

Examples Of Our Editorial Services

This document includes examples of real reports commissioned by our clients, anonymised to preserve the confidentiality of the writers we have worked with.

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Note to Reader

Please note that the reports below serve as **examples** of our services. Although based on real assessments we provided, details have been changed to preserve the author's anonymity. This includes character names, locations, and various plot points.

The example reports below were written by our experienced literary consultants and serve as an apt example of the assessments we provide. It should be noted, however, that every commissioned report is tailored to the unique needs of each client; reports may cover the fundamental tenets of writing and/or the more sophisticated and subtle components of the craft, depending on the report recipient's level of writing experience and how advanced their assessed draft is.

Should you choose to commission an editorial assessment with Marginalia, your literary consultant will tailor the depth and sophistication of their feedback to your goals, drafting stage, and degree of experience with the craft.

Manuscript Assessment of Roger Smith's *Without Borders*

Title and author name have been changed to preserve the anonymity and intellectual property rights of the author who commissioned this manuscript assessment.

Introduction

We're absolutely delighted that you've entrusted us with your manuscript. It was a pleasure to read. We hope that the following report inspires you with confidence and gives you a clear sense of direction for your next draft.

Once you have read the report, we encourage you to set it aside for a short time. We advise that all writers do this, to strengthen their clarity and receptiveness to the feedback provided.

You will of course have the opportunity to ask questions about your report if you would like to. Please direct all questions to hello@marginalia-manuscripts.com and our friendly support team will pass them on to your literary consultant.

Let's get started!

Report Overview

Without Borders is a novel with a compelling and well-cultivated writing style. The protagonist's inner monologue is especially well characterised, consistent, and engaging. The premise of the series is intriguing and original, and has great potential. There are, however, some key areas for improvement. Currently, the novel is held back primarily by the characterisation of other members of the cast, the rapid pace of the narrative, dialogue, and certain plot elements—most notably, the sheer amount of action that occupies a reasonably short word count.

Commercial Viability

Although *Without Borders*, as it stands, is not yet ready for submission to literary agents, it could be commercially viable with the right attention. The plot is original, the

protagonist intriguing, and there is a place in the market for niche thrillers of this nature. The medical and psychological elements of *Without Borders*, as well as your writing style, are suited to an audience with a love of books like *Deceive Me* by Karen Cole and *All in Her Head* by Shaun Fleming.

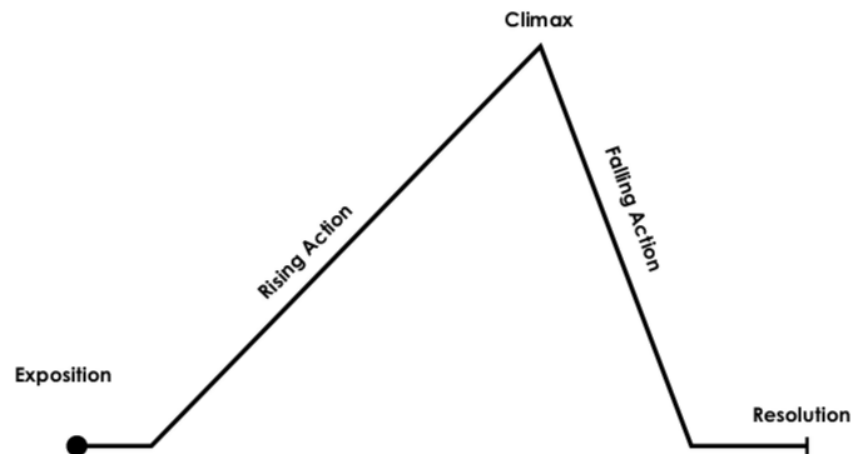
To achieve commercial viability, you will need to increase the manuscript word count. The average length of a thriller novel is between 70,000 and 90,000 words, so we recommend using this as a benchmark. Extending the length of your manuscript will also assist you in rectifying many of the pacing and structural issues identified later in this report.

Plot, Pace & Structure

The plot of *Without Borders* can be convoluted and moves between scenes very quickly, leaving little room for respite. The climactic moment of any scene is defined by the build towards it, the suspense, or—in some cases—the false sense of security. This is the very reason why many thrillers utilise domestic settings; it is the familiarity and the initial sense of security that ramp up the tension when the real action occurs.

In certain scenes and chapters, *Without Borders* moves quickly from one climax to another, with minimal build (i.e., from the grand reveal that the protagonist has cancer to him being kidnapped). Periods of respite are necessary after a reveal in order for the reader and the characters to process what they have just learned. For instance, we learn very little about the protagonist's reaction to the discovery that he has cancer (p.26), and what we do learn seems to indicate that he feels apathetic. If this is the case, then some self-reflection could strengthen the scene. Does the protagonist acknowledge the oddity of his own reaction to this discovery and feel concerned by his own indifference? Reflections of this nature can give weight and meaning to even feelings of apathy.

Although periods of respite can help navigate a reader from one climactic moment to the next, it is worth noting that they can't account for a surplus of climactic moments. One of the strengths of your writing is that it is never dull, but it could be argued that there is too much happening for one novel to carry alone. Even as part of a series, *Without Borders* carries a great number of events in a very limited word count. When structuring your novel, consider the classic story arc:



There are variations on this arc, but most variations share key similarities; namely, the rising action and the climax. I'd encourage you to research variations—two books that explain story arcs brilliantly, and each in a unique way, are *Meander, Spiral, Explode* by Jane Alison and *Structuring Your Novel* by K.M. Weiland. In *Without Borders*, the period of rising action is sporadic, leaping from dramatic event to dramatic event without any sense that it is building towards something of greater significance; this dilutes the final climax. The climax should be clear, indisputable, and should outshine all other instances of action and emotion. It is the culmination of your novel. In its current draft, *Without Border's* climax is overshadowed by the pace and dynamism of the rising action stages of your novel.

To perfect your structure, we'd recommend drawing your plot events on a graph, showing the rise and fall of action. Every reveal, fight, or climactic moment should be depicted as an individual peak on the graph, followed by troughs. The time that passes in between action scenes is an opportunity to provide character insights, by showing their reactions to events, and foreshadow the final climax. The trajectory of the graph as a whole should lead to an ultimate climax (i.e., the end of your novel should have the highest peak). The instances of rising action should culminate in this peak and each should play a role in realising it. We should feel, by the end of the novel, that everything was connected. This is a sense that your current draft lacks (i.e., the revelation that the protagonist was adopted—p.43—doesn't seem to play any part in the novel's wider story, climax or character journey).

The fast-paced nature of *Without Borders* can also cause a lack of clarity and is likely to create confusion for a reader. Writers are always endeavouring to strike a balance between holding back information to create intrigue and avoiding confusing their readers. In this regard, always err on the side of caution—confusion in a reader is a writer's worst enemy and may well cause a reader to abandon a book.

In your writing, you favour short scenes, which contributes to the fast pace of the novel. This isn't necessarily a problem, and can be very well-suited to the thriller genre—provided that you are taking steps to prevent any confusion arising from the short, compact scenes. When moving rapidly between scenes, locations, and character-perspectives, it is helpful to ground the reader from the offset. You can achieve this without compromising the tension in your narrative by including the location and date at the beginning of each new scene. For example, *Killing Eve* (the TV series), like *Without Borders*, is set across multiple locations, with plenty of characters and espionage. *Killing Eve* uses location captions to ground the viewer.

Grounding the reader allows them to focus on other aspects of the scene. Remember that thrillers, and any novel with elements of mystery, are asking a lot of their readers. In your novel, you leave your readers asking many questions, which again isn't necessarily an issue—but be sure to make these questions count. They should never be wondering, “Where am I?”, “Is this a flashback?”, or “Who is speaking?”. Make it easy for readers where you can, to prevent reader fatigue.

As an example, in chapter one we move from the protagonist's first-person perspective on an event in his past (gardening with his father—p.5) to John (the protagonist's brother) arguing with his girlfriend (p.6). Though we have moved in the space of one or two pages between time periods, this is not signposted, creating the likelihood of initial disorientation as the reader moves between scenes. We want intrigue, not disorientation. Fortunately, a timestamp and/or location stamp can be a source of intrigue by their very nature.

The protagonist's hallucinations (p.12, p.18, p.34, p.62, and p.81) and the blurred line between his reality and his imagination throws every new scene into question and creates a sense of unreliability. You have your readers on the edge of their seat, contemplating what's real and what's not, and this is a strength of your novel. However, if the unreliability is too pervasive, what *is* real begins to lose its impact. In many cases, clarity is worth more to a reader than ambiguity; when it is important that they know whether something is real or otherwise, make it known to them.

Clarity does not need to compromise creativity or mystery in your writing. Keep in mind that the purpose of the “show don't tell” advice is to assist writers in avoiding dull, information-heavy narratives. It provides flair and poeticism, but your writing has flair and poeticism in spades. What it needs is greater clarity—more telling.

Another area that could be improved upon is plausibility. There are a few scenes that seem a little too convenient. For instance, the two wholly coincidental instances of the protagonist meeting strangers who can provide information on his father (p.26 and p.31). Though we understand that this information serves a purpose for plot progression, it feels implausible that there would be two separate instances in which strangers have answers to the protagonist's questions.

Realism and plausibility are especially important in this particular genre. Your next draft will be a good opportunity to hammer out any plausibility issues. You may need to rework certain plot elements to achieve this.

Characterisation

With such a large cast of characters, it becomes easy for readers to get lost and lose track of who is who and why they matter. The way you introduce your characters is the defining first impression that holds them in our minds for the rest of the novel. When introducing a new character, be sure to balance showing with telling to fully and sharply define them.

The following is an example of an exceptional character introduction that is liberal with its telling, without compromising on creativity:

*“He was a rich man; banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stage, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him... A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility.” - Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*.*

From this description, we are given the following information: his job, his station, his previous station, his build, his facial features, and his personality, and—most interestingly—what gave rise to his personality. All of this is achieved without ever boring the reader. The most important introductory character details for *your* novel would be their job, who they work for, distinguishing features (particularly as you have a large cast), the nature of their relationship/s with other characters, and perhaps their motives. You should also avoid using variations of names, as this can be confusing; for instance, you refer to John as John, Johnny, and Johnathon at different times throughout the series. As John is an alias, any future references to his true name (Carl) should be caveated with a reminder that it is John who is being referenced (i.e., “Carl, now John...”).

Another issue we have noted is similarity between character names. Though this may seem like a minor consideration, it is especially important when you have a large cast of characters that they are clearly distinguishable. This is achieved in part through physical characteristics, but mostly through names. Many of your character names begin with S; Simon, Suzy, Sienna, Sally, and Saul. We realise that some of these characters were introduced in the first novel in the series, but for those who were not it would be very beneficial to give them more distinctive names.

Perhaps the most notable characterisation issue in *Without Borders* is your representation of certain female characters, which at times verges on hypersexualisation. The emphasis on their sexual characteristics, particularly in the case of Suzy, can at times be gratuitous and seems to overshadow any meaningful character traits.

It reads as if Suzy has been written by the protagonist himself (as a character prone to sexism), rather than you as the author—because she, despite being an educated woman,

conforms to the archetypal male fantasy. This fantasy has its place in erotic fiction, but feels out of place in a thriller, where realism is key.

While we recognise that the protagonist is purposefully written as lustful and sexist, we are concerned that in your efforts to represent *his* sexism, your characterisation of Suzy might be perceived as sexist and unrealistic. For example, when the protagonist first meets Suzy (p.11), he is gruff and unpleasant. Despite this, Suzy is flirtatious and makes bold sexual advances on him, with no explanation as to why she might be attracted to the protagonist. Moreover, despite being well educated and described as confident and talkative, Suzy has very little to say in the novel; her primary role seems to be to demonstrate the protagonist's popularity among women—a popularity that is not only unexplained, but seems undeserved.

There are, of course, examples in literature of hypersexualised female characters that contribute something important to the narrative. In these cases where hypersexualisation works, there is usually a very clear reason for it. Perhaps they have a fetish for power, or have learnt their behaviour from someone they look up to. Perhaps every non-sexual source of power and influence has been taken from them.

Suzy's sexualisation, on the other hand, remains unexplained. Does she resent having been belittled so often by the men in her life that she takes pleasure in belittling men in return? Is she left feeling dirty or empowered when she uses seduction to get her way? For Suzy's hypersexualisation to be plausible, the reader must understand it and be able to empathise with it. For examples of this, you need look no further than the many femme fatales of gothic fiction (and other genres), whose sexuality is their weapon of choice. The eponymous Rebecca, in Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca*, is worth studying as an intriguing and well-developed example of how a female character might be sexualised without compromising her depth and believability.

Moreover, if we are expected to believe that any female character is attracted to the protagonist, we need some explanation for this attraction. Currently, the protagonist is characterised as unpleasant, arrogant, unreliable, and callous; this leaves us wondering what attracts a woman to him in the first place. Do they see something in him that no one else does? Does he remind them of someone they knew in the past? We have to understand where attraction and affection comes from for us to put stock in it.

The protagonist is your most fleshed-out and compelling character. His voice is clear and distinctive. John follows closely behind as a character who is consistent and intriguing. His love for his uncle, and how this love interferes with his work life, makes for a very interesting character relationship. Many of the other characters, however, are less fully formed. You have captured a unique voice for the protagonist, and we think you could benefit from thinking carefully about what each of your sub-characters would sound like were the book written from their perspective. This activity often helps writers truly understand their whole cast of characters, which shines through in the writing.

In the first novel in the series, we get more time with each of the characters. This is missing from *Without Borders*, and Alan and Sienna seem to take a backseat. As characters that are familiar to the readers, we have a vested interest in them and the novel could benefit from placing them in a more centre-stage position, alongside the protagonists, Suzy, and John.

Exposition & Dialogue

Exposition is one of the more challenging aspects of a novel—particularly in the mystery, crime, and thriller genres, where revelation is especially critical to the narrative.

Exposition in dialogue can work very well, but only under specific circumstances. If it misses the mark, the dialogue can sound unnatural and stunted. You'll know when you've missed the mark if any of the following is true:

1. Your character is telling another character something they already know in order for you to reveal the information to the reader.
2. The character has no motivation for revealing the information, besides informing the reader of it. Think carefully about the character's motivation for revealing new information, to avoid the sense that they are simply a plot device.

In some cases, your dialogue can feel a little unnatural and unrealistic. Exposition in dialogue that misses the mark is the root cause of this issue. On p.112, for example, John accounts for what happened to him and Suzy the night before while in dialogue with Suzy herself. Given that Suzy already has an awareness of what happened, it is clear that this exposition is for the reader's sake and the reader's sake alone. This makes the reader hyper aware that they are being told a story which shatters the illusion painstakingly crafted by their imagination. It emphasises the presence of the author, which has the same effect as an inconsistency in the story. As an example, imagine a Starbucks cup left on the mantle in the scene of a film set in the 1800s—jarring, is it not?

Nailing Exposition Inside Dialogue

1. Hold back. There is a rhythm to natural conversation that you should be trying to mimic. Valuable information should never be given completely freely, and there should always be a motive (i.e., oneupmanship, anger, a feeling of companionship and trust).
2. When something comes fast and easily to us as readers, it no longer holds any value. Reading is a journey of discovery, and exposition in dialogue should reveal new information gradually. Every conversation is an opportunity for suspense to

build, and for us to gain new insights into characters. If your dialogue is only serving the purpose of exposition, it is missing the mark.

Voice & Style

As we have already touched on, voice and style are among the most notable strengths of your novel, which is very promising. While issues with characterisation, plot, pace, and structure can be rectified with comparative ease, resolving voice and stylistic problems can be significantly more challenging because the primary solution is—quite simply—taking the time to practice and refine your craft. Discovery of a unique and powerful voice and style does not happen overnight, and yet these are the defining features of your writing that set you apart from other authors.

Fortunately, your voice is strong, distinguishable, and compelling, while your style is concise and sharp. There are few instances in which your voice or style wavers, but these minor inconsistencies tend to manifest in your dialogue ([see above](#)).

Summary

In this draft of *Without Borders*, you have already achieved one of the most challenging aspects of writing a novel—cultivating a writing style that is rich and engaging. We found that the narrative voice was strong and kept us locked in, which is half the battle towards writing a great novel!

The premise of *Without Borders* is bursting with potential and you should be pleased with the work you've achieved. In your next draft, we recommend fleshing out your sub-characters, working on perfecting pace and story arc, and fine-tuning your approach to exposition in dialogue.

By addressing the issues outlined in this report, we feel confident that your finished novel will be a page-turner that strikes the balance between character, pace, and plot.

It was a great pleasure to read your manuscript! We wish you the best of luck with your next draft. If you would like a second assessment of this manuscript at any time in the future, we can offer you a 15% discount.

Lastly, if you have any questions about our report, please don't hesitate to ask. We would be more than happy to walk you through any of the issues we've raised.

Plot Assessment of A.F. Wiley's *The Wayside*

Title and author name have been changed to preserve the anonymity and intellectual property rights of the author who commissioned this plot assessment.

Overview

Hi Alice!

The premise and the settings for this story are very intriguing, and they offer a great deal of potential. I have left comments throughout the synopsis raising questions that need to be answered and flagging specific issues.

We always endeavour to provide helpful recommendations to prevent the writers we work with from becoming discouraged or overwhelmed. This is purely because we think identifying problems without providing potential solutions is counterproductive and de-motivating. Please bear in mind that these are no more than suggestions; we hope they will inspire you.

Let's get started.

Character

First and foremost, let's talk about characters. There are a lot of characters in this plot, which is likely to result in all of them being less compelling than they could otherwise be. Here are a few of the characters that caught my interest as a reader:

- Michael Willis
- Anastasia
- Antoaneta Ivanov
- Elizabeth Chen

These characters could really benefit from being fleshed out more. If possible, I would recommend purging your plot of any characters whose role could be performed by someone more integral to the story or substituted in some other way. For example,

Antoaneta's brother, whose sole purpose seems to be incentivising Antoaneta to cooperate with the corrupt CIA agent. This purpose could be served without the necessity for an additional character (Antoaneta's brother) by, for example, the agent threatening to have Antoaneta framed. This is an immediate threat that would explain Antoaneta's reluctance to report the corrupt agent to his superiors. Alternatively, to prevent Antoaneta's brother from functioning primarily as a plot device, you could make his role in the story more defined.

Charlie is another unnecessary character whose role could be filled by Michael Willis. Michael Willis is intriguing from the very start but has very little depth at this time. A solution to this issue could be making Michael Willis Elizabeth Chen's lover. Perhaps Michael Willis helped Elizabeth Chen commit the murder.

Clover is another character who does not seem to contribute much to the story. If you would like Riley to have a love interest, Antoaneta is a good option. This would also round out the ending, because the inheritance would pass to Antoaneta and Riley. Antoaneta is—of course—a relative of Elizabeth Chen, who would have lived on the estate had her story taken a happier turn. There is something touching about the estate coming full circle and passing into the hands of Elizabeth Chen's granddaughter.

Riley is often given information (i.e. by Trent), instead of discovering it for himself, which makes him a relatively passive character. As the protagonist, he needs a clear goal. Why is he so invested in this mystery? Is it because he is falling in love with Antoaneta, who is being threatened? Does he seek out the information proactively, in an attempt to help her (e.g. by visiting Anastasia and sussing out the nature of what she saw all those years ago)?

Point of View

I'm not sure which point of view you intend to write from, but third-person, semi-omniscient has some notable benefits. There are so many rich and compelling scenes in your story, which would be ideally suited to flashbacks. Particularly Michael Willis seeing the body dragged away—that is the kind of scene that will stick with your readers.

Though there are other options for point of view, which also have their merits, third-person is popular in the mystery genre because it allows you to drop clues without requiring characters to perceive those clues themselves.

Timeframe

The 60-year gap is too substantial and difficult to explain. Why did the agent not come for vengeance sooner? Why has Michael Willis been a sitting duck, not in hiding, simply waiting for the agent to happen upon him? I would suggest a much smaller gap between Elizabeth Chen's disappearance and the agent turning up in Michigan. Perhaps the agent has been looking for Elizabeth Chen and has finally managed to trace her back to Michigan. An interesting twist could be that Michael Willis has been hiding Elizabeth Chen on his estate.

The Catalyst / Inciting Incident

If the inciting incident occurred 60 years earlier, then what has changed to suddenly throw the plot into motion? We need something to drive the sudden movement. What does the agent learn that they didn't know before? How do they come to learn it?

The Ending

The ending needs to have more of a focus. At the moment we have Michael Willis' death, the discovery that Elizabeth Chen is alive, Clover being reunited with his mother, Antoaneta's brother becoming a doctor, Trent getting out of debt, and Riley inheriting the mansion. Is the ending focused on the tragedy of Michael Willis' death? Is it a happy, romantic ending for Riley? Ask yourself what you want your reader to feel and refine your ending accordingly. These multiple endings are too much for a reader to be interested in simultaneously. It lacks climax because it is spread too thinly across a big cast of characters. The arcs should be connected. For instance, if Antoaneta Ivanov were to be Riley's love interest, their arc meets at the end. This would also connect their arc to Elizabeth Chen's character journey, Michael Willis' journey, and even Anastasia's. This is just a suggestion of course, but it serves as an example of how the ending might tie together.

Reading Recommendation

Deadly Night, by Heather Graham. If you haven't read this book, I highly recommend it. The premise combines romance, mystery and crime in a similar way to your plot. It may help you gain some insight into how you want Riley to make certain discoveries, or simply inspire you. This has a similar balance of crime and romance to your story and also maintains a similar distance between the crime and the discovery of the crime.

Further Notes & Questions

While we have provided most of our feedback in the summary report above, we have also left occasional comments raising any questions we might have throughout the synopsis itself. These are not necessarily plot holes, so much as areas that need to be fleshed out within the manuscript to capture character intention, feasibility, etc.

For the purposes of this example report, you will find a list of comments below that would ordinarily be included in the margins of the original synopsis document.

Comment 1:

Why is the estate rundown? The answer to this question is an important reflection on Michael Willis' character. Is he a Miss. Havisham (*Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens) figure, whose life fell into disrepair when his heart was broken? If he is an embittered character, this is likely to feed into Riley's hesitation to reveal his discovery of the body on the estate, for fear of being fired.

Comment 2:

The romance between the plumber and the fashionista journalist with connections is unusual, but not necessarily problematic. There needs to be some explanation for this major work and lifestyle difference between them. Are they childhood sweethearts? How did they meet? Why did they fall in love?

Comment 3:

Clover plays no role in the plot beyond her first appearance, which is problematic. She also isn't strictly necessary at this stage either, so I would consider eliminating her character. If Riley's relative worked as a servant on Michael Willis' estate, this could be his way into the job, substituting Clover's purpose in the story.

Comment 4:

What was Riley doing prior to getting this job on Michael Willis' estate? Why was he unemployed/why was his previous job not making him enough money? Does this new position pay significantly more? In which case, how do we explain a gentleman like Michael Willis (who is unwilling to pay to keep his mansion well-maintained) paying a high wage to a tradesman? This seems unlikely.

Comment 5:

Why has Riley been given reason to fear losing his job? Does he suspect that Michael Willis might be hiding something? If Riley and the reader are expected to believe that Michael Willis might be a murderer, then Riley would be more concerned for his life than his job. This would raise the stakes.

Comment 6:

Is Antoaneta Ivanov being threatened or bribed? If it is a bribe, then it is a poor reflection on Antoaneta Ivanov if she accepts it. A threat is more viable. We also need some explanation of why Antoaneta Ivanov does not immediately report the corrupt agent.

Comment 7:

To establish effective foreshadowing, be sure to introduce Trent towards the beginning of the novel (or remove him entirely and substitute his purpose), or you may risk him seeming like a plot device. If you decide to keep Trent's character, you will also need to establish the nature of his relationship with Riley—are they begrudging step-relatives? Do they actively dislike one another? Are they friends?

Comment 8:

Why does Riley refuse to help Trent? Does Riley have too much integrity to help someone he knows deserves disgrace? Is it that he dislikes Trent? Is he frightened to ask Michael Willis for help on his behalf?

Comment 9:

How does Trent know that Riley has discovered the bones? If Riley has told him this, there needs to be some explanation, especially if Trent and Riley aren't friends.

Comment 10:

What is the significance of the evidence discovered by Riley? It doesn't appear to feature later in the plot. Did the little girl not tell anyone about what she saw because she was afraid?

Comment 11:

The corrupt agent's intention needs to be singular and clear. At the moment, it's a little murky.

Comment 12:

There is a lot that is simply "revealed" in this plot, usually by another character bringing information to Riley. I would recommend devising ways for Riley to discover the truth for himself, making him a more active character.