



Three-Act Structure.

the load-bearing classic.

A complete working guide to the oldest frame in storytelling: setup, confrontation, and resolution, all eight beats, a worked example carried from first page to new equilibrium, the mistakes that sink second acts, 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.

Three-act structure is storytelling's common law. Its root idea, that a whole story has a beginning, middle, and end, each with its own job, is as old as **Aristotle's** *Poetics*; its modern form, with the acts hinged on two decisive plot points at the quarter marks, was codified for screenwriters by **Syd Field** (*Screenplay*, 1979) and has since become the default vocabulary of editors, producers, and workshops everywhere. When someone says "your act two sags," this is the map they are holding.

This guide is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of the structure in its most useful eight-beat form: what each beat is for, how to write it, where drafts usually go wrong, and a running example so you can watch the machinery move. Two orientation notes. First, the acts are **proportions, not chapters**, roughly a quarter, a half, and a quarter of your story, in any medium and at any length. Second, nearly every other framework (Save the Cat, the Hero's Journey, the romance beat sheet) is an elaboration of this one. Learn this frame and you hold the key to all of them; that is why it is the right first structure, and the right fallback whenever a fancier one stops helping.

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Why three acts underlie everything.

a story is a promise, an argument, and a verdict.

The three acts endure because they mirror how any meaningful change actually unfolds. Act one is the world *before*, the promise of what this story will be about, sealed by a disruption and a commitment. Act two is the struggle, the argument between the protagonist and everything that resists them, escalating until it cannot escalate further. Act three is the verdict, the confrontation the whole story has been assembling, and the changed world it leaves behind. Beginning, middle, end; promise, argument, verdict.

The frame's genius is where it puts the hinges. The acts are not equal thirds but a 25/50/25 split, with the story's two most important decisions - **Plot Point One** and the **Crisis** - guarding the borders. Each hinge is a door that locks behind the protagonist. At the quarter mark they commit and can't go back; at the three-quarter mark they hit bottom and can't go forward the old way. Everything else in the structure exists to make those two doors matter.

Because it specifies so little content - no mentors required, no love interest, no whiff of death - the three-act frame fits any genre, medium, or length. That looseness is a feature and a warning. The structure will not write your story for you. It tells you where the load-bearing walls go. What you build between them is the book.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A protagonist's world is disrupted; they commit to a goal, are met by escalating opposition until everything breaks at the lowest point, and then risk it all in a final attempt that answers the story's question and leaves a changed world.

The engine: the dramatic question.

one question, asked early, answered late, argued in between.

Every three-act story runs on a single **dramatic question**, the concrete yes-or-no the plot exists to answer. Will she win the case? Will they escape the valley? Will he tell the truth before it costs a life? The question is *raised* by the inciting incident, *locked in* at Plot Point One, apparently *lost* at the Crisis, and *answered* at the Climax. If you can state it in one sentence, every structural decision gets easier, because each beat's job is simply its relationship to that question.

Underneath the plot question runs its shadow, the **thematic question**, which is what the answer will mean. Plot: will Elena tell the truth? Theme: what does loyalty owe the people it protects? The plot question keeps readers turning pages; the thematic question is why they remember the book. Act three must answer both at once - ideally with the same action.

BUILD THE SPINE IN FOUR LINES

- **Protagonist + want:** one person, one concrete goal you could photograph them achieving.
- **Opposition:** the force with reasons of its own - a person, institution, or truth, strong enough to plausibly win.
- **Dramatic question:** the want and opposition compressed into one askable sentence.
- **Stakes:** what is lost if the answer is no - specific, escalating, and dear to the protagonist.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET ELENA

Throughout this guide we follow one invented drama, working title ***Clear of Conflict***. Elena is a night-shift air-traffic controller, meticulous to a fault, trained by Walt, the tower legend who vouched for her when no one else would and is eight months from retirement. Dramatic question: will Elena tell the truth about the error she helped bury before the cover-up costs a life? Thematic question underneath: what does loyalty owe the people it protects - silence, or honesty? Opposition: not a villain, but Walt's denial, the tower's closed ranks, and Elena's own gratitude. Stakes: her license, his legacy, and a sky full of strangers.

Three acts, eight beats.

a quarter to promise, a half to fight, a quarter to answer.

The eight beats below are the classic skeleton: three single-moment hinges (Inciting Incident, Plot Point One, Midpoint), two long stretches (Rising Action either side of the Midpoint), and the three-beat endgame (Crisis, Climax, Resolution). Percentages are targets, not laws. What matters is the order and the logic: each beat exists because the one before it made it necessary.

ACT ONE • SETUP

01	Setup	~5%
02	Inciting Incident	~12%
03	Plot Point One	~25%

ACT TWO • CONFRONTATION

04	Rising Action	~25-50%
05	Midpoint	~50%
06	Crisis	~75%

ACT THREE • RESOLUTION

07	Climax	~90%
08	Resolution	100%

Note the asymmetry act two carries. It is as long as the other acts combined, which is why nearly every structural complaint in workshops - the sag, the drift, the stall - is an act-two complaint. The Midpoint exists to break that fifty-percent span into two climbable halves, reactive before and proactive after. Guard it accordingly.

BEAT 01

TARGET ~5%

Setup.

the world worth disrupting, drawn in motion.

The opening pages establish the protagonist, their ordinary world, and what they want, while quietly planting the thematic question the ending will answer. The Setup's real product is **investment**. Before anything can be disrupted, the reader needs someone to care about and a status quo precise enough that its breaking will be felt. Show the protagonist mid-life, mid-competence, mid-want, never at rest, waiting for the plot to arrive.

Efficient setups run on the *telling particular*: one habit, one relationship, one object that encodes the whole situation. And every setup should carry a hairline crack, the tension, debt, or avoidance that the inciting incident will split wide. A world with no crack produces a disruption that feels imported; a world that is all crack has nothing left to break.

ON THE PAGE

- Open on the protagonist doing the thing they do best or most; competence and routine are the fastest characterization.
- State the want early and concretely; a reader who knows what the protagonist is after will follow them anywhere.
- Whisper the theme once - an offhand line, an image, a small choice - so the ending can answer something the beginning asked.

WATCH OUT

Setup sprawl. If the disruption hasn't arrived by roughly the twelfth percent, the reader is touring a museum, not starting a story. Establish exactly what the inciting incident needs and not one exhibit more.

CLEAR OF CONFLICT • ELENA

Night shift, radar room: Elena working three frequencies with surgical calm, her checklists laminated, her coffee untouched since midnight. Walt at the next scope, working traffic on charm and forty years of instinct, letters after his name that trained half the room - including her. The telling particular: Walt blanks on a call sign for two full seconds, and Elena supplies it without looking up. Neither mentions it. The crack, in miniature.

BEAT 02

TARGET ~12%

Inciting Incident.

the disruption that asks the question.

An event breaks the status quo and sets the story in motion. The inciting incident happens *to* the protagonist. It is not their decision (that comes at Plot Point One) but the intrusion that makes a decision unavoidable. Its structural job is to raise the dramatic question in concrete form. After this scene, the reader should be able to say what the story is now about and what hangs on it.

Two properties separate a true inciting incident from mere bad news. It must be **irrevocable** - the world cannot return to page one's arrangement, however much everyone wishes to - and it must be **aimed**: of all people, this event lands hardest on this protagonist, hooking directly into the crack the setup showed. An earthquake incites nothing; an earthquake that exposes the forgery in the protagonist's archive incites everything.

ON THE PAGE

- Dramatize it in scene, on the page, with the protagonist present; the story's first detonation should never arrive as a report.
- Size it to the story: quiet dramas incite with a letter or a look; thrillers with a body. Irrevocability, not volume, is the requirement.
- Let the protagonist's immediate response mis-handle it in exactly the way their flaw dictates. The wrong reflex here powers act one's remainder.

WATCH OUT

Confusing the inciting incident with Plot Point One. The incident deals the cards; the plot point is the bet. Fusing them robs the reader of act one's best stretch: watching a person realize the old life is over before they admit it.

CLEAR OF CONFLICT • ELENA

3:14 a.m.: Walt clears a cargo jet across an occupied runway. Elena catches it with nine seconds to spare - a go-around, hearts hammering, officially a non-event. Then Walt, pale, logs it as a pilot deviation. Elena reads the entry, the cursor blinking on the lie, and, out of gratitude, out of reflex, initials the page. The question is now airborne: will she tell the truth before the cover-up costs a life?

BEAT 03

TARGET ~25%

Plot Point One.

the commitment. act one locks shut behind it.

At the quarter mark, the protagonist makes the choice that ends act one. They commit to a course from which there is no going back. Where the inciting incident happened to them, Plot Point One is theirs - a decision, taken with eyes at least half open, that spins the story into its long middle. Syd Field called the plot points the structure's hinges for a reason. Everything before this beat is preparation, and everything after is consequence.

The craft essentials: the choice must be **active** (a deed, not a mood), **costly** (an exit visibly closes in the scene itself), and **question-locking** - after it, the dramatic question cannot be dissolved by walking away, only answered. Note that the commitment need not be wise. Protagonists frequently commit to the wrong course at Plot Point One; the middle act exists to correct them, at compound interest.

ON THE PAGE

- Stage it as a decision scene with a real alternative alive on the page; the road not taken must be visible to cost anything.
- Burn the boat on-screen: the resignation letter sent, the statement signed, the door locked. Off-page commitments don't bind.
- Point the protagonist at a concrete act-two goal; the reader should leave act one knowing what "trying" will look like.

WATCH OUT

The drifting act break. If you cannot name the scene where the protagonist commits, neither can the reader, and act two begins without them. Ambivalence is fine in the character; it is fatal in the structure.

CLEAR OF CONFLICT • ELENA

The FAA pulls that night's tapes in a random audit. Investigator Reyes interviews the shift, and Elena sits across the table holding the truth in her mouth - the alternative alive, breathing, right there. Walt's retirement letter is on the chief's desk; eight months. She signs a statement confirming the pilot-deviation report. Notarized, dated, hers. The boat burns. She is no longer covering for Walt; she is in it.

BEAT 04

TARGET ~25-50%

Rising Action.

escalating obstacles, compounding costs.

The long climb. The protagonist pursues the act-two goal and the world answers back with obstacles escalating in difficulty, intimacy, and price. The governing principle is **escalation with variety**: each obstacle should be harder than the last *and* different in kind (physical, social, moral, internal), because sameness reads as wheel-spinning no matter how high the stakes climb. Along the way the protagonist learns, adapts, and collects allies and enemies, the education act three will spend.

Structure the stretch as **try-fail cycles**: the protagonist attempts a solution, it half-works or fails, and the failure creates a new, worse problem that demands the next attempt. Each cycle should end with the situation changed, not merely delayed. And keep the opposition thinking. An antagonist force that counter-moves between the protagonist's attempts is what makes the middle feel like a duel instead of an obstacle course.

ON THE PAGE

- Chart your try-fail cycles before drafting; three to five substantial cycles carry most stories' first half of act two.
- Alternate arena and register. A public defeat, then a private one; an external blow, then a crack in a relationship.
- Raise stakes by attaching them to people; every new ally is a new hostage the crisis can threaten.

WATCH OUT

The episodic middle, where obstacles could be shuffled without loss. If scene twelve could swap with scene eighteen unnoticed, causality has snapped. Restore the chain where each failure births the next attempt.

CLEAR OF CONFLICT • ELENA

The lie needs maintenance. Elena shadows Walt's shifts, trading for nights she can watch his scope. Try: nudging him toward early retirement (he laughs it off). Fail: her shift-trades trip a fatigue-rule flag - now the chief is watching her. Try: coaching Walt over off-book breakfasts (he pockets the crib cards, touched and humiliated). Fail: Reyes finds the go-around's fuel-burn anomaly and reopens the file. Every fix makes the structure heavier; the reader can hear it creak.

BEAT 05

TARGET ~50%

Midpoint.

the reversal that turns reaction into action.

At dead center, something shifts the story's ground: a reversal of fortune or a revelation of truth, often both in one scene. The classic midpoint transformation is directional: in the first half of act two the protagonist has been **reacting**, absorbing the world's counterpunches; from the midpoint on they turn **proactive**, driving events instead of dodging them. The information or defeat delivered here is what changes the mode. The protagonist now knows something (about the opposition, the situation, or themselves) that makes the old approach untenable.

Use the midpoint to escalate stakes *categorically*, not incrementally - what was private goes public, what was professional turns personal, what seemed a problem reveals itself as a symptom of something larger. And point it at the crisis. A strong midpoint makes the eventual bottom feel inevitable in hindsight, because the truth revealed here is exactly the one the protagonist then spends twenty-five percent of the story trying to half-answer.

ON THE PAGE

- Make it a scene the reader can point to - the biggest event since Plot Point One, not a gradual dawning.
- Convert the revelation into a new plan on the page; proactive means the protagonist's next scene begins with intent.
- Start a clock if the story lacks one; midpoint deadlines keep second halves taut.

WATCH OUT

The missing midpoint. A fifty-percent span with no turn is the sagging middle by definition. The protagonist reacts for a hundred pages, and momentum quietly dies. If your act two drags, install the reversal first and re-outline from it.

CLEAR OF CONFLICT • ELENA

Hunting the audit file in the chief's office, Elena finds a buried two-year-old medical report - Walt's: early cognitive decline, "recommend reassignment." Everyone above her already knows. The lie she has been keeping alone is the tower's policy, and the go-around was Walt's third near-miss, not his first. Reactive Elena dies in that office. The woman who leaves, file photographed, is running a plan: get Walt off the boards before the fourth near-miss. And a clock: his final certification review, five weeks out.

BEAT 06

TARGET ~75%

Crisis.

the lowest point. the want looks impossible.

Act two ends at the bottom. The protagonist's post-midpoint campaign collapses. The plan fails, the allies scatter, the opposition lands its heaviest blow, and the dramatic question appears to be answered *no*. The Crisis (Field's Plot Point Two) is the structure's second hinge, and its depth is a direct investment in the ending. The audience's belief that all is genuinely lost is the capital the climax spends.

Two requirements give the bottom its meaning. The collapse must trace to the protagonist - their flaw, their choice at Plot Point One, their half-measures since - because a bottom made of bad luck teaches nothing and sets up nothing. And the crisis must force the **final choice**: every conventional route exhausted, only surrender remains, or the one act the protagonist has been avoiding all story. Act three is that choice, performed.

ON THE PAGE

- Take everything that act two built - the plan, the standing, the key relationship. Bottoms with assets in reserve are ledges.
- Give the defeat a face and a scene; abstractions don't wound. Someone the protagonist trusts should close a door.
- Let the story breathe for a beat of true despair. The reader must sit in the dark to value the match.

WATCH OUT

The cushioned crisis. If the protagonist retains a plan B, a powerful friend, or an untouched sanctuary, the reader does the math and stops worrying. Audit the bottom: what is the character still holding? Take it.

CLEAR OF CONFLICT • ELENA

Elena goes to the chief with the file - and discovers Walt got there first. Tipped off, he has filed a counter-statement: the incursion was her vector, caught by him, and her shift-trades and crib cards become evidence of instability. Her certification is suspended. The tower closes ranks around its legend; her own notarized signature props up his story. The recording that could clear her would also expose the buried file - destroying Walt, the chief, and the legacy her career is built on. Surrender, or the act she's been avoiding since 3:14 a.m.: the whole truth, under her own name.

BEAT 07

TARGET ~90%

Climax.

the final attempt. both conflicts, one collision.

The protagonist rises from the crisis and makes their final attempt, and the story's external and internal conflicts collide in a single sequence. The climax answers the dramatic question definitively, on the page, through the protagonist's own decisive action. Its power comes from convergence: the outer confrontation (the trial, the duel, the landing) and the inner one (the flaw, the fear, the theme) must be resolved by the *same act*. Winning the plot must require completing the change the story has argued for.

Build it as choice under maximum pressure. The strongest climaxes strip the protagonist of preparation at the worst moment and leave only character: what they do next, unrehearsed, is who they have become, something the act-one version could not have done. Let the cost be real and paid on-screen.

ON THE PAGE

- Put the protagonist's hand on the decisive act; allies may assist, but the final blow, plea, or confession is theirs alone.
- Answer the thematic question with the same action that answers the plot question; one gesture, both verdicts.
- Spend act one's plants - the skill, the object, the line of dialogue - so the ending feels grown, not installed.

WATCH OUT

The delegated climax. If the lawyer wins the case, the cavalry breaks the siege, or the villain trips, the protagonist becomes a spectator at their own verdict. Restructure until no one else can perform the final act.

CLEAR OF CONFLICT • ELENA

Walt's final certification review, examiners watching. Elena, suspended, is in the gallery when it happens: fog, a medevac inbound, Walt clearing it into the path of a departing heavy. Nine seconds again. She takes the frequency and breaks the sky apart with four calm transmissions - then keeps the mic keyed: the March go-around was a controller error, logged falsely, and she signed the statement. Her name, her license, on tape. The act she has dodged since page one, keeping the planes apart for good.

BEAT 08

TARGET 100%

Resolution.

the new equilibrium. the theme's verdict, shown.

After the climax, the story shows the world it made: the new equilibrium, the consequences distributed, the thematic question answered in the changed texture of ordinary life. The Resolution is not a victory lap - it is **evidence**. The reader was promised that the climax mattered; this beat is where it becomes visible. Relationships are recast, prices are paid and honored, and the protagonist lives in a way the setup's version of them could not.

Keep it brief and concrete. The emotional peak has passed; every page now is paid for with the reader's patience, so choose the few images that prove the change and let the rest resolve off the page. The classic close mirrors the opening - same place, same ritual, one decisive difference - because endings are measured against beginnings, and the echo lets the reader do the measuring in a single glance.

ON THE PAGE

- Answer the thematic question in an image or action, never in a speech; verdicts shown outlast verdicts stated.
- Pay every promise: the setup's plants, the allies' fates, the cost of the climax honored, not waived.
- Mirror the opening scene with one element transformed, and end within a page or two of the echo landing.

WATCH OUT

The take-back ending - a resolution that quietly refunds the climax's price (the suspension lifted off-page, the rift healed by montage). Costs that evaporate retroactively cheapen the choice that incurred them; keep the scar.

CLEAR OF CONFLICT • ELENA

Three months later. The hearing cost what truth costs: Walt grounded with his pension intact and his record honest, the chief reassigned, Elena's suspension extended - not erased - for the false statement, with a supervised path back. Night shift, radar room, the echo: Elena at her scope, retraining under a monitor's eyes, laminated checklists and untouched coffee. A rookie two scopes down blanks on a call sign. Elena supplies it - and then, this time, logs the miss, and walks over to talk about it in the open. The sky over the tower is exactly as full of strangers as page one. It is safer now.

Adapting the frame.

every medium, every length, and the famous sag.

MEDIA AND LENGTHS

The proportions travel intact: in a 90,000-word novel, Plot Point One lands near 22,000 words and the Crisis near 67,000; in a two-hour film, pages 25 and 90; in a short story, the same hinges compressed to paragraphs. Novels flex the most; literary fiction routinely stretches act one for immersion, and sagas nest a full three-act shape inside each major section. Hour-long television runs the structure per episode (often relabeled as four or five acts for commercial breaks; the hinges are the same) and again per season. The frame does not care about the container; it cares about the quarter marks.

CURING THE SAGGING MIDDLE

The structure's one notorious weakness is its own act two: fifty percent of the story between hinges. Three reliable treatments. **Split it.** Treat the Midpoint as a true act break, planning "act 2A" (reactive) and "act 2B" (proactive) as separate campaigns with their own mini-goals. **Chain it.** Outline the middle as try-fail cycles so every scene's failure causes the next scene's attempt; sag is almost always broken causality. **Pressurize it.** Install a clock at the midpoint and tighten it at intervals; deadlines convert drift into descent.

RELATION TO OTHER FRAMEWORKS

Most named structures are this one with furniture. Save the Cat's Catalyst, Break Into Two, All Is Lost, and Finale sit exactly on the inciting incident, Plot Point One, Crisis, and Climax; the Hero's Journey's threshold, ordeal, and return trace the same hinges in mythic dress; the romance beat sheet is three acts with the relationship as the plot. The practical upshot is to draft with whichever framework speaks your genre's language but to *diagnose* with this one. When a story built on any system stalls, checking the three-act hinges finds the break fastest.

Seven ways drafts go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The endless setup.** World-building past the twelve-percent mark with nothing disrupted. Fix: establish only what the inciting incident needs; move the rest into act two, where tension makes exposition digestible.
- **2. The passive quarter mark.** The protagonist is pushed into act two by circumstance. Fix: build a decision scene with a live alternative and an on-screen cost; commitment is the hinge, not momentum.
- **3. The episodic middle.** Shuffleable obstacles, severed causality. Fix: re-chain act two as try-fail cycles so each failure causes the next attempt.
- **4. The missing midpoint.** Fifty percent of story with no reversal, no shift to proactive. Fix: install the revelation scene first, then re-outline both halves of act two from it.
- **5. The cushioned crisis.** A bottom with assets in reserve. Fix: audit what the protagonist still holds at 75% - the plan B, the ally, the sanctuary - and take it.
- **6. The delegated climax.** Someone or something else performs the decisive act. Fix: restructure until the protagonist's own hand answers the dramatic question, at personal cost.
- **7. The refunding resolution.** An ending that quietly waives the climax's price. Fix: keep the scar; show the new equilibrium honoring every cost the story charged.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels dead, ask: how does this scene move the dramatic question - toward yes, toward no, or by raising its price? A scene that does none of the three is furniture, whatever else it accomplishes.

Your beat sheet.

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

DRAMATIC QUESTION

04 RISING ACTION

25-50%

THEMATIC QUESTION / STAKES

05 MIDPOINT

50%

01 SETUP

5%

06 CRISIS

75%

02 INCITING INCIDENT

12%

07 CLIMAX

90%

03 PLOT POINT ONE

25%

08 RESOLUTION

100%

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 eight 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/three-act

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.

MORE FREE FRAMEWORK GUIDES

- Save the Cat · the fifteen-beat screenplay standard
- The Hero's Journey · the monomyth, demystified
- Romancing the Beat · the romance arc, beat by beat
- Story Circle · eight steps around the wheel of change
- Kishōtenketsu · four-act structure without conflict
- Mystery / Detective · the fair-play whodunit beat sheet

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ONE MORE DRAFT

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