

The Fanfic Author's Guide to Metatext Checklist

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Checklist

Feel free to make a copy and use it the next time you post a story to AO3! :)

Attribution

- Developed mostly from [Eiiri's The Fanfic Author's Guide to Metatext](#). Read for more detailed descriptions and discussions of each category!
- Additional information added from [ErinPtah's A Users' Guide to AO3 Tagging](#). This information has been noted with a bold superscripted number (2).
- More additional information from [JustSomeAo3Tips's Staring into the Tag Vortex: AO3 tagging demystified](#). This information has been noted with a bold superscripted number (3).

☐ Rating

General, Teen, Mature, Explicit, Not Rated*

*Not Rated is treated as Explicit in searches.

General

- There may be romance, but no direct sexual content or discussion (though jokes and innuendos are ok).
- Scary things might happen and people might get hurt, but violence is non-graphic and usually mild.
- Adults may be shown drinking alcohol or smoking tobacco, and some degree of intoxication may be shown (usually played for laughs and not focused on), but hard drug use is generally not shown or discussed.
- There is little to no foul language written out and what language there may be is mild, though harsher swears may be implied by narration. There are no explicit F-bombs or slurs.

Teen

- There might be some sex and sexual discussion, but nothing explicit is shown—things usually fade to black or are left implied.

- More intense danger, more severe injuries described in greater detail, and a higher level of violence may be present.
- Substance use may be discussed and intoxication shown, but main characters are unlikely to be shown doing hard drugs.
- Some swearing and other harsh language may be present, possibly including an F-bomb or two. In longer works, that might mean an F-bomb every few chapters.

Mature

- Sex may be shown and it might be fairly explicit, but it's not as detailed or graphic or as much the focus of the work as it would be if it were porn.
- Violence, danger, and bodily harm may be significant and fairly graphic.
- Most drug use is fair game. Swearing and harsh language may be extensive.

Explicit

- Sex is highly detailed and graphic.
- Violence and injury is highly detailed and graphic.
- Drug use and its effects may be highly detailed and graphic.
- Swearing and harsh language may be extreme, including extensive use of violent slurs.

☐ Archive Warnings

Graphic Depictions of Violence, Major Character Death, Rape/Non-Con, Underage, No Archive Warnings Apply, Choose Not to Use Archive Warnings

- Select all that apply.

Graphic Depictions of Violence

Detailed descriptions of violence, injury, and gore.

Major Character Death

The death of a character central to canon or to the story being told.

Rape/Non-con

Non-consensual sex i.e. rape.

Underage

Depictions of underage sex, which the site defines as under the age of 18 for humans—Ao3 doesn't care if your local age of consent or majority is lower than that.

No Archive Warnings Apply

Absolutely nothing in your fic falls into any of the four standard warning categories.

Choose Not to Use Archive Warnings

You, the author, are opting out of the warning system; your fic could potentially contain things that fall into any and all of the four standard warning categories.

- Selecting Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings may mean that some readers will avoid your fic because they're not sure it's safe for them. You might need to use more courtesy tags than you otherwise would.
- Opting out of the warning system can be a way to avoid spoilers
- Also good for when you're just not sure if what you've written deserves one of the Archive warnings.
 - Select either the warning it *might* deserve or Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings, then provide additional information in other tags, the summary, or an initial author's note.

On Tags

Before we get into tags, let's review.

- Tags, ultimately, are search tools. If you want your work to be found, you will want to use canonical tags where possible.
 - A "canonical" tag is "a tag that has been standardized by wranglers, and can be filtered on."²
 - You can, and are encouraged, to make up your own tags as you like. However, do so after using all the canonical tags that apply. Again, you want people to be able to find your work!
 - Think about what you would want to find in the tag filter.
 - Tags aren't just lists of contents; they are an expressive advertisement for your work. Consider tagging the characters and relationships that are featured, not every walk-on part.
 - If there's a single sentence in a fic mentioning that X and Y dated back in college, and you were looking for relationship

X/Y, would you want to find this fic? If you were squicked by X/Y, would you want to exclude it?

- Also, please be kind to the rarepair shippers and do not tag every single possible pairing in a group sex fic.
 - Tagging all the involved characters and using the "Group Sex" or "Gangbang" tag trees will connect you more effectively with your readers.
- Use the [Tag Search](#) to look up tags you're curious about. You can search the entire tag database or narrow it down by category, and you can limit it to only canonicals if you're looking for existing standards to use.²
 - Tag landing pages show things like what category a tag is in, and what tags are related to it.
 - You get direct links to these pages from the Tag Search.
 - You can also get to them by clicking the link at the top of a works page.
 - Example: [Works tagged France \(Country\)](#); [landing page for France \(Country\)](#).
 - Anatomy of a Tag Page³
 - At the top
 - A *common tag* means a tag with a canonical form.
 - Anything that's not common (either canonical or a synonym) is just... text.
 - Can't be filtered from the sidebar, can't be sorted, but you can still get a page with a list of every fic that's used that exact tag.
 - *Parent tags* just means the fandoms or characters it's associated with.
 - If you're on a fandom or character's tag page, it has more sections listing the associated child tags.
 - *Tags with the same meaning* are the synonyms! All the synonyms. So many synonyms. Amazing. This is the motherlode, right here. This will tell you
 - the range of what's already being associated,
 - whether your tag is likely to be wrangled as a synonym to this one,
 - what brilliant ideas people are already using, and

- what you could tag if you want to *guarantee* that it already goes to the canon tag.
- At the bottom
 - *Metatags* are the more general tags. They're the boxes that contain this box.
 - Any tag can fit in multiple metatags.
 - *Subtags* are the more specific tags. They're the boxes that fit inside this box.
 - Any tag can contain multiple subtags.
- Adding Tags - Refinements and Caveats³
 - Bulk Tag Entry
 - If you make a comma-separated list of tags, you can enter them all at once and AO3 will split them at the commas.
 - Example: Paste in "These, Tags, Are, Order, Out, Of". Now hit Enter. Magic!
 - Tag Order
 - Your fic will remember the order you typed in your tags. You cannot insert in the middle. To insert in the middle, you'll need to delete all the later ones and reenter them. Bulk tag entry makes this less painful.
 - If you want to reorder your tags, follow these steps.
 1. Figure out how far back in the list you need to resort the tags.
 2. Select and copy your tag list so you do not lose your precious, precious tags.
 3. Click the "Edit" button on your draft or published fic.
 4. Click the X on all the later tags in the tag list to delete them.
 5. Click Save. If you do not save before adding them back in, it will simply remember them in the old order.
 6. Edit again.
 7. Add the tags back in, now in the improved order. (Bulk tag entry, woo!)
 8. Save again.
 - Example: These, Tags, Are, Order, Out, Of
 - These, Tags, Are, ~~Order, Out, Of~~ (click X on each of the last three tags)
 - These, Tags, Are (save)

- These Tags, Are, **Out, Of, Order** (add each of the three tags in the new order)
 - These Tags, Are, Out, Of, Order (save)
- Tighten Your Tags³
 - You will never lose filter or search coverage by using a specific subtag. For the goal of hitting filter searches, a single specific tag can often do the job.
 - Fandom tags are well-structured for effective filtering.
 - These tag sets will appear in exactly the same sets of filter results.
 - Marvel, MCU, Spider-Man - All Media Types, Spider-Man, Tom Holland's Spiderman, Spider-Man: Homecoming (2017)
 - Spider-Man: Homecoming
 - (Canonical form: Spider-Man (Tom Holland Movies))
 - You can use one tag instead of six to appear in the results of all the same filters. This cuts out a lot of noise for people browsing your fic. They can use that extra attention for reading the tags that make your fic special.

□ Fandom Tags

[Fandom], with additional tags like "All Media Types", "& Related Fandoms", RPF, "crossovers," etc. possible.

[Fandom]²

- Use the full name of the fandom.
- Don't use a metatag when you're already using one of its subtags.
 - Example: if your fic is tagged "[Elementary \(TV\)](#)", you don't need to tag it "[Sherlock Holmes & Related Fandoms](#)". It will already show up in that listing anyway.
- If your fandom has the same name as another one, make sure you use a specific tag.
 - Example: if you're writing fic about [The Avengers \(Marvel Movies\)](#), use that tag! That way your fic won't get lumped in with [The Avengers \(TV\)](#), an unrelated British TV series.
- For **crossovers**, enter the names of both fandoms, *as separate tags*.
 - Something like "[Angel and Leverage crossover](#)" — all one tag — is an unwrangleable Frankentag, and your fic won't show up in the works for *either* fandom.

[Fandom] - All Media Types

Useful for cases where there are lots of inter-related series, like Star Wars; there are several tellings of the story in different media but they're interchangeable or overlap significantly, like The Witcher; or the fandom has about a zillion different versions so it's very hard, even impossible, to say which ones your fic does and doesn't fit, like Batman. Also for cases where you mix canon info from different medias in the same story.

[Fandom] & related fandoms

In a situation where one piece of media has a spinoff, maybe several spinoffs, and you wrote a fic that includes things from more than one of them, you might want use the central work's "& related fandoms" tag. For example, the "Doctor Who & Related Fandoms" tag gets used for fics that include things from a combination of any era of Doctor Who, Torchwood, and The Sarah Jane Adventures.

RPF

If you write real person fiction, you need to tag it as an RPF fandom.

Crossover

The placement of two or more otherwise discrete fictional characters, settings, or universes into the context of a single story.

☐ Category

F/F, F/M, Gen, M/M, Multi, Other

- Select all that apply

F/F, F/M, M/M

The F/F, F/M, and M/M categories are for stories focused on pairings of two women, a woman and a man, and two men, respectively.

- Refer to sexual and/or romantic pairings.

Other

For stories focused on (sexual and/or romantic) pairings where one or both partners are not strictly male or female, such as nonbinary individuals, people from cultures with gender systems that don't match to the Western man-woman system,

and nonhuman characters for whom biological sex works differently or is nonexistent, including aliens, robots, and inanimate objects or abstract concepts.

- Also commonly used for masturbation fic (where the focus is on the character's pleasure rather than on the person they're thinking about), as well as fucking machine fic even if the machine isn't sentient.
- If it's sexual but it's not a pairing, it goes into Other rather than Gen.
- It's also Other if the character has literally no idea who they're having sex with. Or if they're horny but don't do anything about it, and the horniness is explored in depth.

Multi

Multi is for stories in which several (sexual and/or romantic) relationships are focused on or which focus on relationships with multiple partners, including cases of polyamory, serial monogamy, strings of hookups with different people, and orgies.

- A fic will also show as "Multi" if you, the author, have selected more than one category for the fic, even if none of those are the Multi category.

Gen

Gen is for stories that do not contain or are not focused on sex or romance.

- Romance may be present in a gen fic but it's going to be in the background.

□ Relationship Tags

"[Character A]/[Character B]" for romance, "[Character C] & [Character D]" for platonic or familial

- Full names, in **alphabetical order by family name**²
 - Example: "[Tsukino Usagi/George Washington](#)"
 - Same thing for poly groupings.
 - Examples: "[Akemi Homura/Kaname Madoka/Miki Sayaka/Sakura Kyouko/Tomoe Mami](#)", "[Bruce Banner/Clint Barton/Steve Rogers/Natasha Romanov/Tony Stark/Thor](#)"
 - If your names are out of order, the tag will not be synned (made a synonym) of the canonical tag. Order matters for findability!³

- Only tag relationships important/central to the story, with main ship first. Brief or background relationships should not be included here, but under the Additional Tags section.
- List ""/"" tags first, then ""&"" tags."
- No ship names in Relationship Tags!

□ Character Tags

"[Character A (First Name Last Name)]," [Character B (First Name "Nickname" Last Name)]," "[Character C (First Name Last Name | Other Identity/Superhero Name/Pseudonym)]," etc.

- Use full names for characters.
 - Use in order of the original canon language.²
 - Example: "[George Washington](#)" but "[Tsukino Usagi](#)"
- Tag the characters that were included in Relationship tags.
- Tag in order of importance (can be in groups of "main characters," "major supporting characters," and "minor supporting characters."
- Tag OCs. Use existing tags for "Original Character(s)," "Original Male Character(s)," and "Original Female Character(s)." If you have an OC character that appears in multiple stories, use "[OC's Name] - Original Character" in addition to the existing tags.
- Tag "Reader," "You," or "Me", if applicable.
- Use the suggestions that appear as you type to ensure you are using the fandom's established way of referring to a given character. If the fandom name appears in parentheses after the character name, use the combined tag, as it connects your story to all others in that fandom.
 - Example: use "[Beast \(Kuroshitsuji\)](#)" or "[The Beast \(AtS\)](#)" or "[Beast \(Beauty and the Beast\)](#)", and avoid the too-generic tag "[Beast](#)".²

□ Additional Tags

Courtesy Tags

Extensions of the Rating and Warning system.

- Used to clarify or provide more information about the Archive Warnings you used (or didn't) and give additional warnings the Archive may not have standard warnings for.

- Examples: “Dubious Consent,” “Incest,” “Drug Use,” “Extremely Underage,” “Toxic Relationship,” and “Abuse.” Many of these have even more specific versions such as “Recreational Drug Use” and “Nonconsensual Drug Use,” or “Mildly Dubious Consent” and “Extremely Dubious Consent.”
- “Heed the tags” should come last or second-to-last, followed only by “Additional Warnings in Author’s Note” so it’s easy to spot.

Descriptive Tags

Gives the reader information about who’s in this fic, what kind of things happen, what tropes are in play, and what the vibe is, as well as practical information about things like format and tense. There are a few general kinds of descriptive tags including character-related, ship-related, temporal, relation-to-canon, trope-related, smut details, and technical specifications.

Character-related

- Examples: bang-path character tags (ex. Werewolf![Character A], Badass![Character B]), “[Character A] Needs a Hug,” “Emotionally Constipated [Character B],” “[Character C] is a Good Dad,” “Nonbinary Character,” “Canon Muslim Character,” “Deaf Character,” “Canon Disabled Character,” etc.

Ship-related

- Ship names
- Tags such as “Idiots in Love,” or other catchphrases related to your ship
- If relevant, specify some things about the nature of relationships in your fic such as “Ambiguous Relationship,” “Queerplatonic Relationships,” “Polyamory,” “Friends With Benefits,” “Teacher-Student Relationship,” etc.

Temporal Tags

Indicate *when* your fic takes place.

- Examples: “Pre-Canon,” “Post-Canon,” “Pre-War,” “Post-Captain America: The Winter Soldier,” “1996-1997 NHL season,” “Future Fic,” etc.

Relation-to-Canon

Other relation-to-canon type tags are “Canon Compliant” for fics that fit completely inside the framework of canon without changing or contradicting anything, “Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence” for fics that are compliant up to

a certain point in canon, then veer off and the various other Alternate Universe tags. The established format for these tags is “Alternate Universe - [type],” but a few have irregular names as well, such as “Wingfic” for AUs in which characters who don’t ordinarily have wings are written as having wings. If you have written an AU, please tag clearly what it is!

Trope-Related

- Examples: “Mutual Pining,” “Bed Sharing,” “Fake Dating,” “Angst,” “Fluff,” “Hurt/Comfort,” etc.

Smut Details

Explicit fics, and sometimes fics with less restrictive ratings, that contain sex usually have tags indicating details about the nature of the sexual encounter(s) portrayed and what sex acts are depicted.

- Tag for the kinks at play, if any, so readers can find what they’re into and avoid what they’re not.
- Tag for what genitalia characters have if it’s non-obvious, including if there’s Non-Human Genitalia involved.
- Tag your A/B/O, your Pon Farr, and your Tentacles, including whether it’s Consentacles or Tentacle Rape.

Technical Specifications

Give information about aspects of the fic other than its narrative content.

- Examples include Poetry, Podfics, things in Script Format, and Art.
 - If it is a podfic, you should tag with the approximate length in minutes (or hours).
 - If a fic is Illustrated (it has both words and visual art) tag for that.
- Tag if your fic is a crossover or fusion.
 - The difference, if you’re not sure, is that in a crossover, two (or more) entire worlds from different media meet, whereas in a fusion, some aspects of one world, like the cast of characters, are combined with aspects of another, like the setting or magic system.
- Tag if your fic is a Reader-Insert or Self-Insert.
- You might want to tag for whether your fic is written with POV First, Second, or Third Person, and if it’s Past Tense or Present Tense (or Future Tense, though that’s extremely uncommon).

- For POV First Person fics that are not self-inserts, or POV Third Person fics that are written in third person limited, you may want to tag which character's POV is being shown.
- Things like OOctober and Kinktober or fic bingo games.
- Ficlet, One Shot, Drabble, etc
- Genre, like Horror, Fantasy, etc

Personal Tags

Tells the readers things about us, the author, our process, our relationship to our fic, and our thoughts at the time of posting.

- Even among personal tags there are established tags! Things like “I’m Sorry,” “The Author Regrets Nothing,” “The Author Regrets Everything,” and “I Wrote This Instead of Sleeping” are common ones.
- Tags about us and our relationship to the fic, such as “My First Work In This Fandom,” “Author is Not Religious,” and “Trans Porn By A Trans Author,” can help readers gauge what to expect from our fic.
- You might want to let readers know your fic is “Not Beta Read”
 - Or, if you’re feeling a little cheekier than that, say “No Beta We Die Like Men” or its many fandom-specific variants.
 - The Archive recognizes all of these as meaning “Not Beta Read.”

□ Titles

- Titles can be long or short, poetic or straight to the point.
- Song lyrics, idioms, quotes from literature, or the fic itself can be good ways to go.
- Single words or phrases with meanings that are representative of the fic can be great.
 - If you find yourself using something that not a lot of people know what it means, like Chiaroscuro (an art style that uses heavy shadow and strong contrast between light and dark), you should define the term in either a subtitle, i.e. “Chiaroscuro: A Study In Contrast,” or at the beginning of the summary.

□ Summaries

Serves two purposes: one, to catch the interest of potential readers, give them a taste of what’s inside, and make them want to know more; and two, to give you a space to provide

information or make comments that don't really fit in the tags but that you want readers to see before they open the fic.

- There are two types of summaries: the blurb, and the excerpt.
 - Blurbs are like the synopses you at least used to see on the backs of published books, or the “Storyline” section on an IMDb page. Writing one is a matter of telling your readers *who* does *what*, *under what circumstances*.
 - An excerpt is a portion of the fic copied out to serve as the summary. It's important to select a portion of the fic that both indicates the *who*, *what*, and *under what circumstances* of the fic and is representative of the overall tone.

☐ Author's Notes

- The very first note on a fic should contain any information, such as warnings or explanations, that a reader *needs* to see before they get to the body of the story, as well as anything like thanks to your beta, birthday wishes to a character, or general hellos and announcements you want readers to see before they get to the body of the story.
- Notes at the end of a fic or chapter are for things that don't need to be said or are not useful to a reader until after they've read the preceding content
 - translations for that handful of dialogue that's in Vulcan or Portuguese
 - any parting greetings or announcements you want to give, like a thanks for reading or a reminder school is starting back so you won't be able to write as much
 - End notes are the best place to plug your social media to readers if you're inclined to do so, but remember that cannot include payment platforms like Patreon or Ko-fi.
- When posting a new work, where the Preface section gives you the option to add notes “at the beginning” or “at the end” or both, if you check both boxes, it means notes at the beginning and end of the entire fic, not the beginning and end of the first chapter.
 - In order to add notes to the beginning or end of the first chapter of a multi-chapter fic you have to first go through the entire process to post the new fic, then go in to Edit, Edit Chapter, and add the notes there.

□ Chapters and Series

Chapters are for dividing up one story into parts, usually for pacing and to give yourself and your readers a chance to take breaks and breathe. Series on Ao3 are for collecting up different stories that you've written that are associated with each other in some way.

- If you have several fics that all take place in the same AU but really aren't the same *story* those should go together as a series.
- Series are also the best way to handle things like prompt games, bingos, or Kinktober, or collect up one shots and drabbles *especially* if your various fills, entries, and drabbles are for more than one fandom.
 - If you put everything for a prompt game or bingo, or all your drabbles, together as one fic with a different chapter for each story, what ends up happening is that fic gets recognized by the Archive as a crossover when it isn't, so it gets excluded from the results pages for everyone who told the filters to Exclude Crossovers.
 - Dividing these kinds of things up into multiple fic in a series makes it so much easier for readers to find what of your work they actually want to read.
 - Another consideration, especially in regard to explicit-themed activities, is the subject of kinks. If you do all your prompts as a story and someone has filtered for a kink present in one of your chapters, then the entire story will be filtered out. Whereas if you've done them as a series, then only the story with that kink will be filtered out.
 - This will depend on the fandom or ship. You may not necessarily want to flood a smaller ship's tags with a bunch of 100-word drabbles (or maybe you do!). Consult with others if unsure.