously managed to convince myself I wasn’t the shy village girl after all, despite my inner feelings.

‘Lord Ashford, how do you do?’ he said with a smile, comfortable as if we were old friends with his complete nonchalance and air of... slobbery. I put my disgust aside: I was there for a desperate reason and wasn’t going to let his informality put me off.

‘I’m not doing very well, as it happens. I find myself needing your help.’ I risked bringing in the melodrama to hurry the matter along. ‘My brother’s life depends upon it.’

‘Please, have a seat. Spencer, is the tea nearly ready? You would like some tea, I hope, Miss Carrington?’

Commented [r11]: Be mindful of your choice of words. “**Ragged**” suggests torn fabric more than a face, consider using “**rugged**”.

Commented [r12]: This is a brilliant character reveal. Here’s a thought: rather than “**practically undressed**,” you could show Sophie’s shock through her reaction—something like “**I nearly turned on my heel, so improper did he appear.**” It makes her voice the focus and sharpens the tension between her primness and his sloppiness.

Commented [r13]: Be mindful of how many exclamation marks you use. I have highlighted **8** within this first chapter. Use strong wording, tone and dialogue tags to emphasise where possible and keep exclamations to a minimum.

Commented [r14]: Maybe “**slovenliness**” instead of “**slobbery**.” Fits the period tone; “**slobbery**” reads saliva-adjacent. *Fun fact: ‘Slob of a man’ was first used in the 1860s (so it is fine to use), but wasn’t until much later that it became a popular English word for slovenly.*

Commented [r15]: Perhaps you can reduce the word count here and pick up the pacing. Consider: **I risked melodrama. ‘My brother’s life depends upon it.’**

‘I would rather we - ’ I looked at him with what I hope was indignation but I bit my tongue as despite my first impressions, this was meant to be the man who would help my brother. And it had been a long walk in these boots. I sat, and nodded. Spencer left the room silently.

‘Excellent, now then, how can I help? Adam is a recent friend of mine, I do hope his life is not really in danger.’

I started. I was quite sure I hadn’t mentioned my brother’s name and was sure there was no way any of them had seen the letter. He couldn’t have got it from my surname as Adam had taken our mother’s name, Boyd.

‘How did you know my brother is Adam?’

‘Ah, well, quite simply, your boots and the bottom of your skirts told me.’

I glanced down and only saw the dust from the road. I looked at him with impatience.

‘On the edge of your heel there you have a particular colour of clay and a bit of straw stuck to it, and the lower half of your skirt has black, red and white hairs upon it. These are the marks of someone who runs a kennel. The only kennel in Eppington that has clay in it’s exercise yard, that and the hairs made it obvious you work with dogs, beagles to be exact – I happen to know Adam’s family is in the kennel business even though he is a journalist,’ he paused whilst I took it all in. ‘At least, I could have used those facts to deduce who you are, but I must admit Adam also told me about you.’

He leaned forward and I found I had to avert my eyes.

‘Now, tell me what has happened.’

Not knowing where to look – attempting to look into his face was deemed impossible – I began.

‘As it seems you know already, Adam is a journalist for the local newspaper. He normally writes the society articles, reporting on such things in town and London. A few weeks ago - ’

‘Specifics please, Miss Carrington.’

‘Oh, I think it must have been three weeks ago yesterday. Now, may I continue? As I was saying, *three* weeks ago we met for lunch in town, something we do regularly, and we discussed each other’s goings on, as we were wont to do. The conversation is usually quite typical, pleasant and not full of detail – frankly we only meet out of fondness of each other. Since he left the household we have kept in touch this way.’

‘Mmm,’ Lord Ashford made a sound in his throat quite voluminous, and I felt I had to get on with the tale.

‘In any case, that day was a little different. Adam seemed quite excitable; he barely let me speak and was intent on telling me about his latest commission for an article. He told me he was to get an interview with Lord Ruthven, some person of repute who had moved to Eppington. What so

Commented [r16]: Think about how people would speak. Even in the 19th Century. A more natural phrasing of this could be: ‘How did you know my brother’s name?’

Commented [r17]: Streamline his deductions for snap:

Clay of that ochre shade clings to your heel, and straw besides. Your skirt carries black, red, and white hairs—the marks of a beagle kennel. Eppington has only one, and I happen to know Adam Boyd’s family keeps it, though he himself writes for the paper...

This improves the pace and still shows us his deduction skills.

This deduction scene is very Sherlockian, which is fun. But Ashford immediately undercuts it by admitting Adam told him about Sophie. You might want to stretch out the deduction before that reveal—otherwise the cleverness fizzles too quickly. What do you think of letting him impress Sophie (and us) a bit longer before admitting the truth?

excited my brother was that Lord Ruthven is supposed to be heavily involved with occult practices, quite the mysterious character.'

'Yes, I remember the article your brother wrote – this Lord Ruthven is originally from **Berkshire**, has spent some years travelling Europe, is very wealthy, lives in the town on the entire top floor of the Hotel Galloway.'

'That is correct – the article was published the following week, just before we met again. This time Adam was even more passionate, apparently he had been allowed by his editor to investigate Lord Ruthven further.'

'Did he tell you why he was to investigate further?'

'Well, there have been a few rumours circulating, small things. Maybe enough to uncover a scandal, I suppose.'

'What small things?'

At this point Spencer returned with a tray of tea. He placed it on a side board before clearing the coffee table. Lord Ashford waved his hands at me.

'Don't mind Spencer, Miss Carrington, you may speak completely freely before him.'

Indeed after Spencer had poured us tea he remained in the room, standing behind Lord Ashford.

'First of all, Lord Ruthven is supposed to run some sort of monthly meeting with a secret society. **Then here** have been a few reports of people going missing. Mainly servants, handmaids, footmen and so on. My brother thinks the two are linked, but he didn't tell me how.'

'How many missing, exactly? Can we attach names to these missing people?'

I had to think, remembering Adam's conversation and what I had overheard in the butcher's whilst paying for the dog feed.

'There was Mrs Fowler's maidservant. She went missing a month and a half ago, but most say she ran away with some lover she had been secretly meeting for a while. Mrs Fowler was said to be quite upset and tried to cover the matter up. Then the same week Adam had told me about Lord Ruthven, a driver who delivers goods around town disappeared. He was last seen leaving **the public house on the London Road**, and the next day he didn't turn up to work.'

'His name?'

'I think it was Robert... I know he used to deliver supplies to the butcher.'

'That will have to do. Anyone else?'

'Not that I know the details of, but I understand there have been three others. Most seem to have been attributed to runaways – but then, of course, there's Adam.'

'Adam?'

I looked at him in amazement.

Commented [r18]: You've anchored the story in a fictional town, **Eppington**, which feels like it sits somewhere near London but not within it. This works well—it gives you flexibility without breaking plausibility. Just a heads-up on some of the real-world names you've dropped in:

Berkshire – firmly south of England, fits fine with a London-adjacent world.

London Road – very common road name across the country, also fine.

Hotel Galloway – this one sticks out a bit, since "Galloway" is strongly Scottish. Readers may subconsciously picture somewhere north of the border, which jars against the otherwise southern-English setting.

Not saying you *can't* use it, but it's worth being aware of the geography signals you're sending. If the aim is Victorian gothic in southern England, you might want to pick a name that leans less Scottish in flavour. Here are a few suggestions:

The Clarendon Hotel – very Victorian, echoes real period hotels in London.

The Bellgrave Hotel – has a faintly gothic edge, but still fits the genteel Victorian setting.

The Grosvenor Arms/Hotel – "Grosvenor" is loaded with upper-class associations and very southern-English.

If you want to stress *mystery and occult rumours*, something like **Bellgrave** works well. If you want it to feel *respectable, society-endorsed*, then **Clarendon** or **Grosvenor** would be perfect.

Commented [r19]: Be careful of grammatical errors and typos.

Commented [r20]: If it matters later, give it a name now (e.g., *The Wheatshaf on London Road*). This adds detail which equals credibility and easier recall.

Commented [r21]: If the narrator is uncertain, make that a character beat:

"Robert, I think—the butcher's man will know his surname."

This adds foreshadowing and shows how she'll gather clues in future chapters.

‘Why, yes!’ I finally looked at Lord Ashford square in the eyes. ‘He has gone missing!’
He seemed quite taken aback, and glanced at Spencer who looked equally surprised.
‘And Lord Ruthven is suspected?’
‘That was what my brother was investigating. It can’t be a coincidence.’
‘I agree.’
‘So you will take the case?’
He paused in a way that made me uneasy.
‘Miss Carrington, I am very sorry that your brother has gone missing. It seems you were very close, and you must be upset. I do hope he turns up.’ Lord Ashford stood up, and I found myself mirroring him, my cheeks hot.
‘You mean to say you will not help?’

‘It seems both your brother and yourself have misjudged what it is that I do.’

‘You are a detective, are you not?’
‘There are perfectly good people who are experienced in missing person cases at the police station in Eppington. They are much more suitable to your needs.’

I like to think I am a patient person – one must have this trait to be able to successfully train dogs – but I found myself slightly raising my voice.

‘You presumed I came to you first, Lord Ashford? Of course I have consulted the police!’ I made my way to the door, where somehow Spencer had already positioned himself and opened it. I turned back to the horrid Lord of the Manor and spoke again. ‘They were as useless and unsympathetic as you have been just now!’ It seems I shall have to find my brother by myself!’

I swept out of the room, headed straight for the front door, and nearly tumbled over a moving object hurtling from the left. We both stopped in our tracks and I looked down in the gloom to behold a young boy, covered in mud, clothes torn and haphazard and looking out of bright, mischievous eyes. He merely gawped at me so I stepped around him. The interruption in my outraged exit allowed Lord Ashford to catch up to the door of his breakfast room, and I decided to alert him to another area of my discomfort.

‘And for goodness’ sake – have some decorum in this house!’ I indicated himself and the unkempt boy, saw just enough of Lord Ashford’s face to see that I had succeeded in my aim, and swiftly went to the now open front door.

At the time I was so angry I thought little of the fact that Spencer met me outside with a trap and driver. I managed a ‘thank-you’, I think, and was very grateful for the transport as I hadn’t quite thought this part of my escape into the world of propriety through.

Commented [r22]: Plant a hint of his speciality:
“...have misjudged what I do. Missing persons are not my field.”
This reduces the “why advertise as detective?” question. Links back to my earlier suggestion on Ashford’s card: “Extraordinary Phenomena” and justifies his refusal.

Commented [r23]: Perhaps give the boy a single telling detail (a slingshot? a wire? a pocket watch?) something that will matter later. Otherwise he reads as noise. Make him memorable.

At supper that evening, I tried my hardest not to reveal any of what had happened to my father, but failed as my father has a most annoying trait of an excellent memory. I could hear the smirk in his voice.

‘Where is Adam, then?’ he asked after barely two mouthfuls.

‘I beg your pardon, father?’

‘Oh, well, my sweet, I assumed that Lord Ashford had solved the great mystery of your brother’s disappearance. Him not being here at dinner is certainly not a clue as whether this is the case, of course, since he hasn’t been to this table for three years.’

I put my cutlery down.

‘Father, it upsets me when you talk about Adam that way. I’m sure I’ve mentioned it before.’

‘Your attachment to your brother is the real mystery, Sophie.’

‘And why shouldn’t I be attached to my own brother? Why aren’t you more fond of your only son?’

It was his turn to free his hands of the metal ware. In fact, he freed himself of the room, all joviality gone like a candle being blown out. At least I was spared any interrogation of my encounter with Lord Ashford. I lamented for a little while about the behaviour of the male being – why did they find it so difficult to understand that the disappearance of my older brother, my playmate, my friend, my protector since I was a babe was distressing and important to me? I resolved that my father and the kennel could do without me for a few days, and I would do exactly as I had said to that impertinent Lord, and find Adam myself.

The trouble was knowing where to start.

Commented [r24]: The dinner scene works to show family conflict, but it slightly stalls the forward momentum. Maybe tighten it to just the sharp exchange with her father. That keeps the focus on Sophie’s determination to find Adam.

Commented [r25]: Remember to show, not tell. Give Sophie’s father some action tags to improve this line. Perhaps:

He didn’t look up from his plate when he said, ‘Where is Adam, then?’

Commented [r26]: If he’s cruel, make it sting, even if he doesn’t mean it. People say horrible things in the heat of the moment:

‘Your attachment to your brother is the real mystery, Sophie. He left. You should do the same.’

This motivates her vow at the end of the scene.

Commented [r27]: This is a great ending line for the chapter. It leaves us with tension and curiosity. Give it some propulsion and emphasise her resolve. Remember to always keep the story pushing forward, even with a small sentence like this.

Consider something along the lines of: **The trouble was knowing where to start—but start I must.**

You'll now see a sample editorial report. This is how we expand on the margin notes, giving you the full breakdown of what works, what could be strengthened, and the big-picture guidance to take your story to the next level.

Editorial Report

Story

I enjoyed this opening chapter: the story has a clear throughline. Sophie's brother Adam has vanished, she's following his instructions, and we immediately get conflict between her, Lord Ashford, and her own nerves. Cause and effect are strong—the cabbie refuses to wait, which pushes her towards the gates, which leads to her discovery of the hidden door, and so on. It feels linked and logical.

There's definitely significant change. Sophie starts scared and unsure but still pushes forward, and by the end she's made a fiery vow to find Adam herself. That's a proper arc in just one chapter. There are plenty of hooks too: the missing brother, the strange Lord Ruthven, Lord Ashford's odd refusal to help, and the hints of something bigger happening in town. The only place plausibility wobbles a bit is Ashford's abrupt dismissal—why advertise as a detective if he won't even consider a missing person? If it's a set-up for his character, maybe seed that contradiction more clearly. What do you think—should he come across as reluctant-but-intrigued instead of flatly brushing Sophie off? The final paragraph of the passage feels rushed and could benefit from more detail and description. Sophie's decision to find her brother on her own is a pivotal moment in the story, and it would benefit from more emotional impact and a clearer sense of her motivations.

Plot

The story kicks off in the right place and immediately sets the stage of this being. Opening with Sophie's arrival at the gates works—she's literally on the threshold of an adventure. Ending

the chapter with her vow to find Adam is also strong; it closes the loop and sets up forward momentum for the next diary entry. The order of events is logical.

If anything, the statues and the servant's theatrics might slow the pace slightly. They're atmospheric, but do they push the plot forward? Maybe they could be trimmed or tied more directly to the mystery. Otherwise, the threads feel balanced: Adam's disappearance, Ashford's strange behaviour, Ruthven's occult society. Each thread gives the reader a reason to keep going.

Character

This is clearly Sophie's story. She's interesting because she's a mix of confidence and insecurity—she talks a good game about independence but is secretly frightened. That feels real and will resonate with readers. Her narration carries a nice self-aware wit that makes her voice engaging. Ashford, meanwhile, is intriguing but a little slippery. His introduction—lounging half-dressed, then being almost rude—paints him as careless, but is that really the detective we're supposed to rely on? You might want to sharpen whether he's meant to be dishevelled genius or just a jerk. Whichever version you pick, make sure he develops as a character with a clear change by the end of the story.

Sophie's father is sketched quickly but effectively—dismissive and sardonic. Adam, though absent, feels present because of the letter and Sophie's fond memories. No characters stand out as unnecessary yet, though the muddy boy at the door feels underdeveloped here. Maybe he becomes important later, but right now he's just a brief distraction.

Point of View

You're using first-person narration from Sophie's perspective, framed as her writing down events after the fact. It works—it gives immediacy and personality. Her narrative voice is consistent and occasionally humorous, which helps balance the gothic atmosphere. There are a few spots where the narration leans a bit heavy into exposition (like the father's dislike of Adam, the statues), but mostly the distance is well-handled. The diary-frame makes it clear she's reflecting but still caught up in the drama.

Setting and Worldbuilding

The Victorian setting comes across vividly—lace gloves, cabs, sprawling estates, grand gates, grotesque statues. It feels anchored in its period, though there's the odd moment (like “modern woman of the eighties”) where you might want to be careful about phrasing—it risks sounding twenty-first century. Otherwise, the details are great.

The worldbuilding around Ashford and Ruthven is strong but mysterious—you've left just enough gaps for intrigue. The grotesque bridge guardians are wonderfully gothic, though again, they don't yet tie into the story. Maybe they will later? I like that you weave the world into Sophie's perspective—her fear of impropriety, her memories of local gossip. It doesn't feel like info-dump.

Scene and Summary

You've got a good mix of scene and reflection. We live through Sophie's arrival, her conversation with Ashford, and the awkward dinner with her father. Her inner commentary adds flavour without drowning us in summary. The only risk is length—Sophie describes her feelings in great detail, sometimes repeating them. Trimming just a little could sharpen the pace. Every scene here does serve a purpose: the cabbie sets tone, the estate builds atmosphere, Ashford gives conflict, the father cements motivation. Nothing feels redundant.

Genre

This opening chapter sits firmly in gothic mystery territory, with a touch of detective fiction. Be mindful of how the story develops if you plan on this being a Historical Urban Fantasy. However, you're using conventions for the current genre well: a brooding estate, a mysterious aristocrat, whispered rumours of occult societies, and a heroine caught between fear and determination. What's missing (so far) is a really strong supernatural element—though maybe that comes later. If you want to subvert the genre, you could lean harder into Sophie's voice, making her self-awareness a stronger contrast to the melodrama around her.

Readership and Market Potential

This feels like it would appeal to readers of gothic mystery, historical fiction, and Victorian-set detective stories. Think fans of Wilkie Collins, Sarah Perry, or even a slightly darker *Enola Holmes*. Readers who enjoy a plucky heroine and a brooding detective will be on board. Similar books *have* found audiences—especially when they mix gothic atmosphere with an engaging central character.

The main thing to watch is pacing. Modern readers like gothic detail, but they also expect tension and forward momentum. If too much time is spent on description or Sophie's inner monologue, it could risk losing some readers. Otherwise, the premise (a secret society, missing people, a reluctant detective, a determined heroine) has strong market potential.

Final Thoughts

This first chapter does a great job of setting tone, character, and mystery. Sophie's voice is a real asset. If you tighten a little, clarify Ashford's role, and make sure every descriptive flourish earns its keep, this could be a gripping opener.

If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch.