STORY FRAMEWORKS · FIELD GUIDE 52

Six-Stage Plot Structure.

five turning points, two journeys.

A working field guide to Michael Hauge's six stages: all five turning points at their fixed marks, the outer goal and the inner journey from identity to essence running side by side, a worked feature carried from setup to aftermath, the mistakes that stall second acts, and a printable stage sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

The six-stage structure comes from the screenwriting teacher and story consultant **Michael Hauge**, first set out in *Writing Screenplays That Sell* (1988) and developed through his later teaching on the hero's inner journey. Its signature is precision: five turning points at fixed percentages of the script, with the six stages between them, and an inner arc tracked alongside the outer plot. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Michael Hauge or any publisher.

What follows is a plain walkthrough of the six stages and five turning points, with a running feature so you can watch the shape work. One orientation note. Each stage and the turning point that closes it share a page here, because in this model they are one motion: the stage builds, the turning point breaks. Read the marks as targets for a 110-page feature, and read the two journeys, outer and inner, as the same story told twice.

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Why the six stages still work.

a plot you can set your watch by, and a change you can feel.

Most structures tell you what happens. The six-stage model tells you **when**, and it is unapologetic about it. The opportunity lands at ten percent, the goal is fixed at a quarter, the hero commits at the half, everything collapses at three quarters, and the climax sits just before the end. Writers sometimes bristle at the arithmetic. Readers of scripts do not. A story that hits those marks feels well built before anyone can say why, and a story that misses them by twenty pages feels slow or rushed before anyone can say where.

The second reason it lasts is that it refuses to separate plot from character. Every turning point does two jobs. It moves the hero closer to or further from a visible outer goal, and it pushes them one step out of the **identity** they hide behind and toward the **essence** of who they are. The structure is a plot engine and a character arc drawn on the same line, which is why it suits films where the inner change matters as much as the outcome.

It is also small enough to hold. Six stages, five turns, two journeys. You can write it on an index card and check a draft against it in an hour. That economy is the point. The model does not tell you what your story is; it tells you whether your story is standing up straight.

> THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION
>
> A hero with a visible goal and a hidden wound is pushed through five fixed turning points, each raising the outer stakes and stripping one more layer of the protective identity, until the climax decides the goal and the hero chooses who they really are.

The engine: two journeys, one hero.

the outer goal is what they chase. the inner journey is what it costs to catch it.

The model runs on two tracks at once. The **outer journey** is the pursuit of a visible, finite goal with a clear endpoint the audience can picture: win the case, cross the desert, get the band back together. It supplies the plot and the deadline. The **inner journey** is the hero's movement from identity to essence. Identity is the self they built to survive an old wound, the role they play to stay safe. Essence is who they are under it, the person they would be if the fear were gone. The outer goal matters because chasing it forces the hero to shed the identity, one turning point at a time.

The two journeys must be wired together or the film splits in half. The simplest wiring is this: the goal can only be reached by someone living in essence, and the hero starts the film unable to do that. Every turning point then tightens both tracks at once. The stakes climb and the mask slips. By the climax the hero cannot win the outer goal without finally letting the identity go, and that single choice decides both stories together.

BUILD THE ENGINE IN FOUR LINES

- **The outer goal:** one visible, finite thing the hero wants, with an endpoint the audience will know when it arrives.
- **The wound and the identity:** the old hurt, and the role the hero plays to keep it from happening again.
- **The essence:** who the hero is underneath, shown once early, usually by accident, so we know it is there.
- **The wiring:** the reason the goal cannot be won by the identity. Write this sentence before you outline.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE · MEET JONAH

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented feature, working title **Second Chair**. Jonah Pell, forty-one, is the most reliable session cellist in the city and has not played a solo in public since a breakdown on stage at twenty-three. His identity is the dependable second chair: never late, never loud, never the one anyone is looking at. His essence is the player his teacher once called the best she had heard. The outer goal, when it arrives, will be a solo chair. The wiring is simple. Nobody wins a solo chair by being invisible.*

Six stages, five turning points.

the stages build. the turning points break.

The stages are the stretches of the film; the turning points are the single events that end them. The marks below are where each lands in a 110-page feature, taken from the end of each stage and the page of each turn. Hold the turning points firmly. The stages between them can breathe, but a turning point that drifts twenty pages pulls the whole film out of true.

ACT ONE

I	**Stage I: Setup**	to ~9%
TP1	**Turning Point 1: Opportunity**	~10%
II	**Stage II: New Situation**	to ~24%
TP2	**Turning Point 2: Change of Plans**	~25%

ACT TWO

III	**Stage III: Progress**	to ~49%
TP3	**Turning Point 3: Point of No Return**	~50%
IV	**Stage IV: Complications and Higher Stakes**	to ~74%
TP4	**Turning Point 4: Major Setback**	~75%

ACT THREE

V	**Stage V: Final Push**	to ~89%
TP5	**Turning Point 5: Climax**	~95%
VI	**Stage VI: Aftermath**	100%

Note the inner journey running underneath. Through Stages I to III the hero lives in identity. The point of no return is where they first step out of it; the major setback is where the identity fails them for good; the climax is where they choose essence. The aftermath shows what that choice made.

STAGE I · TURNING POINT 1 PAGES 1-11 · TURN AT ~10%

Setup.

the everyday life, drawn so we care, and the chance that interrupts it.

The first stage shows the hero's ordinary world, and its one job is to make the audience **care** before anything happens. Establish where they live, what is missing from their life, and the protective identity they hide behind, all through the things they do in a normal week. Let the essence show once, briefly, when no one is watching. The audience needs to see the person under the mask early, or the inner journey later will look like a personality transplant.

TURNING POINT 1: OPPORTUNITY · ~10%

At the ten percent mark something happens that gives the hero a new desire or a chance they did not have before. It moves them into a new situation, but it does not yet hand them a visible goal. That distinction is the model's first lesson. The opportunity is an invitation, not a mission. The hero accepts it for small, reasonable, in-character reasons, and only later discovers what it is going to ask of them.

ON THE PAGE

- Show the identity working. The mask should be useful to the hero on page one, not obviously a problem.
- Let the opportunity arrive from outside. The hero should not have to change to accept it; that comes later.

> **WATCH OUT**
> The goal on page ten. If the opportunity already states the outer goal, Stage II has nothing to discover and Turning Point 2 arrives early. Keep the invitation smaller than the mission.

SECOND CHAIR · JONAH

A recording studio at two in the morning. Jonah plays a film-score cue in one take, perfectly, then waves off the engineer's praise and packs up before anyone can ask him to stay. At home he plays the first bars of the Elgar concerto alone, with the lights off, and stops at the place he stopped eighteen years ago. Page eleven: the principal cellist of the city orchestra collapses during a rehearsal, and the conductor, who has heard Jonah's sessions, asks if he will sit in for the season.

STAGE II · TURNING POINT 2 PAGES 11-27 · TURN AT ~25%

New Situation.

reacting, settling in, and finding out what they really want.

The second stage is the hero's reaction to the opportunity. They enter the new place or circumstance, learn its rules, meet the people who will matter, and start to work out what they actually want from it. The identity is still fully in place; the hero is handling the new situation the way they handle everything. But the situation is starting to ask questions the mask cannot answer, and by the end of the stage a specific desire has formed.

TURNING POINT 2: CHANGE OF PLANS · ~25%

At the quarter mark the hero's goal becomes specific and visible. This is the **outer motivation** the rest of the film is about, and it should be stated so plainly that the audience could write it on the poster. Something in the new situation turns a vague wish into a concrete objective with an endpoint, and the hero commits to it. The commitment is the end of Act One. From here on, every scene is measured against whether it brings the goal closer.

ON THE PAGE

- Use the new situation to introduce the people who will carry the inner journey: the one who sees the essence, the one who needs the mask.
- Make the goal finite. "Be happier" is a theme; "win the solo chair by the spring concert" is a goal.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The fuzzy goal. A change of plans that leaves the audience unsure what winning would look like leaves Act Two with nothing to measure. If you cannot say the goal in a sentence, the hero cannot chase it.

SECOND CHAIR · JONAH

Jonah takes the chair the way he takes everything, quietly and flawlessly. The section likes him. The conductor, Ilse Varga, watches him more than he would like. He notices Priya Mehta, the twenty-six-year-old assistant principal who plays like she has nothing to lose. Page twenty-seven: Varga announces that the spring centerpiece, the Elgar, will be played by whichever cellist wins an internal audition in eight weeks. Jonah goes home, takes the concerto off the shelf, and for the first time in eighteen years plays past the place he stopped.

STAGE III · TURNING POINT 3 PAGES 27-55 · TURN AT ~50%

Progress.

the plan seems to work, until staying safe stops being an option.

The third stage is the long first half of Act Two, and its mood is **progress**. The hero pursues the goal and the plan mostly works. Obstacles appear, but they are the kind the identity can handle, and the hero handles them. This is the stretch where the audience enjoys watching a capable person do the thing the premise promised. Underneath, the cost is building. Each success is won by the mask, and each one makes it slightly harder to keep wearing.

TURNING POINT 3: POINT OF NO RETURN · ~50%

At the midpoint the hero commits fully and burns a bridge. Something is given up, a job, a safety net, a relationship that depended on the old self, and turning back stops being possible. This is also the first real step out of the identity. The hero does something the mask would never do, and the audience sees the essence act on purpose for the first time. The second half of the film is harder because this choice has removed the way home.

ON THE PAGE

- Let the progress be real. A hero who fails from page thirty is not making progress, and the midpoint commitment means nothing.
- Make the burned bridge visible and expensive. The audience should be able to name what can no longer be undone.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The midpoint that is only a setback. Hauge's midpoint is a commitment, not a reversal. If the hero merely suffers at page fifty-five, nothing has been chosen and the second half runs on the same fuel as the first.

SECOND CHAIR · JONAH

Eight weeks of work. Jonah practices like a man paying a debt, and it shows: the first audition round goes to him over players half his age. Priya starts sitting in on his practice; he starts playing louder when she is there. The session world calls with the contract that has kept him safe for a decade, a year of studio dates that would make the audition impossible. Page fifty-five: he turns it down, on the phone, in front of the section, with nothing in writing from the orchestra. There is no second chair to go back to now.

STAGE IV · TURNING POINT 4 PAGES 55-82 · TURN AT ~75%

Complications and Higher Stakes.

harder from every side, with more and more to lose.

The fourth stage is where the goal gets harder and the **stakes climb**. Having burned the bridge, the hero now faces conflict from every direction at once: the opposition adapts, allies waver, the inner wound reopens under pressure, and each new complication raises what losing would cost. The identity, half shed at the midpoint, no longer protects the hero and nothing has replaced it yet.

TURNING POINT 4: MAJOR SETBACK · ~75%

At three quarters everything falls apart. A defeat puts the goal out of reach, and in the wreckage the hero has to face the thing that has been holding them back all along. This is the end of Act Two, and it is the inner journey's lowest point. The setback must be caused, at least in part, by the identity. The old self reaches for the old protection one last time, and that is what loses the goal. Only now does the hero see the mask for what it is.

ON THE PAGE

- Escalate on both tracks. Every outer complication should also press on the wound, so the stakes climb inside and out together.
- Make the setback the identity's fault. A defeat that is just bad luck teaches the hero nothing.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The gentle setback. A page-eighty-two defeat the hero can shrug off is not a major setback. The goal has to look genuinely lost, to the audience and to the hero, or the final push is just more progress.

SECOND CHAIR · JONAH

The hand tremor comes back. Jonah hides it, the way he hides everything, and it costs him the second round when the slow movement shakes. His old teacher turns up at a rehearsal and says what she said eighteen years ago: he plays like someone apologizing. Page eighty-two, the final audition. Jonah plays it safe, perfect and small, the second-chair performance of his life. Priya plays it like the end of the world. Varga gives her the Elgar. Jonah congratulates her and means it, and goes home to an empty calendar.

STAGE V · TURNING POINT 5 PAGES 82-104 · TURN AT ~95%

Final Push.

nothing left to lose, everything learned, one last run at the goal.

The fifth stage is the hero going after the goal one last time, at **full risk**. With the safe options gone and the mask exposed, they use everything the journey has taught them and commit without reservation. The pace tightens, the obstacles compress, and the hero is now visibly a different person from the one in Stage I, not finished changing but no longer hiding. This stage usually opens with a decision, often a quiet one, to try again when trying again makes no sense.

TURNING POINT 5: CLIMAX · ~95%

The hero faces the biggest obstacle of the film and the outer goal is decided, won or lost, on the page. At the same moment, inside, they must let go of the identity for good. The model's rule is that these are one event, not two. The climax should be built so that the hero cannot win the outer fight while still wearing the mask, and the choice to drop it is what decides the outcome. The audience should feel the two journeys land as a single blow.

ON THE PAGE

- Open the final push with a choice the page-one hero could not have made. The arc has to be visible before the climax, not just at it.
- Stage the climax so that the essence is the only way through. If the mask could win it, the inner journey was decoration.

> **WATCH OUT**
> The separate climaxes. A film that decides the goal in one scene and the inner change in another has written two endings and earned neither. Fuse them, or the lesser one will feel bolted on.

SECOND CHAIR · JONAH

Two weeks before the concert Priya breaks her wrist on a bicycle. Varga does not ask Jonah; he asks her, on his own, in front of the section, with the tremor in his hand where everyone can see it. The final push is ten days of playing the Elgar with a shaking bow until the shaking becomes part of the sound. Page one hundred and four, the concert. The slow movement arrives and his hand goes, and for one bar he plays it the old way, small and safe. Then he stops hiding it and plays the rest as loud as he is afraid. It is not perfect. It is the best anyone in the hall has heard.

STAGE VI

PAGES 104-110 · TO 100%

Aftermath.

the new life, and what the change was for.

The sixth stage is the new life after the journey. It is short, usually a scene or two, and its job is to show **who the hero has become** and what the change means for the world around them. This is the only stage with no turning point to close it, which is the point. The pressure is off. The audience has watched the mask come down in the climax; now they get to see the face, at rest, doing something ordinary that the page-one hero could not have done.

The craft is restraint. Resist explaining the change in dialogue; the aftermath is for showing it in behavior. The surest shape is a mirror of Stage I with one thing different, so the whole inner journey can be read in a single image. Keep the cost honest, too. The hero chose essence, and essence is not the same as reward. If the outer goal was lost, let it stay lost, and let the aftermath show why the inner win was worth it anyway.

ON THE PAGE

- Mirror the setup. Same place or same routine, one element transformed, so the audience measures the distance at a glance.
- Show essence in a small act, not a speech. The hero does, without thinking, the thing they could not do on page one.
- Stop early. Once the new life is visible, every further page spends the climax's credit.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> The victory lap. An aftermath that tours every relationship to its tidy end turns a glimpse into a ceremony. One image of the new life is enough. Trust it and get out.

SECOND CHAIR · JONAH

A recording studio at two in the morning. Jonah plays a film-score cue in one take, and when the engineer praises it he stays, and asks to try it again, louder. On the stand beside him is a program for a recital at a small hall next month, his name alone on it, the tremor and all. He does not have the principal chair; Priya will have it when her wrist heals. He has stopped apologizing. He plays the take again, and the second one is better.

Adapting the frame.

the novel, the television hour, and the romance.

THE NOVEL

The percentages translate directly. In a ninety-thousand-word novel the opportunity lands around nine thousand words, the change of plans at twenty-two thousand, the point of no return at the center, the major setback near sixty-seven thousand. Novelists often find the inner journey easier to carry than screenwriters do, because interiority is cheap on the page, and the common failure runs the other way. The outer goal goes vague. Keep it finite and visible even when the book's real subject is the change inside.

THE TELEVISION HOUR

A pilot can run all six stages in an hour, with the climax deciding the episode's goal and the aftermath doubling as the series hook. Across a season the model works at two scales at once. Each episode has its own small six-stage shape, and the season's arc places the point of no return near the middle episode and the major setback two or three from the end. The inner journey, identity to essence, is the one that spans the whole season; it should not finish in any single hour.

THE ROMANCE

Hauge's model is unusually well suited to love stories, because the inner journey is built in. In a romance the opposition is often the identity itself, the mask one or both lovers wear, and the outer goal is whatever external pursuit keeps them in the same room. The point of no return is frequently the first real intimacy; the major setback is the break-up that the identity causes; the climax is the choice to be seen. If you write romance, you may find this the most natural frame on the shelf.

RELATION TO OTHER FRAMEWORKS

The five turning points map cleanly onto the three-act skeleton: TP2 is the first plot point, TP3 the midpoint, TP4 the second plot point, TP5 the climax. What the model adds is the fixed arithmetic and the inner journey. Use it alongside a beat sheet when you want to know not only what should happen but whether it is happening on time, and whether the person it is happening to is changing.

Seven ways six-stage drafts go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The invisible essence.** The hero's true self never shows in Stage I, so the change later looks like a new character. Fix: let the essence slip out once, early, when nobody is watching.
- **2. The goal on page ten.** The opportunity already states the mission, and Stage II has nothing to find. Fix: make the opportunity an invitation; save the visible goal for the quarter mark.
- **3. The fuzzy goal.** Nobody could say what winning looks like. Fix: write the outer goal as one finite sentence with an endpoint and put it in the hero's mouth by page twenty-seven.
- **4. The setback midpoint.** Page fifty-five is a reversal, not a commitment. Fix: make the hero burn a bridge on purpose and take their first step out of the identity.
- **5. The unlucky setback.** The three-quarter collapse is bad luck instead of the mask's fault. Fix: let the old self reach for the old protection and let that be what loses the goal.
- **6. The split climax.** The goal is decided in one scene and the inner change in another. Fix: build the climax so the essence is the only way through, and decide both at once.
- **7. The drifting marks.** Turning points landing twenty pages from their targets. Fix: number the pages of your five turns and move scenes until they sit near 10, 25, 50, 75 and 95 percent.

> **THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC**
>
> Write the five turning points on one line with their page numbers, and under each one write what the hero gave up of the identity there. If any turn has a page number and no inner cost, you have plot without arc at that mark. If any has a cost and no page number, you have arc the audience cannot feel.

Your stage sheet.

print this page. one line per stage and one per turning point is enough to start.

OUTER GOAL (ONE FINITE SENTENCE)

IDENTITY / ESSENCE

I SETUP 0-9%

TP1 OPPORTUNITY 10%

II NEW SITUATION to 24%

TP2 CHANGE OF PLANS 25%

III PROGRESS to 49%

TP3 POINT OF NO RETURN 50%

IV COMPLICATIONS AND HIGHER STAKES to 74%

TP4 MAJOR SETBACK 75%

V FINAL PUSH to 89%

TP5 CLIMAX 95%

VI AFTERMATH 100%

Keep going.

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

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

onemoredraft.com/guides/hauge-six-stage

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ONE MORE DRAFT

The six-stage plot structure, its five turning points and the identity-to-essence inner journey are the work of Michael Hauge, set out in *Writing Screenplays That Sell* (1988 and later editions) and his subsequent teaching. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Michael Hauge or any publisher. © 2026 One More Draft. You are welcome to share this PDF in its original, unmodified form.