Is it necessary for stories to have endings? We might say of a book we like that “I can’t wait to see how it ends!” or “I loved it so much, I never wanted to end!” Many theorists of narrative hypothesize that our sense of story is constructed in relation to its ending, which might reveal the answer to a puzzle, match up the characters in appropriate romantic partnerships, or the like. But many stories do not have endings, perhaps because the author died before he finished, or abandoned the story out of boredom or frustration or lack of audience, or because the ending of an ancient text was lost in an accident. Some texts have been made fragments by their authors, as when Nikolai Gogol burned the second part of his novel Dead Souls; others, like Kafka’s The Castle or a choose-your-own-adventure novel, may be inherently unfinishable.

In this course we will read a selection of these unfinished novels, both in order to bring into a focus a corpus of fascinating texts that lack definitive endings and in order to interrogate the function of the ending in storytelling. In particular, we will trace fragmentary texts from Russian Romanticism into the twentieth century in order to create a genealogy of the Russian fragmentary text in practice and in literary theory. Authors include Petronius, Jane Austen, Franz Kafka, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Vladimir Nabokov.