



McKee's Quest Structure.

*the gap between
expectation and result.*

A complete working guide to Robert McKee's classical design: the inciting incident, two major reversals, the narrowing middle, the obligatory crisis scene, and the climax that settles the story's value for good. Seven beats, a worked example carried from first shock to new balance, the mistakes that hollow out serious drama, and a printable beat sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

Robert McKee has taught his Story seminar to screenwriters, novelists, and playwrights for decades, and in 1997 he set it down in *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. The book is not a beat sheet. It is an argument about how stories work at the level of desire, value, and choice, and the seven beats here are the practical skeleton that argument produces along a timeline. McKee calls the classical form the archplot; most drama described as serious or grown-up is built on it.

This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary on that design. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by Robert McKee, his company, or his publisher. What it offers is a working map: what each beat is for, how to write it, where drafts go wrong, and a running example. Two notes. First, McKee's beats are **events that change a value**, never events that merely happen; a scene where nothing turns is not a beat. Second, the frame is built backward from the crisis. Decide the impossible choice first and every earlier beat has a job: remove one more way out.

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Why the gap is the whole story.

a character acts, expecting one thing. the world answers with another.

McKee's central idea is small enough to hold in one hand. A character wants something, takes an action to get it, and expects the world to respond in a certain way. The world responds differently, and usually more forcefully. That distance between expectation and result is the **gap**, and it is where story lives. Everything else in the design (the reversals, the complications, the crisis) is a way of opening the gap wider and wider until the protagonist has nothing left but a choice.

What the character wants is the **object of desire**. It has to be concrete enough to pursue: not "happiness" but the farm, the verdict, the child brought home. Underneath it there is often an unconscious desire the character would deny if asked, and the best quests are the ones where the two desires turn out to conflict. Around the object stands the story's **value**, the human quality the whole thing is really about (truth, justice, love, freedom, survival), which can be charged positive or negative at any moment. A quest is the record of that charge flipping, scene by scene, until the climax settles it.

Two more ideas hold the frame together. The **controlling idea** is the story's meaning stated as a single sentence: a value, plus the cause that brings it about, as in "trust survives when its keepers refuse to look away." You do not put the sentence in the script. You build the climax so the reader could write it. And **progressive complications** is the rule that the middle must narrow rather than wander. Each obstacle removes an option the protagonist had before; the road only ever gets thinner, and it leads to one place.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

An event upsets the balance of a protagonist's life and creates a desire; every attempt to satisfy it opens the gap between what they expect and what they get, until they face a choice with no third option, act on it, and live in the balance the action leaves behind.

The engine: desire, value, and the controlling idea.

before you place a single beat, decide what the story is a record of.

A quest in McKee's sense is a pursuit under pressure. The protagonist chases the object of desire, and forces of **antagonism** push back from three directions at once: from the world (institutions, weather, money), from other people (rivals, allies with their own needs), and from inside (the protagonist's own conflicting wants). The strongest stories keep all three levels alive and let the pressure move inward as the story goes on, so that what began as a problem with the world ends as a problem with the self.

The value at stake is the instrument that measures all of this. Pick one, name its opposite, and think of the story as a needle swinging between them. The inciting incident gives it a hard shove. Each reversal swings it the other way, further. The crisis is the moment the protagonist must choose which side the needle will rest on, and the climax is where it rests. If you cannot say which way the needle moves in a scene, the scene is not yet doing structural work.

BUILD THE SPINE IN FOUR LINES

- **Object of desire:** one concrete thing the protagonist pursues, and the unconscious want underneath it that may contradict it.
- **Value at stake:** the human quality the story measures, written as a pair. Trust and betrayal. Freedom and captivity. Truth and the lie.
- **Antagonism:** the forces pressing back on all three levels, strong enough that the protagonist could plausibly lose.
- **Controlling idea:** value plus cause, in one sentence you will never write into the story but will build the climax to prove.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET NORA

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented drama, working title **Clean Bill**. Nora Feld, 44, runs the veterinary practice her late father built in a dairy county of eleven farms, where the practice and the farms keep each other alive. Object of desire: keep the county, the practice, and her father's name intact. Unconscious desire: to stop being the person who handles things quietly. Value at stake: trust and betrayal. Antagonism: a county that closes ranks, a farmer she loves, and her own gratitude. Controlling idea: trust survives when its keepers refuse to look away, whatever looking costs.*

Seven beats on one spine.

a shove, two swings, a narrowing, a choice, an action, a rest.

The seven beats below are the working skeleton of McKee's classical design. Three are single turning points (Inciting Incident, First Major Reversal, Second Major Reversal), one is a long stretch (Progressive Complications, which fills the middle between the reversals), and three make up the endgame (Crisis, Climax, Resolution). The percentages are targets, not laws. The order and the logic are what matter: each beat exists because the one before it removed an option and left this one as the next necessary step.

ACT ONE • THE SHOVE AND THE FIRST SWING

01	Inciting Incident	~10%
02	First Major Reversal	~25%

ACT TWO • THE NARROWING

03	Progressive Complications	~50%
04	Second Major Reversal	~65%

ACT THREE • THE CHOICE AND ITS COST

05	Crisis (The Obligatory Scene)	~75%
06	Climax	~90%
07	Resolution	100%

Notice where the weight sits. The crisis arrives at roughly three quarters, and everything before it is preparation for a single decision. McKee's design is unusual among frameworks in how much it asks of that one scene, which is why he calls it obligatory. Plan it first. Then plan the inciting incident as its mirror, and fill the road between them with doors closing.

BEAT 01

TARGET ~10%

Inciting Incident.

the event that upsets the balance and starts the clock.

The inciting incident is the event that throws the protagonist's life out of balance. McKee is strict on this point: until it happens, the story has not begun, and everything before it is exposition, however lively. The event can be good luck or catastrophe, chosen or suffered, but it must radically flip the charge of a value the protagonist holds. And it must do one more thing: make the protagonist want something, specifically and urgently, so the rest of the story can be the pursuit.

The incident's second product is the first gap. The protagonist acts on an expectation of how the world will respond, and the world responds otherwise, harder and stranger than expected. That gap is the story's true opening, because it tells the reader what kind of world this is and how much pressure the protagonist will be under. Place the incident early enough that no one is bored, and late enough that the reader knows whose life is being upset and what its balance was worth.

ON THE PAGE

- Stage it on the page, in a scene the reader watches, never in summary or memory. The first shock must land on the reader too.
- Name the object of desire the incident creates, in one sentence you could write on an index card, before drafting the next scene.
- Charge the value. Decide which value just flipped and in which direction, because every later beat will re-charge it.

WATCH OUT

Mistaking a mood for an incident. A protagonist who is vaguely unhappy at page ten has not been struck by anything. If you cannot name the event, the hour, and what changed, the story has not started.

CLEAN BILL • NORA

A routine herd screen from the Brandt place, the county's largest farm, comes back flagged for a reportable infection. Confirmation takes ten days. Nora expects the retest to clear it, as retests usually do. Her object of desire, born in that minute, is simple and doomed: keep the herd, the farm, and the practice exactly as they are.

BEAT 02

TARGET ~25%

First Major Reversal.

the value flips. the door behind her closes.

A turning point is any moment where the charge of the story's value flips, and the first major reversal is the largest one so far. It usually closes Act One. Where the inciting incident put the protagonist off balance, this beat removes the easy way of restoring it. The protagonist's first plan, built on the belief that the world will behave, fails, and the failure costs something. McKee's insight is that turning points work through the gap. The protagonist acts, expecting one result, and gets a different and larger one. That widening is what a reversal is.

The reversal should push the protagonist to a decision, not merely a reaction. A choice made here, under the first real pressure, sets the terms for the whole middle of the story. It should be a choice that looks reasonable and turns out to be expensive. Aim for an action that commits the protagonist to a course they cannot abandon without admitting failure, and let the reader see the alternative they refused.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the flip visible in one scene, the phone call or the lab result. A reversal spread across three chapters is not a reversal.
- Tie the flip to the protagonist's own action. Bad luck reverses nothing; a plan that backfires reverses everything.
- Give the decision a witness. Someone should see the protagonist choose, so the choice can be remembered against them later.

WATCH OUT

Reversals that change circumstances but not values. A car crash is an event. A car crash that turns the protagonist from innocent to guilty is a turning point. Ask what value flipped, and if none did, the scene is incident, not structure.

CLEAN BILL · NORA

The confirmation comes back positive. Hal Brandt, who carried her father's casket, asks for three weeks; his refinancing closes then, and a quarantine now means the bank walks. He reminds her that her father handled things. Nora agrees to run a third test through a private lab before filing anything. Josie, her tech, watches her make the call. Trust flips in one afternoon from clean to compromised.

BEAT 03

TARGET ~50%

Progressive Complications.

every fix removes the next fix. the options narrow.

The middle of a quest is not a series of obstacles but a narrowing. Each complication should do two things. It should make the protagonist's previous solution impossible, and it should raise the conflict to a level the protagonist cannot retreat from. McKee's word is progressive. The complications do not accumulate, they escalate, and they escalate by moving inward. What began as a problem in the world becomes a problem with other people, and then a problem inside the protagonist, where the values they are fighting for turn out to be fighting each other.

The rule that keeps this stretch honest is the point of no return. Before each complication, ask what the protagonist could still do to walk away. After it, that option should be gone. If a complication leaves every earlier option open, it is not a complication, it is texture. Track the gap as you go. The protagonist keeps expecting the world to cooperate, and the world keeps declining, with more force each time.

ON THE PAGE

- Outline this stretch as a list of doors closing. Name the door, then name the complication that closes it, in order.
- Escalate across levels: first the world resists, then allies resist, then the protagonist's own values resist. Never repeat a level without raising it.
- Keep the protagonist acting, not enduring. Each complication should follow from something they tried, not something that happened nearby.

WATCH OUT

Complications that could be reordered. If scene twenty could trade places with scene thirty and nothing breaks, the middle is a list, not a progression. Each complication must depend on the last one having happened.

CLEAN BILL • NORA

The private lab takes fourteen days. A calf sickens on the neighboring Voss farm and Nora treats it without testing. Dr. Oyelaran, the state veterinarian, arrives early for his audit. Hal moves cattle at night to a cousin's pasture. Josie finds the missing paperwork and asks one direct question. The gap is no longer between Nora and the world. It is between her and herself.

BEAT 04

TARGET ~65%

Second Major Reversal.

the deeper flip. only one road leads on from here.

The second major reversal is the first one's darker twin. The value flips again, more steeply, and this time it takes something the protagonist assumed was safe. Betrayal, revelation, and loss are the usual instruments, because each of them changes not only the protagonist's situation but their understanding of the story they are in. The protagonist discovers that the game was different from the one they thought they were playing, and that the stakes were higher. Whatever they have been avoiding is now the only thing left to face.

Structurally, this beat exists to make the crisis inevitable. After it there should be exactly one decision left, and the reader should feel it approaching. Let the reversal come from a character rather than a circumstance, and let it be the consequence of the choice the protagonist made at the first reversal. The story's shape should close like a hand.

ON THE PAGE

- Aim the blow at what the protagonist protected. The second reversal takes the thing the first reversal was meant to save.
- Prefer a betrayal to a disaster. A person who turns carries the story's values; a storm carries nothing.
- Let the protagonist learn something true here that they could not have learned earlier, about the antagonist or about themselves.

WATCH OUT

The reversal that only repeats the first one at higher volume. Louder is not deeper. The second reversal must change what the protagonist knows, not just how much they have lost.

CLEAN BILL • NORA

The lab confirms. And Hal has already sold forty head at auction across the state line, shipped under a health certificate Nora signed weeks ago for a different lot. Her signature is on the spread. The value flips from compromised to complicit, and the man she protected has made her the instrument. She expected loyalty to be repaid in kind. The result is that she is now the most dangerous person in the county, and the one with the least room to move.

BEAT 05

TARGET ~75%

The Crisis.

the choice with no third option. the heart of the story.

McKee treats the crisis as the story's obligatory scene, the one the entire quest has been promising, and he places it at the heart of the whole design. It is a dilemma. The protagonist must choose between two irreconcilable goods, or between two evils, and no compromise is available. The choice reveals character more completely than anything else in the story, because a person is what they choose under maximum pressure when the choice costs everything. Design it first, before the inciting incident, and build the story backward so that every earlier beat removes one more escape from it.

The crisis is a decision, not an action. Keep them separate. The protagonist chooses here; the choice is carried out in the climax. That separation gives the reader a held breath between knowing what the protagonist will do and watching it done. It also lets the choice be quiet. Some of the strongest crisis scenes happen in a parked car or across a kitchen table, with nothing moving but a mind.

ON THE PAGE

- Test the dilemma. Write the case for each side in one honest paragraph. If one side is obviously right, you have a decision, not a crisis.
- Put the antagonist's pressure in the room, in person or in consequence. The choice should be made in the antagonist's shadow.
- Make the choice active and irreversible. A protagonist who chooses to wait has not chosen.

WATCH OUT

The false dilemma. If the reader can see a third option the protagonist has not tried, the crisis collapses into a plot hole. Audit the escape routes and show each one closed before the choice arrives.

CLEAN BILL • NORA

Dr. Oyelaran asks for the Brandt herd's complete records. Two doors. The whole truth means quarantine, Hal's ruin, the co-op's collapse, her father's name and her own license gone. Sanitized records mean everyone she loves stays safe and infected cattle keep moving through three states. She reaches for the full file.

BEAT 06

TARGET ~90%

Climax.

the choice, performed. the value settled for good.

The climax is the crisis decision made visible. The protagonist acts on the choice, and the action produces the story's final, absolute change of value. What was unstable through the whole quest is now settled. The value ends positive, or negative, or ironic, and it will not flip again. McKee asks that the climax be the most expressive scene in the story, the one where meaning and emotion arrive together. It should be the richest scene you write and the last one that can surprise the reader without cheating them.

Expressive does not mean loud. The climax needs a scene of action, but the action can be a signature, a sentence, or a door held open. What matters is that it changes the world irreversibly and that the protagonist caused the change. The climax should also deliver the controlling idea, the story's argument about how and why life changes, as an image rather than a statement.

ON THE PAGE

- Let the protagonist's own hand do it. Allies may be present; the decisive action belongs to no one else.
- Pay the crisis's price on the page. If the choice was supposed to cost something, the climax is where the bill arrives.
- End the scene on the settled value, not on the aftermath. The resolution handles aftermath.

WATCH OUT

The climax that softens the crisis. The protagonist chose the hard thing; then the climax arranges for the hard thing to turn out fine. The cost promised in the crisis must be paid here, fully, or the choice meant nothing.

CLEAN BILL • NORA

The co-op's emergency meeting in the extension hall, her father's portrait on the wall behind the podium. Nora stands and reads Oyelaran's report aloud, the dates, the moved cattle, the certificate with her signature on it. Hal is in the third row. The quarantine takes effect at dawn. The value that has been turning all story settles: trust, rebuilt, at the price of everything trust had been protecting. She does not look at the portrait. She looks at the farmers.

BEAT 07

TARGET 100%

Resolution.

the new balance, shown briefly and without apology.

The resolution is a short return to a life in balance, a different balance from the one the inciting incident upset. Its job is to let the reader see the settled value in ordinary terms: who is still speaking to whom, what the town looks like now, what the protagonist does on a Tuesday. McKee's guidance is proportion. A story that spent its climax on a battle earns a longer resolution than one that spent it on a sentence. Either way, the beat should be brief, concrete, and honest about what the climax cost.

The resolution has two uses beyond tidiness. It can pay off subplots the climax had no room for, and it can give the reader a last image that carries the controlling idea one final time, quietly. Avoid speeches. If the story has done its work, the reader already knows what it meant. Show them the world and let them finish the thought.

ON THE PAGE

- Keep the scar. Whatever the crisis cost, show it still costing something. Refunded prices cheapen the choice that incurred them.
- Echo the opening in one changed detail so the reader can measure the distance without being told.
- Resolve the subplot that carried the theme, and let the others end off the page.

WATCH OUT

The resolution that reopens the value. A final twist that flips the value once more after the climax is not a resolution, it is a second climax, and it steals from the first. Settle it and stop.

CLEAN BILL • NORA

Six months on. The Brandt land is a soybean lease and Hal does not speak to her. The county's other ten herds tested clean, because the spread was caught early. Nora's license is on probation; Josie runs the front desk and the paperwork. The clinic's new wing has a blank plaque where her father's name was going to be. On a Tuesday a first-year farmer brings in his first calf, and Nora tests it, and writes the result down, and shows him.

Adapting the frame.

archplot, miniplot, antiplot. and the frame's honest limits.

THREE KINDS OF DESIGN

McKee maps story design as a triangle. At the top sits the **archplot**, the classical form this guide describes: one active protagonist, a mostly external conflict, linear time, consistent reality, causality rather than coincidence, and a closed ending in which the value is settled. At one lower corner sits the **miniplot**, which keeps the archplot's logic but subtracts from it: passive or multiple protagonists, conflict that is mostly internal, an open ending that leaves the value unresolved for the reader to weigh. At the other corner sits the **antiplot**, which inverts the logic on purpose, with coincidence, nonlinear time, and realities that refuse to stay consistent.

McKee's position, stated plainly, is that the archplot is where most audiences live and that a writer should master it before subtracting from it. He is not hostile to the other corners. He argues that they are built from the archplot's parts, and that a writer who cannot execute a crisis scene has nothing to subtract. This guide takes the same view. If your story is a quiet, interior, open-ended piece, the seven beats still apply, but the reversals may be perceptions rather than events, and the climax may settle the value for the reader without settling it for the character.

MEDIA AND LENGTHS

The design was written for the feature film and travels well. In a two-hour screenplay the crisis lands near page ninety; in a 90,000-word novel, near 67,000 words; in a hour-long pilot, the beats compress but the crisis still belongs at three quarters. Novels have room for more complications and more levels of antagonism. Short fiction usually keeps one reversal and moves straight to the crisis.

RELATION TO OTHER FRAMEWORKS

The seven beats sit on the three-act skeleton almost exactly: the first reversal is the act-one break, the second reversal is the act-two collapse, and the crisis and climax are the endgame. What McKee adds is the discipline underneath. Other frameworks tell you where the turns go. This one tells you what a turn is made of, which is why it is the best diagnostic tool for a draft built on any of them.

Seven ways quest structures go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The late start.** Thirty pages of world before anything upsets it. Fix: find the event that flips a value and creates a desire; cut or redistribute everything before it that the reader does not need to feel the flip.
- **2. The abstract desire.** The protagonist wants "to be free" or "to belong." Fix: give the want an object you could photograph them holding, and let the abstract need hide underneath it.
- **3. The turn that isn't.** Big events, no value change. Fix: for each supposed reversal, name the value and the direction it moved. If it did not move, the scene is incident.
- **4. The shuffleable middle.** Complications that could be reordered. Fix: rebuild the stretch as doors closing, each complication removing an option the last one left open.
- **5. The dilemma with an exit.** A crisis the reader can solve. Fix: list every third option and show each one closed, on the page, before the choice arrives.
- **6. The delegated climax.** Someone else performs the decisive act. Fix: restructure until the protagonist's own hand settles the value, and the cost the crisis promised is paid.
- **7. The controlling idea in dialogue.** A character explains what the story meant. Fix: cut the speech and check whether the climax already proves it. If it does not, the problem is the climax.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels dead, name the value at stake at the top of the scene and its charge at the bottom. If the charge is the same at both ends, nothing turned, and the scene is not yet a scene, whatever else it accomplishes. Find the gap, or cut it.

Your beat sheet.

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

OBJECT OF DESIRE

04 SECOND MAJOR REVERSAL

65%

VALUE AT STAKE / CONTROLLING IDEA

05 CRISIS (OBLIGATORY SCENE)

75%

01 INCITING INCIDENT

10%

06 CLIMAX

90%

02 FIRST MAJOR REVERSAL

25%

07 RESOLUTION

100%

03 PROGRESSIVE COMPLICATIONS

50%

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 outline in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/mckee-quest

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.

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ONE MORE DRAFT

The concepts in this guide (the inciting incident, the gap, progressive complications, the obligatory scene, the controlling idea, and the archplot, miniplot, and antiplot distinction) are drawn from Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997). This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Robert McKee, McKee Seminars, or any publisher. © 2026 One More Draft. You are welcome to share this PDF in its original, unmodified form.