

A note for prospective clients: this is a demonstration assessment of John Buchan's 1915 thriller The Thirty-Nine Steps (public domain), evaluated as if it were a debut manuscript submitted today for the modern commercial thriller market. It shows exactly what you receive in an assessment: an honest readiness score, a diagnosis of the book's structural machinery, and a prioritized P0/P1/P2 roadmap. Client assessments are confidential; this sample exists so you can see the method before you buy it.

The Thirty-Nine Steps

MANUSCRIPT ASSESSMENT — EDITORIAL LETTER

AUTHOR

[Client Name]

LENGTH

~41,000 words

GENRE TARGET

Commercial thriller (chase / espionage)

ASSESSED AGAINST

Current adult commercial thriller market

58%

MARKET-READINESS SCORE

Dear [Author],

Thank you for trusting me with this manuscript. I read it twice — once as a reader, once as an editor — and I'm going to give it to you straight, because that's what you're paying for.

You have written a book with a genuinely magnetic engine. The premise — an ordinary man framed for murder, hunted simultaneously by the police and by the conspirators, with the fate of a nation hanging on what he knows — is timeless. Your pacing instinct in the first act is superb: the murder lands by Chapter 2, Hannay is on the run by Chapter 3, and the reader never gets a chance to put the book down. Your gift for landscape-as-pressure — the Scottish moors as a place with nowhere to hide — gives the chase sequences a claustrophobia most thriller writers never achieve in open country.

But the manuscript is not ready, and the reasons are structural, not cosmetic. At 58%, this book would earn requests from agents on the strength of its opening and then lose them in the middle third. Here is why, and here is the fix.

The Three Load-Bearing Problems

1. The plot runs on coincidence, and the reader notices

P0

Your hero survives because the right stranger appears at the right moment, five separate times. The literary innkeeper shelters him. The political candidate hands him a podium. The roadman's identity is available for the borrowing. Most damagingly, when Hannay flees across an empty moor and breaks

into the one house available, it belongs to the enemy mastermind. That is not tension; that is a lottery win for the villain.

One coincidence is a story. Five is a pattern, and modern thriller readers — trained on decades of tightly-plotted procedurals — will register each one as authorial rescue. Every rescue drains tension, because the reader stops believing the hero can actually lose.

The fix is causation. Each encounter must be *earned* by a choice Hannay makes or *engineered* by the enemy. The innkeeper shelters him because Hannay reads the man's ambitions and manipulates him — showing us Hannay's intelligence instead of his luck. The enemy's house on the moor isn't chance: the conspirators have been herding him there, which transforms your weakest scene into your most frightening one — the moment Hannay realizes he was never escaping at all.

2. Your protagonist is a passenger in his own investigation P0

Hannay runs brilliantly. But between Chapter 2 (receiving Scudder's notebook) and Chapter 7 (decoding it), he *solves* almost nothing — the plot's secrets are handed to him in a dead man's cipher, and the climactic mystery of the Thirty-Nine Steps is cracked in a committee room by other men consulting tide tables. Your hero is present at his own climax mostly as a witness.

Readers forgive a reactive first act — being framed is the genre's engine. They do not forgive a reactive third act. **The decisive deductions must be Hannay's**, drawn from things only he experienced in the field: something he saw at the moor house, something the "bald archaeologist" said that didn't fit. The tide-table insight should cost him something to obtain, and it should be his.

3. The climax is quieter than the middle P0 · inverted pace curve

The novel's most dangerous sequence — captivity and escape from the enemy's house — happens at the 60% mark. Everything after is de-escalation: a safe walk south, friendly officials, and a final confrontation that consists of watching three men play bridge and waiting to see if one of them blinks. You built to a detonation and delivered a drawing-room scene.

The bridge-game recognition scene is actually a *jewel* — the horror of the ordinary, villains hiding inside perfect Englishness. Keep it. But it cannot be the whole climax. It should be the *false calm* before a final physical movement: the escape attempt down the steps to the sea, a confrontation on the beach or aboard the *Ariadne*, with Hannay — not the assembled officials — forcing the ending. Ten to fifteen new pages, positioned last, correct the entire curve.

The Secondary Issues

4. The villains are a fog P1

The Black Stone is faceless until the final chapters, and a faceless enemy generates dread but not *pressure*. Give the enemy one recurring embodied agent — the "archaeologist" is the obvious candidate — visible from Act 1, so pursuit has a face and the bridge-scene payoff has a history.

5. Scudder's cipher is a plot vault, not a character **P1**

The dead man's notebook dispenses exposition on schedule. Break its revelations into partial, misleading fragments — Scudder lied about some things (you gesture at this; commit to it), and Hannay must correct the record through action.

6. The stakes are national but never personal **P1**

Hannay has no one — no person whose fate is tied to his failure. Even one connection (the innkeeper's family sheltered him and is now exposed; a sister in London) converts abstract stakes into felt ones. This is a 2,000-word fix with outsized returns.

7. Period texture vs. modern pace **P2**

Several dialect passages and political-context digressions run long for today's reader. Trim, don't sand — the texture is part of the book's identity.

8. Continuity **P2**

The timeline of Hannay's moor wanderings loses a day between Chapters 5 and 6, and the June 15th deadline is stated with three different levels of urgency. A continuity calendar (produced at Tier 2) will lock every date, journey, and deadline against the map.

Your Prioritized Roadmap

P0 — THE BOOK DOES NOT WORK WITHOUT THESE

1. Convert the five coincidences to causation (enemy engineering + Hannay's agency) — Chs. 3–7
2. Transfer the decisive deductions from officials to Hannay — Chs. 8–10
3. Rebuild the climax curve: bridge scene as false calm → physical confrontation at the steps — Ch. 10
+ new material

P1 — THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PUBLISHABLE AND SELLABLE

4. Embody the enemy early (recurring agent from Act 1)
5. Fracture Scudder's notebook into unreliable fragments
6. Give Hannay one personal stake

P2 — POLISH

7. Pace-trim dialect and digression passages (list of 14 specific cuts available at Tier 2)
8. Continuity calendar and date-lock verification

Delivered as fix-packs, this is approximately 11 packs: three structural (P0), four targeted (P1), four line-level (P2), with new material totaling roughly 8,000–12,000 words. My estimate is that these revisions move the manuscript from 58% to 95%+ market readiness. After your revision round, I run a verification pass — every fix confirmed landed, every new seam checked against the continuity calendar — before I'd call it done.

The heart of this book is already beating. Hannay's voice — capable, dry, allergic to self-pity — is exactly what the genre wants, and your chase choreography is better than most published thrillers I read this year. What the manuscript needs is not more talent. It needs the machinery under the talent rebuilt so the reader never catches the author holding the safety net.

That's the work. I'd be glad to do it with you.

Warmly,

Ibrahim Roble

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This sample assessment is of a public-domain work and reflects the same depth, structure, and candor delivered in every client assessment. Client manuscripts and editorial letters are strictly confidential.