



The Story Circle.

*eight steps around
the wheel of change.*

A complete working guide to Dan Harmon's story circle: all eight steps, the geometry of comfort and chaos underneath them, a worked example carried around the full wheel, the mistakes that flatten episodic stories, and a printable circle sheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

The story circle was developed by writer and showrunner **Dan Harmon** (creator of *Community* and co-creator of *Rick and Morty*), who distilled Joseph Campbell's monomyth into eight steps arranged around a clock face, a "story embryo" simple enough to plot an episode on a napkin. He published the system in a series of essays for the Channel 101 community, and it has since become the working structure of countless half-hour television episodes and short character arcs.

This guide is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of the circle, covering what each step is for, how to write it, where episodic stories go wrong, and a running example so you can watch the wheel turn. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by Dan Harmon. One orientation note before you start. The circle's genius is its **reusability**. Where feature-film structures describe a once-in-a-lifetime transformation, the circle describes the ordinary unit of change, small enough to run every episode, deep enough to run a whole series. Characters can go around it forever, and that is not a bug; it is the truest thing a structure has ever said about people.

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Why a circle beats a line.

the hero's journey, shrunk to fit a human week.

Most structures draw story as a line. A hero departs, transforms, and arrives somewhere new. The circle makes one radical edit: it bends the line back to its beginning. The protagonist ends where they started, at the same diner counter, the same desk, the same family table, *changed*. That single edit is what makes the shape perfect for episodic storytelling. The world must reset for next week, but the character keeps the dent. Story after story, the circle spends its drama on the only thing that can accumulate in a returning world - who the character is becoming.

The bend also relocates the story's meaning. On a line, the payoff is the destination. The treasure, the wedding, the crown. On a circle, the destination is the starting point, so the payoff can only be the **difference**, what the trip cost and what it taught. Harmon's insight is that audiences don't actually crave new places; they crave watching someone they know get changed by one. That is why the circle powers shows where nothing permanent can happen and everything important does.

Finally, the circle is honest about scale. It works identically at every size: a scene, an episode, a season, a series, a life. Wheels within wheels, each turning at its own speed. Learn it once and you own a structure that zooms.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A character in a zone of comfort wants something, enters an unfamiliar situation to get it, adapts, finds it, pays a heavy price for it, and returns to where they started - changed.

The engine: order above, chaos below.

the circle is a clock face with a horizon through the middle.

Draw the circle as a clock and cut it in half with a horizontal line. Everything above the line is the world of **order** - the known, the comfortable, the routine, life as the character has arranged it. Everything below is **chaos** - the unfamiliar, the uncontrolled, the situation where the old arrangements don't work. The story crosses the horizon exactly twice: downward at step 3 (Go), when the character leaves what they know, and upward at step 7 (Return), when they climb back out carrying what the depths charged them for.

That geometry is the whole engine. The top half asks *who is this person and what do they lack?* The bottom half answers by taking them somewhere the lack cannot be ignored. And the two crossings are the story's hinges, which is why weak episodes almost always fail at a horizon, with a Go that doesn't really leave the comfort zone or a Return that comes home without paying for anything.

BUILD THE CIRCLE IN FOUR LINES

- **Comfort zone:** the routine, drawn fondly and precisely - what the character has arranged their life around keeping.
- **Want:** the concrete thing that pulls them out; underneath it, the need it stands in for.
- **Unfamiliar situation:** the one place or dynamic where their usual moves fail - the opposite of the comfort zone, tailored to it.
- **Price:** what getting the want must cost. A belief, a comfort, a self-image. Decide this early; it is the story's actual subject.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET SAM

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented half-hour episode - "The Regular," from an imaginary diner comedy called **Counter Culture**. Sam runs the night shift at a 24-hour diner and has the 3 a.m. universe memorized: the truckers, the nurses, the crossword guy, and Gus - corner stool, rye toast, coffee with exactly one refill, every night for eleven years. Sam's comfort zone: knowing everyone's order. Sam's lack, unnamed: knowing nothing else about any of them. One night, Gus's stool is empty. And the next night. And the next.*

Eight steps around the wheel.

down into chaos at three, back into order at seven.

The eight steps sit at even intervals around the clock. Steps 1 and 2 at the top establish order and desire; 3 and 4 descend into the unfamiliar; 5 and 6 at the bottom deliver the want and collect the price; 7 and 8 climb home with the change. Percentages below are targets for a single continuous story; in a broadcast half-hour, steps 1-2 are roughly the cold open and first scenes, 3-4 the first act, 5-6 the second-act turn, and 7-8 the final act and tag.

THE TOP • ORDER

01	You - a character in a zone of comfort	~10%
02	Need - but they want something	~20%

THE DESCENT • CROSSING DOWN

03	Go - they enter an unfamiliar situation	~30%
04	Search - adapt to it	~45%

THE BOTTOM • CHAOS

05	Find - find what they wanted	~60%
06	Take - pay a heavy price for it	~75%

THE ASCENT • CROSSING UP

07	Return - back to the familiar situation	~90%
08	Change - having changed	100%

Percentages are targets, not laws. What matters is the order and the logic: each step exists because the one before it made it necessary, and because the wheel, once pushed, wants to complete its turn.

STEP 01

TARGET ~10%

You.

a character in a zone of comfort.

The circle opens on a person the audience can occupy. Harmon's word is *you* because the first job is identification, not information. Establish the protagonist in their stable, familiar situation with enough texture that we feel the shape of an ordinary day: the rituals, the small competencies, the arrangements that keep life manageable. In episodic work this step doubles as a renewal of vows. Each episode re-establishes the baseline in a few strokes so this week's turn of the wheel has something to measure against.

Draw the comfort zone with affection, not contempt. The audience must understand why the character stays. Comfort zones are genuine achievements, routines that solved old problems, which is exactly why leaving them costs. A zone drawn as merely pathetic makes the whole circle condescending; a zone drawn as earned makes the coming disruption an actual decision.

ON THE PAGE

- Open mid-ritual: the character doing the thing they always do, well. Routine is the fastest possible characterization.
- Establish the specific order the episode will disturb - not the whole life, the one arrangement this story is about.
- Keep it brief. In a half-hour, this is a cold open's worth of world; the audience arrives pre-warmed to routine.

WATCH OUT

Comfort with no visible seams. If the zone contains no hint of what it costs to maintain, step 2 will have to invent the want from nowhere. Show the crack in the same shot as the comfort.

COUNTER CULTURE · SAM

Cold open: Sam calls every order before the regulars sit down - rye toast landing as Gus's coat comes off, crossword guy's pen uncapped beside his mug. A new waitress asks how Sam knows all this. "Eleven years." She asks what Gus does for a living. Sam opens their mouth. Nothing comes out.

STEP 02

TARGET ~20%

Need.

but they want something.

Something surfaces that the comfort zone cannot supply. The want can be conscious and concrete (win the contest, get the date, fix the leak) or an unnamed lack the character only feels as restlessness. Either way, this step converts a portrait into a story. Desire is the force that will pull the character across the horizon, and the audience now has a question to track around the whole wheel.

Harmon's craft point is worth underlining. The stated want and the true need usually differ, and the gap between them is where the episode's meaning lives. The character wants the trophy; they need to be seen. They want the old customer back; they need to admit they never really knew him. Write both in your notes; the circle will pay the want at step 5 and collect for the need at step 6, and confusing the two is the most common structural bug in episodic drafts.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the want concrete enough to film. A viewer should be able to say what "getting it" would look like.
- Let the want arise from the comfort zone's crack, not from an external assignment; desire born of the established world feels inevitable.
- Size it honestly. Circle-sized wants are human-sized. A missing regular is enough; the wheel supplies the depth.

WATCH OUT

A want the character could satisfy without leaving the zone. If a phone call from the counter would solve it, the circle never has to turn. Build the want so the answer only exists below the horizon.

COUNTER CULTURE · SAM

Three nights, three empty corner stools. Sam re-brews the decaf Gus never drank, snaps at the crossword guy for sitting one seat too close to the gap. The want, said out loud to the pie case: find out what happened to Gus. The need, said by nobody: find out whether eleven years of knowing his order ever added up to knowing him.

STEP 03

TARGET ~30%

Go.

they enter an unfamiliar situation.

The character crosses the horizon into chaos, the unfamiliar situation where their usual moves don't work. The crossing can be literal (a new place) or figurative (a new dynamic, a confrontation postponed for years, a role reversed), but it must be a genuine departure. The defining property of the lower half of the circle is that **the comfort zone's rules stop applying**. Whatever competence the character showed at step 1 should be exactly the wrong toolkit down here.

Keep the threshold visible. The audience should feel the click of the border - a door, a bus ride, a sentence that can't be unsaid. The circle's meaning depends on knowing which side of the horizon a scene is on. And let the character choose the crossing. Circles turned by outside force produce passengers; the step is called Go, not Sent.

ON THE PAGE

- Invert the opening ritual: whatever the character did expertly at step 1, stage its clumsy mirror here.
- Mark the border with a sensory shift - light, noise, dress code, language. Chaos should be feelable on arrival.
- Burn a small boat: a shift traded away, a cover story told, a pride swallowed. Crossings that cost nothing read as errands.

WATCH OUT

The fake departure - a "new situation" where the character's old status and skills still work fine. If they are comfortable in scene one below the horizon, you haven't crossed it; you've redecorated the zone.

COUNTER CULTURE • SAM

Sam does the unthinkable, trading away a night shift to go out in daylight. Squinting like something excavated, armed only with a first name and a rye-toast order, Sam rides a bus across town to the last address a delivery guy half-remembers. The daytime city is Sam's inverted diner: everyone is a stranger, nobody has a usual, and knowing someone's order turns out to be no way to find him.

STEP 04

TARGET ~45%

Search.

adapt to it.

The longest stretch of the circle. The character navigates the unfamiliar situation, struggling, failing, learning the local rules, recruiting help, improvising with the wrong tools. Harmon sometimes calls this the road of trials, and its double duty is the point: every beat should *advance the want* and *work on the character* at the same time. The search is where chaos does its teaching, one humiliation and one small victory at a time.

Structure it as adaptation, not endurance. The character who ends the search should operate differently than the one who began it, reading the new world, borrowing its methods, shedding a first layer of the comfort zone's armor. That visible adaptation is what earns step 5. The find must be findable only by the person the search has started to make.

ON THE PAGE

- Escalate the attempts and vary their kind - a practical failure, a social one, a small win that teaches a local rule.
- Give chaos a native guide: someone fluent in the new situation whose help costs the character a little pride to accept.
- Track the armor coming off. Each beat of the search should trade a piece of old certainty for a piece of new sight.

WATCH OUT

Wheel-spinning - obstacles that delay the want without changing the character. If the search scenes could be shuffled or halved without loss, they are corridor, not descent.

COUNTER CULTURE • SAM

The search: a wrong apartment (a very confused shift worker), a pharmacist who won't say anything, a park chess table where Gus is a legend with a completely different sandwich order. Sam's whole cosmology wobbles. The guide: Gus's mail carrier, who trades the block's gossip for Sam's diner gossip, one-for-one. Adaptation on display: by the fourth stop, Sam has stopped opening with "he gets rye toast" and started opening with questions.

STEP 05

TARGET ~60%

Find.

they get what they wanted. it isn't what they thought.

At the bottom of the circle, the search pays out. The character finds what they were after. The want, as stated at step 2, is delivered, and the delivery is never quite the package they ordered. Success at the bottom of the wheel arrives with different dimensions than it had in daydreams at the top. The goal achieved reveals what it was actually made of, and often what it was standing in for. This is the circle's meeting with truth, staged as a victory.

Play the beat honestly in both directions. Let the character genuinely get the thing. Circles that cheat the find breed audiences that stop believing wants matter. And let the getting complicate: the found object, person, or answer should raise the exact question the character crossed the horizon to avoid asking. The gap between want and need, planted at step 2, opens here, and step 6 walks into it.

ON THE PAGE

- Deliver the want literally and completely; the twist belongs in what it means, not in whether it counts.
- Stage the find at the deepest point of unfamiliarity - farthest from the comfort zone, geographically or emotionally.
- Put the need in the same frame as the want: the found thing should make the unasked question impossible to postpone.

WATCH OUT

The bait-and-switch find - the character gets something other than what they wanted, and the story calls it irony. That breaks the circle's contract. They get exactly what they wanted; the revelation is what wanting it was really about.

COUNTER CULTURE • SAM

The find: Gus, alive and fine, in the dayroom of a retirement residence across town, moved in two weeks ago by his daughter after a fall on his icy steps. Want delivered in full. And complicated in full: Gus is delighted to see Sam, introduces them to the dayroom as "my friend from the diner" - and Sam realizes, shaking hands around the room, that Gus knows the names of Sam's parents, Sam's old band, Sam's night-school major. The regular knew his server. The server knew an order.

STEP 06

TARGET ~75%

Take.

pay a heavy price for it.

Nothing comes up from the bottom of the circle for free. Having found the want, the character now pays for it, and the currency is never incidental. The price is a relationship strained, a belief broken, a comfort surrendered, a self-image cracked. Something from the top half of the circle, the order the character was protecting, handed over at the bottom. Harmon's phrasing is exact: they *take* what they wanted, and taking has a cost attached.

Design the price to recontextualize the victory. The strongest step 6 makes the audience re-see steps 1 through 5: the comfort zone was armor; the want was a proxy; the search was the character circling the thing they actually needed to face. In a comedy the price can be a bruise to the ego; in a drama it can be structural. Either way it must land on the **need**, not just the plot. The bill is for who the character has been, not for what they did this week.

ON THE PAGE

- Charge the price in comfort-zone currency: whatever step 1 established as precious is what step 6 dents.
- Let the character pay knowingly. A price absorbed by accident teaches nothing; a price accepted is a decision.
- Keep the find and the price in one continuous movement; separating them by scenes lets the victory escape unexamined.

WATCH OUT

The waived bill. Episodic gravity tempts writers to soften the price so next week resets clean. Resist it. The reset can restore the *world*, but a circle where nothing costs anything is a carousel, and audiences feel the difference in one episode.

COUNTER CULTURE • SAM

The price, paid in the parking lot: Gus's daughter thanks Sam for coming - "he talked about the diner constantly; I always wondered why nobody ever visited when he stopped." Eleven years of found family, and not one of them noticed a fall, a move, an absence, until the toast went cold. Sam's comfort zone of knowing everyone is revealed as its opposite, out loud, to a stranger, and Sam doesn't argue. That's the take: the want in one hand, the self-image it cost in the other.

STEP 07

TARGET ~90%

Return.

back to the familiar situation.

The character climbs back across the horizon into the world of order, usually the literal place they started, always the thematic one. The return is a crossing, not a commute. The character re-enters carrying what the bottom charged them for, and the familiar situation must be shown receiving them. The audience's pleasure here is stereoscopic, the same counter and the same routine seen through eyes the circle has changed. Stage the return against the exact scenery of step 1 and let the echo do the arithmetic.

Give the crossing a beat of resistance. Coming home is its own threshold. The zone will try to reabsorb the character unchanged, the routine reaching for them like a warm current, and for a moment they could let it. The return earns its place on the wheel when re-entry is chosen with the new knowledge intact, not despite it.

ON THE PAGE

- Restage the opening frame: same set, same ritual, same camera position if you have one. Difference needs sameness to show against.
- Let a zone-native notice something's off before anyone says it - the routine itself should register the change first.
- Keep the price visible in the character's behavior on arrival; a return played entirely as relief refunds step 6.

WATCH OUT

The teleported return. Jumping from the take straight to "back to normal" skips the crossing, and the crossing is where the character decides what to carry home. Give re-entry its own scene, however small.

COUNTER CULTURE • SAM

Night shift, next evening. The counter reaches for Sam like nothing happened: orders called, toast down, crossword guy in his spot. Sam's hands do the ritual perfectly - and pause at the corner stool. Instead of clearing it for customers, Sam wipes it, sets a mug, and leans a hand-lettered card against the napkin holder: RESERVED. The new waitress raises an eyebrow. "Regular?" she asks. "Friend," says Sam.

STEP 08

TARGET 100%

Change .

having changed.

The final step is not an event; it is a demonstration. The character, back in the zone of comfort, is different. Sometimes wiser, sometimes sadder, sometimes carrying only a hairline shift that a stranger would miss. The story closes by making the difference visible in behavior. Harmon's deepest point lives here. The change is the story's actual subject. Everything else on the wheel - the want, the descent, the find, the price - existed to produce this one altered person standing in the old familiar light.

Calibrate the size honestly. Episodic change is compound interest, not conversion: a habit adjusted, a truth admitted, a door left open. Small is not weak - small is what allows the wheel to turn again next week without lying about people. And end on the proof, not the moral. One image or action the step-1 version of the character could not have produced, then out.

ON THE PAGE

- Show the change as a modified ritual - the step-1 routine performed with one deliberate difference.
- No speeches. If a character must announce what they learned, the wheel didn't finish turning on the page.
- Leave one thread warm for the next circle; in series work, this week's change is next week's comfort zone.

WATCH OUT

The reset that erases. Returning the world to normal is episodic craft; returning the character to normal is amnesia. Keep the dent. Audiences are bookkeeping even when the show pretends not to be.

COUNTER CULTURE • SAM

The tag: 3 a.m., weeks later. The corner stool has a rotation now - Gus's daughter on Tuesdays, Gus himself when she can drive him, the chess-park crowd discovering the pie. Sam still calls every order before the door closes. But now, sliding the plate across, Sam asks the crossword guy a question that has nothing to do with toast: "Seven down. What's your actual name?" Freeze on his delighted face. End of episode. The wheel is already leaning into its next turn.

Adapting the frame.

one wheel, every size of story.

THE HALF-HOUR EPISODE

The circle's native habitat. A useful default mapping: steps 1-2 in the cold open and first scenes, the Go landing at the first act break, the Search filling act two, Find and Take at the second act break's turn, Return and Change in the final act and tag. B-plots run their own smaller circles in parallel, often only four steps deep (comfort, want, price, change), and the neatest endings let the A and B circles pay each other's prices.

ENSEMBLES

Give each major character their own circle and interlock them. One character's Go is another's step-1 disruption; one's Take is the price a second character helps pay. An ensemble episode is a gearbox of circles turning at different speeds, and a character who gets no circle this week should at least be a working part of someone else's.

SEASONS, FEATURES, NOVELS

The circle zooms. A season is one large circle whose eight steps land on episode numbers; a feature or novel runs the wheel once at full depth, usually with each step expanded to a sequence. Nesting works too. Every scene can be a micro-circle (someone wants something, pursues it, pays, adjusts), which is the fastest scene-level diagnostic the frame offers. If a scene has no tiny wheel in it, it usually has no reason to exist.

RELATION TO THE MONOMYTH

The circle is the Hero's Journey with the mysticism drained and the repeatability turned up: Go is the threshold, Search the road of trials, Find and Take the ordeal and reward, Return the road back. What Harmon added is the shape's honesty about ordinary life. Change is a cycle you run weekly, not a pilgrimage you survive once. For the full mythic apparatus (mentors, shadows, resurrection), see our Hero's Journey field guide; for a beat-level screenplay clock, Save the Cat. The circle plays happily under either.

Seven ways episodic stories go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The carousel.** The wheel turns but nothing costs anything and nobody changes. Fix: audit steps 6 and 8. Name the price in comfort-zone currency and the one behavior that proves the dent.
- **2. The phone-call want.** A desire satisfiable without leaving the zone. Fix: rebuild the want so its answer only exists below the horizon.
- **3. The redecorated zone.** A "new situation" where the character's old status still works. Fix: invert the opening ritual. Whatever they did expertly at step 1 must fail at step 3.
- **4. The corridor search.** Obstacles that delay without adapting the character. Fix: give every search beat a trade - one piece of old certainty for one piece of new sight.
- **5. The bait-and-switch find.** The character gets something other than the want and the story calls it depth. Fix: deliver the want literally; put the twist in what having it means.
- **6. The teleported return.** Cut from crisis to "back to normal" with no crossing. Fix: give re-entry its own scene, with the zone reaching to reabsorb them and the character choosing what to carry in.
- **7. The announced change.** A closing speech about lessons learned. Fix: cut the speech; restage the step-1 ritual with one deliberate difference and let the audience do the math.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels dead, ask: which step of the wheel is this, and is the character above or below the horizon right now? A scene that can't answer both questions is off the circle - and off the circle, in this structure, means off the story.

Your circle sheet.

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

COMFORT ZONE / WANT vs NEED

04 SEARCH - ADAPT TO IT

45%

THE PRICE (DECIDE IT EARLY)

05 FIND - GET WHAT THEY WANTED

60%

01 YOU - ZONE OF COMFORT

10%

06 TAKE - PAY A HEAVY PRICE

75%

02 NEED - THEY WANT SOMETHING

20%

07 RETURN - BACK TO FAMILIAR

90%

03 GO - UNFAMILIAR SITUATION

30%

08 CHANGE - HAVING CHANGED

100%

Keep going.

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

This entire circle exists as a **free interactive planner** at One More Draft, with the same eight steps and a text box under each one that saves as you type. Read the step, draft your character's version of it right on the page, and walk away with a complete episode outline in an afternoon.

onemoredraft.com/guides/story-circle

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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- 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
- Kishōtenketsu · four-act structure without conflict
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ONE MORE DRAFT

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