

# The Brothers Karamazov

Fyodor Dostoevsky | 1880

## YOUR PACE

15–20 minutes of reading per day

Estimated completion: 12–14 weeks

Goal: Full comprehension — get through it, understand it

Edition recommended: Katz (Liveright, 2023) — or the free Garnett translation at [archive.org](http://archive.org)

## How to Use This Guide

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This guide is built for a first read at a sustainable pace. It does not require prior knowledge of Russian literature, philosophy, or theology.

It is organized in three parts:

- Part I: The Schedule — a week-by-week breakdown of what to read, roughly how long each section runs, and what major events occur.
- Part II: The Study Sections — for each major block of the novel, a set of themes to watch for, discussion questions to sit with, and one specific thing to pay attention to as you read.
- Part III: The Reference — character guide, key concepts, and a glossary of Russian naming conventions so the names stop tripping you up.

You do not need to read the study sections before reading the novel. Read the chapter first. Then come back, read the corresponding section, and see what lands differently the second time through.

Read only the section that corresponds to what you've just finished. Do not read ahead.

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## Part I — The Reading Schedule

At 15–20 minutes per day, you will read approximately 10–14 pages daily depending on density. The novel runs roughly 800 pages. Some weeks are shorter — the early books are slow but essential for everything that follows. Do not skip them.

| Week     | Books / Chapters      | Pages (approx.) | Key events   |
|----------|-----------------------|-----------------|--|
| Week 1   | Book I–II             | pp. 3–41        | Meet the Karamazov family. Fyodor, Dmitri, Ivan, Alyosha. The monastery visit. Zosima's bow to Dmitri — pay attention to this moment.                                |
| Week 2   | Book II (cont.) & III | pp. 42–108      | Fyodor's household. Grushenka introduced. The money dispute between Fyodor and Dmitri escalates. Alyosha's relationships established.                                |
| Week 3   | Book III & IV         | pp. 109–252     | Ivan and Alyosha begin their real conversations. The suffering of children. Zosima's teachings on love. The first hints of the coming murder.                        |
| Week 4   | Book V, Ch. 1–4       | pp. 253–291     | CRITICAL WEEK. Ivan's Rebellion (p. 281). The argument against God's world built on children's suffering. Read slowly. Do not rush this.                             |
| Week 5   | Book V, Ch. 5–7       | pp. 292–324     | CRITICAL CHAPTER. The Grand Inquisitor begins p. 292. One chapter. Read it twice if possible. This is the center of the novel.                                       |
| Week 6   | Book VI               | pp. 325–394     | Father Zosima's life and teachings. This is the answer to Ivan — not an argument but a life. Read as scripture.  |
| Week 7   | Book VII–VIII         | pp. 395–494     | Zosima dies. Alyosha's crisis of faith. Dmitri spirals. The night of the murder approaches. Tension increases significantly.   |
| Week 8   | Book IX               | pp. 495–574     | The murder. The interrogation of Dmitri. The investigation. The novel shifts into thriller mode — this is the most plot-driven section.                              |
| Week 9   | Book X                | pp. 575–624     | The children's subplot — Ilyusha and Kolya. Do not skip or skim. This section is the emotional foundation of the ending.   |
| Week 10  | Book XI               | pp. 625–714     | Ivan's three conversations with Smerdyakov. Ivan's devil. His breakdown begins. The most psychologically intense section of the novel.                               |
| Week 11  | Book XII              | pp. 715–834     | The trial of Dmitri. The prosecutor's and defense attorney's speeches. One of the greatest courtroom sequences in all of literature.                                 |
| Week 12  | Epilogue              | pp. 835–end     | The verdict. Alyosha at Ilyusha's stone. Final speech. The ending that is both incomplete and perfect.   |
| Wk 13–14 | Buffer / Reread       | —               | Use this time to reread Book V (Ivan's Rebellion + Grand Inquisitor) and Book VI (Zosima's teachings) with fresh eyes. Everything makes more sense after the ending. |

## Part II — Study Sections

Each section below corresponds to a major block of the novel. Read the novel first. Then return here. The questions are not tests — they are entry points for sitting with what you just read.

### Weeks 1–2 | Books I–III: The Family

#### Themes

- The sins of the father passed to the sons
- Three types of human being: passion (Dmitri), intellect (Ivan), spirit (Alyosha)
- The monastery as counter-world to Fyodor's household
- What does a father owe his children? What do children owe a father?

#### Discussion

1. Fyodor Karamazov is disgusting, buffoonish, and strangely human. Do you find yourself pitying him at any point? Why or why not?
2. Zosima bows deeply before Dmitri during the monastery visit. It seems strange — almost wrong. What do you think he saw?
3. Alyosha is described as someone everyone instinctively loves. Does he earn that on the page, or does Dostoevsky just tell you to feel it?

#### Watch for

Watch for how each brother responds to their father differently — Dmitri with rage, Ivan with cold contempt, Alyosha with love. That difference is the entire novel in miniature.

### Weeks 3–4 | Books IV–V (Ch. 1–4): Rebellion

#### Themes

- Theodicy — the problem of God's justice in a world of innocent suffering
- Ivan's distinction between rejecting God's existence vs. rejecting God's world
- Love as the basis of Ivan's rejection (he loves children too much to accept their suffering)
- The difference between abstract love of humanity and concrete love of persons

#### Discussion

1. Ivan does not say God doesn't exist. He says he is 'returning the ticket.' What is the difference? Does that distinction matter to you?
2. Ivan's argument is built on the suffering of children specifically — not adults. Why children? What does that choice do to the argument?
3. Alyosha cannot answer Ivan's argument. He says only: 'That's rebellion.' Is that a response, or an evasion?

#### Watch for

Ivan uses real, documented accounts of child abuse — Dostoevsky pulled these from newspapers. The horror is intentional and should be felt as horror. Don't abstract it into philosophy while you're reading it.

## Week 5 | Book V, Chapter 5: The Grand Inquisitor

### Themes

- The three temptations of Christ as a framework for all human governance
- Bread vs. freedom – the permanent human trade-off
- Benevolent authoritarianism – control through love, not cruelty
- The silent response: what love does that argument cannot
- Ivan's ambivalence – he composed the argument, but can he live inside it?

### Discussion

1. The Grand Inquisitor is not cynical – he genuinely loves humanity and has sacrificed his own soul for them. Does that make him more or less frightening than a straightforwardly evil antagonist?
2. Christ kisses the Inquisitor and says nothing. Is that a response or a surrender? What does silence accomplish that argument cannot?
3. Alyosha immediately kisses Ivan after hearing the poem. Ivan cries: 'You plagiarized my poem.' What has Alyosha understood that Ivan didn't expect him to understand?
4. Where do you see the Inquisitor's logic operating in the world today – systems or institutions that trade human freedom for human comfort?

### Watch for

Read this chapter twice. The first time for the Inquisitor's argument. The second time watch Ivan – his hesitations, his qualifications, his need to tell Alyosha this story specifically. The poem reveals something Ivan cannot say directly.

## Week 6 | Book VI: The Russian Monk

### Themes

- Kenotic theology – self-emptying love as the highest spiritual act
- Each person is responsible for everyone and everything – cosmic interconnection
- Active love vs. abstract love (Zosima's central teaching)
- Suffering as transformation rather than punishment
- This book is the answer to Ivan – not a counter-argument but a counter-life

### Discussion

1. Zosima teaches that 'each of us is responsible for everyone and for everything.' Do you find that beautiful, overwhelming, or both?
2. Zosima's theology is rooted in love so radical it sounds impossible. How does it compare to any theology or philosophy you've encountered before?
3. Does Zosima's life actually answer Ivan's argument? Or does it simply refuse to engage with it on Ivan's terms?

### Watch for

Note that Zosima's teachings were based by Dostoevsky on St. Isaac the Syrian, a 7th-century monk who believed even hell is ultimately the scourge of God's love. That background colors everything Zosima says about suffering.

## Weeks 7–9 | Books VII–IX: The Murder

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>Themes</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Faith tested by scandal — Alyosha's crisis when Zosima's body decays</li><li>– Dmitri's passion as both his destruction and his redemption</li><li>– How a man who wanted to kill did not kill — and was convicted anyway</li><li>– The gap between legal truth and actual truth</li></ul>   |
| <b>Discussion</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Alyosha's faith collapses when Zosima's body begins to smell (miracles were expected, not decay). What does that crisis reveal about what his faith was actually built on?</li><li>2. Dmitri is guilty of wanting his father dead, guilty of the hatred that created the conditions for the murder — but did not commit it. Is he innocent? What does the novel suggest guilt actually is?</li><li>3. Smerdyakov is the character everyone underestimates. What has the narrative been quietly showing you about him throughout Books I–VIII?</li></ol> |
| <b>Watch for</b>  | The murder itself happens offstage. Dostoevsky does not show it to you directly. That is a deliberate craft choice — notice what it does to your experience of reading the investigation.  |

## Week 10 | Book X: The Boys

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>Themes</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Ilyusha as the innocent child Ivan said could not be justified — but who is loved</li><li>– Kolya as a young Ivan — intellectual, proud, performing coldness he does not feel</li><li>– Memory as the foundation of moral life</li><li>– Small love, enacted, as the actual answer to large philosophical despair</li></ul>  |
| <b>Discussion</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Ilyusha is the kind of suffering child Ivan said could never be justified by any cosmic harmony. Does his death feel different having read Ivan's argument? Does the love surrounding his death say anything back to Ivan?</li><li>2. Kolya is clearly a miniature Ivan — but Alyosha reaches him. What does Alyosha do or say that actually works on Kolya, when intellectual argument never could?</li><li>3. Why do you think Dostoevsky inserted this entire subplot about children into the final third of the novel, right before the climax?</li></ol> |
| <b>Watch for</b>  | Don't read this section fast. The Ilyusha material is not a subplot — it is the emotional and theological core of the novel's ending. Everything Alyosha says to the boys at the stone is the accumulated answer to Ivan.  |

## Week 11 | Book XI: Ivan's Devil

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>Themes</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– The logical consequence of Ivan's philosophy — Smerdyakov used his ideas as a murder manual</li><li>– Ivan's breakdown as the cost of sustained disbelief</li><li>– The devil as Ivan's own voice made flesh</li><li>– Moral responsibility without direct action</li></ul>  |
| <b>Discussion</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Ivan's devil quotes Ivan's own ideas back at him. Does that mean the devil is simply Ivan's subconscious — or something more?</li><li>2. Ivan told Smerdyakov that 'everything is permissible.' Smerdyakov took him literally. Is Ivan responsible for the murder? In what sense?</li><li>3. Ivan decides to testify at the trial in Dmitri's defense, knowing it will destroy him. Why? What has changed in him?</li></ol> |
| <b>Watch for</b>  | Ivan's breakdown is the most psychologically precise section in the novel. Dostoevsky was himself an epileptic who had experienced dissociation and hallucination. He knew exactly what he was depicting.  |

## Week 12 | Book XII & Epilogue: The Trial and the Stone

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| <b>Themes</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Legal truth vs. moral truth — the court convicts the wrong man for the right reasons</li><li>– The speeches of Kirillovich (prosecutor) and Fetyukovich (defense) as competing interpretations of the entire novel</li><li>– Alyosha's final speech at the stone — memory, love, and the goodness of life</li><li>– The novel's incompleteness — this was Book I of a planned two-part work</li></ul>   |
| <b>Discussion</b> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. The jury convicts Dmitri despite the defense being technically superior. What does that say about how justice actually works?</li><li>2. Alyosha's final speech to the boys is about memory — about how one good memory from childhood can save a person's soul later in life. Do you believe that?</li><li>3. The novel ends without resolving Ivan's argument, Dmitri's fate, or Alyosha's future. Dostoevsky planned a second novel that he never wrote. Does the incompleteness feel like a failure or does it feel right?</li></ol> |
| <b>Watch for</b>  | The final scene at Ilyusha's stone is deliberately small and quiet after 800 pages of enormous questions. Dostoevsky ends not with a philosophical resolution but with a group of boys, a dead child's memory, and the word 'Hurrah.' Sit with that.  |

## Part III — Reference

### The Russian Naming System

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Every Russian character has three names: a given name, a patronymic (father's name + ovich/evna), and a surname. They are used interchangeably. This is the single biggest source of confusion for first-time readers.

| Given name | Nickname(s)     | Patronymic   | Who they are   |
|------------|-----------------|--------------|--|
| Alexei     | Alyosha, Lyosha | Fyodorovich  | The youngest brother. Novice monk. Spiritual center.                       |
| Ivan       | Vanya           | Fyodorovich  | The middle brother. Intellectual. Atheist. Author of the Grand Inquisitor. |
| Dmitri     | Mitya           | Fyodorovich  | The eldest brother. Passionate. Accused of murder.                         |
| Fyodor     | —               | Pavlovich    | The father. Disgusting, comic, and murdered.                               |
| Zosima     | Elder Zosima    | —            | The monk. Alyosha's teacher. Dostoevsky's theological answer to Ivan.      |
| Katerina   | Katya           | Ivanovna     | Dmitri's fiancée. Also in love with Ivan. Torn between them.               |
| Agrafena   | Grushenka       | Alexandrovna | The woman both Fyodor and Dmitri want. Stronger than either.               |

## Core Themes at a Glance

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### THEODICY

Why does God permit evil in the world, specifically the suffering of innocent children? This is Ivan's question. The novel's entire architecture is an attempt to answer it without flinching from it.

### FREEDOM

The Grand Inquisitor argues that human beings cannot bear the freedom Christ gave them. The novel asks: is that true? And if so, what follows from it?

### GUILT

Who is actually responsible for Fyodor's murder? The novel suggests guilt is not individual — it is distributed.

### LOVE

Zosima's teaching: active love of actual persons, not abstract love of humanity. The difference between loving 'mankind' and loving the person in front of you.

### FAITH

Not faith as belief in propositions, but faith as a way of inhabiting the world. Alyosha does not argue for God, he lives in a certain way. That is the distinction Dostoevsky is making.

## The Five Characters You Must Track

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- Alyosha, the moral center. Watch how he responds to people, not what he says.
- Ivan, the intellectual crisis. Track his deterioration from Book V onward.
- Dmitri, the passion arc. His movement from rage to something close to grace.
- Smerdyakov, the shadow. Re-read his early scenes after you finish the novel.
- Zosima, appears briefly but structurally anchors the entire second half.

## Three Chapters to Read Twice

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- Book V, Chapter 4 — Rebellion (Ivan's theodicy argument)
- Book V, Chapter 5 — The Grand Inquisitor (the prose poem)
- Book VI — The Russian Monk (Zosima's life and teachings)

Everything else in the novel is either setup for these three sections or consequence of them.

## A Note on the Ending

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Dostoevsky planned *The Brothers Karamazov* as the first of two novels. Alyosha was meant to be the hero of the second book — an adult Alyosha moving through the world, tested by it, becoming something greater. He died before writing it.

The novel you are reading is therefore formally incomplete. The 'answer' to Ivan's argument — which Dostoevsky believed was Alyosha's life — exists only in the first third of a story that was never finished.

Whether that incompleteness undermines the novel or deepens it is, finally, your question to answer.