



The Fichtean Curve.

*start in the fire.
climb from there.*

A complete working guide to the thriller writer's favorite shape. Open in the fire, drop the exposition, and climb a chain of escalating crises straight to the climax. All seven beats, a worked suspense example carried from first page to fast close, the mistakes that flatten the curve, and a printable crisis sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

The Fichtean curve borrows its name from the dialectical philosophy of **Johann Gottlieb Fichte**, whose thought moved by an ascending series of tensions rather than a calm line. As a storytelling model it was popularized in twentieth-century writing instruction, and it has no single how-to author; it is a shape teachers reach for, not a proprietary system. The idea is radical in its simplicity: cut nearly all the opening exposition, begin at or near the inciting incident, and drive upward through a chain of escalating crises to a single climax.

This guide is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of the curve in its most useful seven-beat form: what each beat is for, how to write it, where drafts go slack, and a running suspense example so you can watch the tension climb. One orientation note before you begin. The Fichtean curve is a shape, not a scene list. It specifies almost no content, only a trajectory, relentless escalation from a fast open to a hard peak, which is exactly why it suits thrillers, horror, and any story that should grab the reader by the collar on page one and not let go until the drop.

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Why the curve opens in the fire.

no throat-clearing. the story starts where the trouble does.

Most structures begin with the world before. The Fichtean curve throws that away. It opens at or just before the inciting incident, on the theory that a reader dropped into motion will care first and ask questions later. The slow three-act setup, the ordinary day drawn in loving detail so its disruption can be felt, is exactly what this frame refuses. Curiosity, the curve wagers, is a stronger hook than familiarity. Show a person in trouble and the reader will follow them to learn how it started, not because they were introduced first.

From there the curve only climbs. Instead of the familiar rise-and-fall of a three-act plot, the Fichtean story stacks crisis on crisis, each one sharper and harder to escape than the last, with almost no valleys between them. There is no long reactive middle to sag, because the protagonist never gets a quiet stretch to react in. Backstory and character are not delivered in set-piece scenes; they are squeezed out under pressure, revealed by how a person behaves when the walls keep moving in.

The trade-off is real and worth naming. What the curve gains in momentum it risks in relief, and a story that is nothing but escalation can numb a reader as surely as one that never starts. The craft of the form is managing that intensity, banking just enough breath between crises to keep the climbs felt. Used well, though, the Fichtean curve is the most propulsive shape in the toolkit, which is why thriller and suspense writers reach for it first.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A protagonist is dropped into trouble on the first page and driven upward through a chain of escalating crises, each worse than the last, to a single climax the whole chain has been loading, then a fast drop to the close.

The engine: a chain of crises.

each crisis is the child of the last one's solution.

Every Fichtean story runs on one mechanism: **escalation by causation**. A crisis arises; the protagonist responds; the response creates a new and worse crisis. Repeat, climbing, until the pressure has nowhere left to go but the climax. This is what separates a Fichtean curve from a simple list of bad things happening. The crises are not a sequence of unrelated obstacles; they are a chain, each link forged by the attempt to escape the one before. Break that causal chain and the structure collapses into episodes.

The second half of the engine is **ranked intensity**. Because the curve is nothing but rising action, every crisis must top the one before it, in stakes, in intimacy, or in how thoroughly it traps the protagonist. A flat chain is the form's fatal flaw. If crisis three feels no worse than crisis two, the reader's pulse levels off and the curve becomes a plateau. Before drafting, it helps to number your crises and check that the line only ever goes up.

BUILD THE CHAIN IN FOUR LINES

- **Opening point:** the latest moment you can start, the scene after which nothing returns to normal.
- **Causal link:** every crisis must grow from the response to the crisis before it.
- **Ranked intensity:** each crisis harder than the last, and different in kind so it never repeats.
- **The peak:** the single confrontation every crisis is loading; decide it before you draft the middle.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET DARA

Throughout this guide we follow one invented suspense story, working title **Cold Storage**. Dara Whitlock works the graveyard shift at a county evidence warehouse, a deliberately dead-end job she took to disappear after testifying, years ago, against a decorated detective and starting over under a borrowed name. Opening point, a routine 2 a.m. inventory scan that returns a homicide case closed nine years ago, its evidence bag physically present and freshly resealed. The peak, decided early, is whether, cornered, she hands the bag over and vanishes again, or uses the one system she controls to expose the truth and blow her own cover. Every crisis between the two grows from the last.

One open, then the climb.

a fast start, four rising crises, a peak, and a quick drop.

The seven beats below are the Fichtean skeleton: a single fast opening, four escalating crises that form the long rising action, the climax they build to, and a short falling action. Percentages are targets, not laws. What matters is the shape, a line that climbs almost the entire way and drops only at the very end, and the causal logic, each crisis born from the response to the one before.

THE OPENING • IN MEDIAS RES

01	Inciting Incident	~6%
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THE RISING CHAIN • ESCALATING CRISES

02	First Crisis	~22%
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03	Second Crisis	~40%
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04	Third Crisis	~58%
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05	Fourth Crisis	~74%
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THE PEAK • CLIMAX AND CLOSE

06	Climax	~90%
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07	Falling Action / Resolution	100%
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Note where the weight sits. Four of the seven beats are crises, and together they occupy the great middle of the story, roughly the fifteen-to-seventy-five-percent span that a three-act writer would call the confrontation. The Fichtean answer to the sagging middle is simply to fill it with escalation and let no reactive lull open up in the first place.

BEAT 01

TARGET ~6%

Inciting Incident.

no runway. the story starts already moving.

The Fichtean curve refuses a warm-up. The first scene is at or just before the event that detonates the plot, and everything a slower structure would spend on setup is either cut or smuggled in later, under pressure. The opening's whole job is to put the protagonist and their problem in motion on the same page. A reader who meets the character mid-crisis will accept almost any backstory afterward, because they already care what happens next.

Unlike the inciting incident of a three-act story, which arrives after a stretch of ordinary life, the Fichtean opening is the ordinary life and the disruption compressed into one moment. Establish only enough for the reader to feel the ground before it tilts, a name, a place, one clear stake. The rest is delivered on the move. If your first page could be deleted without losing the story, it was setup, and the curve has no room for it.

ON THE PAGE

- Open at the latest possible moment - the scene after which nothing can go back to normal.
- Put the protagonist in motion, not at rest; the reader meets them doing, not waiting for the plot.
- Trust the reader to catch up; deliver who and where in fragments as the crisis unfolds.

WATCH OUT

The habit of a running start. If you find yourself writing a calm establishing chapter to reach the good part, delete it and open on the good part. The curve begins in the fire.

COLD STORAGE • DARA

2:40 a.m., the county property warehouse. Dara Whitlock runs the graveyard inventory alone, scanner clicking down a row of sealed evidence. One barcode returns a homicide closed nine years ago - yet the bag is here in her hand, resealed with tape still shiny. She is not cleared to see this case. The scanner has already logged that she did. The story is moving before she decides to.

BEAT 02

TARGET ~22%

First Crisis.

the first turn of the screw.

The opening problem is now a live wire, and the protagonist reaches for the obvious solution - which fails, and fails in a way that makes everything worse. This is the engine of the whole structure in miniature. A Fichtean crisis is not just an obstacle; it is a complication that the protagonist's own response generates. The reader learns the rules of this story here: trouble does not sit still, and every attempt to contain it opens a wider one.

Keep the first crisis smaller than what follows but sharp enough to commit the protagonist fully. It should close an exit. Where a three-act story would still be arranging its pieces, the Fichtean story has already narrowed the character's options once. Reveal a sliver of who they are through how they respond, not through a pause to explain them. Panic, competence, a bad reflex - the crisis is a character test the reader grades in real time.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the crisis grow from the protagonist's own move, not from a coincidence walking in the door.
- End it by closing a door, not opening a menu; each crisis should subtract options.
- Let the response reveal character; pressure is your exposition, so spend it, don't narrate around it.

WATCH OUT

A crisis that only delays. If the protagonist could wait out the problem or walk away unscathed, it is an obstacle, not a crisis. Make the response cost something that cannot be refunded.

COLD STORAGE • DARA

Dara does the correct thing: she flags the item for re-logging and pulls the digital record. It has been edited hours ago - the bag scrubbed from the system, the case marked destroyed in 2017. Her graveyard scan is now the only proof the evidence still exists, and it stamps her name, her badge, her hands on a homicide she was never assigned. Fixing it made her the anomaly.

BEAT 03

TARGET ~40%

Second Crisis.

the stakes climb, and the past starts to show.

The second crisis raises the ceiling. What was a professional problem becomes personal; what threatened a reputation now threatens something harder to replace. This is also where the Fichtean writer pays for skipping the opening setup. Backstory arrives now, forced out by pressure - a reaction that only makes sense given a history, a name the protagonist flinches at, an old wound the crisis presses. The reader assembles the character's past from what the present squeezes out of them.

Guard the escalation. The second crisis must clearly outrank the first, or the curve flattens into a plateau and the reader's pulse settles. Escalation can mean higher stakes, but it can also mean a threat that gets closer, more intimate, or harder to fix. And keep the causal chain intact. The second crisis should be traceable to how the protagonist handled the first, so the danger feels earned rather than piled on by an author running short of ideas.

ON THE PAGE

- Outrank the last crisis on purpose; if you cannot say why this one is worse, it is not.
- Deliver backstory only as a reaction under pressure; if the story could pause for it, cut it.
- Make the danger more personal, not just larger; proximity frightens readers more than scale.

WATCH OUT

Backstory that stops the clock. A flashback or a page of history freezes the curve at its worst possible moment. If a fact matters, let a character bleed it out mid-crisis, never in a lull.

COLD STORAGE • DARA

Now we learn why Dara took a job where no one talks. Nine years ago she testified against a decorated detective and vanished into night work under a borrowed name. The closed case is his. At 3 a.m. a man in a records windbreaker buzzes the loading dock, badge held to the camera, asking for one bag by its number. He is calm. He already knows it is here.

BEAT 04

TARGET ~58%

Third Crisis.

the walls move inward.

By the third crisis the reader should feel the structure tightening like a fist. Each new complication is harder to escape than the last, and the protagonist's early advantages, the allies, the cover, the room to maneuver, are stripped one by one. This is the heart of the rising action, and its rule is relentlessness. The middle of a Fichtean story does not sag, because there is no reactive lull to sag in; there is only the next crisis, arriving before the last one is resolved.

Vary the kind of crisis so escalation never reads as repetition. If the first two were problems of information and identity, make this one physical, or moral, or a betrayal from a direction the reader trusted. The protagonist can still act, still fight, but each choice now runs down a narrowing corridor. Give them one small, hard-won gain here if you like; the curve tolerates a brief upward step, so long as the next crisis erases it and then some.

ON THE PAGE

- Change the kind of threat each time; information, then identity, then the body, keeps escalation from feeling repetitive.
- Strip an advantage the protagonist leaned on; every crisis should leave them with fewer tools.
- Let a small win in, then take it back; false hope sharpens the fall that follows.

WATCH OUT

The flat middle. Three crises at the same pitch feel like one crisis told three times. Before drafting, rank them one to four by pressure, and hold the line: each must top the one before.

COLD STORAGE • DARA

Dara refuses to hand over the bag and calls the on-duty sergeant. The line is dead; so are the dock cameras and the interior lights, killed from a panel only staff can reach. The man is inside now, unhurried, checking the aisles row by row. He calls her by the name she buried nine years ago. Her keycard blinks red at the first door she tries. The building has become his.

BEAT 05

TARGET ~74%

Fourth Crisis.

cornered, out of exits and out of tricks.

The final crisis before the peak is the tightest turn of all. Every escape the protagonist has tried is closed, every ally spent or turned, every clever workaround exhausted. What is left is the one confrontation they have been running from since the first page. This beat is the crisis that removes the last alternative to the climax; after it, there is no third option, no clever dodge, only the collision the whole curve has been loading toward.

Do not resolve anything here. The fourth crisis pushes the protagonist to the edge and holds them there, at the lowest, most trapped point on the curve. It is the mirror of a three-act story's crisis point, but reached by a steeper, faster road. Let the reader feel that the situation is genuinely hopeless, because the climax spends exactly the despair you bank now. A protagonist who still has a comfortable option has not reached the fourth crisis yet.

ON THE PAGE

- Close the last exit on the page; the reader must see the final door shut, not infer it.
- Strip the protagonist to character alone; no gadget, no ally, only who they are.
- Bank real despair here; the climax can only spend what this beat makes the reader believe.

WATCH OUT

The cushioned corner. If the protagonist keeps a hidden phone, a spare key, or a friend still coming, the reader relaxes. Take the last comfort away, and let the fourth crisis truly trap them.

COLD STORAGE • DARA

Dara backs into the walk-in evidence freezer and the door seals behind her, deadbolt thrown from outside. The man's voice comes through the steel, reasonable: give him the bag, take a bus out of the county tonight, live. Her phone shows four percent and no signal past the concrete. In her gloved hand is the one thing he needs gone, and the only exit left is a choice, not a door.

BEAT 06

TARGET ~90%

Climax.

the peak the whole chain was building.

The climax is the highest point of the curve, and in a well-built Fichtean story it feels inevitable and surprising at once. Every crisis has narrowed the protagonist to this single confrontation and this single choice, and now they make it. The power of the beat comes from accumulation. The reader has watched pressure compound for the whole book, so when it finally breaks, the release is enormous. Nothing new is introduced here; the climax is the sum of everything that came before.

Resolve the story's central pressure through the protagonist's own decisive act. The climax must answer the question the opening asked, on the page, by their hand. The strongest Fichtean climaxes force a choice the character could not have made at the start, using precisely what the crises taught or cost them. Let it be expensive. The curve has spent the whole book raising the price of this moment, so the protagonist should pay something real to reach the other side of it.

ON THE PAGE

- Put the decisive act in the protagonist's hands; no rescue, no coincidence, no villain who trips.
- Spend what the crises built; the skill, wound, or fact the chain planted should decide the peak.
- Charge a real price; a climax that costs nothing cannot pay off a book of mounting pressure.

WATCH OUT

The rescued climax. If help arrives, the lights come back, or the antagonist slips at the crucial second, the protagonist becomes a bystander at their own peak. Make the final act unmistakably theirs.

COLD STORAGE • DARA

In the freezer, phone dying, Dara does the one thing the property system lets a clerk do from anywhere: she scans the bag into a live county-wide inventory and reads its full chain of custody aloud into the last of her battery, naming herself, the tampered record, and the case. When the door finally opens, the confession is already on the server. She chose the truth over the exit, in her own voice.

BEAT 07

TARGET 100%

Falling Action / Resolution.

a short, steep drop, and out.

After the peak, the Fichtean curve does not linger. The falling action is brief and controlled, a fast descent that lets the accumulated consequences land and then closes the story before the tension can leak away. Where a three-act resolution may unwind for a full act, the Fichtean ending is measured in pages. The reader has been held at altitude for the whole book; release them cleanly, show what the climax cost and changed, and stop.

Resolution here means consequence, not celebration. Show the new situation in a few decisive strokes: who survived, what the confrontation changed, what it took. The best Fichtean endings answer the opening's question and then trust the reader to feel the drop without a guided tour of it. Resist the urge to explain the whole ride in hindsight. The curve earned its speed by cutting exposition at the start; do not smuggle it all back in at the end.

ON THE PAGE

- Keep it short; every page after the peak spends reader adrenaline the climax worked to raise.
- Show consequence, not a summary; one image of the changed world beats a page of accounting.
- Answer the opening question and then leave; the drop is the point, so let it be steep.

WATCH OUT

The long tail. A leisurely wind-down flattens the curve you spent a book sharpening. If a scene after the climax does not show a consequence, cut it, and end on the one that does.

COLD STORAGE • DARA

Sirens, pulling into the lot. The man is taken at the freezer door with the bag still in his fist, the server timestamp already beyond his reach. The nine-year-old case reopens by morning; the detective Dara once testified against is named in it. Her borrowed name is finished, and she lets it go without grief. She walks out into the first daylight she has faced in years. The curve drops, and the story is done.

Adapting the frame.

the right length, the right genre, and the exposition problem.

SHORT FORMS AND LONG

The curve is a natural fit for the short story, where there is no room for a slow build and a single line of rising tension can carry the whole piece. It scales up, too, but rarely as one unbroken climb. In a novel, most writers chain several Fichtean curves together, running one per act or per sequence, each with its own fast open and local peak, so the reader gets periodic release without ever returning to a leisurely setup. Horror and thriller series often repeat the shape per chapter, a small crisis-climb-drop that leaves each chapter ending on a hook.

MANAGING EXPOSITION UNDER PRESSURE

The curve's hardest craft problem is the backstory it refuses to front-load. The answer is not to omit character and history but to deliver them in motion. Reveal a past through a reaction that only makes sense given that past, through an object a character will not abandon, through a name that changes how they stand. Every fact the reader needs can be smuggled into a moment of pressure. If you catch yourself opening a quiet window to explain, close it, and hand the explanation to the next crisis instead.

RELATION TO OTHER FRAMEWORKS

The Fichtean curve is closest to Freytag's pyramid with the exposition trimmed and the rising action steepened into a stack of crises; where Freytag climbs gently to a central climax and falls at length, the Fichtean line starts high, climbs harder, peaks late, and drops fast. Against three-act structure, it compresses act one to almost nothing and refuses the reactive first half of act two. Draft a thriller with this frame for propulsion, and if it ever stalls, diagnose with three-act structure to find the beat where the causal chain broke.

Seven ways the curve goes slack.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The slow start.** Opening pages that behave like a three-act setup, establishing normal life before anything happens. Fix: cut to the crisis; begin at the latest moment the story can start.
- **2. The flat chain.** Crises pitched at the same intensity, so the curve plateaus. Fix: rank every crisis upward; each must top the last in stakes or in how thoroughly it traps the protagonist.
- **3. The coincidence crisis.** A new problem that arrives by luck rather than consequence. Fix: link each crisis to the response that caused it; no trouble should walk in unannounced.
- **4. The exposition brake.** Halting the climb for a flashback or a page of history. Fix: reveal backstory only under pressure, through reaction and object, never in a lull.
- **5. The unrelenting monotone.** All tension and no modulation, until the reader goes numb. Fix: bank a short breath between crises, a micro-valley, so the next climb is felt.
- **6. The unearned climax.** A peak solved by rescue, coincidence, or a fact the chain never planted. Fix: make the climax the sum of the crises, decided by the protagonist's own hand.
- **7. The long tail.** A slow wind-down that flattens the drop. Fix: resolve in a few pages; show consequence, answer the opening question, and stop.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene, ask two questions. Is the pressure higher here than in the scene before it? And did this scene's trouble grow from the last scene's? A scene that fails either test is a plateau, and plateaus are where Fichtean stories quietly die.

Your crisis sheet.

print this page. one line per beat is enough to start.

OPENING POINT / STORY QUESTION

THE PEAK (DECIDE IT EARLY)

01 INCITING INCIDENT 6%

02 FIRST CRISIS 22%

03 SECOND CRISIS 40%

04 THIRD CRISIS 58%

05 FOURTH CRISIS 74%

06 CLIMAX 90%

07 FALLING ACTION / RESOLUTION 100%

Keep going.

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

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

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