



Five-Act Structure.

*the classical
pyramid.*

A complete working guide to Freytag's pyramid: all five acts from exposition to denouement, the central climax that sets it apart from the modern three-act curve, a worked tragedy carried from settled world to altered rest, the mistakes that flatten the fall, and a printable act sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

The five-act shape was diagrammed by the German critic **Gustav Freytag** in *Die Technik des Dramas* (*Technique of the Drama*, 1863). Studying Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, he drew their common architecture as a pyramid: a rise, a peak, and a fall. The five-act division itself is older still, urged by the Roman poet Horace and standard in neoclassical theatre, but it is Freytag's pyramid that gave the parts their modern names. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by any estate or publisher.

What follows is a plain walkthrough of the five acts: what each is for, how to write it, where drafts collapse, and a running tragedy so you can watch the shape work. Two orientation notes. First, the acts are **proportions, not chapters**. They mark where the load sits, in any medium and at any length. Second, the pyramid's defining feature is a **central climax**. Where the modern three-act frame hides its climax near the end, Freytag puts the turning point in the middle and spends the rest of the story on the fall. That is why it suits literary fiction and the stage, where the climax is a revelation and the meaning lives in the aftermath.

CONTENTS

Why the pyramid still stands	03
The engine: the turning point	04
The map: the rise, the peak, the fall	05
Act one - Exposition	06
Act two - Rising Action	07
Act three - Climax	08
Act four - Falling Action	09
Act five - Denouement	10
Adapting the frame: TV and the pyramid debate	11
Seven ways five-act drafts go wrong	12
Your act sheet (printable worksheet)	13
Keep going	14

Why the pyramid still stands.

a story that rises to one peak, then earns its fall.

The pyramid endures because it takes the fall as seriously as the rise. Most modern stories are built on a curve that climbs to a climax near the very end and then exits fast. Freytag's shape does the opposite. It sets the turning point at the center and gives the second half of the story to consequence: what the climax breaks, who pays, and what settles in the ruins. The rise earns the height. The fall spends it.

That symmetry is why the five-act frame belongs to tragedy and to literary fiction. When the climax is a revelation rather than a chase, the interesting part is not the reveal but the living-with. A late-climax structure has no room for that. A central climax has half a book. The shape is an argument that meaning is made in the aftermath, not the collision.

It also asks less of you than the beat-heavy frames. Five acts, one peak, no mandatory catalyst or all-is-lost. That lightness is freedom and hazard both. The pyramid will hold any weight you hang between its corners, but it will not tell you what to hang. The rise and the fall are yours to fill.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A settled world is pressured through escalating events to a central turning point, after which the consequences play out in full until a new and altered equilibrium finally settles.

The engine: the turning point.

everything climbs to one reversal, and everything falls from it.

Every five-act story runs on a single **turning point** at its peak, the moment the protagonist's fortunes reverse. The Greeks had two words for what happens there. *Peripeteia* is the reversal, the swing from rising to falling. *Anagnorisis* is the recognition, the instant a character sees the truth they have been missing. Freytag built his climax from both. The strongest peaks deliver a reversal and a recognition in the same scene, so the fall begins the moment the eyes open.

Locate that turn first and the rest of the pyramid lays itself out. The rise exists to build the height the fall will need, stacking the pressures and stakes the turn will release. The fall exists to cash them, tracing every consequence to rest. Write the climax as a hinge, not a wall. Before it, the protagonist is climbing. After it, they are descending, and the same forces now pull the other way.

BUILD THE PYRAMID IN FOUR LINES

- **Protagonist and standing:** one person with something to lose, a name or a love or a certainty, drawn so its loss will land.
- **The pressure:** the escalating force that pushes them up the rise, gaining weight each act until the peak cannot be avoided.
- **The turning point:** the central reversal and recognition, the one scene the whole shape pivots on. Name it before you outline.
- **The new equilibrium:** where the fall comes to rest, and what it costs to get there. Decide it early; it is the theme.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET RENATA

Throughout this guide we follow one invented tragedy, working title ***The Cold Works***. Renata Vance is the last of her family and master of the Vance Glassworks, the furnace that has been her town's pride for a hundred years. She has staked everything on a centennial exhibition to restore the name, and she is hiding two cracks: three years of losses in a locked ledger, and a fault running up the furnace crown. The turning point to come is whether, offered a rescue that erases the family name, she saves the works or saves her pride.

The rise, the peak, the fall.

two acts up, one act at the summit, two acts down.

The five acts sit on the pyramid in three movements. Two acts climb. Exposition sets the world; Rising Action loads it with pressure. One act stands at the summit, the Climax, where the story turns. Two acts descend. Falling Action pays out the consequences; Denouement settles the new world. Percentages are targets. What matters is that the peak sits near the middle, with real story left to fall.

THE RISE

I	Exposition	~10%
II	Rising Action	~35%

THE PEAK

III	Climax	~60%
-----	--------	------

THE FALL

IV	Falling Action	~80%
V	Denouement (Resolution)	100%

Note where the weight sits. Unlike the modern three-act curve, whose climax crowds the final tenth, the pyramid spends nearly half its length after the peak. That falling half is not a victory lap. It is where a five-act story does its thinking, and the first place a draft trained on late climaxes tends to go thin.

ACT 01

TARGET ~10%

Exposition.

the settled world, drawn so its breaking will hurt.

The first act builds the world before disturbance: the protagonist, their place, the arrangement of their life, and the conflicts and themes still folded out of sight. Its real product is **weight**. A pyramid can only fall as far as its base is high, so exposition is not throat-clearing but foundation. Everything the climax will overturn must first be set standing here, drawn precisely enough that the reader feels its solidity now, and later, its collapse.

Classical exposition moves slower than a modern opening, and that is by design, not neglect. The five-act frame trusts the fall to earn back the patience. Still, plant a fault line in the same view as the order. The settled world should carry one hidden strain, a debt, a lie, a pride, that the rest of the pyramid will widen. A base with no fault has nothing to give way.

ON THE PAGE

- Open on the protagonist in their element, competent and at home; a settled world is fastest shown through practiced routine.
- Plant the theme once, quietly, in an image or an offhand line, so the denouement can answer what the first act asked.
- Seat one hidden fault inside the calm. Name it in your notes; it is the crack the climax will finish.

WATCH OUT

The museum. Five-act openings tempt writers into rooms of pure furniture, all world and no strain. Establish only what the climax will overturn, and hang a visible fault on the wall while you do.

THE COLD WORKS • RENATA

Dawn at the Vance Glassworks, the furnace roaring as it has for a hundred years. Renata works the blowpipe with the whole town's history in her wrists, turning a goblet no factory could match. On the wall, the founder's portrait; in the ledger she keeps locked, three years of losses. A hairline runs up the furnace crown. Renata glazes it over with fresh clay and says nothing. The centennial is ten weeks off.

ACT 02

TARGET ~35%

Rising Action.

pressure that builds, event by event.

The second act is the climb. A chain of escalating events disturbs the equilibrium the exposition set, and the protagonist's situation grows more tangled, more pressured, harder to ignore. The governing law is **escalation**. Each event should raise the stakes above the last and, ideally, differ in kind, so the rise feels like a gathering storm rather than one note struck louder. This is the longest climb on the pyramid, and its job is to make the coming peak inevitable.

Freytag placed an *exciting force* at the foot of this act, the first push that starts the equilibrium sliding. Give the rise that ignition early, then let each event breed the next so the act reads as causation, not a list. Keep the opposing pressure alive and thinking between the protagonist's moves. A rise the protagonist could stop at any moment is a slope, not a story, and readers feel the difference as drift.

ON THE PAGE

- Escalate in kind, not just degree; alternate the public blow with the private one, the outer threat with the inner.
- Chain the events by cause. Each should arise from the last, so the climb cannot be reshuffled without breaking.
- Raise the stakes onto people. A pressure attached to someone loved climbs faster than any abstract threat.

WATCH OUT

The gentle slope. Rising action that repeats the same beat is not rising at all. If two events could trade places unnoticed, the climb has stalled; make each one cost more than the last.

THE COLD WORKS • RENATA

The pressure climbs. The bank's letter turns to a visit; the visit to a deadline. Old Emeric, master these forty years, draws Renata aside: the crown will not survive another full firing. Then her son Theo comes home from the city with a folder and a plan to save the works by selling the land beneath it. Renata thanks him and does not open the folder. Each week the goblets get finer and the debt gets louder.

ACT 03

TARGET ~60%

Climax.

the turning point at the peak.

The middle act is the summit, the pivotal moment of greatest tension or change. A decision is made, a confrontation reaches its peak, or a truth is revealed, and the story's whole trajectory turns on it. This is the pyramid's defining stroke and its hardest. Unlike the late climax of the three-act curve, this one arrives near the center, which means it must both pay off the entire rise and open the entire fall. It is a door the story walks through, not a wall it ends against.

Build the turn as reversal plus recognition. The protagonist's fortunes swing, and in the same beat they see something they could not see before. The most durable climaxes are self-inflicted. A peak the protagonist causes, through a choice or a flaw, sets up a fall that means something, because the coming ruin traces back to their own hand. After this scene, nothing can return to the shape it held on the way up.

ON THE PAGE

- Put the turn near the middle. Leave yourself half a story to fall; a peak at the end is a three-act climax mislabeled.
- Fuse reversal and recognition; let the swing of fortune and the opening of the eyes land in one scene.
- Make the protagonist the cause. A climax they trigger falls harder than one that merely happens to them.

WATCH OUT

The buried climax. Writers trained on late peaks shove the turn to the ninth-tenth mark, leaving no room to fall. If your climax has nowhere to go but the end, it is not a five-act climax.

THE COLD WORKS • RENATA

The centennial. The whole town in the works, the founder's portrait wreathed. Theo stands and makes his offer aloud: sell the land, move the furnace to the cooperative, keep everyone working under a new name. Emeric, gray, confirms the crown is cracked through; this firing is the last. Renata could take the rescue and lose the name, or refuse and lose everything. Before them all, she refuses, and orders one final grand pour. The pyramid tips.

ACT 04

TARGET ~80%

Falling Action.

the consequences, playing out in full.

The fourth act is the descent. The consequences of the climax play out, tension releases by degrees, and the threads the rise wound now tie off or unravel. This is the act the modern curve throws away, and reclaiming it is the whole reason to write in five. The falling action is where a story does its accounting: who was right, what it cost, what the turn actually meant once the shock has passed. The protagonist spends this act absorbing the climax, not escaping it.

Descent is not the same as deflation. The tension must keep a current, or the reader leaves before the rest. Freytag kept a late jolt here, a *moment of final suspense*, a last flare that briefly suggests the fall might yet be arrested before it completes. Pay out consequences in order of weight, and resist starting anything new. The falling action closes accounts; a fresh conflict opened here reads as a second, smaller story crashing the first.

ON THE PAGE

- Give the descent a current. A late flare of suspense keeps the fall from going slack before it lands.
- Pay consequences in order of weight, heaviest first, so the act tightens toward rest instead of trailing off.
- Open nothing new. The falling action closes threads; a fresh conflict here starts a second story you cannot finish.

WATCH OUT

The skipped fall. Cutting from climax straight to a final image refunds the turn's whole meaning. The consequences are the point of a five-act story; give them their act, and let the reader watch the cost land.

THE COLD WORKS • RENATA

The pour is magnificent and doomed. The centerpiece, a great window for the town hall, comes out flawless and shatters in the annealing as the cracked crown fails. The bank forecloses within the month. Theo leaves for the cooperative and takes the willing hands with him; Lise, Renata's daughter, goes too. The town's pride curdles into pity. Renata sweeps the cullet alone and, for the first time, lets herself understand what her refusal cost.

ACT 05

TARGET 100%

Denouement.

the new equilibrium, and its verdict.

The last act shows the world the story made. The **denouement**, from the French for untying, presents the new equilibrium: how life looks now, what was lost or gained, who the protagonist has become. It answers the thematic question the exposition asked, not with a speech but with the changed texture of ordinary things. In tragedy this act is the catastrophe made bearable, the survivors sorting the wreckage; in a lighter story it is the calm after the reversal has set things right.

Keep it brief and concrete. The peak has long passed, so every page now spends the reader's patience, and the surest close mirrors the first act with one thing changed. Same place, same ritual, one difference that measures the whole fall. Honor the cost. An ending that quietly gives back what the climax took cheapens the turn the entire pyramid was built to earn. Leave the scar and let it rest.

ON THE PAGE

- Answer the theme in an image or an act, never a speech. A verdict shown outlasts a verdict announced.
- Mirror the first act with one element transformed; the echo lets the reader measure the fall at a glance.
- Keep the cost paid. Do not refund the climax off-page; the scar is the proof the turn mattered.

WATCH OUT

The tidy refund. A denouement that heals every wound and restores the opening world erases the fall you just wrote. Let the new equilibrium be genuinely new, lighter or sadder, but never a return to page one.

THE COLD WORKS • RENATA

A year on. The works stands cold, the furnace dark, the sign sold to a collector. Renata rents the old annealing shed and teaches six students at a single bench, glass for its own sake, no name on it. Theo's cooperative supplies her batch; they speak now, carefully. On the shelf sits one goblet from the last true firing, kept, not sold. The town is smaller, and truer. She has stopped guarding a myth.

Adapting the frame.

the five acts on modern television, and the shape of the argument.

FIVE ACTS ON MODERN TV

The five-act division never really left; it went to television. The network hour still breaks into acts around commercials, and the older grid ran a teaser and five acts before today's four-, five-, and six-act variants took hold. Two honest cautions. Those TV acts are placed for ad breaks and page counts as much as for Freytag's dramatic rhythm, so a script's act numbers rarely fall on his pyramid. And the hour's climax usually sits late, near the last act, closer to the three-act curve than to a central peak. The label is five; the shape is often not.

THE PYRAMID DEBATE

Purists and adapters have argued Freytag's diagram for over a century. The **original pyramid is symmetrical**, its climax dead center, which fits the classical tragedy it was drawn from. Many modern writers, raised on the three-act curve, push the climax far to the right and shrink the falling action, producing a lopsided pyramid that is really a three-act story in five labels. Neither is wrong. A central climax foregrounds consequence and meaning, which is why it suits literary and tragic work; a late climax foregrounds suspense and payoff, which is why film prefers it. Choose the one your effect needs, and place your peak on purpose.

RELATION TO OTHER FRAMEWORKS

Freytag's five acts and the modern three are the same drama cut differently. Fold his Exposition and Rising Action into one and you have Act One and the first half of Act Two; his Climax is the midpoint or the late crisis depending on where you set it; Falling Action and Denouement are the back half and the resolution. Draft with whichever cut speaks your genre, but when a literary or tragic story feels thin after its big scene, the pyramid is the frame that names the fault: you have skipped the fall.

Seven ways five-act drafts go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The museum exposition.** All world, no fault, nothing set to break. Fix: establish only what the climax will overturn, and plant one visible strain in the opening calm.
- **2. The gentle slope.** Rising action that repeats instead of escalating. Fix: chain the events by cause and make each cost more than the last, in kind as well as degree.
- **3. The buried climax.** The turn shoved to the final tenth, no room to fall. Fix: move the peak toward the middle and leave half the story for consequence.
- **4. The weightless climax.** A peak that changes events but reverses nothing. Fix: fuse reversal with recognition and let the protagonist cause the turn, so the fall means something.
- **5. The skipped fall.** Cutting from climax to final image, the falling action gone. Fix: give the consequences their own act and let the reader watch the cost land.
- **6. The runaway fall.** Falling action that opens fresh conflicts instead of paying old ones. Fix: close threads in order of weight and start nothing new after the peak.
- **7. The tidy refund.** A denouement that heals everything and restores page one. Fix: keep the scar; make the new equilibrium genuinely new, lighter or sadder, never a reset.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

Point to your climax and check the clock. Is it near the middle, with real story left to fall? If your peak lands at the end and the falling action is a paragraph, you have written three acts wearing five labels. Rebuild toward the center.

Your act sheet.

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

THE TURNING POINT (NAME IT FIRST)

III CLIMAX

60%

THE COST / NEW EQUILIBRIUM

IV FALLING ACTION

80%

I EXPOSITION

10%

V DENOUEMENT

100%

II RISING ACTION

35%

Keep going.

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

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

onemoredraft.com/guides/five-act

One More Draft is a complete workshop for writers: a distraction-free manuscript editor, industry-standard screenplay formatting, story planning tools for characters, beats, and worlds, and Quill, our resident writing partner, when you want a second pair of eyes. The editor is free, and there is a free desktop app for Windows.

MORE FREE FRAMEWORK GUIDES

- Save the Cat · the fifteen-beat screenplay standard
- The Hero's Journey · the monomyth, demystified
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic
- Romancing the Beat · the romance arc, beat by beat
- The Story Circle · eight steps around the wheel
- Kishōtenketsu · four-act structure without conflict
- Mystery / Detective · the fair-play whodunit beat sheet
- The TV Pilot · the shape of a series opener

All free, all fill-in-able, at **onemoredraft.com/guides**.



ONE MORE DRAFT

The five-act structure was diagrammed by Gustav Freytag in *Die Technik des Dramas* (*Technique of the Drama*, 1863), formalized from Greek tragedy and Shakespeare; the five-act division itself is older, urged by Horace and standard in neoclassical theatre. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by any estate or publisher. © 2026 One More Draft. You are welcome to share this PDF in its original, unmodified form.