



The Pixar Pitch.

*the story spine,
in six lines.*

A complete working guide to the story spine, the six-sentence template that runs from once upon a time to until finally: each line laid out on its own, the because-of-that chain that turns a list of events into a story, a worked example carried from setup to landing, and a printable spine sheet to pitch or draft your own.

How to use this guide.

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

The story spine is six sentence-openers you finish in your own words: **Once upon a time... Every day... One day... Because of that... Because of that... Until finally...** It came out of improv theatre, where the teacher **Kenn Adams** wrote it in the early 1990s as a way to build a coherent story on the spot. Pixar story artist **Emma Coats** later shared a version of it among a set of story guidelines that spread widely online, which is why the spine now travels under the studio's name. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Pixar.

What follows walks the six lines one at a time: what each is for, how to fill it, where drafts go slack, and a running example so you can watch the shape work. Two orientation notes. First, the spine is a **template, not a genre**. It fits a picture book, a treatment, or a nine-hundred-page novel, because it marks function, not length. Second, its engine is **causality**. The repeated "Because of that" is the whole trick, and most of this guide comes back to it.

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Why six sentences hold a story.

a fill-in-the-blanks template that shows the shape at a glance.

Fill the six blanks and you hold a whole story in miniature: a beginning that establishes a world, a disruption that breaks it, a middle that escalates by cause, and an end that resolves. It is the smallest complete structure in this series and the most portable. You can write it on an index card, say it across a table, or lay it under a finished outline to see where the plot loses its grip. Nothing about it is decorative. Every line does a structural job.

The reason it holds is that the spine is really two setup lines and a chain. **Once upon a time** and **Every day** establish a specific world and the routine that governs it. **One day** breaks that routine. Then the two **Because of that** lines run the consequences forward, each one caused by the last, until **Until finally** lands the story in a changed state. The setup is small on purpose. The weight lives in the chain.

Use the spine three ways. As a **drafting scaffold**, it gives a short story or treatment its bones before you write a word. As a **pitch**, the six lines compress to a logline you can speak aloud. As a **diagnostic**, it exposes the exact seam where a saggy plot stops causing itself and starts merely continuing.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A specific protagonist in a settled routine meets a disruption that, one caused consequence after another, drives them to a new and changed state.

The engine: because of that.

causality, not “and then.”

The secret of the spine is the hinge repeated in its middle. “Because of that” forces every event to be **caused** by the one before it, not merely to follow it in time. Swap the phrase for “and then” and you feel the floor drop out: “and then” is a list of things that happen, while “because of that” is a story in which each thing happens for a reason the last thing created. Adams built the spine to teach exactly this, and it is why the finished lines feel inevitable rather than arbitrary.

Coincidence has one job and one place. It may start the story at **One day**, where a chance event is allowed to break the routine. After that, chance is spent. Every beat past the disruption should be a consequence the protagonist causes or is forced to suffer, so the reader can trace an unbroken line of cause from the ending all the way back to the break. A story can begin by accident. It cannot be driven by accident.

THE AND-THEN TEST

- Read your beats aloud with “and then” between them. Anywhere it fits as smoothly as “because of that,” the causal link is missing and the beat is floating.
- Let coincidence strike once, at “One day.” From there on, every turn should be chosen or forced, never a fresh piece of luck arriving to move the plot.
- Walk the chain backward from the ending. If you cannot get from “Until finally” back to “One day” through the because-of-thats, a link has broken.

THE TIDE CLOCK • MEET WREN

*Throughout this guide we fill one invented spine, working title **The Tide Clock**. In the fog-bound harbor of Cann, a girl named Wren keeps the tide bell and reads the sea’s temper better than anyone alive. The town sets its whole working life by her call. What the spine will test is what happens to a place that trusts one person to always be right, and to the person who believes she must be.*

The six-line spine.

two lines of setup, one spark, two turns, and a landing.

The six lines fall into four movements. Two lines set up: they draw a specific world and the routine that runs it. One line sparks: the disruption that breaks the routine and starts the story. Two lines chain: the caused consequences that escalate. One line lands: the changed state the story leaves you in. The percentages mark where each line's weight sits, not where a chapter ends.

THE SETUP

1	Once upon a time...	~10%
2	Every day...	~25%

THE SPARK

3	One day...	~40%
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THE CHAIN

4	Because of that... (first turn)	~60%
5	Because of that... (second turn)	~80%

THE LANDING

6	Until finally...	100%
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Notice the balance. The setup is compact, the disruption lands before the halfway mark, and everything after it is consequence. More than half the spine is the chain and its landing, because the template is built to spend its length on cause, which is the one thing a slack plot never has enough of.

LINE 01

TARGET ~10%

Once upon a time...

the protagonist and the world, drawn in one concrete line.

The first line names **who** and **where**. It establishes the protagonist and the world they inhabit at the story's start, and its whole job is to be specific. A vague opening gives the fall nothing to measure against; a concrete one plants the exact things the disruption will later break. Resist the urge to summarize a premise here. You are placing one person on one patch of ground, vividly enough that the reader can already picture what it would cost to lose it.

Keep it to a single sentence, and let the detail carry the weight. One telling image of the world does more than a paragraph of backstory, because the spine trusts the chain to reveal everything else in motion. Choose the detail that the ending will echo. The best "Once upon a time" is quietly a promise the last line will pay off.

ON THE PAGE

- Name one protagonist in one place. Not a cast, not a setting tour; a person and their patch of the world.
- Pick a concrete detail over an abstract label. "Reads the sea's temper" beats "is very skilled" every time.
- Plant something the ending can answer. The opening image is the first half of a rhyme.

WATCH OUT

The generic opening. "There was a girl who lived in a town" sets up nothing to break. Make the protagonist and the place specific enough that their disruption will hurt.

THE TIDE CLOCK • WREN

Once upon a time, in the fog-bound harbor of Cann, a girl named Wren kept the old tide bell and could read the sea's temper better than anyone alive.

LINE 02

TARGET ~25%

Every day...

the routine that the story will break.

The second line establishes the **pattern**: the status quo, the ritual, the way life runs before the story begins. This is the line writers most often skip, and skipping it is expensive. Without a routine, the disruption has nothing to disrupt. “Every day” is what makes “One day” land, because a break only registers as a break against something regular. State the ordinary clearly and you charge the coming spark with meaning.

Show the routine working, not just existing. The strongest version reveals how much the protagonist’s world depends on the pattern holding, so that when it stops, the cost is already understood. Keep it a single sentence, and choose the daily thing that the disruption will strike first. The routine is not filler between the opening and the story. It is the thing the story is about to take away.

ON THE PAGE

- State the pattern, not a single scene. “Every day” is habitual: what happens over and over before page one.
- Tie the routine to what others depend on. A pattern the whole world leans on breaks louder than a private one.
- Aim the routine at the coming spark. Establish the exact thing “One day” will interrupt.

WATCH OUT

The skipped routine. Jumping straight from the character to the inciting event leaves the disruption with no floor to crack. Give the ordinary its one line, even in a phrase.

THE TIDE CLOCK • WREN

Every day, at dawn and at dusk, Wren rang the bell from the old stone tower, and the whole fishing fleet set its sailing by her call.

LINE 03

TARGET ~40%

One day...

the disruption that starts everything.

The third line is the **break**. Something new happens that shatters the routine and sets the story in motion. This is the only place in the spine where coincidence is welcome: the disruption can arrive by chance, by accident, by a stranger at the door. What it must do is be big enough that the protagonist cannot simply return to “Every day.” A disruption they could shrug off is not a disruption; it is a delay.

Land it near the front half of the story, and make it specific to the routine you just built. The most efficient “One day” strikes the exact pattern the second line established, so the reader feels the machine seize up. This line ends the setup and hands the story to causality. From here on, nothing else is allowed to be an accident.

ON THE PAGE

- Break the specific routine you built. The disruption should hit the pattern from “Every day,” not some unrelated corner.
- Make it unignorable. If the protagonist could return to normal by doing nothing, raise the stakes until they cannot.
- Spend your coincidence here and nowhere else. Chance may light the fuse; it may not carry the story.

WATCH OUT

The soft spark. A disruption that barely dents the routine, or that arrives too late, leaves the chain nothing to pull. Break something the protagonist has to answer for.

THE TIDE CLOCK • WREN

One day a freak fog swallowed the harbor for three days, and a boat she had rung out on a reading she was not sure of never came home.

LINE 04

TARGET ~60%

Because of that...

the first consequence, caused not coincidental.

The fourth line is the **first link in the chain**: the major consequence of the disruption, and the protagonist's first real response to it. The word "because" is doing the work. This beat must follow from "One day" as effect follows cause, not as the next item on a list. Usually it is what the protagonist **does** about the break, and that choice is what cascades into everything after. Their character shows here, in the shape of their first move.

Make the response active and revealing. A consequence that just happens to the protagonist keeps them a passenger; a consequence they choose puts them in the driver's seat of their own downfall or rescue. Whatever they do, it should close one door and open a worse one, so the second turn has somewhere to escalate. The first "Because of that" is where the story stops happening to the protagonist and starts happening through them.

ON THE PAGE

- Make it a consequence, not a coincidence. It must be caused by "One day," readable as effect from cause.
- Let the protagonist act. Their first response to the break reveals who they are and drives the next line.
- Close a door as you open one. The first turn should narrow the options so the second can raise the stakes.

WATCH OUT

The floating beat. If this line would read just as well after "and then," it is not caused by the disruption. Rewrite it so it could not exist without the break.

THE TIDE CLOCK • WREN

***Because of that,** sick with blame and certain her judgment had killed a man, Wren refused to ring again; the tower stood dark and the bell stayed silent.*

LINE 05

TARGET ~80%

Because of that...

the second consequence, and the point of no return.

The fifth line is the **escalating link**: the consequence of the consequence, larger than the one before. The stakes rise, the protagonist is now committed, and turning back is no longer an option. Where the first “Because of that” was a response, this one is the price of that response coming due. The chain tightens. The protagonist is carried past the point where they could have undone the break by simply reversing course.

Escalation is the law here. The second turn should not merely repeat the first at a higher volume; it should raise the cost onto something the protagonist cannot walk away from, forcing the final confrontation. If your two “Because of that” lines could trade places without anyone noticing, the second is not escalating. Make this one the beat that makes “Until finally” unavoidable.

ON THE PAGE

- Escalate, do not repeat. The second consequence must cost more than the first, not just cost again.
- Commit the protagonist. Close the exit; make turning back impossible so the landing becomes necessary.
- Point the pressure at the ending. This line should force the confrontation that “Until finally” resolves.

WATCH OUT

The flat repeat. A second turn that only echoes the first stalls the chain. If the two because-of-thats are interchangeable, the story has stopped climbing.

THE TIDE CLOCK • WREN

***Because of that,** the boats sailed on their own guesses and ran aground one after another, until the wrecked families began packing to leave Cann for good.*

LINE 06

TARGET 100%

Until finally...

the new state, and what it all meant.

The last line **lands** the story. The protagonist arrives at a new state, for better, for worse, or for something ambiguous, and the world is changed. This is the payoff of the entire chain, and it must be a payoff, not a stop. A story that simply runs out of consequences has not ended; it has quit. “Until finally” resolves the pressure the two turns built, and it answers the question the setup quietly asked.

The test of the landing is whether it pays the setup. It should visibly change what “Every day” established and echo the image from “Once upon a time,” so the reader can measure the whole distance travelled in one glance. The change may be triumphant or tragic; what it may not be is a reset. Honor the cost. The final line proves the middle mattered, or it reveals that it did not.

ON THE PAGE

- Resolve, do not just stop. The landing pays off the chain; running out of events is not an ending.
- Pay the setup. Change what the routine established and echo the opening image; that is how the reader feels the arc.
- Keep the cost. A landing that quietly undoes the turns refunds the story you just told.

WATCH OUT

The unpaid landing. An ending that resolves a different story than the one “Once upon a time” began feels arbitrary. Answer the world you opened, not a new one.

THE TIDE CLOCK • WREN

***Until finally,** in the worst fog of the year, Wren climbed the dark tower and rang the bell by feel and memory alone, guiding the fleet home and learning the town had never needed her to be right, only to keep ringing.*

Adapting the spine.

scale it up, pitch it, or use it to find the break.

SCALING IT UP TO AN OUTLINE

For anything longer than a short story, treat each line as an **act** or a **sequence** rather than a sentence. “Once upon a time” and “Every day” become your opening act, the world and its routine. “One day” is the inciting incident that ends act one. Each “Because of that” expands into a full stretch of rising action, the first establishing the new normal and the second driving to crisis. “Until finally” holds the climax and the resolution. The spine becomes the skeleton, and you hang scenes on the ribs. If the six-line version is causally sound, the long version inherits its spine and will not wander.

USING IT AS A LOGLINE OR PITCH

The spine is already a pitch; you only have to compress it. Keep “Once upon a time,” “Every day,” and “One day” nearly intact, then fold the two turns into a single “because of that” and finish with the stakes of “Until finally.” What remains is one or two sentences a listener can follow in a single breath. When someone asks what your story is about, the spine is the answer, minus the internal repetitions.

DIAGNOSING “AND THEN” PLOTS

When a draft feels like things merely happening, lay it over the spine and look for the two usual faults. Either the “One day” is missing or weak, so the routine never truly breaks, or the “Because of that” links are secretly “and then” links, where events follow in time without causing each other. Name the broken beat and you have named the fix. The spine does not just build stories; it locates exactly where an existing one comes apart.

Seven ways the spine goes slack.

read this list again after your first pass.

- **1. And then, not because of that.** Events follow in time but do not cause each other. Fix: rewrite each link so the later beat could not happen without the earlier one; if “and then” fits, the causation is missing.
- **2. No real “One day.”** The routine never actually breaks, or the disruption is too small to matter. Fix: make the spark change something the protagonist cannot ignore, and land it in the front half.
- **3. A generic “Once upon a time.”** A vague protagonist in a vague place gives the ending nothing to measure. Fix: one concrete person in one concrete world, in a single specific line.
- **4. A skipped “Every day.”** The routine is missing, so the disruption has no status quo to break. Fix: state the pattern the spark will shatter, even in a phrase.
- **5. A passive middle.** The protagonist only reacts to accidents instead of causing consequences. Fix: after “One day,” spend no more coincidence; make each turn something they choose or trigger.
- **6. Flat escalation.** The second turn does not raise the stakes above the first. Fix: make the second “Because of that” commit the protagonist so turning back is no longer possible.
- **7. A landing that does not pay the setup.** “Until finally” resolves a different story than the one that opened. Fix: answer the routine and echo the opening image; the ending should visibly change what “Every day” established.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

Read the whole spine aloud in one breath. If any link takes “and then” as easily as “because of that,” or if the ending would still make sense with the middle removed, the chain is broken there. Rebuild that link before you draft on.

Your story-spine sheet.

print this page. one line each is the whole point.

ONCE UPON A TIME...	10%	BECAUSE OF THAT...	80%
EVERY DAY...	25%	UNTIL FINALLY...	100%
ONE DAY...	40%	THE CAUSAL CHAIN	×3
BECAUSE OF THAT...	60%	ONE-LINE PREMISE	

THE CAUSAL CHAIN, OUT LOUD

Say your six lines through in one breath, linking them only with “because of that... because of that... because of that...” If every link holds, you have a story. If one takes “and then” instead, you have found your rewrite.

Keep going.

the paper version ends here. the fill-in version does not.

This whole spine sheet exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft, with the same six lines and a text box under each that saves as you type. Read the line, write your story's version of it on the page, and walk away with a working spine in a single sitting.

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ONE MORE DRAFT

The story spine was developed by improv teacher Kenn Adams and later popularized as a pitch tool by Pixar story artist Emma Coats; the technique belongs to improv and storytelling tradition and is free for anyone to use. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by Pixar. © 2026 One More Draft. You are welcome to share this PDF in its original, unmodified form.