

You are writing literary fiction in close third person, past tense.

5 models · September 5, 2026 · AI Prose Testing Lab

The prompt

You are writing literary fiction in close third person, past tense.

Scene: Mara, 41, has waited three days for her brother to call after their father's funeral. Her sister Ines is visiting. It is raining. Write 350-450 words. No flashbacks. Do not name the father. End on a physical action, not a thought.

Goal

Make the silence between the sisters do the work. I want to feel the unmade call without anyone saying so.

The verdict

Recommended: MiniMax M3

The author's own criterion was the unmade call felt without anyone saying so, and MiniMax M3 is the only draft that honours it -- a 1% dialogue share, Ines's weather-flat "He'll call," and two women at a window not speaking -- while still writing at a high level and ending on a clean, unglossed action.

Claude Opus 5 is the best-written page in the set -- "closing them would be a remark, and a remark would start something" is the strongest sentence anyone produced, and its 12.8 sentence-length spread gives it a rhythm none of the others match -- but its 25% dialogue share lets Ines say out loud exactly what the author asked to keep unsaid, so it wins on prose and loses on the brief. MiniMax M3, ranked lower on prose for its safer, occasionally slack sentences, beats Claude Opus 5 precisely where the author cares most, and its ending (reaching for the phone, stopping, winding the father's clock instead, "listening for the catch") transfers the waiting into an object without a word of commentary. Claude Sonnet 5 sits between them: sparer than Gemini 3.8 Flash, more disciplined than GPT-5.6 Terra, with the loose tarp patiently seeded and then paid off, though it puts the refusal into dialogue and then over-explains the final gesture. Gemini 3.8 Flash is the most technically compliant after Claude Opus 5 but the least trusting -- it tells us Ines "spared her the indignity of pity," and its 8.7:1 verb-to-adjective ratio shows how much of its atmosphere is upholstery; even so, its frozen forty-percent battery is a sharper detail than anything in GPT-5.6 Terra. GPT-5.6 Terra is the clearest miss: over length at 467 words, carrying a retrospective waiting sequence the prompt forbade, and turning the silence into an open quarrel.

Rank	Prompt compliance	Prose	Your goal
#1	Claude Opus 5	Claude Opus 5	MiniMax M3
#2	Gemini 3.8 Flash	Claude Sonnet 5	Claude Sonnet 5
#3	Claude Sonnet 5	MiniMax M3	Claude Opus 5
#4	MiniMax M3	GPT-5.6 Terra	Gemini 3.8 Flash
#5	GPT-5.6 Terra	Gemini 3.8 Flash	GPT-5.6 Terra

Assessed blind by anthropic/claude-opus-5: model names were hidden from the judge.

By the numbers

Measure	Claude Opus 5	Claude Sonnet 5	GPT-5.6 Terra	Gemini 3.8 Flash	MiniMax M3
Words	431	404	467	395	417
Paragraphs	15	19	31	8	9
Words per sentence	11.2	10.1	7.8	16.8	15.1
Short sentences (p10)	3	3	1	8	5

Long sentences (p90)	33	33	22	27	30
Sentence-length spread	12.8	13.1	8.8	7.5	9.7
Fragments	12%	17%	18%	4%	7%
Front-loaded clauses	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%
Asyndeton	0.40	0.57	0.79	0.62	0.32
Polysyndeton	0.30	0.21	0.11	0.19	0.34
Verb : adjective	12.0:1	43.0:1	17.7:1	8.7:1	36.0:1
Interior thought	8%	7%	7%	4%	7%
Sentences per paragraph	2.7	2.2	2.0	3.0	3.1
Words per paragraph	29.7	22.4	15.3	50.4	47.1
Short paragraphs	60%	68%	77%	38%	11%
Dialogue share	25%	18%	14%	3%	1%
Words per dialogue line	7.9	5.2	3.9	6.0	3.0
Tagged dialogue	14%	27%	35%	100%	100%
Time to write	17s	11s	12s	65s	22s
Cost of this passage	\$0.023	\$0.0071	\$0.0091	\$0.037	\$0.0032
50,000-word novel	\$2.67	\$0.884	\$0.970	\$4.63	\$0.382
Judge	Claude Opus 5	Claude Sonnet 5	GPT-5.6 Terra	Gemini 3.8 Flash	MiniMax M3
Compliance score	88	83	52	86	80
Prose score	90	83	68	66	80
Goal score	76	79	54	64	88

Claude Opus 5

431 words · 17s · \$0.023 for this passage · a 50,000-word novel at this rate ? \$2.67

Mid-length sentences, wide rhythm, some dialogue, frequent fragments, short paragraphs.

Prompt compliance -- 88/100

431 words, close third past tense, rain from before light, three days, Ines visiting, father unnamed, and a strong closing physical action (bare arm into the gutter, pulling out wet leaves). No dramatised flashback -- the past enters only through what the sisters say aloud.

Prose -- 90/100

The most alive writing here: "She had put it there at breakfast the way you might set a place for someone," and "closing them would be a remark, and a remark would start something." Gesture is used with real precision -- the wrist turned to contain grief that "contained nothing," the involuntary lean toward a bank notification, the screen turned face-down "the way you'd close a door on a sleeping child." A 12.8 sentence-length spread and 12% fragments give it genuine variation rather than mannerism.

Your goal -- 76/100

Superb unspoken business (the shrieking chair neither of them mentions, the shameful lean) but a 25% dialogue share means Ines states the case explicitly -- "He'll call in six weeks about the house," "He looked like a man who'd already left" -- so the reader is often told what the author wanted left in the air.

The passage

The rain had been going since before light, the fine kind that didn't fall so much as hang, and by noon the windows had gone soft and grey as tracing paper. Mara had the phone face-up on the counter beside the sugar bowl. She had put it there at breakfast the way you might set a place for someone.

Ines was making tea she wouldn't drink. She had opened three cupboards looking for the strainer and left them all standing open, and Mara found she could not bring herself to close them, because closing them would be a remark, and a remark would start something.

"He's not going to call today either," Ines said.

"You don't know that."

"I know him." Ines poured, missing the cup a little, wiping the counter with the flat of her hand. "He'll call in six weeks about the house. He'll be very reasonable on the phone and I'll want to put my fist through a wall."

"He might just be --" Mara turned her wrist, a gesture that was supposed to contain grief, distance, the difficulty of dialing. It contained nothing. "It's three days."

"It's three days," Ines agreed, and sat down, and the chair legs shrieked on the tile, and neither of them said anything about that.

Outside, the gutter had blocked again and water came off the corner of the roof in a rope. Mara watched it braid and unbraid itself. She thought about the number of hours involved, which was seventy-two, roughly, and that the arithmetic of it was a thing she should stop doing, and that she would keep doing it.

"The flowers were nice," Ines said. "In the end."

"They came late."

"They came." Ines wrapped both hands around the cup. "You did everything. I want that said out loud in this kitchen. You did everything, and he stood at the back in his good coat, and he left before the cars."

"He looked terrible."

"He looked like a man who'd already left."

The phone lit. Mara's whole body went toward it, an involuntary lean, shameful, and it was a bank, an offer, a rate, and she turned the screen down against the counter with two fingers, gently, the way you'd close a door on a sleeping child.

Ines was looking at her. Mara took the cold tea from her sister's hands and poured it into the sink, and then she went out through the back door into the rain, in her socks, and reached up into the gutter with her bare arm and began pulling out the wet black leaves.

Claude Sonnet 5

404 words · 11s · \$0.0071 for this passage · a 50,000-word novel at this rate ? \$0.884

Short sentences, wide rhythm, some dialogue, frequent fragments, short paragraphs.

Prompt compliance -- 83/100

404 words, correct POV and tense, rain, three days, Ines in her coat, father never named, closes on the physical act of gathering the tarp. The funeral is only glanced at via "at the church," and "She was thinking of the last thing she'd said to him" edges toward a remembered moment rather than staying in the present.

Prose -- 83/100

Spare and well-tuned; the opening image of the house "being held underwater" earns its place, and the newspaper folded "until it was a small dense square she could have thrown" is exact. The tarp's "dull wet slap against the logs, on and off, on and off" is patiently seeded and then paid off. A measured 10.1 words per sentence with 17% fragments suits the clipped exchange, though the closing simile ("like something that needed carrying inside") states the meaning the action had already made.

Your goal -- 79/100

The sisters' terse volleys keep most of the pressure under the line, and the tarp carries the unmade call physically -- but "You could call him" / "I'm not calling him" puts the central refusal directly into speech.

The passage

The rain had been going on so long that Mara no longer heard it as rain, just a pressure against the windows, like the house was being held underwater. She stood at the sink with a mug she wasn't drinking from, and watched the water come down the glass in threads that kept breaking and reforming.

"He'll call," Ines said from the table. She had her coat still on, though she'd been inside for an hour, as if she hadn't decided yet whether she was staying.

"He said three days."

"He said he'd call soon. That's not the same as three days."

Mara set the mug down without having drunk from it. "It's been three days."

Ines turned a page of the newspaper she wasn't reading either. The kitchen light made everything a little too yellow, a little too warm for how the day actually felt. Outside, the neighbor's tarp had come loose from the woodpile again and was flapping, a dull wet slap against the logs, on and off, on and off.

"He's not good with phones," Ines said. "You know this."

"He's not good with a lot of things."

"That's not fair."

"I didn't say it to be fair."

Ines folded the newspaper in half, then in half again, until it was a small dense square she could have thrown. "You could call him."

"I'm not calling him."

"Why not?"

Mara didn't answer. She was thinking of the last thing she'd said to him at the church, some ordinary sentence about parking, and how neither of them had cried yet, not really, not where the other could see it. She was thinking that if she called and he didn't answer that would be worse than this, than the waiting, which at least still had the shape of a possibility in it.

The tarp slapped again, harder, and she saw it come fully loose and lift, a pale shape in the gray yard, twisting once before it dropped into the mud.

"I'm going to get that," she said.

"It's pouring."

"I know."

She didn't put on a coat. She went out through the side door and across the yard in her socks, feeling the cold mud come up between her toes before she'd even reached it, and she bent down and gathered the tarp into her arms, heavy now with rain, and held it against her chest like something that needed carrying inside.

GPT-5.6 Terra

467 words · 12s · \$0.0091 for this passage · a 50,000-word novel at this rate ? \$0.970

Short sentences, some dialogue, frequent fragments, short paragraphs.

Prompt compliance -- 52/100

At 467 words it overruns the 350-450 cap, and the long pluperfect paragraph ("Mara had waited through the first evening after the funeral... then the following night... On the third day she had carried it from room to room") is a retrospective sequence the no-flashback rule was written to exclude. POV, tense, unnamed father and the closing action (picking up the phone, carrying it to the sink) are correct.

Prose -- 68/100

Some fine images -- peel "like something shed," juice on a thumb, tea spreading "amber and thin, toward the phone." But 31 paragraphs at 7.8 words per sentence and 77% short paragraphs make the page feel chopped into fragments, and the writing keeps annotating itself ("The simplicity of it sat between them," "She hated that she could still feel the shape of expectation in her body").

Your goal -- 54/100

The unmade call is not implied but litigated -- "He could have called," "Don't defend him," "you always make a place for people to fail you" -- which converts the requested silence into an argument.

The passage

Rain pressed against the kitchen windows in long, wavering lines, blurring the garden into a dark wash of leaves and fence posts. Mara stood with her hand around a cold mug, watching water gather at the edge of the sill and slip away.

Her phone lay facedown beside the sugar bowl.

Ines had arrived an hour earlier with a paper bag of oranges and a wet umbrella that dripped steadily into the hall. She had not taken off her coat. Now she sat at the table, peeling an orange in one unbroken spiral, her thumbnail working carefully beneath the rind.

"He might be busy," Ines said.

Mara looked at the phone.

"He has a job," Ines added. "Children. A life."

"So do I."

Ines's hands paused. The strip of peel hung from her fingers like something shed.

Mara had waited through the first evening after the funeral, when the house still smelled faintly of lilies and damp wool. She had waited the next morning, then the following night, charging her phone beside the bed though it had been nearly full. On the third day she had carried it from room to room, placing it on the counter while she washed dishes, on the arm of the sofa while she answered emails she did not read, beside her plate at lunch.

Nothing.

"He spoke to me," Ines said.

Mara turned from the window. "When?"

"Yesterday."

The rain ticked faster against the glass. Somewhere beyond the kitchen, the radiator gave a soft metallic knock.

"What did he say?"

Ines separated an orange segment and held it out, but Mara did not take it. Juice shone on Ines's thumb.

"He asked whether you were all right."

Mara laughed once, without sound. "Did he."

"He didn't know what to say."

"He could have called."

"Yes."

The simplicity of it sat between them. Ines lowered her hand. The orange segment slipped onto the tablecloth, leaving a bright wet mark.

Mara imagined her brother's number appearing on the screen--not his voice, not his face, only the small arrangement of digits and the name she had not been able to bring herself to delete. She hated that she could still feel the shape of expectation in her body, a tightening behind the ribs whenever the phone shifted from silence to any small light.

Ines began gathering the peel into the paper bag.

"Don't defend him," Mara said.

"I'm not."

"You always do."

Ines looked up then, her expression stripped of patience. "And you always make a place for people to fail you."

Mara set the mug down too hard. Tea jumped over the rim and ran across her knuckles.

Neither of them moved while it spread, amber and thin, toward the phone.

Then Mara picked it up and carried it to the sink.

Gemini 3.8 Flash

395 words · 65s · \$0.037 for this passage · a 50,000-word novel at this rate ? \$4.63

Mid-length sentences, little dialogue.

Prompt compliance -- 86/100

All constraints met: 395 words inside the 350-450 window, close third, past tense, rain, three days, Ines present, father referred to but unnamed, and it closes on a physical action (shoving the sash upward). The bolted-on "At forty-one, Mara recognized..." delivers the age as data rather than character.

Prose -- 66/100

The most decorated prose here and the least trusting: "relentless, slate-colored drumming," "the calculated mercy of her sister's silence," "exhaling the faint, medicinal camphor that had outlived him." The measured verb:adjective ratio of 8.7:1 -- by far the lowest in the set -- confirms the adjectival drag, and the phone is described three separate ways ("blank screen," "small glass rectangle," "the small glass rectangle on the walnut"). The battery frozen at forty percent is the one genuinely earned detail.

Your goal -- 64/100

The silence is staged well (the unbroken apple peel, the unoffered slice) but then explained outright -- telling us Ines "spared her the indignity of pity" does the reader's feeling for them, which is the opposite of letting the unmade call be felt.

The passage

The rain had been falling since dawn, a relentless, slate-colored drumming that flattened the hydrangeas against the parlor glass. Mara kept the telephone face-up on the low walnut table, its blank screen reflecting the grey rectangle of the window. Three days since the funeral, and her brother had not called. He had not sent a message, nor had he checked in with Ines, whose own device lay face-down on the arm of the sofa, deliberately abandoned.

Across the rug, Ines sat with her knees drawn up, methodically paring a green apple with a small kitchen knife. The peel coiled away in a continuous ribbon that draped over her knuckles. She did not look at the table. At forty-one, Mara recognized the calculated mercy of her sister's silence; Ines possessed an instinct for when another person's waiting had curdled into humiliation, and she spared her the indignity of pity.

"The radiators are clanking again," Ines said softly, without looking up from the fruit.

"The valve on the landing is loose," Mara said.

Her voice sounded thin, stripped of timbre by the damp that crept under the baseboards. The house smelled of boiled tea and wet wool. In the vestibule, their coats hung dripping onto the linoleum--hers, Ines's, and the heavy black overcoat their father had left behind on the brass peg. It hung there swollen with humidity, exhaling the faint, medicinal camphor that had outlived him.

A car rattled past on the street outside, its tires hissing through standing water. Mara's gaze flicked to the street, watching the red taillights dissolve into the fog, before returning to the small glass rectangle on the walnut. Nothing lit up. The battery icon remained frozen at forty percent. Her fingers twitched in her lap, aching to press the button, to verify once more that the volume was not muted, that the ringer had not failed.

Ines quartered the peeled apple with two sharp, clean strokes and set the blade aside. She did not offer a piece, and Mara was grateful not to have to refuse it.

The rain quickened, drumming hard against the tin awning above the back porch. Mara stood up from the armchair, the stiff fabric of her mourning skirt pulling tight across her knees. She crossed the room to the front window, unlatched the brass catch, and shoved the heavy sash upward into its frame.

MiniMax M3

417 words · 22s · \$0.0032 for this passage · a 50,000-word novel at this rate ? \$0.382

Mid-length sentences, wide rhythm, little dialogue.

Prompt compliance -- 80/100

417 words, correct POV and tense, rain, three days, Ines visiting, father unnamed, ends on physical action (fitting the key, turning it). The clock's provenance and "the small scratch near the hinge where he had once dropped it" push at the no-flashback rule and leave "he" ambiguous between father and brother; the italicised recollected lines are recounted speech rather than a scene, but they brush the same edge.

Prose -- 80/100

Quiet, unhurried, and controlled -- cold tea with a skin on it, four o'clock darkness, the gutter dripping into a bucket until "the rhythm of it had become the rhythm of the house." A measured 15.1 words per sentence with a 9.7 spread gives it a steady, unforced cadence. It is the safest voice of the five and occasionally slack ("She had nothing left to say about it"), but the final gesture -- reaching for the phone, stopping, winding the clock instead, "listening for the catch" -- lands cleanly and without comment.

Your goal -- 88/100

Best fulfilment of the brief: a 1% dialogue share, Ines's flat "He'll call" repeated like weather, and the two of them standing at the window not speaking -- the unmade call is entirely felt and never argued about.

The passage

Mara stood at the kitchen window and watched the rain come down in sheets across the back garden. The pots on the sill were too wet to hold dry soil anymore; she had stopped watering them days ago. Her phone lay on the counter behind her, face up, sound on, the way she had left it every morning since the funeral.

Ines was at the table with a cup of tea she had stopped drinking an hour ago. The surface had gone cold and formed a thin skin. Ines didn't seem to mind.

"He'll call," Ines said. She said it every few hours, in the same tone, as though she were remarking on the weather.

Mara didn't answer. She had nothing left to say about it. She had already said the things she could say--*He promised*, and *It's been three days*, and *He's my brother too*--and each one had come out wrong, or had come back wrong, changed by the look on Ines's face.

She wiped the condensation from the glass with the heel of her hand. The garden was almost dark at four in the afternoon. The lavender she had planted years ago had spread beyond the border now, and she ought to have cut it back in September.

She heard Ines get up and rinse the mug in the sink. The water ran briefly, then stopped. The radiator ticked in the hallway. Somewhere a gutter was dripping into a bucket Mara had put out under the downpipe weeks ago, and the rhythm of it had become the rhythm of the house.

She looked up at the clock above the stove. It was the clock her father had given her for her thirtieth birthday, a heavy thing with a brass frame and Roman numerals that had never quite kept good time. She had never learned to wind it properly. The minute hand sat a little behind where it should have been.

Ines came back into the room and stood beside her at the window. She didn't speak. They watched the rain together, and the garden filled and emptied and filled again with the sound of it.

Mara reached for her phone, then stopped. She lifted the clock off its hook instead and turned it over in her hands, feeling the cool brass, the worn key, the small scratch near the hinge where he had once dropped it. She fitted the key into the slot and began to turn it, slowly, listening for the catch.