



The 22 Steps.

*structure that grows
from the inside out.*

A complete working guide to John Truby's twenty-two building blocks: the premise work underneath them, the moral argument between hero and opponent, every step from need to new equilibrium, a worked example carried through the whole climb, the mistakes that flatten character-driven novels, and a printable two-page worksheet to plan your own.

How to use this guide.

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

The 22 Steps come from **John Truby**, a screenwriting teacher whose book *The Anatomy of Story* (2007) argued that most structure advice starts too late and too far outside. Where act grids tell you where the turns fall, Truby's steps tell you what each turn is made of, and they are built from the hero's weakness, need, and desire rather than from page counts. The result is a sequence of twenty-two connected story events that grow one from another, the way a body grows from a cell rather than the way a house is assembled from a plan.

This guide is One More Draft's independent walkthrough of the twenty-two steps as they appear in our planner: what each step is for, how to write it, where drafts go wrong, and a running example carried from the first page to the last. It is not affiliated with or endorsed by John Truby. Two orientation notes. First, the percentages are **targets, not laws**; Truby himself resists fixed proportions, and the numbers here exist only so you can see the shape at a glance. Second, this is the deepest guide in the series. Read it once straight through for the logic, then use it one step at a time while you plan.

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Why structure should grow, not snap together.

a story is an argument about how to live, dramatized as a fight.

Truby's central objection to the popular frameworks is that they describe stories from the outside. They tell you a turn should land at the quarter mark without telling you what makes a turn necessary. His alternative is **organic structure**. Every story has a premise, one line that names a hero, a situation, and an action. Hidden in the premise is a **designing principle**, the single idea that gives this story its particular shape: a journey down a river, a life told backward, a week of seven dinners. Find the designing principle and the steps stop being a checklist and start being consequences.

The second load-bearing idea is the **moral argument**. A hero begins with a weakness that hurts them and, more importantly, hurts other people. The opponent is not simply an obstacle but the character best placed to attack that weakness, because both of them want the same thing and disagree about how a person should get it. Their conflict is the story's argument about right action, and the hero's self-revelation is the verdict.

Everything else in the twenty-two steps serves those two ideas. The ghost explains the weakness. The desire gives the argument a prize. The revelations reshape the plan. The battle makes the argument physical. And the moral decision proves the verdict was learned rather than announced. A structure built this way cannot be pasted onto a story, because it *is* the story.

THE ONE-SENTENCE VERSION

A flawed hero, driven by a need they cannot see, pursues a concrete desire against an opponent who wants the same prize and attacks their weakness, until a series of revelations and a final battle force a self-revelation, a moral choice, and a changed life.

The engine: need, desire, and the opponent.

three lines, written before anything else.

Truby's steps run on a distinction most writers blur. **Desire** is what the hero wants, a concrete goal the reader can watch them chase. **Need** is what the hero must learn or overcome in order to live well, and they cannot see it. Desire runs the plot; need runs the meaning. The whole twenty-two-step shape exists to bring the two lines together, so that pursuing the desire forces the hero to confront the need, usually at great cost, usually late.

The third line is the **opponent**, and Truby's test for a good one is severe. The opponent must want the same goal as the hero, must be uniquely able to attack the hero's weakness, and must have a moral position of their own that the story takes seriously. A villain who is simply wrong produces a lecture. An opponent who is partly right produces an argument, and arguments are what readers stay up for.

BUILD THE SPINE IN FOUR LINES

- **Premise:** hero, situation, action, in one sentence you could say to a stranger.
- **Designing principle:** the organizing idea that makes this telling unlike any other; a shape, a metaphor, a clock.
- **Weakness and need:** how the hero hurts themselves and others, and what they must learn to stop.
- **Desire and opponent:** the concrete goal, and the person who wants it too and knows where the hero is soft.

THE RUNNING EXAMPLE • MEET HATTIE

*Throughout this guide we follow one invented literary novel, working title **The Salt Ledger**. Hattie Voss, forty-one, runs the last hand-raked salt works on a tidal estuary, in a town that has mostly stopped needing it. Premise: a woman who has held her family's failing trade together by sheer control tries to buy back the marsh her father sold, and must decide what she will spend to own it. Designing principle: one tidal year, told through the ledger she keeps. Desire: the marsh. Need: to stop treating the people she loves as tools. Opponent: Mags Dunmore, the oyster grower next door, who wants the same ground.*

Twenty-two steps, four movements.

foundation, web, campaign, battle.

The steps cluster rather than spacing evenly. Five lay the foundation of the hero's inner life. Three build the web of characters. Nine make up the long campaign of plans, revelations, and counterattacks. Five form the endgame the whole structure was aimed at. Percentages are guides; order and cause are the law.

MOVEMENT ONE • FOUNDATION

01	Self-Revelation, Need & Desire	~1%
02	Ghost & Story World	~4%
03	Weakness & Need	~7%
04	Inciting Event	~10%
05	Desire	~13%

MOVEMENT TWO • THE WEB

06	Ally or Allies	~18%
07	Opponent and/or Mystery	~22%
08	Fake-Ally Opponent	~27%

MOVEMENT THREE • THE CAMPAIGN

09	First Revelation & Decision	~31%
10	Plan	~35%
11	Opponent's Plan & Counterattack	~40%
12	Drive	~46%
13	Attack by Ally	~52%
14	Apparent Defeat	~58%
15	Second Revelation & Decision	~63%
16	Audience Revelation	~67%
17	Third Revelation & Decision	~71%

MOVEMENT FOUR • THE BATTLE

18	Gate, Gauntlet, Visit to Death	~76%
19	Battle	~83%
20	Self-Revelation	~89%
21	Moral Decision	~93%
22	New Equilibrium	~97%

Notice where the weight sits. Nine of the twenty-two steps belong to the campaign, and three of those are revelations. Truby's middle is not a stretch to survive but the place the argument is actually made, one turn of the desire at a time.

STEP 01

TARGET ~1%

Self-Revelation, Need & Desire.

the ending, written first.

Truby's first step is not a scene. It is a planning act. Before you draft, you write down three things: the self-revelation your hero will reach at the end, the need that self-revelation answers, and the desire they will chase to get there. This is the story in miniature, and it is the reason the twenty-two steps hang together. Every later step is designed backward from the truth the hero will finally see.

Write the **self-revelation** as a sentence the hero could not say on page one. Write the **need** as the flaw underneath it, split into a psychological weakness that hurts them and a moral weakness that hurts others. Write the **desire** as something concrete enough to photograph. If the three do not connect, if chasing the desire could never expose the need, the story has no engine yet.

ON THE PAGE

- Draft the self-revelation in the hero's own voice, plainly; if it sounds like a moral, sharpen it into a specific realization.
- Make the moral weakness cost someone else on the page, not just the hero's own happiness.
- Test the desire: could a stranger tell, in a single scene, whether the hero got it or not?

WATCH OUT

A self-revelation the hero already half-believes on page one. If they could nod along to it in chapter two, it is a theme, not a revelation. Push it until it contradicts how they currently live.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Hattie's self-revelation, written before a word of the novel: I have been buying land with people. Her need: to stop treating loyalty as a debt owed to her, and to let herself be helped. Psychological weakness: she cannot ask. Moral weakness: she uses her brother, her crew, and her friends as instruments and calls it family. Desire: buy back the Voss marsh at the county auction in October.

STEP 02

TARGET ~4%

Ghost & Story World.

the wound behind the weakness, and the world that keeps it open.

The **ghost** is the event from the past that still governs the hero's present. It is the source of the weakness, the thing they have not made peace with, and it usually surfaces as a fear rather than a memory. The **story world** is the ghost made physical: a setting that expresses the hero's starting condition, which Truby describes as a kind of slavery. The hero is not free at the start, and the world shows how.

Ghost and world are paired for a reason. A wound with no landscape reads as backstory; a landscape with no wound reads as tourism. Choose the two or three physical facts of the world that rhyme with the ghost, and let the reader feel the enclosure before anyone explains it. The best story worlds are ones the hero cannot leave and does not yet want to.

ON THE PAGE

- Show the ghost's effect before you show the ghost; the habit first, then the history.
- Pick a world with a built-in shape (a season, a tide, a shift rota) that can carry the designing principle.
- Make the world express the enslavement: what the hero cannot do here, and who benefits from that.

WATCH OUT

The flashback dump. A ghost delivered in one early block of memory loses its power to haunt. Reveal it in pieces, and save the fullest version for the moment it costs the most.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

The ghost: the night Hattie, sixteen, watched her father sign the marsh over to the county to clear his debts, after she had begged him not to. Her mother left that spring. The world: the salt works itself, wooden pans and rakes on a shrinking spit of land, worked by a crew of four who stay because Hattie has arranged their lives so that leaving would feel like betrayal.

STEP 03

TARGET ~7%

Weakness & Need.

the flaw in action, before anything changes.

Now the reader sees the weakness at work. Not described, dramatized. The hero does something in the ordinary course of their life that reveals both weaknesses: the psychological one that limits them and the moral one that damages someone nearby. Truby insists that the **moral weakness** matters more, because a hero who only hurts themselves gives the story nothing to argue about. This step establishes the debt the ending will have to pay.

Keep it small and characteristic. The weakness should look like competence from the inside; heroes rarely experience their flaw as a flaw. Let the person harmed register it, even faintly, so the reader can hold a judgment the hero cannot. That gap between what the hero sees and what the reader sees is the tension the whole novel will close.

ON THE PAGE

- Stage one ordinary scene where the hero's usual method works and quietly wounds someone.
- Give the injured party a reaction the hero misreads as agreement or gratitude.
- Do not name the flaw; let the reader diagnose it from behavior alone.

WATCH OUT

Confessing the weakness in narration. A hero who thinks "I know I control people too much" has already had the self-revelation. Keep the flaw in the blind spot where it belongs.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Hattie reworks the crew's rota so her brother Teo covers the spring tides, cancelling the college visit he has not told her about. He never had to; she reads his mail. She calls it planning. Teo says "sure," and rakes the far pan alone until dark. The reader sees the cost. Hattie sees a good week's yield, and enters it in the ledger.

STEP 04

TARGET ~10%

Inciting Event.

the world moves, and the desire has an object.

Something happens from outside that connects the hero to their desire. In Truby's design the inciting event is deliberately modest compared with other frameworks; it does not need to explode. It needs to make the desire specific and available, to turn a general longing into a goal with an address and a date. The hero may not commit yet, but after this event they know what they would have to do.

The event should reach the hero **through the weakness**. An inciting event that lands on their strength produces a competent response and no story. One that lands where they are soft produces a characteristic, flawed response, and the plot begins to grow from character rather than from circumstance.

ON THE PAGE

- Make it external and irreversible; the hero did not cause it and cannot undo it.
- Attach a deadline or a door that will close, so the desire cannot be deferred forever.
- Have the hero's first reaction be the weakness, not the need.

WATCH OUT

Inciting with a decision. If the hero simply resolves to act, the story lacks the outside pressure that makes the desire urgent. Let the world move first, then let the hero answer it.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

The county posts notice. The Voss marsh, held as surplus for twenty-five years, will go to sealed-bid auction in October, minimum bid set at a number Hattie cannot reach with what the works earns. She reads the notice twice, folds it into the ledger, and tells no one. Then she starts a new column.

STEP 05

TARGET ~13%

Desire.

the line the reader follows to the end.

The hero commits to a specific goal, and the story acquires its spine. Truby's desire is deliberately narrow. It is not happiness or freedom or love but a thing the hero can win or lose in a scene the reader can picture. That narrowness is the point. Because the goal is concrete, every step from here can be measured against it, and the opponent has something definite to want too.

State the desire on the page, in action if possible, and let the hero want it **more than is reasonable**. The excess is where the weakness lives. A hero who wants something the right amount has no need to overcome; one who wants it too much, or for the wrong reasons, has handed the story its argument.

ON THE PAGE

- Phrase the desire so a reader could recognize the ending from a single image: the deed signed, the door opened.
- Show the hero's first concrete move toward it, at a cost to someone else.
- Let the motive be partly wrong; the need hides inside the reason for the wanting.

WATCH OUT

A desire that shifts every chapter. Later revelations will adjust it, but the core line must hold. If you cannot name it in six words, the reader cannot follow it through a long middle.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Hattie decides. She will buy the marsh back under the Voss name, alone. Her first move is to take the works' winter reserve, the money that covers the crew through the lean months, and open a bid account with it. She tells herself she will replace it by September. The ledger's new column has a heading now. It reads, simply, "Marsh."

STEP 06

TARGET ~18%

Ally or Allies.

the helper who carries the theme.

The hero gains a companion, and the story gains a second point of view on the argument. Truby's ally does more than assist. The ally has their own desire, usually smaller and often more humane than the hero's, and their presence lets the reader watch the hero's method from the outside. An ally who only helps is a tool. An ally who wants something is a mirror.

Introduce the ally through what they want, then through how they see the hero. The best allies believe in the hero's goal and quietly disapprove of the hero's means, which sets up the attack that comes at step thirteen. Give them a skill the hero lacks, a life the hero has not noticed, and a reason to stay that is not about the hero at all.

ON THE PAGE

- Let the ally state a version of the theme early, lightly, in their own idiom.
- Give the ally something to lose if the hero's campaign goes wrong.
- Make the ally competent at exactly what the hero's weakness prevents.

WATCH OUT

The ally as cheerleader. If they never disagree, they cannot attack later, and the middle loses its conscience. Plant the disagreement now, even as a joke the hero laughs off.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Teo, twenty-six, is the ally, though Hattie would say he is staff. He can talk to anyone: the harbor master, the oyster crews, the county clerk who will run the auction. He wants to leave for a marine biology program in January and has not said so. He believes the marsh should be Voss land. He does not believe it should cost what Hattie is already spending.

STEP 07

TARGET ~22%

Opponent and/or Mystery.

the one who wants the same thing and knows where you are soft.

The opponent enters, or is finally seen clearly. Truby's rule is that hero and opponent must **compete for the same goal**, because only then does every gain for one become a loss for the other. And the opponent must be built to attack the hero's specific weakness, not just their position. In a mystery, the hidden opponent is replaced by the puzzle itself until the truth surfaces.

Give the opponent a moral case. They should believe, with reasons the reader can follow, that their way of pursuing the goal is right and the hero's is wrong. That belief is what makes the coming conflict an argument about values rather than a contest of force. The reader should be able to imagine a version of this book with the opponent as hero.

ON THE PAGE

- Write the opponent's want in the same concrete terms as the hero's; same prize, different reason.
- Show the opponent doing the thing the hero cannot: asking, sharing, trusting, delegating.
- Give them a weakness of their own that the hero could exploit, so the fight can go both ways.

WATCH OUT

The opponent as obstacle. A bank, a storm, or a bureaucracy cannot argue back. If your opposition has no face and no values, you have a problem, not an opponent, and the moral argument has no second voice.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Mags Dunmore farms oysters on the leases beside the marsh and needs its channels for a nursery, or her beds fail within five years. She is bidding too. She has organized the other growers into a cooperative to raise the money, which Hattie finds contemptible and slightly frightening. Mags believes ground should belong to the people who work it together. Hattie believes it should belong to the name on the ledger.

STEP 08

TARGET ~27%

Fake-Ally Opponent.

the friend who is working for the other side.

A character appears to help the hero while secretly serving the opponent, or occasionally the reverse, an apparent enemy who turns out to be an ally. The fake-ally opponent adds a second layer to the conflict. The hero is now fighting an opponent in front of them and a betrayal beside them, and the reader, once the truth is out, gets to reread every earlier scene.

The fake-ally works **because of the hero's weakness**. They offer exactly what the hero's flaw makes them crave: validation, ease, a shortcut. Build the deception out of the hero's blind spot, and their eventual exposure becomes part of the moral argument rather than a plot twist. Not every story needs this step, but character-driven novels usually benefit from one.

ON THE PAGE

- Let the fake-ally give real help early, so the reader trusts them alongside the hero.
- Tie their deception to the weakness; they succeed because of what the hero refuses to see.
- Decide now whether the reader learns the truth before the hero (step sixteen) or with them.

WATCH OUT

A fake-ally with no motive but plot. Betrayal without a want of its own feels authored. Give them a desire that the opponent's side serves better than the hero's ever could.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Ruben Lasko, the county's land agent, takes an interest. He drinks with Hattie after work, walks the marsh with her, explains how sealed bids are opened and what the assessors weigh. He is generous with her, and she likes being the one who knows things. Ruben is also, quietly, advising the growers' cooperative. He has a percentage riding on whichever bid brings the county the cleaner deal.

STEP 09

TARGET ~31%

First Revelation & Decision.

new information; a changed desire and a changed motive.

The hero learns something that alters their understanding of the situation, and in response they decide. The desire adjusts, and so does the motive behind it. Truby's revelations are the gears of the middle. Each one turns the hero a few degrees, so that by the end they are pointed somewhere the beginning could not have predicted. The first revelation usually concerns the opponent or the true size of the task.

The **decision** matters as much as the information. A revelation the hero absorbs without acting on is exposition. Make them choose something in its light, preferably something that costs more than the previous course did. And let the new motive be slightly worse than the old one. Heroes typically get more driven and less wise before they get better.

ON THE PAGE

- Deliver the information in scene, through a character with a reason to reveal it.
- Write the decision as a visible change of course, not a private resolve.
- Revise the desire's phrasing on your worksheet; if nothing changed, the revelation was too small.

WATCH OUT

A revelation that only raises stakes. Bigger is not the same as different. The hero should now want the goal in a new way or for a new reason, not merely more of it.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Ruben lets slip the cooperative's likely bid. It is nearly double what Hattie has. The revelation: she cannot buy the marsh with the works' money, ever. The decision: she will bid with the works itself, by mortgaging the pans, the equipment, and the house against a bank note. Her motive shifts from restoring her father's mistake to beating Mags. She does not notice the difference. Teo does.

STEP 10

TARGET ~35%

Plan.

the strategy, and the flaw baked into it.

The hero forms a plan for reaching the goal and defeating the opponent. In Truby's design the plan is where character becomes visible as strategy. A hero built on control will plan to control; a hero built on charm will plan to charm. The plan should be intelligent, specific, and shaped by the weakness in a way the hero cannot see and the reader can.

Lay it out plainly. The reader needs to understand the plan well enough to feel each later deviation, because most of the middle is the plan meeting the opponent's counter-plan and bending. A plan that stays vague makes the drive stretch feel like drift. A plan the reader can hold makes every setback legible.

ON THE PAGE

- Give the plan steps the reader can count, three or four, and let them be tracked.
- Build one step on an assumption about another person that the weakness makes the hero certain of.
- Show the plan's first move succeeding, so the reader invests before it bends.

WATCH OUT

A plan that is really just the desire restated. "Win the case" is a goal. How, with whom, against whose interference, and in what order, that is a plan.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Hattie's plan, in the ledger. One, secure the bank note by pledging the works and Teo's half of the house, which he will sign because he always signs. Two, use Ruben to learn the cooperative's number. Three, bid one dollar over it. Four, replace the winter reserve from the first spring harvest of a bigger works. Each step depends on a person doing what Hattie has decided they will do.

STEP 11

TARGET ~40%

Opponent's Plan & Counterattack.

the other side is also thinking.

The opponent has a plan of their own, and now they act on it. This step is what separates Truby's middle from an obstacle course. The opposition is intelligent, has its own logic, and moves on its own schedule. The counterattack should hit the hero's plan where it rested on the weakness, so that the hero's first real loss is also the first evidence for the story's argument.

Show the opponent's plan from the opponent's side if your point of view allows it, or through its effects if it does not. Either way the reader should sense **a mind at work**. The best counterattacks are ones the hero, with the flaw, could not have anticipated, and a reader without the flaw could.

ON THE PAGE

- Give the counterattack a scene of its own, with the opponent's reasons on the page.
- Aim it at the plan's most human assumption, the person the hero was sure of.
- Let it succeed cleanly. A counterattack the hero shrugs off teaches nothing.

WATCH OUT

An opponent who only reacts. If every move they make is a response to the hero, they are an obstacle wearing a face. Give them at least one initiative the hero never saw coming.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Mags does not fight Hattie. She goes around her. She offers the salt works' crew, all four, seasonal contracts on the oyster leases at better pay, with winters guaranteed. Two accept within the week. Her plan was never to outbid Hattie; it was to make the works worth less than the note, so the bank pulls it. Hattie, who never asked her crew what they needed, learns this from the harbor master.

STEP 12

TARGET ~46%

Drive.

attack, counterattack, escalation. the long middle.

The drive is the campaign, the sequence of the hero's attacks and the opponent's replies as the hero pushes toward the goal. In Truby's design it is the longest stretch and the one where the hero usually behaves worst. Losing ground, they lean harder on the weakness, take moral shortcuts, and begin to resemble the thing they are fighting. The drive is where the argument gets its evidence.

Structure it as **escalating exchanges**, each one changing the board. Vary the arenas: a public loss, then a private one; a practical setback, then a moral compromise. Keep the opponent moving between the hero's moves. And track the hero's descent explicitly, because the apparent defeat at the end of this stretch has to feel earned by the hero's own choices, not delivered by luck.

ON THE PAGE

- Chart the exchanges before drafting; four to six substantial moves carry most novels' middles.
- Make one of the hero's moves something the page-one version would have refused to do.
- Keep costs attached to people; every shortcut should land on someone the reader knows.

WATCH OUT

The episodic drive, where moves could be shuffled without loss. If chapter fourteen could swap with chapter nineteen unnoticed, causality has snapped. Each exchange must make the next one necessary.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Hattie fights. She poaches back one crewman with a raise she cannot afford, paid from the bid account. She has Ruben whisper to the bank that the cooperative is shaky. She forges nothing yet, but she drafts the pledge on Teo's half of the house and leaves it on the kitchen table, signature line blank, for three days. Mags, meanwhile, buys the works' salt contract with the town's two restaurants. Cleanly.

STEP 13

TARGET ~52%

Attack by Ally.

the conscience of the story speaks.

The ally confronts the hero about how they are pursuing the goal. This is one of Truby's most distinctive steps, and one that most frameworks lack. The hero has been descending through the drive, and someone who loves them names it. The attack is moral, not tactical. It is not "your plan won't work" but "look at what you are becoming to make it work."

Write it as a real fight, with the ally at risk. They should say the thing the hero least wants to hear, in terms the hero cannot dismiss as naivety, and then pay for saying it. And the hero should **refuse**. If they accepted the critique here, the story would be over at the midpoint. The attack plants the self-revelation; it does not deliver it.

ON THE PAGE

- Let the ally use evidence from earlier scenes, so the reader recognizes the case being made.
- Give the ally a threat with teeth: to leave, to refuse, to tell.
- Have the hero win the argument on the page and lose it in the reader's mind.

WATCH OUT

The ally as mouthpiece. If the speech sounds like the author's thesis, cut it and rewrite from the ally's own wound. The critique has to be personal to land as anything but a lecture.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Teo finds the pledge on the table. The fight is in the salt house, at night, both of them soaked. He tells her she is doing exactly what their father did, spending people to keep ground. He tells her about January, the program, the deposit already paid. He will not sign. Hattie tells him he owes the works everything he is. He goes to sleep on Mags's boat. She wins the argument.

STEP 14

TARGET ~58%

Apparent Defeat.

the bottom. the opponent seems to have won.

The hero's campaign collapses and the goal looks lost. Truby places the apparent defeat earlier than most frameworks put their dark night, at roughly the three-fifths mark, because in his design the hero still has a long climb of revelations ahead. This is the low point of the *plan*, not yet the low point of the self. The hero has lost the means, not yet the illusion.

Make the defeat trace to the weakness. Bad luck teaches nothing; a defeat the hero authored, through the shortcuts the drive documented, becomes the first stone of the self-revelation. And strip the hero of assets honestly. A reader who can see a plan B in reserve stops worrying, and the revelations that follow lose their force.

ON THE PAGE

- Take the plan's central asset and the ally in the same stretch, so the loss is both practical and personal.
- Give the defeat a face; the opponent, or someone acting for them, closes the door in scene.
- Let the hero sit in it for a beat before the next revelation arrives.

WATCH OUT

The cushioned defeat. Audit what the hero still holds, a friend, a fund, a secret. If any of it would obviously fix the problem, the bottom is a ledge. Take it.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

The bank pulls the note. Without Teo's signature the pledge is short, and without the crew and the restaurant contract the works is not worth what Hattie claimed. Ruben delivers the news kindly, over a drink, and mentions that the cooperative has filed its bid. Hattie walks the marsh at low tide, alone, with a ledger that now has nothing to enter. It looks, to everyone in town, finished.

STEP 15

TARGET ~63%

Second Revelation & Decision.

obsession. the desire changes again, and hardens.

A new revelation arrives and the hero, rather than accepting defeat, redoubles. Truby is specific here. The second revelation drives an **obsessive push**. The hero's desire and motive shift once more, and this time the shift is toward compulsion. Whatever they wanted the goal for at the start, they now want it because losing has become unbearable. This is the weakness at full strength.

The revelation should open a door the hero could only walk through by becoming worse. Give them a way back into the fight that costs a principle, and let them take it. The reader should feel dread as much as hope. The story is not rescuing the hero here; it is letting the argument reach its extreme so the verdict, when it comes, is total.

ON THE PAGE

- Make the revelation concrete and actionable: a document, a name, a loophole.
- Write the decision as the hero crossing a line they drew for themselves earlier.
- Rewrite the desire on the worksheet a third time; it should sound narrower and harder.

WATCH OUT

A second revelation that simply restores the first plan. The hero must come back changed for the worse, not merely refunded. If the new push looks like the old one, the middle is idling.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Going through her father's papers for the bank, Hattie finds the original transfer, with a clause reserving the family a right of first refusal, never exercised, never mentioned. A revelation with a signature. The decision: she will file the claim, and fund it by signing Teo's name on the pledge herself. She tells herself he would have signed in the end. Her desire is no longer the marsh. It is not losing to Mags.

STEP 16

TARGET ~67%

Audience Revelation.

the reader learns what the hero has not.

The reader receives a key piece of information the hero does not yet have, most often the true allegiance of the fake-ally opponent. Truby's audience revelation is a tool of **dramatic irony**. From this point the reader watches the hero act on a false picture, which turns every scene of the obsessive push into suspense rather than mere action.

Handle it with control. In a close single point of view you may need a second viewpoint, a document, or a scene the hero witnesses but misreads. Whatever the device, do not let the hero learn it yet. The gap between reader knowledge and hero knowledge is the pressure that the third revelation will release, and releasing it early wastes it.

ON THE PAGE

- Choose the device before drafting: a second viewpoint, an overheard exchange, a letter the reader sees whole.
- Reveal enough for dread, not enough to predict the ending.
- Immediately follow with a scene where the hero trusts the wrong person, so the irony bites.

WATCH OUT

Skipping this step in first person. It can be done, through an event the narrator reports without understanding it. If it is truly impossible in your point of view, merge it into the third revelation, but do so on purpose.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

A short chapter from the ledger's other reader. Ruben, at his kitchen table, drafts a note to the cooperative's lawyer. The Voss claim is real, and here is the paper that defeats it, a waiver Hattie's father signed the same night, which Ruben has held for a month. He mentions his percentage. Then he texts Hattie to ask how the filing went, and whether she has eaten.

STEP 17

TARGET ~71%

Third Revelation & Decision.

the last turn before the battle.

The final revelation reaches the hero and forces the decision that sends them into the endgame. Typically this is where the hero learns what the reader learned at step sixteen: the fake-ally's true face, the opponent's real plan, or the hidden fact that reframes the whole contest. The decision that follows is the hero's last chance to choose the arena and the terms of the battle.

Let the revelation hurt and clarify in the same stroke. The hero should see, at last, the true shape of the opposition, and choose to fight anyway, but with a difference. Some part of the coming battle should be chosen for a reason the page-one hero would not have had. The self-revelation is not here yet, but **its shadow** should fall across the decision.

ON THE PAGE

- Stage the discovery in scene, ideally with the fake-ally present and unable to deny it.
- Make the decision irreversible: a filing, a summons, a public commitment to the fight.
- Give the hero one moment of doubt about the desire itself, then let them go anyway.

WATCH OUT

A third revelation that solves the problem. Information should sharpen the battle, not replace it. If the hero can now simply win, you have skipped the endgame and the argument goes unanswered.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Hattie finds the waiver because Mags shows it to her. On the marsh at dawn, Mags hands over a copy, tells her where it came from, and says she will not use it if Hattie withdraws the forged pledge. Ruben's name is on the cover letter. Hattie's decision: she refuses the deal, keeps the claim, and takes the fight to the auction hearing. But she burns the pledge that night.

STEP 18

TARGET ~76%

Gate, Gauntlet, Visit to Death.

the narrowing path, and a glimpse of the end.

On the way to the final conflict the hero passes through a narrowing gauntlet. Pressure from every side, options closing, allies stripped away, until only the battle remains. Somewhere in this passage they brush against death, literally or symbolically. Truby's **visit to death** is a moment of seeing one's own limit, and it is what makes the self-revelation possible. A hero who has not glimpsed the end cannot yet see the whole of their life.

Build the gauntlet from the story world. The setting that expressed the hero's slavery at the start should now close in physically: the tide, the season, the shift, the clock the designing principle set running. And keep the death visit quiet. It is a recognition, not a set piece, and it works best when the hero has a moment alone with it.

ON THE PAGE

- Sequence three or four closing doors in quick succession; the tempo should tighten.
- Bring the ghost forward here, at its most complete, when it costs the most.
- Write the death visit as a specific perception: a grave, a diagnosis, a tide line, a name on a stone.

WATCH OUT

The gauntlet as action montage. Movement without narrowing is just noise. Each pressure should remove a choice, so the hero arrives at the battle with only one way through.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

The week before the hearing. The works loses its last two crew. The bank posts a lien. A spring storm floods the pans and Hattie goes out alone at night to save the harvest, and the tide comes in faster than the ledger says it should. She is waist-deep on the marsh, in the dark, at the exact spot her father once showed her the property line, when she understands she could die here for it.

STEP 19

TARGET ~83%

Battle.

the argument, out in the open.

Hero and opponent meet in the final conflict, and everything hidden becomes visible. The battle is the **moral argument made physical**. It settles the desire, who gets the goal, and it forces the two value systems into direct collision where neither can retreat. Truby's requirement is that the battle be a true contest of the two positions, not just the hero's strength against the opponent's.

Stage it as the biggest scene in the book, in the arena the designing principle has been pointing toward. Bring the ally, the fake-ally, and the ghost into it. And let the hero fight with the weakness one last time before they fight without it. The self-revelation happens through the battle, so the battle must contain the moment where the old method finally fails.

ON THE PAGE

- Put every major character in the room or on the field; the web of characters closes here.
- Make the opponent's case at full strength, in their own words, before it is answered.
- Let the hero's decisive act be one the page-one version could not have performed.

WATCH OUT

The delegated battle. If the lawyer wins, the ally rescues, or the opponent stumbles, the hero becomes a spectator at their own verdict. Restructure until only they can act.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

The auction hearing, in the county room, the whole town on benches. The cooperative presents its bid. Hattie presents her claim. Ruben, called by the county, produces the waiver. Then Mags asks the panel to let Hattie speak to what the marsh is for, and Hattie stands with the ledger, a year of columns headed "Marsh," and finds she cannot make the old argument out loud, in front of Teo.

STEP 20

TARGET ~89%

Self-Revelation.

the hero sees the truth about who they have been.

Through the battle the hero sees themselves clearly for the first time. This is the step the whole structure was designed backward from at step one. Truby distinguishes a **psychological** self-revelation, in which the hero sees how they have limited their own life, from a **moral** one, in which they see how they have hurt others. The strongest stories deliver both, and the moral one matters more.

Keep it wordless if you can, or nearly so. A self-revelation delivered as a speech reads as the author arriving to explain. Instead, show the hero perceiving something concrete that reorganizes everything, and let the reader assemble the meaning. The sentence you wrote on the worksheet at step one should now be visible on the page without ever being said in full.

ON THE PAGE

- Tie the perception to an image from the setup, so the reader measures the change against the beginning.
- Have the hero see the injured party, the ally, as they actually are, for the first time.
- Resist the urge to name the lesson; one honest sentence of dialogue at most.

WATCH OUT

A self-revelation the hero reaches by being told. Someone else can hold up the mirror, but the seeing must be the hero's own, and it must arrive through what the battle made them do.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Hattie opens the ledger to speak and sees the first column, the spring rota with Teo's name on the far pan, in her own hand, and beside it the yield. She has been keeping the same book her father kept. Every line on every page is a person converted to salt, then salt converted to ground. She closes it. She looks at Teo on the bench and, for once, does not know what he will do.

STEP 21

TARGET ~93%

Moral Decision.

the change, proved by a choice that costs.

The hero acts on the self-revelation. In Truby's design the moral decision is the **proof of change**, the step that converts insight into deed. It usually comes at the end of the battle or just after, and it must be a real choice between two things the hero wants, resolved in favor of the value the story has argued for and against the one the weakness served.

Make it cost the desire, or a large piece of it. A moral decision that also happens to win the goal is a reward, not a test. The hero should give up something that page-one them would have died holding, and do it in front of someone who knows what it costs. The reader should feel the loss and the rightness at once.

ON THE PAGE

- Stage it as a visible act, in the same scene or the next, with witnesses.
- Have the choice benefit the person the moral weakness hurt at step three.
- Let the opponent see it; the argument ends when the other side recognizes the verdict.

WATCH OUT

The take-back decision, in which the hero sacrifices and the story immediately refunds the sacrifice. Costs that evaporate cheapen the choice that incurred them. Keep the loss real and on the page.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Hattie withdraws the Voss claim. Then she does the thing she has never done. She asks. She asks the panel to let the cooperative's bid stand and to write the salt works into it as a member, one vote among nine, the pans leased back at cost. She tells Teo, in front of the room, to go in January. Mags, who could refuse, says the growers will need a salt maker.

STEP 22

TARGET ~97%

New Equilibrium.

the world settles. desire is gone. the hero is someone else.

The story comes to rest at a new level. Truby's new equilibrium is not a return but a settlement. The desire is finished, won, lost, or surrendered, and the hero lives differently because of what they saw. In a tragedy the level is lower and the hero fails to change or changes too late. In most stories it is higher, and the world has been altered by the argument's outcome.

Show it, briefly, in the story world's own terms. The setting that expressed slavery at step two should now express the new condition, ideally through the same objects and rituals with one element transformed. Keep it short. The reader was promised that the battle mattered; this page is the **evidence**, and evidence is best given in a few concrete images.

ON THE PAGE

- Return to the setup's most telling particular and change exactly one thing about it.
- Show the ally's fate and the opponent's, in a line each; the web closes with the story.
- End within a page or two of the echo landing; the argument is over.

WATCH OUT

Explaining the change. If a character summarizes what the hero learned, the reader is being told the verdict twice. Let the changed world state it in silence.

THE SALT LEDGER • HATTIE

Spring tides, a year on. The cooperative's channels run through the marsh; the pans lease at cost. Hattie rakes the near pan with a crew of two she hired by asking what they wanted. On the salt house wall, where the ledger hung, a rota with names she did not write. A postcard from a research station, in Teo's hand. The last entry in the old book, dated October, reads "Marsh," and beneath it, "shared."

Adapting the frame.

novels, screenplays, series, and the steps you may skip.

NOVELS VERSUS SCREENPLAYS

Truby wrote for screenwriters, but the twenty-two steps fit long-form fiction better than almost any other framework, because a novel has room for three revelations and an attack by ally where a two-hour film often has to fold them together. In a 90,000-word literary novel, the apparent defeat lands near 52,000 words and the battle near 75,000, with the endgame taking about a fifth of the book. In a screenplay, compress. Merge the second and third revelations, and let the gauntlet run straight into the battle.

WHICH STEPS ARE OPTIONAL

A handful of the steps are load-bearing in every story: weakness and need, desire, opponent, plan, battle, self-revelation, and new equilibrium. The rest are tools. Quiet literary novels often omit the fake-ally opponent and the audience revelation. Mysteries replace the visible opponent with the puzzle and deliver most of the revelations as clues. Ensemble stories give each major character a compressed set of their own steps and braid them. Cut deliberately, and write down why.

SERIES AND SEASONS

In television or a multi-book series, run the twenty-two steps across the season for the lead's arc, and use a shorter subset (desire, plan, counterattack, revelation, decision) for each episode. The self-revelation and moral decision belong to the finale; episodes deliver revelations and adjust the desire. The ghost and story world can be seeded once and revisited, deepening each time the gauntlet tightens.

RELATION TO OTHER FRAMEWORKS

The inciting event, apparent defeat, and battle sit close to the three-act hinges, so the steps can be checked against any act grid. What the other frameworks do not have is the **moral line**: weakness, attack by ally, self-revelation, and moral decision. If a story built on any structure feels hollow, borrow those four steps and see where they would fall. That is usually where the hole is.

Seven ways organic structures go wrong.

read this list again at the end of every draft.

- **1. The invisible need.** The hero has a want and no weakness, so the ending has nothing to reveal. Fix: rewrite step one until the moral weakness costs a specific person in the setup.
- **2. The obstacle opponent.** A storm, a system, or a faceless villain who cannot argue. Fix: give the opposition a person who wants the same prize and a moral case the reader can follow.
- **3. Revelations that only raise stakes.** The desire gets bigger but never changes. Fix: after each revelation, rewrite the desire and the motive on your worksheet; if neither moved, the revelation is too small.
- **4. The agreeable ally.** No attack by ally, so the middle has no conscience. Fix: give the ally a want of their own and a scene where they name what the hero is becoming.
- **5. The rescued defeat.** The apparent defeat arrives by bad luck or is cushioned by a hidden asset. Fix: trace the collapse to the hero's shortcuts, and take everything they still hold.
- **6. The announced self-revelation.** A speech explains the lesson. Fix: replace the speech with a perception, one concrete image from the setup seen differently, and cut the explanation.
- **7. The refunded moral decision.** The hero sacrifices and the ending gives it back. Fix: keep the loss on the page and let the new equilibrium show it honored.

THE MASTER DIAGNOSTIC

For any scene that feels dead, ask which line it moves: the desire (closer, farther, or costlier), the moral argument (hero or opponent gaining ground), or the hero's understanding (a revelation building). A scene that moves none of the three is furniture, however well it is written.

Your step sheet.

print both pages. one line per step is enough to start.

SELF-REVELATION / NEED

DESIRE / OPPONENT

01 SELF-REVELATION, NEED & DESIRE 1%

02 GHOST & STORY WORLD 4%

03 WEAKNESS & NEED 7%

04 INCITING EVENT 10%

05 DESIRE 13%

06 ALLY OR ALLIES 18%

07 OPPONENT AND/OR MYSTERY 22%

08 FAKE-ALLY OPPONENT 27%

09 FIRST REVELATION & DECISION 31%

10 PLAN 35%

11 OPPONENT'S PLAN &
COUNTERATTACK 40%

Your step sheet, continued.

the campaign's second half, and the endgame.

12 DRIVE 46%

13 ATTACK BY ALLY 52%

14 APPARENT DEFEAT 58%

15 SECOND REVELATION & DECISION 63%

16 AUDIENCE REVELATION 67%

17 THIRD REVELATION & DECISION 71%

18 GATE, GAUNTLET, VISIT TO DEATH 76%

19 BATTLE 83%

20 SELF-REVELATION 89%

21 MORAL DECISION 93%

22 NEW EQUILIBRIUM 97%

Keep going.

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

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

onemoredraft.com/guides/truby-22

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
- Three-Act Structure · the load-bearing classic
- Romancing the Beat · the romance arc, beat by beat
- The Story Circle · eight steps around the wheel of change
- Kishōtenketsu · four-act structure without conflict
- Mystery / Detective · the fair-play whodunit beat sheet
- The TV Pilot · the episode that sells the series

All free, all fill-in-able, at **onemoredraft.com/guides**.



ONE MORE DRAFT

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