A FREE GUIDE FOR READERS

FREE BOOKS BEFORE ANYONE ELSE



The Reader's Guide to ARCs
Find them. Read them. Review them honestly.

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The Reader's Guide to Advance Reader Copies: where to find them, how to read them, how to review them honestly

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Free edition, 2026.

Introduction

There is a particular pleasure in reading a book before it is famous. Nobody has told you what to think about it yet. The characters are yours alone for a while. And if you tell the author what you thought, someone on the other side actually reads it.

Advance reader copies, usually called ARCs, are how that happens. For decades they were mostly passed around inside publishing: reviewers, librarians, booksellers. Today, with independent authors publishing in huge numbers, ordinary readers can join in, and many do.

This short guide is for readers who like the idea and want to know how it works, without hype. It explains what an ARC is, why authors share them, where readers find them, how to be a good ARC reader, how to write a review that helps someone, and how to avoid the pitfalls. It is free, it is short, and it asks nothing of you.

What this guide is not

It is not a way to make money. Nobody should pay you to review, and you should never pay someone to receive a free book. It is not a way to collect free books by writing fake reviews. And it is not a promise that you will receive any particular book; availability depends on authors and on how many readers ask.

Who wrote it

This guide comes from the team behind GetBookReviews, a free platform built by a community of readers and indie authors, for readers and indie authors. We say

so openly because we run it. Chapter 7 explains how it works; everything else in this guide works without it.

> ***Want your first free book today?*** *GetBookReviews has a library of indie books you can read for free, in genres from fantasy to thrillers to non-fiction. Create a free account and browse the library. No subscription, no payment, and nobody tells you what to write. The text was written with the help of an AI language model and edited by the team; it contains no invented stories or statistics.*

How to read it

Start with Chapter 1 if you are new to ARCs. If you already read them, skip to Chapter 4 for the etiquette and Chapter 5 for writing reviews. Chapter 7 describes our platform, Chapter 8 covers safety, and the appendix has a checklist you can copy.

CHAPTER 1

What Is an ARC?

An advance reader copy, or ARC, is a copy of a book given to a reader before the official release. It is usually free. The reader is invited to read it and, if they wish, share an honest opinion.

ARC, galley, proof

Different words describe slightly different things. A galley or proof is traditionally an early, sometimes uncorrected, printed or digital version sent to reviewers. An ARC is a more polished version, often close to final. In the independent world the terms are used loosely: an ARC usually means “a free copy before release”, often in e-book format.

What you get

Usually an EPUB or PDF file, sometimes a link to read on a platform, sometimes a printed copy for professional reviewers. The text may contain small errors that will be corrected before release. A note at the front often says so.

What you do not get

You do not get ownership of the book’s rights. You may not copy or share the file. You do not get paid. And, importantly, you do not owe the author a review.

A short history

Publishers have sent advance copies to critics for a long time, so that reviews could appear when the book reached stores. When e-books and self-publishing grew, authors started doing the same on a smaller scale. Online platforms now help authors connect with readers who want to read early. The idea is the same: a book needs readers, and readers like early access.

Why “advance” matters

An early opinion helps in two ways. It helps the author find problems before more readers see them. And it helps the next reader decide. This is why many advance readers share their thoughts when the book goes on sale.

> ***Try this:*** *Think of the last book you read that you wish you had known about earlier. What would have helped you find it? Keep that answer in mind; it is what advance readers provide for others.*

CHAPTER 2

Why Authors Give Books Away

It may seem strange: why would an author give away something they spent months writing?

Because unknown books need readers

A new author has no reputation. A stranger will not pay for a book they have never heard of, from someone they do not know. A free copy removes the risk and lets the reader decide. The author hopes the reader will like the book, tell friends, and read the next one.

Because honest feedback is valuable

Authors cannot see their own mistakes. A reader might spot a continuity error or find that chapter three drags. Early readers help authors improve the book before release or in an updated edition.

Because reviews help other readers

When a book goes on sale, shoppers look at what others thought. An empty review section tells them nothing. A few honest opinions help them decide whether this book is for them.

What authors may not do

Authors are not allowed to buy reviews, require a review in exchange for a free copy, ask for positive-only opinions or give you a reward for reviewing. The big stores forbid these things. If an author asks you to promise a five-star review, that is a red flag. Politely decline and, if you wish, report it to the platform.

What you can expect from a good author

A good author tells you what the book is about, what format they offer, when it comes out and what they ask. They say clearly that you may read it and decide freely. They thank you whether or not you review. They do not chase you.

> ***Try this:*** *Imagine you are an author with ten readers. What would you want them to tell you? That question shows what a helpful review contains.*

CHAPTER 3

Where to Find ARCs

There is no single place. Here are the main routes, with their usual strengths and limits. Details such as pricing and rules change often, so check each site before you sign up.

Authors' own newsletters and websites

Many independent authors invite their mailing list to read advance copies. This is often the best route because the author wants engaged readers and tells you what to expect. Sign up for the newsletters of authors you already enjoy. It costs nothing.

Marketplaces that match readers and authors

Some websites let readers request advance copies of new books, and authors accept or decline requests. They differ in how they select readers, whether they require a track record of reviews, and what they charge authors. Some are free for readers, others have optional paid features. Read how each one works before you join.

Large publisher programmes

Some programmes are aimed mostly at professional reviewers, librarians and booksellers. If you review regularly and have a public profile, you may qualify. New readers may find it hard to be accepted. That is normal, not a judgement of you.

Reader communities and giveaways

Community platforms for book lovers run giveaways, in which authors offer free copies. Entering is usually free. Some give you an advance copy of a new book; others give copies of recently published ones. Winning is partly luck. Giveaways may carry review requests but not conditions that break store rules; read the terms.

Free reading platforms

A handful of platforms offer readers free books from independent authors with no subscription. Some are funded by ads, some by voluntary features. GetBookReviews, described in Chapter 7, is one of them, and the easiest to start with: you browse a library, pick a book and read it. Take a look at the free library.

Social media and groups

Many readers find ARCs through genre groups and hashtags. These can be lively, but they are also where scams appear. Be careful with unknown accounts that ask you to pay, share personal information or install software.

Library and bookstore programmes

Some libraries and independent bookstores receive advance copies for staff and sometimes offer them to loyal readers. Ask at your local branch whether they have anything like this. They might not, but asking costs nothing.

A sensible starting point

If you are new, try three things: sign up for the newsletters of two or three authors you like, join one free reading platform such as GetBookReviews, and enter one giveaway. After a month, see which one gave you books you enjoyed.

> ***Try this:*** *Write down five authors whose next book you would love to read early. Visit their websites and look for a sign-up form.*

CHAPTER 4

How to Be a Good ARC Reader

Reading an advance copy is a small agreement of trust. These habits keep it fair for everyone.

Read honestly and at your pace

You are not obliged to finish. If a book is not for you, it is fine to stop, and fine to say so politely. Many authors prefer an honest “this was not for me” to silence.

Respect the file

An ARC is for you. Do not forward the file, post it online, or upload it to a sharing site. If you want a friend to read it, point them to the author’s page.

Mind the deadline, kindly

Some authors ask for feedback by a certain date so it can help before release. If life gets in the way, a short message such as “I will not finish in time, sorry” is enough. Authors would rather know.

Say that you got it free

Some stores and platforms ask reviewers who received a free copy to say so, and some build the disclosure into the review form. Where it is asked, do it; where it is not, a short line such as “I received a free advance copy” is a good habit. Honesty about how you got the book makes your review more credible.

Do not expect anything in return

An ARC is a gift. Do not ask the author for money, merchandise or special treatment. If an author offers something for a review, such as a gift card, an entry in a draw or a bonus, decline. It breaks the rules of most stores, and it makes your opinion less trustworthy.

Keep spoilers out

Readers who have not yet read the book will see your review. Keep the plot twists to yourself, or hide them behind a clear spoiler warning where the platform allows it.

Be kind, not nice

You can be critical without being cruel. Comment on the book, not on the author as a person. “The pacing slowed in the middle” is a useful sentence. “This writer should quit” is not.

> ***Try this:*** *Before you start your next ARC, write down the three things that matter most to you in a book (for example, characters, pace, ending). After reading, check how the book did on each.*

CHAPTER 5

Writing a Review Someone Can Use

A good review is not long or fancy. It helps a stranger decide whether to read the book.

The simple structure

You do not need rules, but this shape works for most readers.

1. **What it is.** One sentence on the genre and the premise, without spoilers.
2. **What worked.** Two or three specific points: a character, a setting, the humour, the pace.
3. **What did not.** One or two honest points, said politely.
4. **Who it suits.** A sentence about the reader who would enjoy it.
5. **How you got it.** If relevant, a line saying you received a free advance copy.

Be specific

"Great book!" tells nobody anything. "The relationship between the sisters felt real, and the dialogue made me laugh" tells another reader what to expect.

Specifics are what turn an opinion into help.

Choose a rating that matches your words

If you write that you were bored for half the book but still give five stars, readers will not know what to think. Choose the rating that fits your review. Stars are a rough summary; the text is the real information.

Length

Two to six sentences are plenty. If you have more to say, say it. If you do not, that is fine.

Where to post

Post wherever you usually share opinions: a store page, a reader community, your blog. Nobody can require you to post anywhere. If you want to post on a particular store, check its rules for reviewers, since some stores have conditions, for example about accounts and minimum purchases.

Do not copy

Copying text from other reviews, the blurb or the author’s own words is not a review. Even a short own opinion is better than a long borrowed one.

Never write a review for money

If someone offers to pay you for a review, or asks you to review a book you have not read, say no. Fake and paid reviews harm readers and can get your account closed.

An example

Here is a short, invented example to show the shape. “A cosy mystery set on a tidal island, with a retired lighthouse keeper as the detective. I loved the setting and the slow reveal of the island’s secrets. The middle dragged a little for me, and one subplot felt unfinished. Good for readers who like gentle puzzles over high-speed chases. I received a free advance copy.”

> ***Try this:*** *Take the last book you finished and write a review in the five-part shape above. It takes five minutes and will show you how much you already had to say.*

CHAPTER 6

The Rules Behind the Scenes

You do not need to memorise policies, but a little background helps you stay safe and helps authors stay safe too.

Why stores care

Reviews are only useful if readers can trust them. Stores therefore ban reviews written for payment or other compensation, reviews written by people with a close connection to the author, fake accounts and review swaps. They investigate reports, remove reviews and sometimes close accounts.

What this means for you

- You may read a free copy and write an honest review. Many stores allow this.
- You should not be paid or rewarded for writing a review.
- You should not write a review because an author asked you to give a certain rating.
- You should not review books by friends or family on stores where this is restricted.
- You should not trade reviews with other readers or authors.

- If you are unsure, check the store's current guidelines on community or customer reviews. They are the final authority.

Disclosure is your friend

When you say you received a free copy, you protect your credibility. A reader who sees "I received an advance copy and this is my honest opinion" can weigh your words accordingly.

If an author breaks the rules

If an author promises a reward for reviews, demands a rating, or pressures you, you can decline, leave the group or report the behaviour to the platform. You are not obliged to give a reason.

Privacy

Be careful about sharing your email address and personal details. Reputable platforms and authors will not ask for your bank details or passwords. If someone does, stop.

> ***Try this:*** *Look up the current review guidelines of the store you use most. Read them once and note one rule that surprised you.*

CHAPTER 7

GetBookReviews, a Free Library of Indie Books

We run this platform, so read this chapter knowing that. We think it is the simplest free way to start reading indie books early. Here is how it works, limits included.

What it is

GetBookReviews is a free platform that connects readers with independent authors who offer free copies of their books. It was built by a community of readers and authors, for readers and authors. You browse a library by genre, pick a book that interests you and read it. If you want to, you share your honest opinion on a review site such as Goodreads, StoryGraph, LibraryThing, BookBub or Amazon.

How it works

1. Create a free account. No subscription and no payment details.
2. Open the library and browse by genre: fantasy, romance, mystery and thriller, science fiction, horror, non-fiction and more.
3. Press Pick on a book you like. For most books you then download the file.

4. You have fourteen days to read it, with a friendly reminder before the time is up.
5. If you want to share your opinion, write it in your own words on the site the book's campaign names, and say that you received a free copy. Every rating from one to five stars is welcome.
6. If the book is not for you, you can cancel the pick and the copy goes back to another reader.

What readers get

- **Free books.** Real indie books from real authors, often before many other people have read them.
- **Your own opinion.** Nobody tells you what to write or which rating to give, not the authors and not us.
- **No subscription.** You never pay to read.
- **Bookmarks.** Points inside the platform, credited when you pick a book and the same for any rating. They have no cash value; you can use them to support authors you like or, if you write yourself, to list your own book.
- **A community.** Many readers on the platform also write. Your honest reading helps them improve.

What authors get

Authors can list a finished book without paying a subscription and reach readers who chose their book on purpose. Reviews cannot be bought, swapped or guaranteed on the platform, and authors may not ask for a rating.

Why it exists

Independent authors struggle to reach readers, and readers struggle to find good books beyond the bestseller lists. The platform connects the two without making either pay for the privilege.

One rule to keep in mind

Stores have their own rules about reviews of free copies, and some, Amazon included, are strict about anything that looks like a benefit linked to a review. Before you post, read the current review guidelines of the site you post on, as Chapter 6 suggests, and always say that your copy was free.

Honest limits

It is a growing community. The library is smaller than a big store's, and what is available changes every week. Not every book will suit you.

How to join

Create your free account and browse the library here. It takes about a minute.

Disclosure: The team that wrote this guide also runs GetBookReviews.

> ***Try this:*** *Pick one book in a genre you already love and one in a genre you do not usually read. See which one you enjoy more.*

CHAPTER 8

Staying Safe

Free books attract scams. A few simple habits help.

Never pay for an ARC

Reputable platforms and authors do not charge readers for advance copies. If someone asks you to pay, treat it as a warning.

Beware of “paid review” jobs

Offers of money for reviews, or for “reading” books, are usually either fake or against store rules. If a job asks you to buy a book first and promises a refund after a review, it is a common scam.

Protect your accounts

Do not share passwords. Do not install software from people you do not know. Use a separate email address for newsletter sign-ups if you like.

Be careful with files

Download files only from the author or the platform. If a file asks you to enable macros or run a programme, delete it. E-books do not need either.

Do not share the file

Besides being unfair to the author, sharing an ARC with others can get you removed from a platform.

When in doubt, ask

If you are unsure whether an offer is legitimate, ask the platform or the author. A real author will not mind.

> ***Try this:*** *List the email addresses and sites where you are signed up for ARCs. Check that each still seems trustworthy.*

CHAPTER 9

Making ARC Reading a Habit

If you enjoy it, a few small habits make it sustainable.

Keep a simple list

A notebook or spreadsheet with title, author, date received, date finished and a one-line opinion is enough. After a year, you will see which genres and authors you like.

Do not overload yourself

Four ARCs at once is a chore. One or two at a time keeps it a pleasure. Saying “not now” is fine.

Read widely

Sometimes the best surprises come from genres you do not usually try. An advance copy is a low-risk way to explore.

Talk to other readers

Book clubs, forums and community pages are good places to share what you read. Follow the rules of each space, and be wary of anyone who asks for a review in exchange for something.

Support authors in other ways

If you loved a book, tell a friend, recommend it to your library, or follow the author. Those actions do not require a review and are very helpful.

Keep it fun

You are reading for pleasure. If it starts to feel like homework, take a break.

> ***Try this:*** *Choose one ARC, set a reading date and write one sentence about it afterwards. Small steps count.*

CHAPTER 10

Questions Readers Ask

Do I have to write a review?

No. An advance copy is a gift. Authors hope for opinions, but nobody can require one, and a platform or author who insists is not following the usual rules. If you did not feel like writing, a private thank-you message is a kind gesture.

Can I post my review before the release date?

It depends on the store and the author. Some sites do not allow reviews of books that are not yet on sale; some authors ask you to wait for release day so that all reviews appear together. Follow the author's instructions and the site's rules. When in doubt, wait.

What if I do not like the book?

Say so politely, or say nothing. Honest reviews that explain what did not work are valuable, because they help other readers with different tastes. What you should not do is write a harsh review to be funny, or a glowing one to be nice.

What if I know the author?

If you are a friend, relative or business partner of the author, many stores ask you not to review the book on their site. You can still tell the author what you think in private, and you can recommend the book to others in your own words.

Can I review a book I did not finish?

Many readers do, and say so: “I stopped at about 40 percent because the pacing lost me.” That is honest and useful. Do not give a full review pretending you read everything.

What if the file has typos or errors?

Advance copies are often not final. Tell the author privately rather than in a public review, if you can; they may fix it before release. A public review can mention that the copy was an unfinished version.

Can I keep the book?

Usually yes, for your own reading. Do not share it. Read the note that comes with the copy; some platforms remove access after a period.

What if I receive too many requests or messages?

Say no politely, or stop answering. You are a reader, not an employee.

Is it all right to read only one genre?

Of course. A reader who enjoys one genre can give the most useful feedback for books in that genre. Try others only if you are curious.

Does reviewing change my account on a store?

Some stores have conditions for posting reviews, such as a minimum amount spent. Check the store’s current help pages. If you cannot post on a store, you can still share an opinion on a reader community, a blog or a friend chat.

Where can I report something that feels wrong?

Use the report tool on the store or platform where it happened. Describe what you saw, calmly and briefly. You do not need to prove anything.

CHAPTER 11

Your First Thirty Days as an ARC Reader

A small plan makes the first month relaxed and rewarding.

Week one: set up

- Create a separate email folder or address for newsletters and ARC offers.
- Make a list of five authors or genres you would like to read early.
- Join one free reading platform and one author newsletter.
- Read the review guidelines of the store you use most.

Week two: choose your first book

- Choose one advance copy that sounds like a book you would buy.
- Read the description, the content notes and the length. Check that it fits the time you have.
- Download it from the author’s or the platform’s official link.
- Note the date you got it and any deadline.

Week three: read and take notes

- Read in short sessions. Make two or three notes while reading: what you like, what confuses you.
- Do not rush to finish. A deadline you can meet matters more than speed.
- If it is not for you, stop kindly and write a short note to yourself about why.

Week four: reflect and decide

- Write down what you thought, using the five-part template.
- Decide whether you want to post it, and where. If the author asked for a specific date, check it.
- Thank the author privately if you like, with one sentence.
- Choose the next book, or take a break.

After thirty days

Look at your list. Which books did you enjoy? What did the best ones have in common? That answer is your own taste, and it is the real reward of reading early: you learn what you like, and you help others find it.

> ***Try this:*** *Put the four weeks in your calendar today, with one small task each.*

Conclusion

Reading a book before anyone else is one of the nicer corners of the reading world. It asks little of you: read, be honest, say where you got the book, and keep it to yourself. In return, you meet new authors, help them improve, and help the next reader decide.

Remember four things. An ARC is a gift, not a contract. Honest means honest, even if that means “not for me”. Never take or give anything for a review. And keep yourself safe.

Your first early read can start today. Open the free GetBookReviews library, pick one book in a genre you love, and read it this week. It costs nothing, and nobody tells you what to think. We run the platform, so take our description with that in mind. If you leave a review of this guide, please make it your own honest opinion.

Appendix

A. The ARC reader's checklist

- I know where the book came from and who the author is.
- I read it for myself and did not share the file.
- I said honestly whether I liked it.
- I mentioned that I received a free copy when asked or when it was relevant.
- I did not take or give anything in exchange for a review.
- I kept spoilers out of my review.
- I was kind about the person, honest about the book.

B. A five-part review template

1. What it is (genre, premise, no spoilers)
2. What worked (two or three specifics)
3. What did not (one or two, politely)
4. Who it suits
5. How I got it (if relevant)

C. Words that should make you stop

- “Pay a fee to receive advance copies”
- “Guaranteed five stars”
- “We will refund your purchase after you review”
- “Send your password to verify”
- “Share the file with your friends”

D. A short glossary

ARC: advance reader copy, a copy before release. **Galley or proof:** an early version sent to reviewers. **Blurb:** the short description of a book. **EPUB:** a common e-book file format. **Giveaway:** a draw in which authors offer free copies. **Review gating:** steering unhappy readers away from public reviews; not allowed on many platforms.

E. About GetBookReviews

GetBookReviews is a free platform built by a community of readers and indie authors, for readers and indie authors. Readers pick free indie books from the library, read them within fourteen days and may share an honest review, at any rating, on review sites such as Goodreads, StoryGraph, LibraryThing, BookBub or Amazon. Authors list finished books without a subscription. Reviews are never sold, swapped or guaranteed, and nobody may ask for a rating. The team behind this guide also runs the platform.

Start here: getbookreviews.org/free-books-to-review