ONE MORE DRAFT

STORY FRAMEWORKS · FIELD GUIDE 51

Eight-Sequence Structure.

eight small movies inside one feature.

A working field guide to the sequence approach: all eight sequences with page targets, the mini-movie engine that keeps a middle from sagging, a worked feature carried from status quo to resolution, the mistakes that flatten second acts, and a printable sequence sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

read it once for the shape, then keep it open while you plan.

The sequence approach was taught by **Frank Daniel**, the Czech-born dean who ran the film programs at Columbia, USC and the American Film Institute, and it was set down in print by his former student **Paul Gulino** in *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach* (2004). Its root is older still, in the ten-to-fifteen-minute reels of the silent era, each written with its own small shape. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Mr. Gulino, Frank Daniel's estate, or any publisher.

What follows is a plain walkthrough of the eight sequences, with a running feature so you can watch the shape work. One orientation note. The sequences sit **inside the three acts**, not instead of them: two make Act One, four make Act Two, two make Act Three. The approach changes nothing about where the story turns. It changes how you survive the pages between the turns.

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Why eight sequences still work.

nobody can hold a hundred pages in their head. anyone can hold twelve.

Three-act structure tells you where a feature turns. It says almost nothing about the sixty pages in the middle, and that silence is where most screenplays die. The sequence approach fills the silence. It treats a feature as eight stretches of ten to fifteen pages, each with its own question, its own pressure and its own small ending. The writer never faces the whole film at once. They face the next reel.

The unit is not arbitrary. A sequence is about as much story as an audience can hold in suspense before it needs a release, and about as much as a writer can draft in a sitting without losing the thread. Scenes are too small to carry tension across a day of writing. Acts are too large. Twelve pages with a goal at the top and a turn at the bottom is the size at which a story feels **steerable**.

It also protects the middle. Act Two sags when it is written as one long stretch of trying. Cut it into four sequences, each with a fresh tension that the last one created, and the sag has nowhere to form. Every twelve pages the audience gets a question answered and a bigger one asked. That rhythm is the whole trick, and it is easier to keep than any beat sheet.

> **THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION**
> A feature is eight short films in a row, each with its own tension and resolution, and each resolution is the next film's problem, until the eighth answers the question the first one asked.

The engine: the mini-movie.

each sequence asks a question, and its answer is the next sequence's problem.

Every sequence runs on a **sequence tension**, a question the audience wants answered within the next dozen pages. Will she get the contract? Will he get out of the building? The question is smaller than the film's main tension and nested inside it. When the sequence answers its question, the answer must change the situation enough that a new question forms at once. Yes, she got the contract, and now she cannot pay the crew. That handoff is the engine. A sequence that ends by simply ending has stalled the film.

Think of each sequence as a short film with the feature's cast. It has a beginning that states the local goal, a middle of attempts and resistance, and an end that resolves the local question in a way that costs something. Write the end first. If you know what the sequence has to leave broken, the twelve pages before it will fall into order, because every scene is either moving toward that break or being pushed away from it.

BUILD A SEQUENCE IN FOUR LINES

- **The local question:** one thing the protagonist is trying to get or avoid in the next twelve pages, stated so the audience can track it.
- **The resistance:** who or what stands in the way, and how it gets smarter as the sequence goes on.
- **The turn:** how the question is answered, yes or no, and what new trouble that answer creates.
- **The handoff:** the next sequence's question, written in one line before you leave the page.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE · MEET DESSA

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented feature, working title **Low Water**. Dessa Kell, thirty-four, pilots the Marigold, the last independent push-boat on the Vermilion River, in the driest year anyone can remember. The grain co-op's silo has been condemned, the harvest has to reach the downriver terminal before the Hollis Lock is drained for repairs in six days, and the corporate tow line will not touch a river this low. Dessa will. Her main tension, the question that holds all eight sequences, is simple. Can she get the grain down the river before the lock closes?*

Eight sequences, three acts.

two to set up, four to fight, two to finish.

The eight sequences sit inside the familiar three acts. Act One is two sequences and ends with the protagonist locked in. Act Two is four sequences, the long middle, hinged on a midpoint. Act Three is two sequences, the last tension and its answer. Percentages are targets, taken from where each sequence ends. In a 110-page feature, read each as roughly twelve to fifteen pages.

ACT ONE

01	**Status Quo and Inciting Incident**	~12%
02	**Predicament and Lock-In**	~25%

ACT TWO

03	**First Obstacle**	~37%
04	**First Culmination (Midpoint)**	~50%
05	**Subplot and Rising Action**	~62%
06	**Main Culmination**	~75%

ACT THREE

07	**New Tension and Twist**	~87%
08	**Resolution**	100%

Note the two culminations. The first, at the midpoint, resolves the opening half of Act Two and raises the stakes. The main culmination, at the end of Act Two, resolves the film's main tension itself, usually badly. What is left for Act Three is a new tension born from that resolution. That is the sequence approach's quiet departure from the usual map: the big question is answered at 75%, and the last quarter is about what the answer set loose.

SEQUENCE 01 ENDS ~12% · PAGES 1-13

Status Quo and Inciting Incident.

who they are, what they want, and the event that breaks the day.

The first sequence establishes the protagonist, the world they live in and the thing they already want before the story arrives. It then ends on the **inciting incident**, the event that disturbs their life and starts the film. Both halves matter. The status quo gives the audience a baseline to measure change against. The incident gives them a reason to keep watching. Deliver only the world and you have a brochure; only the incident, and there is nothing for it to disturb.

This sequence has its own tension even before the big event. Give the protagonist a small, immediate problem on page one, something that shows their competence and their flaw in the same motion. That local question carries the setup, so the incident lands on a person already in motion, not one waiting for a plot.

ON THE PAGE

- Open on a small problem the protagonist is already solving, so the exposition rides on action instead of sitting beside it.
- Plant the want before the incident. The audience should know what this person would do with a chance before the chance arrives.
- End the sequence on the incident itself, not the reaction to it. The reaction is Sequence 2's job.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The late incident. If the event that starts the story lands on page twenty, Sequence 1 has become two sequences of setup. Thirteen pages is the ceiling; the audience's patience with ordinary life runs out around there.

LOW WATER · DESSA

Dawn on a river you can walk across in places. Dessa noses the Marigold through a shoal the chart says is six feet deep and is now two, reading the water by color. Her brother Cole, eight months sober, works the deck and does not meet the eye of the deputy waiting on the landing. Then the co-op's manager comes down the bank with the condemnation notice. The silo goes Monday. The grain, the whole town's year, has nowhere to be but downriver.

SEQUENCE 02 ENDS ~25% · PAGES 13-27

Predicament and Lock-In.

the easy way out fails, and the door closes behind them.

The second sequence is the protagonist's reaction to the new problem, and it almost always begins with them trying the **easy way out**: someone else to handle it, a cheaper fix, a way back to the status quo. The sequence's tension is whether that will work, and the answer is no. Each attempt to avoid the story narrows the exits, until the protagonist is locked into the central goal and cannot walk away. That lock-in is the end of Act One.

The lock must be real. If the audience can see a sensible exit the protagonist did not take, the rest of the film plays as stubbornness. Close every door on the page, the authority that will not help, the money that is not there, the deadline with no extension, then let the protagonist choose the hard road anyway. A lock the character chooses holds; a lock the plot imposes rattles.

ON THE PAGE

- Give the easy way out a fair hearing. Let it almost work, so its failure is a loss, not a formality.
- State the main tension in one line somewhere in this sequence, out loud or in action, so the audience can carry it for sixty pages.
- End on a choice, not an accident. The protagonist steps through the door; the door does not fall on them.

> **WATCH OUT**
> The volunteer. A protagonist who leaps at the goal on page fourteen has skipped the predicament, and with it the reluctance that tells the audience how big the task is. Make them try to get out of it first.

LOW WATER · DESSA

Dessa tries everything but the river. Trucks, but the county has closed the grade for the fire ban. Rail, but the spur was torn up years ago. Pryce Marine quotes a price that would leave the farmers owing money on their own harvest. So she signs. Four leased barges on her boat's title, six days to the Hollis Lock, and Cole on deck because no one else will crew a river this low. The Marigold casts off at dusk.

SEQUENCE 03

ENDS ~37% · PAGES 27-41

First Obstacle.

the first real attempt, and the first real proof of how hard this is.

The third sequence is the protagonist's first serious attempt at the goal in the new situation, and its job is to show the audience the **true size of the task**. Act One made the promise; this sequence prices it. The obstacle should be bigger than anything the predicament suggested, and it should be specific to this story, not a generic setback. If the film is about running a river, the river fights back here.

This is where the audience learns the rules of the new world, so let the protagonist learn them the hard way. An obstacle overcome easily teaches nothing. One survived narrowly, at a cost, teaches that the goal will take everything they have. The sequence ends with the obstacle behind them, the stakes visibly higher, and the next question forming out of the damage.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the obstacle native to the premise. The thing that nearly stops them should be the thing the film is about.
- Let the protagonist pay to get past it: a lost ally, a spent resource, something the audience can count.
- Introduce the opposition's intelligence. Whoever or whatever resists them should show it can adapt.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The warm-up. A first obstacle cleared without loss tells the audience the film will be easy, and nobody stays for an easy film. Cost them something on the way through.

LOW WATER · DESSA

Mile forty, the Teague Bar, where the channel has moved a hundred yards since the last survey. Dessa walks it at night in waders with a pole and a lantern while Cole holds the tow against the current. They find a slot eleven feet wide for barges that are ten. She threads it in the dark, steel scraping gravel the whole way, and comes out with a bent rudder and one barge taking water. Pryce Marine's survey boat watches from the bank and makes a call.

SEQUENCE 04 ENDS ~50% · PAGES 41-55

First Culmination (Midpoint).

a win or a loss that looks like an answer and is really a raise.

The fourth sequence builds through escalating attempts to a big midpoint event, the **first culmination**. It resolves the tension that has been driving the first half of Act Two, and it does so in a way that looks, for a moment, like the end of the story. The protagonist seems to have won, or to have lost completely. Then the event turns over and shows its other face. The win has a cost nobody saw; the loss opens a door nobody knew was there.

The midpoint's function is to make the second half different from the first. Before it, the protagonist pursues the goal one way. After it, they must pursue it another way, usually with more to lose and less time. Give the sequence a real set piece at its peak, the biggest scene so far, so the audience feels the film shift gears.

ON THE PAGE

- Build to the culmination through at least two escalating attempts, so the big event feels earned rather than scheduled.
- Give the event two faces: the apparent answer and the real consequence. Let the audience see the second a beat before the protagonist does.
- Change the plan on the page. By the end of the sequence the protagonist should be doing something they would not have done on page one.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The quiet midpoint. A midpoint that only raises the stakes in a conversation leaves the second half feeling like the first. Make it an event, and make it the loudest thing in the film so far.

LOW WATER · DESSA

The leaking barge goes down at Cutter's Bend with a quarter of the grain in it. Dessa saves the other three by cutting it loose in the current, the worst thing a pilot can do and the only thing. On the bank, Harlan Pryce is waiting with an offer: he will buy the cargo where it sits, for a tenth of its worth, and take the boat's note too. Dessa says no in front of Cole. Three barges, four days, a falling river, and a man who wants her to fail.

SEQUENCE 05 ENDS ~62% · PAGES 55-68

Subplot and Rising Action.

the fallout spreads, and the people around the goal come forward.

The fifth sequence is the fallout from the midpoint. Pressure builds, new complications pile up, and the **subplots and key relationships** that have been running beside the main line now come forward and tangle with it. This is deliberate. The midpoint changed the plan; this sequence shows the plan's cost to everyone else. Whatever has been simmering in the margins now takes a scene of its own and pushes the main tension somewhere the protagonist did not choose.

The craft is in the braid. A subplot that merely alternates with the main plot pads the film; one that complicates it earns its pages. Ask of every subplot scene what it does to the goal, and cut the ones that do nothing. The sequence should end with the protagonist's situation worse on two fronts at once, so that the main culmination ahead has more than one thing to break.

ON THE PAGE

- Pick the one subplot that can hurt the main goal most and give it the sequence's biggest scene.
- Let the relationship pressure change what the protagonist is willing to do, not just how they feel about it.
- Keep the clock running underneath. Even the quietest scene here should cost time or ground on the main line.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The intermission. If the subplot pauses the main plot instead of complicating it, the audience feels the film stop to catch its breath. The B story is a second weight on the same rope, not a rest from pulling.

LOW WATER · DESSA

Two days of hard water, and the boat's crew is a family coming apart. Cole finds a bottle Pryce's survey man left on the deck and does not drink it, and does not tell Dessa, and she finds it anyway. The fight is about the bottle and about their father, who ran this river drunk for twenty years and taught them both. The co-op calls: Pryce has offered to buy the silo land. Half the board wants to take it and call the grain a loss. Dessa has two days to prove the river is still a road.

SEQUENCE 06 ENDS ~75% · PAGES 68-82

Main Culmination.

the film's main tension peaks and is answered, usually at the bottom.

The sixth sequence brings the film's **main tension** to its peak and resolves it. This is the approach's boldest move. The question the audience has carried since the lock-in is answered here, at three quarters, not at the climax. Often the answer is no, and the protagonist is at their lowest. Either way the original goal is settled, and Act Two ends on a reckoning, not a cliffhanger.

Why answer it early? Because a question answered at the climax leaves no room for the answer to mean anything. Settling it here gives Act Three a different job: not whether they get the thing, but what they do now that the getting is decided. Write it as the largest confrontation yet, with the midpoint and the subplot both loaded onto it.

ON THE PAGE

- Resolve the main tension on the page, explicitly. The audience should be able to say which way it went.
- Bring the subplot's pressure into the same scene, so the loss or the win costs on both fronts at once.
- Give the protagonist a moment at the bottom with no plan. The new tension should not form until the next sequence.

> **WATCH OUT**
> The deferred answer. Writers raised on late climaxes hold the main question for page 100 and fill this slot with a setback. Then Act Three has nothing new to be about. Answer it here.

LOW WATER · DESSA

The Narrows at night, the last bad water before the lock. Pryce's survey boat has anchored across the only channel, with a permit. Dessa tries the bar side and the tow breaks apart. Two barges swing onto the rocks and spill. She holds the third with the engine screaming and Cole on the wires. At dawn she has one barge, a quarter of the harvest, and the co-op's answer on the radio. They are taking Pryce's money. The contract is void. She failed.

SEQUENCE 07 ENDS ~87% · PAGES 82-96

New Tension and Twist.

the consequences form a new question, and the full stakes come clear.

The seventh sequence begins Act Three by turning the main culmination's consequences into a **new tension**, often by way of a twist. The old goal is gone or won; something the resolution set loose now demands an answer. The twist can reverse what the culmination seemed to mean, reveal who the opposition really is, or set a new deadline the old answer created. It should feel like a consequence the first six sequences made inevitable and the audience did not see coming.

This is also the sequence in which the protagonist forms the **final plan** and the stakes are stated at their fullest. Everything they have learned since the lock-in should be in that plan, and everything they could still lose should be on the table. The sequence ends with the plan in motion and the audience able to say, in one line, what the climax will decide.

ON THE PAGE

- Derive the new tension from the old answer. It should be impossible to imagine this question without the culmination that caused it.
- Let the protagonist choose the final plan at the bottom, with nothing left to protect. The choice is the character arc landing.
- State the full stakes once, plainly, so the climax is measured against something the audience holds in words.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The replay. A new tension that is just the old tension with a bigger number means Act Two was never resolved. The seventh sequence asks a question the film has not asked before.

LOW WATER · DESSA

The twist comes from the co-op's own lawyer. Pryce's offer for the silo land is conditional on the grain being declared lost, and one barge of it is sitting at the Narrows with Dessa's name on the manifest. If that barge reaches the terminal, the harvest is salvage, not loss, the deal collapses, and the town keeps its land. The new question is no longer about money. The lock closes at six tomorrow morning, the river is six inches lower than any chart, and Pryce knows exactly where she is.

SEQUENCE 08 ENDS 100% · PAGES 96-110

Resolution.

the climax, the answer, and the changed world.

The eighth sequence is the climax and the resolution of the new tension, and with it the story's central question in its deepest form. The plan from Sequence 7 meets the opposition at full strength, and the outcome turns on what the protagonist has become. Then the film shows the **changed world**: what the journey cost, what it gained, who stands differently now. This sequence mirrors the first. The status quo was the question; the resolution is the answer.

Keep the climax physical and specific, in the film's own vocabulary, and keep the resolution short. Once the question is answered, every page spends goodwill. The strongest closes revisit an image from Sequence 1 with one thing changed, so the whole distance can be read in a frame. Honor the cost; an ending that quietly returns what the culmination took has not earned its last page.

ON THE PAGE

- Let the climax turn on a choice the page-one protagonist could not have made. The arc decides the plot.
- Answer the new tension and the original question in the same stroke, so the ending feels like one answer, not two.
- Mirror the opening with one element transformed, then stop. The changed world is a glimpse, not a tour.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The long goodbye. A resolution that tours every subplot to its tidy end turns a climax into a ceremony. Pay off the one or two threads that carried weight and trust the audience with the rest.

LOW WATER · DESSA

Dessa runs the last barge at night with the lights off, the way her father did, reading the river by sound and by the color of the dark. Cole walks the bar ahead of her with a pole, sober and shaking, calling depths. At the lock the gates are closing on schedule, and the lockmaster, who has known her since she was six, holds them eleven minutes he will be asked about later. The barge clears by a boot's width. Dawn on the terminal, grain going up the elevator. One barge in four, enough to call it a harvest and keep the land. The Marigold, dented and afloat, turns upriver toward home.

Adapting the frame.

other lengths, the television hour, and the sequence inside a novel.

SHORTER AND LONGER FEATURES

Eight is a target, not a law. A ninety-page comedy may run its sequences at ten pages each and still hit every culmination on schedule. A two-and-a-half-hour epic may need ten or twelve, usually by splitting Sequences 3 and 5, the two stretches of rising action, into pairs. What should not stretch is the proportion. Two sequences to the lock-in, a culmination at the center, the main tension answered around three quarters. Keep those marks and the count will take care of itself.

THE TELEVISION HOUR

An hour of television is already written in sequences; the industry calls them acts and places them around breaks. A five-act hour maps almost directly onto Sequences 1 through 5 with a compressed resolution, which is why writers trained on the sequence approach tend to find episodic structure familiar. The one caution is that a TV act must end on a hook strong enough to survive a commercial, so its handoffs are louder than a feature's. Borrow that loudness for your Sequence 4 and 6 endings; leave it out of the rest.

THE SEQUENCE INSIDE A NOVEL

Novelists use the same unit without the name. A sequence is a run of chapters with one driving question, and the handoff is the chapter break that turns an answer into a new problem. The approach suits the novel's long middle especially well. If your book sags between its first turn and its midpoint, try naming the local question of each ten-thousand-word stretch and the trouble its answer makes. Most sags turn out to be a stretch with no question at all.

RELATION TO OTHER FRAMEWORKS

The sequence approach is a way of drafting inside three-act structure, not a rival to it. It sits comfortably under a beat sheet, too. Save the Cat's fifteen beats fall roughly two to a sequence, and its Midpoint and All Is Lost are the first and main culminations by other names. Use the beats to know what must happen; use the sequences to know what you are writing today.

Seven ways sequence drafts go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The sequence with no question.** Twelve pages of things happening, nothing being asked. Fix: write the local question at the top of the sequence and cut every scene that does not move it.
- **2. The soft handoff.** A sequence ends and the next simply starts, no new trouble created. Fix: make each answer cost something, and write the next question in one line before you move on.
- **3. The late lock-in.** Act One drifts past page thirty because the easy way out never fails. Fix: close every exit on the page and let the protagonist choose the hard road by page twenty-seven.
- **4. The quiet midpoint.** The first culmination is a conversation, not an event. Fix: stage it as the biggest set piece so far and give it two faces, the apparent answer and the real cost.
- **5. The intermission subplot.** Sequence 5 pauses the main plot to visit the B story. Fix: let the subplot complicate the goal, and keep the clock running under every scene.
- **6. The deferred answer.** The main tension is held for the climax, so Act Three repeats Act Two. Fix: resolve it at the main culmination and build Act Three on a new question the answer created.
- **7. The long goodbye.** A resolution that tours every thread to its tidy end. Fix: mirror the opening with one thing changed, pay off the threads that carried weight, and stop.

> **THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC**
>
> Write the eight local questions down the margin of your outline, one per sequence. If any line is blank, or if any two are the same question, you have found the sag. The fix is never more pages; it is a question those pages were missing.

Your sequence sheet.

print this page. one question and one turn per sequence is enough to start.

THE MAIN TENSION (ONE LINE)

01 STATUS QUO AND INCITING INCIDENT 12%

02 PREDICAMENT AND LOCK-IN 25%

03 FIRST OBSTACLE 37%

04 FIRST CULMINATION (MIDPOINT) 50%

05 SUBPLOT AND RISING ACTION 62%

06 MAIN CULMINATION 75%

07 NEW TENSION AND TWIST 87%

08 RESOLUTION 100%

THE CHANGED WORLD (LAST IMAGE)

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version doesn't.

This entire sequence sheet exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft, with the same eight sequences and a text box under each one that saves as you type. Read the sequence, draft your film's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a full outline in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/eight-sequence

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: industry-standard screenplay formatting, a distraction-free manuscript editor, and story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

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- Six-Stage Plot Structure · Michael Hauge's turning points and the inner journey
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- The Story Circle · eight steps around the wheel
- Screenplay Formatting Basics · the page, element by element
- How to Write a Logline · one sentence that sells the film
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ONE MORE DRAFT

The sequence approach was developed and taught by Frank Daniel at Columbia University, the University of Southern California and the American Film Institute, and set out in print by Paul Gulino in *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach* (Continuum, 2004). This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Paul Gulino, the estate of Frank Daniel, or any publisher. © 2026 One More Draft. You are welcome to share this PDF in its original, unmodified form.