



The Story Grid.

*the five
commandments.*

A complete working guide to Shawn Coyne's Five Commandments of Storytelling: the five turns that must land in every story, every act, and every scene, paired with your genre's obligatory scenes, carried through a worked crime thriller from the first imbalance to the cost paid, and set down as a printable sheet to grid your own.

How to use this guide.

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

The Story Grid is the work of **Shawn Coyne**, a book editor of twenty-five years who set out to make story analyzable the way an editor reads it. At its center sit the **Five Commandments of Storytelling**: five turns that every working story makes, and that repeat, fractally, inside every act and every scene. This guide is One More Draft's independent commentary and is not affiliated with or endorsed by its author or publisher.

What follows is a plain walkthrough of the five commandments: what each does, how to land it, where drafts fail, and a running crime thriller so you can watch them work. Two notes. The commandments are **diagnostic, not a recipe**; they tell you whether a unit of story turns, never what to pour into it. And they never travel alone. Pair them with your genre's controlling value and its obligatory scenes.

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What the Story Grid is.

a diagnostic, not a formula: the editor's eye turned on your own draft.

Most frameworks tell you what to write next. The Story Grid tells you whether what you wrote is **working**. It is a diagnostic built from the way a professional editor reads: not scene by scene for prose, but structurally, asking of every unit whether it actually turns. That question resolves into five checkpoints, the Five Commandments, and a unit that misses any one of them is not yet a story. It is a situation.

The commandments are **fractal**. The same five turns that shape the global story shape each act, and shape each individual scene. Zoom out and the whole book has one inciting incident, one crisis, one climax. Zoom in and today's scene has its own small version of all five. This is the framework's real power: one lens that works at every magnification, so a soft chapter and a soft book fail the same test and take the same fix.

Because it diagnoses rather than dictates, the grid asks something of you first. You must know what is **at stake** and what kind of story you are telling. Name those two things and the commandments become a checklist you can run on any draft, at any scale, to find exactly where the tension leaks out.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A story is a value at stake, disturbed by an inciting incident, escalated through complications to a turning point, forced to a genuine crisis, decided by an active climax, and settled, changed, in the resolution.

The value and the obligatory scenes.

every genre makes promises; the commandments are how you keep them.

Before the five turns mean anything, two things must be fixed. The first is your **controlling value**: the single spectrum of human experience your story moves along. Life to death. Justice to injustice. Love to hate. Every unit of story exists to shift that value from one charge to another, and if a scene ends on the same charge it opened with, nothing happened. Name the value and you have a ruler for every scene you write.

The second is **genre**. In the Story Grid, genre is not a shelf label but a set of promises. A thriller reader is owed certain **obligatory scenes** and conventions: the hero at the mercy of the villain, an all-is-lost low point, a speech in praise of the antagonist. Skip them and the reader feels cheated even when the prose is fine. The Five Commandments are the mechanism that delivers those obligatory scenes on time and with force. Pair them.

FIX THESE TWO BEFORE YOU GRID

- **Controlling value**: the one spectrum at stake, stated as a pair of opposites. It is your yardstick for whether a unit turned.
- **Genre and its promises**: what your reader is owed. List the obligatory scenes and conventions of your genre before you outline.
- **The link**: map each obligatory scene onto the commandment that will carry it, so the required moments land at full pressure.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET MARI

Throughout this guide we follow one invented crime thriller, working title **The Undertow**. Marisol Vega is a search-and-rescue diver in a fading Pacific fishing town, the person they call when the water keeps someone. Her controlling value runs from **life to death**, and beneath it, justice to injustice. Her genre owes us its obligatory scenes: the hero cornered by the villain, an all-is-lost, a hard reckoning. The turning point to come will ask whether she can pull the truth up from the bottom without drowning the people she loves.

The five commandments.

disturb, escalate, decide, act, settle: the five turns every unit makes.

The commandments sit inside the Story Grid's three larger movements. The **Beginning Hook** disturbs the value and poses the story question. The **Middle Build** escalates until the ground shifts under the protagonist. The **Ending Payoff** forces the choice, acts on it, and settles the value in its new place. Percentages are targets for the global story; the same five turns recur at every scale.

THE BEGINNING HOOK

01 **Inciting Incident** ~5%

THE MIDDLE BUILD

02 **Progressive Complication (Turning Point)** ~40%

THE ENDING PAYOFF

03 **Crisis** ~70%

04 **Climax** ~85%

05 **Resolution** ~95%

Read the order as cause. The inciting incident opens a question; the progressive complications refuse to let it be answered easily; the crisis makes the question unavoidable; the climax answers it in action; the resolution shows the price of the answer. Miss a step and the reader feels the gap even when they cannot name it. That felt gap is what the grid exists to find.

COMMANDMENT 01

TARGET ~5%

Inciting Incident.

the event that knocks a life out of balance.

The first commandment is the disturbance. Something happens that throws the protagonist's life out of its normal balance and raises the story's central question. It can be **causal**, an act by another character, **coincidental**, a stroke of chance, or ambiguous between the two, but it cannot be optional. The reader must feel the ground move. Before it, a life was holding steady; after it, that life will not settle again until the value has swung all the way to its opposite pole and back.

Its real job is the **question**. Every inciting incident poses one, and the whole story is the answer earned in full. Will she survive. Will the guilty be caught. Will the marriage hold. Frame that question precisely on the first page, because the climax must answer this exact question and no other. An incident that raises a vague disturbance yields a story that cannot find its ending.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the imbalance real, not mild. A life knocked off its axis, not an errand or an inconvenience the protagonist could ignore.
- State the value at stake in the same beat. The disturbance should threaten the exact spectrum the ending will resolve.
- Name the central question in one line, in your notes, before you draft. The climax is that question answered.

WATCH OUT

The soft open. An inciting incident that merely nudges the protagonist starts a story no reader will chase. If the character could shrug and go back to their day, the ground has not moved. Raise the stakes until they cannot.

THE UNDERTOW • MARI

A routine recovery dive off the north jetty. Mari goes down for a car the coast guard logged as an accident and finds the driver still belted in, wrists bound with zip ties under the sleeves. The town ruled it a drunk who missed the turn. The water says otherwise. She surfaces with the question that will run the whole book: who put him there, and what will it cost to say so out loud.

COMMANDMENT 02

TARGET ~40%

Progressive Complication.

complications escalate to a turn that forces a new path.

The second commandment is the long climb, and the bulk of your story lives here. The protagonist pursues the story question, and complications rise against them, each one harder than the last. The word that matters is **progressive**. These are not repeated obstacles but escalating ones, and they build to a **turning point**: a new piece of action or a new piece of information that changes everything and forces the protagonist off the path they were on.

A turning point on **action** is an event that shifts the situation. A turning point on **information** is a revelation that shifts the meaning. Either way, the old plan is now impossible, and the protagonist must choose a new course. Give the middle real turns, not just more of the same trouble, or the reader senses a treadmill. Each complication should close a door the protagonist was counting on, until only the hardest door is left.

ON THE PAGE

- Escalate, do not repeat. If two complications could trade places unnoticed, neither is progressive; make each cost more than the last.
- Land the turn on new action or new information, and make it irreversible. After it, the protagonist cannot go back to the old plan.
- Keep the opposition intelligent and active between beats. A middle stalls the moment the antagonist stops thinking.

WATCH OUT

The saggy middle. Complications that stack sideways instead of climbing are the most common failure in the whole grid. If your protagonist ends the middle on the same path they started it, you built obstacles, not turns.

THE UNDERTOW • MARI

Her incident report vanishes from the file. The harbormaster warns her, gently, then not gently, to let the water keep its dead. A cut air hose on her spare rig says the warning has teeth. Then the turn, on information: the bound driver was the brother of Sal, the old diver who taught Mari everything, and the man burying the case is Ren Doyle, the county officer marrying Mari's sister in three weeks. The job just became her family.

COMMANDMENT 03

TARGET ~70%

Crisis.

the best-bad-choice, or two goods that cannot both stand.

The third commandment is the dilemma, and it is where the Story Grid is most demanding. The complications have cornered the protagonist into a genuine crisis, a question with no easy answer. Coyne names two valid shapes. The **best-bad-choice**: every option is bad, and the protagonist must pick the least ruinous. The **irreconcilable goods**: two things are right, both cannot be had, and choosing one betrays the other. If either option is plainly correct, you do not have a crisis. You have a formality.

The crisis is the still point before the storm, and it must be **stated as a question** the protagonist can hear themselves ask. It is also the truest test of character in the book, because a choice between two hard things reveals what a person values when it costs them. Do not rush it. Let the protagonist stand at the fork long enough for the reader to feel both prongs pull, and long enough to believe the choice could go either way.

ON THE PAGE

- Build a true dilemma. Both roads must cost something the protagonist cannot afford to lose; an obvious answer is no crisis at all.
- Write it as a question. State the fork in one sentence so the protagonist, and the reader, feel exactly what is being weighed.
- Tie the choice to your controlling value. The crisis should force a bet on life or death, justice or loyalty, the thing your story is about.

WATCH OUT

The false fork. A crisis where one option is clearly right is a decision, not a dilemma, and the reader disengages the instant they solve it faster than the hero. If you can pick the answer in a breath, the prongs are not sharp enough.

THE UNDERTOW • MARI

Mari has the dive footage, the cut hose, and Sal's shaking confession that he saw and said nothing for years. The crisis question: take it to the state and watch it detonate, ending her sister's marriage, exposing the mentor who raised her, painting a target on her own back, or bury it, protect the two people she loves most, and let a killer keep the town. A best-bad-choice. Both roads drown someone.

COMMANDMENT 04

TARGET ~85%

Climax.

the choice made, and acted on.

The fourth commandment is the answer in motion. The protagonist makes the crisis choice and **acts on it**, and this is the most active, most decisive moment of the unit. The crisis was the deciding; the climax is the doing. It is the direct reply to the question the inciting incident asked, and it must be paid by the protagonist's own hand. A climax the hero merely witnesses, or one resolved by luck or by a rescuer, refunds every page that led to it.

Make the climax **visible and physical** wherever you can. A choice is proven by action, not narration, so put the decision into a deed the reader can watch. This is also where your genre's obligatory scenes come due: the hero at the mercy of the villain, the confrontation the whole book promised. Deliver them here, at full pressure. The climax is the bill for the promise the first page made.

ON THE PAGE

- Let the protagonist act, not receive. The hero must cause the climax through their own choice; no coincidence, no cavalry.
- Show the deed. Turn the decision into an on-page action the reader can see, so the choice is proven rather than reported.
- Pay the genre here. The obligatory confrontation your genre promised belongs in this beat, delivered at maximum force.

WATCH OUT

The passive climax. If the truth comes out by accident, or someone else acts while the hero watches, the crisis meant nothing. The protagonist must spend the choice themselves, in the open, and wear what it costs.

THE UNDERTOW • MARI

The rehearsal on the pier, the whole town watching. Mari chooses. She walks to Ren with a state investigator already on the line and lays the drive on the table in front of her sister, Sal, and everyone. Doyle makes his move for the water and she takes him down on the boards, the obligatory reckoning delivered in full. She answers the question the jetty asked: she says it out loud, and she is the one who says it.

COMMANDMENT 05

TARGET ~95%

Resolution.

the new balance, and where the value settles.

The fifth commandment is the settling. The action is over; now the story shows the new balance, counts the cost, and lets the **controlling value** come to rest in its changed place. This is where the reader learns what the whole turn was worth. In the Story Grid, resolution is not decoration. It is the proof that the value moved, and the last chance to honor the price the climax charged.

Keep it **brief and concrete**, and above all honest. A resolution that quietly gives back what the climax took cheapens the crisis you built. Let the value land where the choice sent it, whether that is safer or lonelier, and let the reader see the difference in ordinary things. The strongest resolutions echo the opening with one element changed, so the reader can measure the whole swing at a glance.

ON THE PAGE

- Land the value, changed. Show the controlling spectrum resting at a new charge; that new charge is the meaning of the story.
- Keep the cost paid. Do not refund the climax off-page. The scar is the evidence the crisis was real.
- Mirror the opening with one difference. Same place, same ritual, one thing transformed, so the reader feels the distance travelled.

WATCH OUT

The tidy refund. An ending that heals every wound and restores the first page erases the turn you just wrote. Let the new balance be genuinely new. The point of a crisis is that something could not be kept.

THE UNDERTOW • MARI

Doyle is charged; the case reopens a dozen others. The wedding does not happen, and Mari's sister will not take her calls. Sal turns himself in for the years of silence and Mari drives him to the county line herself. She still dives. The town is smaller and colder toward her, and the water gives its dead back now. Life has beaten death, but not for free, and she has stopped mistaking silence for peace.

Working the grid fractally.

the same five turns diagnose the whole book, a single act, and one scene.

ONE LENS, EVERY SCALE

The reason the Story Grid outlasts a beat sheet is that it does not care about scale. Run the five commandments on your **global story** and you check the spine. Run them on a single **act** and you check whether that stretch earns its place: does it open on a disturbance, escalate through complications, force a crisis, resolve in an active climax, and settle. Run them on one **scene** and you check the smallest unit of all. A scene that fails the five is a scene that does not turn, and a book made of scenes that do not turn will feel flat no matter how good the sentences are.

Use this to find the leak. When a chapter reads slow, do not rewrite the prose first. Ask which commandment it is missing. Usually it is the crisis: the scene has action and information but no real choice, so nothing at stake actually changes hands. Grid it, name the missing turn, and the fix is structural and small.

TWO SHAPES OF CRISIS, AT EVERY LEVEL

The crisis question comes in the same two forms whether it governs the book or a single page. The **best-bad-choice** puts the protagonist among options that are all bad and asks for the least ruinous; it is the engine of thrillers, war stories, and most plot-driven work. The **irreconcilable goods** sets two rights against each other so that choosing one betrays the other; it is the engine of literary and relationship stories, where the pain is that both roads are honorable. Know which shape your value calls for, and sharpen the fork until neither prong is safe. That single choice, repeated at every scale, is what makes a story feel like it means something.

Seven ways the grid breaks.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. No value at stake.** Scenes end on the same charge they began, so nothing changes hands. Fix: name your controlling value as a pair of opposites and make every unit shift it from one pole toward the other.
- **2. The soft inciting incident.** A nudge instead of a genuine imbalance, or one that arrives too late. Fix: knock the life truly off its axis, early, and state the story question it raises in one line.
- **3. Complications that repeat.** Obstacles stack sideways and the middle sags. Fix: make each complication cost more than the last, and land a turning point on new action or new information that forces a new path.
- **4. The false crisis.** A fork where one road is obviously right. Fix: build a true best-bad-choice or irreconcilable goods, and write it as a question with no safe answer.
- **5. The passive climax.** The truth surfaces by luck, or a rescuer acts while the hero watches. Fix: let the protagonist make the crisis choice and pay it in a visible, on-page deed.
- **6. The skipped obligatory scene.** The genre's promised moments never arrive. Fix: list your genre's obligatory scenes and conventions up front and deliver each one at full pressure, most of them in the climax.
- **7. The refunded resolution.** The ending heals every wound and the value never settles anywhere new. Fix: land the value in a changed place, keep the cost paid on the page, and leave the scar.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

Point to any unit, scene, act, or book, and run the five in order. Disturbance, escalation, crisis, active climax, changed value. The first one you cannot point to is the reason that unit feels slow. Fix that turn, not the prose around it.

Your Story Grid sheet.

print this page. fix the value and the genre first, then the five turns.

CONTROLLING VALUE (e.g. LIFE /
DEATH)

02 PROGRESSIVE COMPLICATION 40%

GENRE + OBLIGATORY SCENES

03 CRISIS 70%

THE CRISIS QUESTION

04 CLIMAX 85%

ONE-LINE PREMISE

05 RESOLUTION 95%

01 INCITING INCIDENT 5%

Keep going.

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

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

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