

STRUCTURING YOUR NOVEL IN THREE ACTS

A practical, flexible guide to act turns, escalating conflict, character transformation, Robert McKee's Story principles and the Save the Cat! Writes a Novel beat sheet

Three-act structure is often presented as a row of boxes: beginning, middle, end. That description is correct in the same way that a map of a coastline is correct. It gives you the outline, but not the tides, weather, currents or decisions that make the journey dramatic. A novel becomes compelling when each act changes the conditions of the story, each major turn narrows the protagonist's options, and the climax forces a choice that reveals who the protagonist has become.

This guide brings together two influential approaches. Robert McKee's Story offers a principle-driven account of story events, value change, conflict, crisis and climax. Jessica Brody's Save the Cat! Writes a Novel adapts Blake Snyder's fifteen-beat method specifically for novelists, giving writers a more visibly timed map. The approaches are not identical. McKee's language helps you test whether events genuinely turn; Brody's beat sheet helps you see whether the large-scale movement is paced and complete.

Use both as instruments, not as commandments. A beat can occupy a paragraph, a chapter or a cluster of chapters. An act can end at twenty per cent or thirty per cent. A literary novel may turn quietly; a thriller may turn violently. What matters is not that a label appears on schedule, but that the story's value, pressure and direction genuinely change.

"Story isn't a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for truth."
— Robert McKee

Inside this guide

- **Foundations — Sections 1 to 5:** acts, values, conflict, character and McKee's Archplot/Miniplot/Antipplot spectrum.
- **The beat map — Sections 6 and 7:** all fifteen *Save the Cat!* beats, their flexible percentages and their relationship to McKee's principles.
- **Genre engines — Sections 8 and 9:** original structural summaries of McKee's twenty-five genre traditions and the ten *Save the Cat!* transformation genres.
- **Application — Section 10:** a complete original worked example showing plot, genre and character arc moving together.
- **Planning and revision — Sections 11 to 16:** outline steps, scene cards, diagnostics, revision workflow, a fillable planning template and final principles.

1. Three acts are three changes of dramatic strategy

The most useful definition of an act is not “a portion of the manuscript.” An act is a sustained phase of action governed by a particular strategy. It ends when that strategy produces a major, irreversible reversal and the protagonist must enter a new phase of the struggle.

In **Act I**, the protagonist lives inside an unstable version of the ordinary world. Something disturbs the balance. The protagonist may resist, misunderstand or make provisional responses, but by the act break they commit to a course of action. The governing question is: *Will this person leave the familiar pattern and enter the central conflict?*

In **Act II**, the protagonist acts on an incomplete understanding. Attempts meet resistance. Success creates new danger; failure exposes a deeper problem. Relationships complicate the goal, the antagonist adapts, and the cost of withdrawal rises. Around the midpoint, the story reveals information or produces an event that changes the meaning of the struggle. By the end of the act, the protagonist's old strategy has failed. The governing question is: *What must this person learn, lose or relinquish before a different action becomes possible?*

In **Act III**, plot and character converge. The protagonist brings a revised understanding into the decisive confrontation. The crisis presents incompatible goods, evils or obligations; the climax converts the choice into action. The governing question is: *What will this person choose when the cost is highest, and what value will that choice place at the centre of the novel?*

The acts therefore do different work:

- **Act I creates commitment.** It turns possibility into a problem the protagonist must address.
- **Act II creates transformation.** It destroys easy solutions and exposes the inadequacy of the protagonist's initial worldview or tactics.
- **Act III creates proof.** It asks the protagonist to act from the person they have become, or to fail because they cannot change.

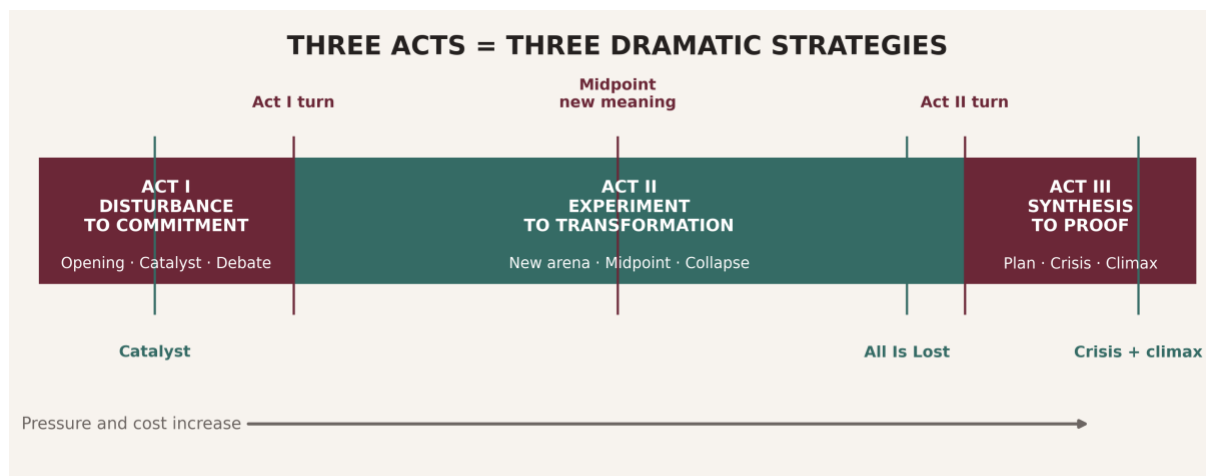


Figure 1. An original three-act spine. The positions are flexible planning zones, not mandatory page targets.

The proportions are useful, but the turns are essential

The familiar 25/50/25 division is a good diagnostic because it protects the novel from a delayed launch, a starved middle or an overlong resolution. It is not a law. The official [Save the Cat! method overview](#) places its first act break at about twenty per cent and its third-act break at about eighty per cent. McKee's examples range more widely: his discussion of *45 Years* praises a story designed as one concentrated act, while his analysis of *Moonlight* identifies a crucial act of maturity in Act Three.

A better revision question than “Is Act I exactly twenty-five per cent?” is: **Has the story crossed a threshold after which the protagonist cannot simply return to the opening pattern?** If the answer is no, the act break is cosmetic. If the answer is yes, the structure is functioning even if the page number varies.

A compact act test

At the end of each act, check four kinds of change:

1. **Circumstance:** What is now factually different?
2. **Value:** What has moved from safety to danger, trust to suspicion, freedom to captivity, belonging to exile, or the reverse?
3. **Knowledge:** What does the protagonist or reader understand differently?
4. **Strategy:** What new action becomes necessary because the old approach no longer works?

An act break does not need to answer all four at maximum intensity, but it should alter more than location or mood. A new city is not a new act if the protagonist pursues the same desire in the same way with the same stakes. A quiet discovery at a kitchen table can be an act climax if it changes the meaning of a marriage, makes denial impossible and forces a new course of action.

2. McKee's story engine: event, value and turning point

McKee's Story begins from change. Activity is not automatically story. A dinner, chase, conversation, memory or revelation earns its place when conflict turns the condition of a character's life in a perceptible way. On the official McKee page reproducing an excerpt from *Story*, he writes: [“No scene that doesn't turn. This is our ideal.”](#)

This principle scales upward:

- A **beat** changes the behaviour within an exchange.
- A **scene** turns one or more values through conflict.
- A **sequence** gathers scenes into a larger movement and climaxes with a stronger change.
- An **act** gathers sequences and ends in a major reversal.
- The **story climax** produces the largest and most meaningful change, after which the central question can be resolved.

The design is fractal. The whole novel does not become dramatic by adding a dramatic climax to two hundred pages of static preparation. Each level must carry change, and the changes must grow in consequence.

Values give structure emotional meaning

A story value is a human quality with a meaningful charge: life/death, love/hate, freedom/slavery, truth/lie, justice/injustice, belonging/exile, dignity/humiliation. At the beginning of a scene, ask what value is at stake and how it is charged. At the end, ask whether the charge has changed.

Suppose a daughter visits her estranged father to request money. If she asks, he refuses and she leaves, the scene may merely confirm what the reader already knew. But if his refusal reveals that he secretly paid her debts years ago, the value of **resentment** may turn toward **conflicted gratitude**. If she then discovers the payment was made to control her, gratitude may turn toward **betrayal**. The physical action is small; the value movement is substantial.

When planning acts, choose a primary value line for the central plot and one or two supporting value lines for character and relationship arcs. For example:

- Central plot: **public safety** → **danger** → **apparent safety** → **systemic danger** → **costly security**
- Relationship: **distrust** → **alliance** → **intimacy** → **betrayal** → **chosen trust**
- Inner life: **self-contempt** → **competence** → **pride** → **shame** → **earned self-respect**

These lines prevent a structure from becoming a list of events. They show why each event matters.

The inciting incident: a radical imbalance

The inciting incident is the event that decisively disturbs the protagonist's life and awakens a desire to restore balance or create a new one. McKee's official [inciting-incident page](#) describes an event that “radically upset[s] the balance” and allows chaos into the protagonist's universe.

In a novel, the inciting incident does not always occur on page one. It must, however, arrive early enough that the opening does not feel like an extended preface. Its position depends on how much context the reader needs to experience the disruption as meaningful. The key is causal energy: after this event, the protagonist wants something they did not want in quite the same way before.

Test it with three questions:

- **Balance:** What stable or tolerable arrangement has been disturbed?
- **Desire:** What conscious objective arises in response?
- **Obligation:** Why can the protagonist not indefinitely ignore the disturbance?

The inciting incident and the Act I break are usually not the same event. The first creates the problem; the second records the protagonist's consequential response. A body is discovered; later, the reluctant detective takes the case. A job is lost; later, the protagonist accepts the dangerous offer. A letter arrives; later, the protagonist chooses to return home.

The spine: desire pursued through escalating action

McKee uses the idea of a story's spine to describe the protagonist's deep pursuit of an object of desire. The conscious goal gives the reader something concrete to follow. Beneath it may sit an unconscious need the protagonist cannot yet name.

The conscious desire should be playable: win custody, expose the fraud, return the stolen object, keep the house, survive the winter, reconcile with a sister. The unconscious need is thematic and

characterological: accept uncertainty, relinquish control, learn to receive love, face complicity, recognise another person's autonomy.

Strong structure lets these desires cooperate and collide. The protagonist may pursue the conscious goal using habits that protect the old self. Act II makes those habits increasingly expensive. Act III asks whether the protagonist can pursue, redefine or sacrifice the goal from a transformed position.

3. Conflict is an intelligent counterforce

Conflict is not synonymous with argument, violence or misery. Conflict is the resistance a desire meets. It may arise within the protagonist, between people, from institutions, from material conditions, or from forces of nature and time. Often the richest scenes combine several levels.

McKee's [discussion of inner conflict](#) connects internal struggle with wider forces of antagonism. His broader emphasis is that antagonism must be strong enough to force the protagonist beyond habitual effort. If the goal can be achieved by asking politely, waiting patiently or trying the same action twice, the character has no reason to reveal a deeper self.

Three levels of conflict

Inner conflict arises from competing desires, fears, values and self-conceptions. The whistleblower wants to tell the truth and protect her colleagues. The parent wants the child to be free and cannot bear to let the child go.

Personal conflict arises in intimate relationships. Other people do not merely block the protagonist; they want their own incompatible goods. The most effective personal antagonists are persuasive because their desires are legible and because they can wound the protagonist where strangers cannot.

Extra-personal conflict arises from institutions, social orders, law, technology, environment, illness, distance, money or time. These forces create constraints that cannot be solved by defeating a single villain.

A courtroom novel, for instance, may combine the protagonist's fear of public failure, a damaged alliance with a witness, and evidentiary rules that exclude the one fact that could win the case. The scene becomes richer because the levels interact.

Progressive complications: change the problem, not only its size

Escalation is sometimes mistaken for amplification. If the first threat is one anonymous email, the next cannot simply be ten anonymous emails and the next one hundred. Quantity can increase tension briefly, but true progression changes the nature of the problem.

A useful escalation sequence is:

1. **Resistance:** The first sensible tactic fails.
2. **Adaptation:** The protagonist changes approach and gains partial success.
3. **Reversal:** The success produces a larger liability or reveals a stronger counterforce.
4. **Compression:** Time, allies or safe options disappear.
5. **Dilemma:** The protagonist must choose between incompatible values.

6. **Transformation or collapse:** The decisive action reveals a new self or the fatal persistence of the old one.

Each complication should be difficult in a *different* way. One attacks competence, another loyalty, another identity, another moral legitimacy. Variety keeps Act II from feeling like repeated obstruction.

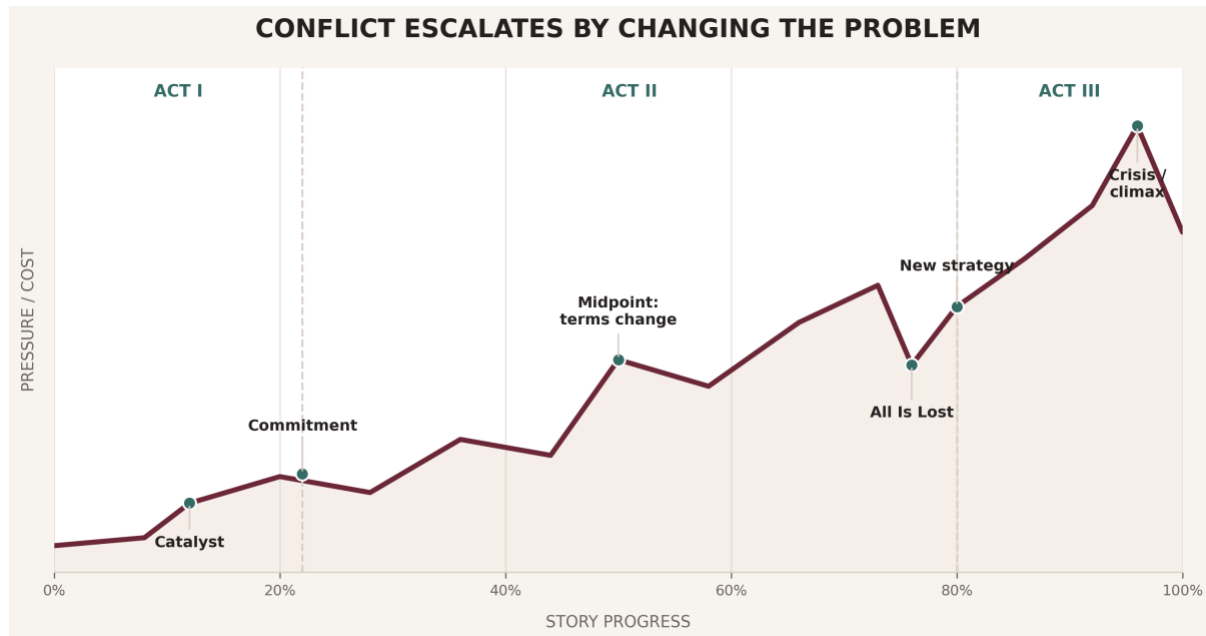


Figure 2. An original conflict-escalation curve. Pressure rises through reversals; the midpoint changes the terms, and the crisis removes the easy option.

The gap between expectation and result

When a character acts, they carry an expectation: *If I do this, that will happen*. Drama opens a gap between the expected result and the actual result. The larger but still credible the gap, the stronger the turn.

The gap should be caused, not arbitrary. It emerges because the protagonist misreads another person, lacks information, underestimates a system, overestimates themselves, or acts from a flawed belief. A useful scene-design exercise is to write three lines before drafting:

- **The protagonist expects: ...**
- **The counterforce actually does: ...**
- **Therefore the protagonist must now: ...**

The word **therefore** is structural gold. It turns juxtaposition into causation.

4. Character is revealed and changed under pressure

Plot is not the external container into which character is poured. Plot is the pattern of pressure that reveals character and makes change costly. The official page for McKee's later book *Character* states that "the only way we ever come to know characters in depth is through their choices under pressure."

That formulation helps distinguish traits from character. A protagonist may be witty, shy, punctual, tattooed and fond of old films. These are observable traits. Deep character appears when they choose between safety and truth, belonging and integrity, revenge and mercy, autonomy and intimacy.

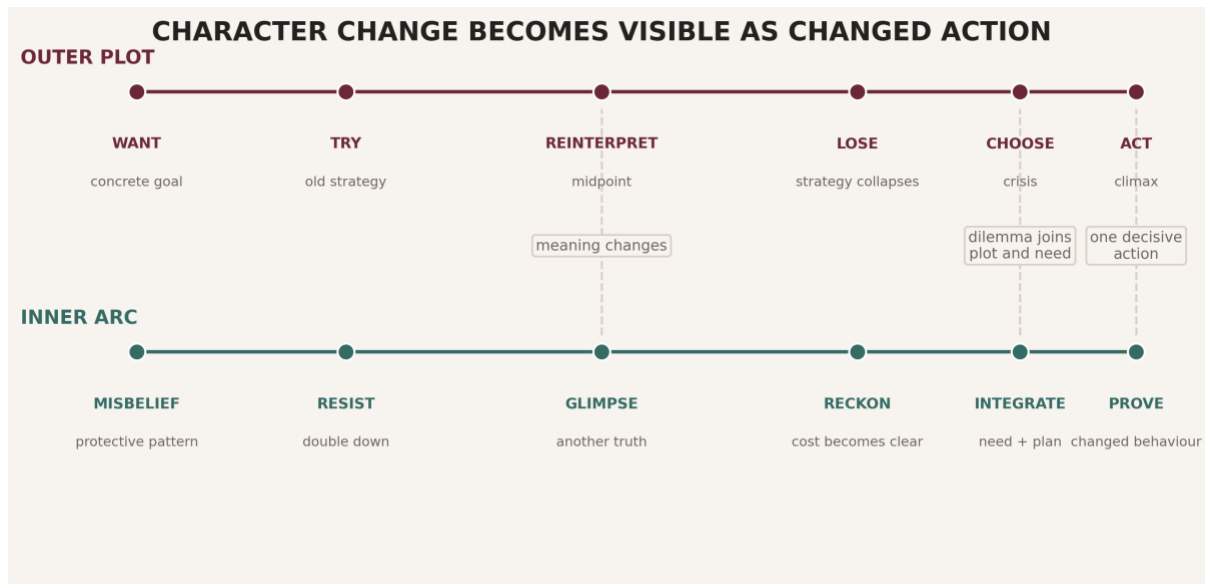


Figure 3. An original two-lane character arc. External pursuit and inner development converge in the crisis choice and climax action.

Want, need, misbelief and protective strategy

A practical character-arc design uses four elements:

- **Want:** the concrete outcome the protagonist consciously pursues.
- **Need:** the capacity, truth or relationship required for deeper flourishing.
- **Misbelief:** the limited proposition that makes the old life bearable, such as “If I remain useful, no one will leave me.”
- **Protective strategy:** the repeated behaviour generated by the misbelief: overwork, control, charm, withdrawal, aggression, caretaking or perfectionism.

Act I shows the strategy functioning just well enough to persist. The inciting incident exposes its limits. Act II tempts the protagonist to use the strategy harder, even as consequences mount. The midpoint offers a glimpse of a different way. The crisis makes neutrality impossible. The climax proves whether transformation has reached behaviour.

Character change is therefore not a speech about learning. It is a changed action under comparable or greater pressure.

Positive, flat and negative arcs

A **positive arc** moves from a constricting belief or moral condition toward a more adequate one. The protagonist does not need to become cheerful or conventionally admirable; the movement may be from denial to tragic knowledge, dependence to agency, or shame to responsibility.

A **flat arc** gives the protagonist a comparatively stable central truth. The world, institution or surrounding characters change because the protagonist tests and embodies that truth. Flat does not mean static: the protagonist's commitment is pressured, refined and costly.

A **negative arc** moves toward corruption, defeat, disillusionment or confirmed self-deception. The protagonist may reject the insight available at the midpoint and crisis. The final action then proves not growth but hardening, collapse or a devastating recognition that arrives too late.

These possibilities connect directly to McKee's transformation genres. His official [discussion of redemption, education, degeneration and disillusionment plots](#) distinguishes them by the direction of change and the quality being changed. His analysis of [45 Years as a Disillusionment Plot](#) tracks a movement from experienced meaningfulness to meaninglessness, while his discussion of [Moonlight](#) emphasises an Act Three action that demonstrates maturity.

The midpoint as a mirror

The midpoint is often described as a false victory or false defeat. That is useful, but its deeper function is interpretive. It changes what events mean. The protagonist may obtain the object and discover it is insufficient; lose the object and discover the real stakes; learn who the antagonist is; become intimate with the person they mistrusted; or see the cost of continuing unchanged.

Try framing the midpoint with a before-and-after sentence:

- **Before:** "I can solve this by proving I am competent."
- **After:** "Competence will not matter unless I expose the person I love."

The new sentence should make the second half of Act II more focused and more dangerous.

5. McKee's story-design spectrum: Archplot, Miniplot and Antipplot

Before applying a three-act template, decide what kind of causal experience your novel promises. In *Story*, McKee contrasts three broad designs. They are not rankings and they are not marketing genres. They describe how a story treats causality, time, agency, closure and the central protagonist.

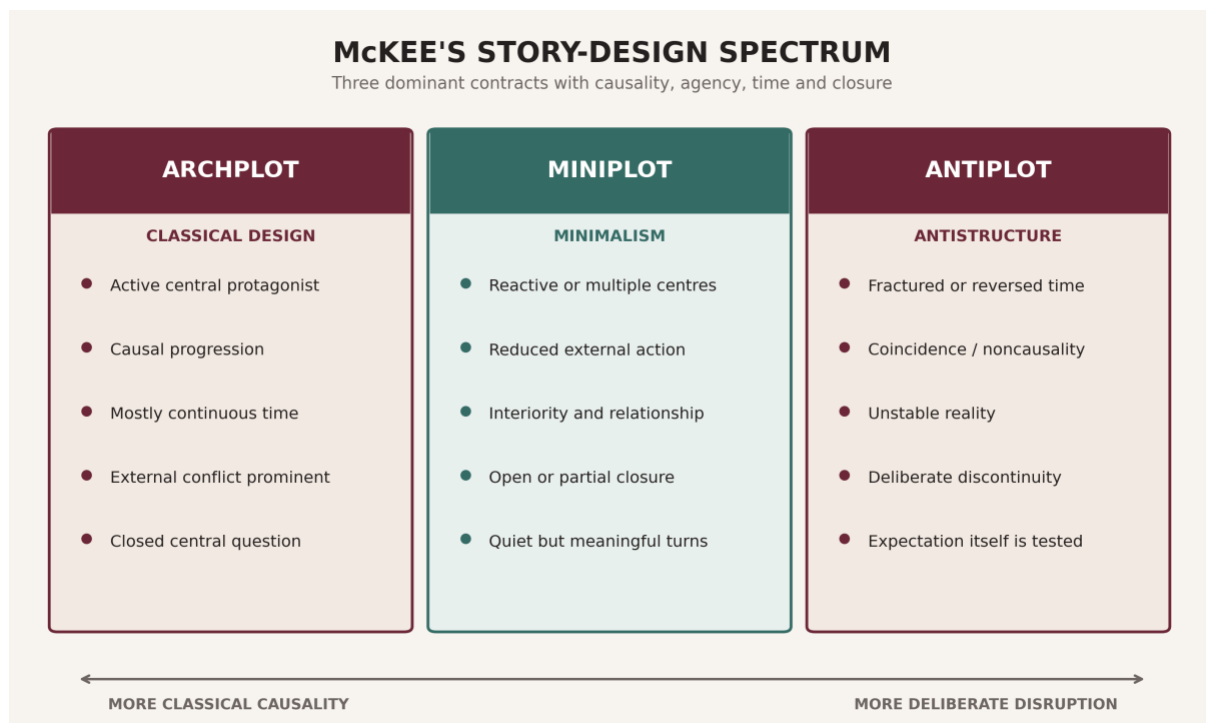


Figure 4. An original comparison of McKee's three broad story designs. A novel can combine features, but its dominant contract should be legible.

Archplot: classical, causal design

In an **Archplot**, a principal protagonist actively pursues a desire through a largely causal chain of events. Time is mainly continuous, external conflict is prominent, and the ending closes the major dramatic question. This design is naturally compatible with a visible three-act spine because the act turns mark decisive causal thresholds.

Act I establishes the desire and commitment. Act II escalates opposition through progressive complications. Act III converts the crisis decision into a climactic action with an irreversible result. Many commercial, historical, crime, romance and adventure novels use this design, even when narration or chronology is sophisticated.

Minipilot: minimalism, interiority and open space

In a **Minipilot**, external action may be restrained, the protagonist may be reactive or divided among several central characters, and closure may remain partly open. Conflict often resides in relationships, perception and interior life. A three-act structure can still operate, but the turns may be changes of understanding rather than spectacular events.

The structural test remains value change. A withheld confession, a decision not to board a train, or the reinterpretation of a decades-old photograph can complete an act if it changes the character's life and the reader's understanding. McKee's praise of the one-act compression and minimalism of *45 Years* is a useful reminder that dramatic power does not depend on noise.

Antiplot: disruption of classical causality

In an **Antiplot**, the work deliberately challenges classical assumptions. Time may fracture; coincidence may replace ordinary causality; realities may multiply; actions may not produce stable meanings. Such a novel can resist three-act expectations, but resistance is most effective when deliberate. The reader should feel an authored challenge to narrative order, not an accidental loss of control.

Even an antistructural novel benefits from pressure, contrast and pattern. Instead of asking whether the protagonist crosses a conventional threshold at twenty-five per cent, ask: *What expectation about reality, time, identity or causation does each movement establish, and how does the next movement overturn it?*

Choosing a dominant design

Answer these questions before outlining:

- Does the reader expect a closed answer to the central dramatic question?
- Is the protagonist an active causal agent, a reactive consciousness, or one voice among several?
- Is chronological continuity a source of clarity, or is temporal fracture part of the meaning?
- Will conflict be carried mainly by public action, intimate relationships or interior perception?
- Is ambiguity an earned final condition, or a temporary effect before revelation?

The answers determine how visible your act turns should be. A classical crime novel may need a hard commitment, midpoint reversal and exposed culprit. A minimalist relationship novel may turn through consent, refusal and recognition. Both need form; they simply distribute pressure differently.

6. The *Save the Cat!* Writes a Novel fifteen-beat map

[Jessica Brody's adaptation for novelists](#) joins plot timing to character transformation. In the official excerpt, Brody calls [“Plot, structure, and character transformation”](#) the “Holy Trinity of Story.” The official [Save the Cat! overview](#) supplies the standard beat names and percentage ranges used below.

The percentages refer to the position in the complete story, not the percentage of a particular act. For an 80,000-word novel, one per cent is approximately 800 words. Treat these figures as planning coordinates and revision signals. A beat can arrive earlier or later if causality, genre and reader expectation support the choice.

“*Genres tell us how stories differ. The Beat Sheet shows us how they're built.*” — *Save the Cat! method overview*

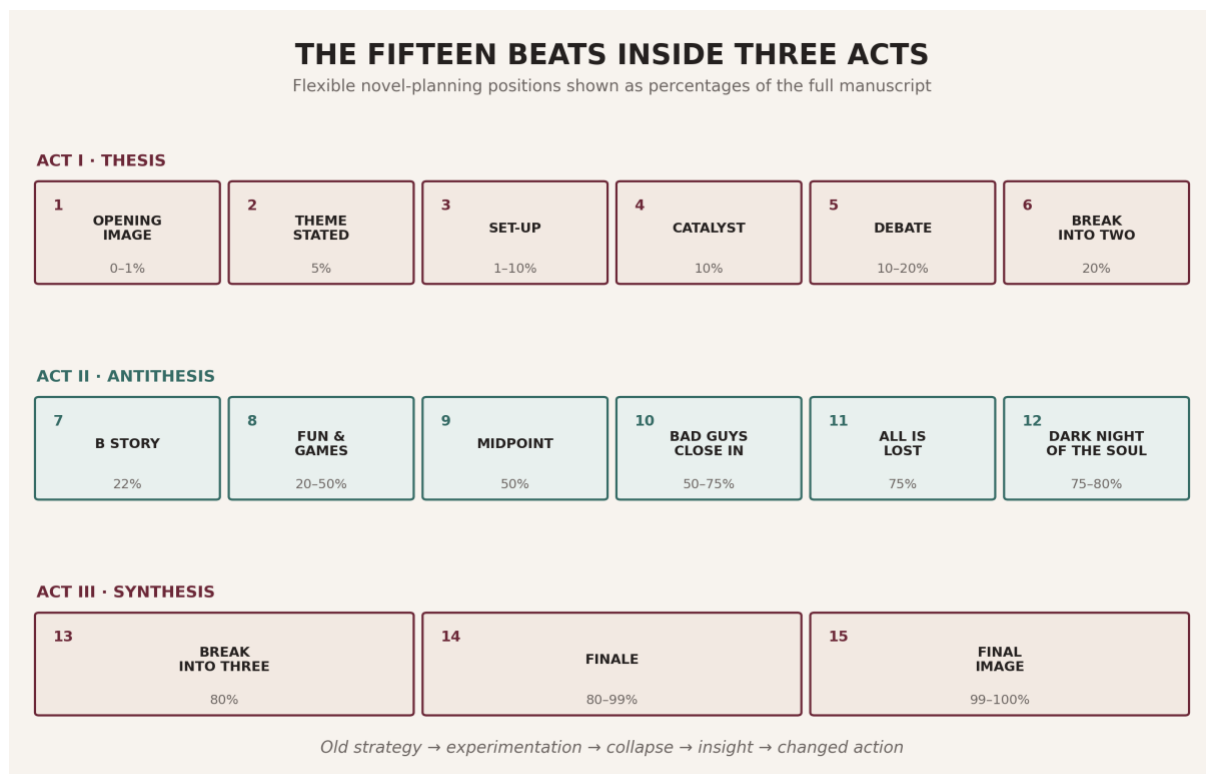


Figure 5. An original fifteen-beat map showing how the *Save the Cat!* beats sit inside three acts.

Act I: Thesis — the old world and the first commitment

1. Opening Image — 0 to 1 per cent

Offer a concentrated experience of the protagonist and world *before* transformation. This is not necessarily a landscape description or cinematic tableau. It may be a choice, ritual, failure, relationship pattern or voice-driven moment that embodies the old equilibrium.

Structural job: establish a baseline that the Final Image can meaningfully answer.

Novel question: What can the opening dramatise, rather than explain, about the protagonist's current way of living?

2. Theme Stated — around 5 per cent

Let the novel raise, usually indirectly, the truth the protagonist will need to test. Another character may speak it, but the theme can also appear as an image, argument, warning, contradiction or recurring phrase. The protagonist normally cannot understand its full meaning yet.

Structural job: plant the moral or existential question beneath the plot.

Novel question: What proposition will the climax prove, complicate or reject through action?

3. Set-Up — 1 to 10 per cent

Show the ordinary system: relationships, pressures, resources, obligations and flaws. Brody's “stasis equals death” principle is often used here as a diagnostic: what in the protagonist's life cannot continue indefinitely? Avoid a dossier-like introduction of every character. Select details that will be activated by later conflict.

Structural job: make the coming disturbance consequential by showing what it threatens and why change is necessary.

Novel question: Which three conditions of the opening life must be overturned, repaired or consciously retained?

4. Catalyst — around 10 per cent

Deliver the event that disrupts the old arrangement. It may be an invitation, loss, arrival, crime, diagnosis, exposure, accident, refusal or impossible opportunity. The catalyst should be clear enough that the reader feels the story's direction sharpen.

Structural job: create a problem or opportunity that demands a response.

Novel question: What becomes newly possible, newly dangerous or newly necessary?

5. Debate — 10 to 20 per cent

Let the protagonist react, resist, prepare, gather information or attempt a smaller solution. Debate does not require indecision on the page for ten per cent of the manuscript. It is the dramatic proof that the threshold matters. Even when the protagonist rushes forward, practical barriers or competing duties can embody the debate.

Structural job: test reluctance, capacity and stakes before commitment.

Novel question: What legitimate reason does the protagonist have not to enter the central conflict?

6. Break into Two — around 20 per cent

The protagonist makes, or is forced into, a decision that enters a new arena of action. The strongest break contains agency: even if circumstances are coercive, the protagonist chooses a strategy within them. The goal becomes more concrete and the rules change.

Structural job: close the old world and launch the sustained central pursuit.

Novel question: What action makes retreat costly or impossible?

Act II, first movement: Antithesis — promise, experiment and midpoint revelation

7. B Story — around 22 per cent

Introduce or intensify a relationship, subplot or thematic counterline that helps the protagonist encounter the story's deeper question. It may involve a lover, rival, friend, sibling, mentor, community or even a second temporal strand. “B” does not mean decorative. The line should exert causal or thematic pressure on the main action.

Structural job: create a human arena in which the protagonist's need becomes visible.

Novel question: Who can challenge the protagonist's governing misbelief in a way the central antagonist cannot?

8. Fun and Games — 20 to 50 per cent

Deliver the distinctive experience promised by the premise. A museum heist novel needs ingenious preparation and theft; a campus satire needs the absurd machinery of the institution; a romance needs charged encounters; a portal fantasy needs discovery and consequence. “Fun” refers to readerly fulfilment, not necessarily happiness for the characters.

This long section should also complicate. The protagonist tests the initial strategy, gains skill, makes allies, attracts opposition and produces consequences. Each episode should either deepen the promise or tighten the trap.

Structural job: explore the premise while building a causal ladder toward the midpoint.

Novel question: Which scenes could exist only in *this* novel?

9. Midpoint — around 50 per cent

Create a major false victory, false defeat, revelation, public exposure, intimacy, betrayal or deadline. Raise the stakes and change the protagonist's understanding. The midpoint often moves the story from exploratory action to focused pressure.

Structural job: reinterpret the goal and make consequences more immediate.

Novel question: What does the protagonist now know, possess, lose or risk that makes the second half fundamentally different from the first?

Act II, second movement: pressure, collapse and insight

10. Bad Guys Close In — 50 to 75 per cent

Let external and internal antagonism converge. The antagonist adapts; allies divide; institutions resist; the protagonist's flaw contaminates partial success. In a novel without a literal villain, the “bad guys” may be time, illness, secrecy, ideology, grief or the consequences of the protagonist's earlier choices.

Structural job: remove safe options and expose the limits of the old strategy.

Novel question: How can each apparent solution create a more intimate or morally costly problem?

11. All Is Lost — around 75 per cent

Stage the apparent defeat. The goal seems impossible, the relationship ruptures, the evidence is destroyed, the community rejects the protagonist, or the victory is revealed as hollow. The beat frequently carries a “whiff of death”: literal death, symbolic death, the death of a plan, identity or future.

Structural job: end the initial strategy and create the conditions for genuine change.

Novel question: What loss would make the protagonist believe the story is over?

12. Dark Night of the Soul — 75 to 80 per cent

Allow grief, reckoning and re-evaluation. This is not empty wallowing. The protagonist assembles the meaning of what happened, recognises complicity, mourns what cannot be restored, or finally hears the thematic truth planted earlier.

Structural job: convert defeat into insight or, in a negative arc, into a final refusal of insight.

Novel question: What truth is available only after the old identity or plan has failed?

Act III: Synthesis — a new plan proved through action

13. Break into Three — around 80 per cent

Bring the external clue and internal insight together. The protagonist discovers a new plan, but the plan matters because it expresses changed understanding. A convenient rescue from another character weakens the beat unless it still requires the protagonist to make the decisive choice.

Structural job: launch the final strategy from a transformed or clarified position.

Novel question: What can the protagonist do now that the Act I version of this person could not have done?

14. Finale — 80 to 99 per cent

Execute the plan through escalating tests. The finale is not one undifferentiated showdown. It often has its own mini-structure: gather the team or resources; enter the dangerous space; suffer a reversal; improvise without the old protection; make the crisis choice; enact the climax; show the immediate result.

Structural job: resolve the central dramatic question and prove character through action.

Novel question: Does each stage demand more courage, skill, sacrifice or truth than the last?

15. Final Image — 99 to 100 per cent

Create an “after” image that answers the opening. It may mirror the same location, behaviour, relationship or object under changed conditions. The image need not announce a happy ending. In a tragedy, it can show the cost of failed change; in an open ending, it can establish the precise ambiguity that remains.

Structural job: compress the novel's transformation into a final felt contrast.

Novel question: What single action, perception or arrangement makes the change undeniable without explaining it?

7. Mapping McKee's principles to the fifteen beats

The two systems become most useful when treated as complementary lenses.

Inciting incident and Catalyst: Both disturb equilibrium and create desire. McKee emphasises the radical imbalance and the protagonist's resulting object of desire; *Save the Cat!* supplies a typical position near ten per cent.

Act I climax and Break into Two: Both demand a major turn into sustained action. The crucial test is commitment, not the label.

Progressive complications and Fun and Games/Bad Guys Close In: McKee's complications explain how opposition should grow in quality and consequence. The beat sheet divides that long progression around the midpoint, protecting the novel from a repetitive middle.

Crisis and Dark Night/Break into Three: McKee separates the crisis decision from the climax action. The *Save the Cat!* sequence makes room for defeat, reflection and the discovery of a new synthesis.

Climax and Finale: Both insist on decisive action with maximum meaning. McKee's official climax page says, "Without your Climax, you have no story." The climax need not be loud; it must resolve the central value struggle.

Resolution and Final Image: Both allow the reader to absorb the new equilibrium. The ending should be long enough to experience the consequence and short enough that narrative energy does not leak away.

Where writers get confused

The **Catalyst** is not necessarily the **Break into Two**. The first knocks the world out of balance; the second is the protagonist's consequential entry into the central pursuit.

The **Midpoint** is not merely "something exciting in the middle." It changes the terms or meaning of the conflict.

All Is Lost is not automatically the **Crisis**. All Is Lost creates defeat; the crisis crystallises the choice produced by that defeat.

The **Climax** is not the longest action sequence. It is the action that produces the final, irreversible value change.

The **Final Image** is not an epilogue summary. It is a concrete experience of the after-state.

8. McKee's genre system: twenty-five structural traditions

McKee argues that genre is not a shelf label but a set of creative obligations. The official [McKee genre page](#) stresses learning the conventions of the chosen tradition; the current [McKee genre programme](#) puts the principle plainly: all writers work within genre traditions of events, characters and values.

The taxonomy in *Story* is film-oriented, but it transfers readily to novels. Some categories describe a central conflict, some a pattern of character change, some a setting or historical relation, and some a mode of presentation. This is why genres can be mixed. A novel might be a Historical Drama in setting, a Love Story in its relationship plot, a Modern Epic in its central conflict and an Education Plot in its character arc.

The summaries below are original. They identify the primary structural promise and a productive three-act movement for each tradition. They are not substitutes for McKee's detailed discussion or for reading widely in the genre.

Relationship and ordeal

1. Love Story

A [Love Story](#) turns on forces that attract and separate the lovers. Act I creates the bond or recognises its possibility; Act II intensifies intimacy and the counterforces against it; Act III demands a choice that defines what love costs. In a tragic design, union may be impossible, but the climax still resolves the value of love against duty, fear, status or death.

2. Horror

[Horror](#) encloses vulnerable characters with a source of terror and a transgression, wound or opening that lets the threat enter. Act I reveals the breach; Act II tests explanations and survival strategies while the monster's reach expands; Act III confronts the true nature and cost of the horror. The monster can be rational, supernatural or held between explanations.

3. Action/Adventure

[Action](#) organises peril through power, pursuit, tactical choices and set pieces. Act I establishes the threat and mission; Act II alternates gains with reversals as the antagonistic force proves stronger; Act III forces the protagonist to act without the protection of the original plan. Adventure often adds destiny, hubris, exploration or spiritual stakes; survival stories make nature the principal counterforce.

The individual, history and collective power

4. Modern Epic

The Modern Epic places the individual against the state, empire, ideology or vast institution. Act I reveals the machinery and recruits the protagonist into opposition; Act II widens the struggle from private grievance to public consequence; Act III measures personal sacrifice against collective change. The climax must answer whether one life can alter, expose or survive the system.

5. Western

The Western uses the frontier to test law, community, violence and the boundary between civilisation and wilderness. Act I brings a destabilising force into contested territory; Act II makes every available law inadequate or compromised; Act III requires a founding, abandoning or redefining of the social order. A novel can use this structure outside the historical American West whenever frontier conditions shape value.

6. War

The War genre centres combat rather than merely using war as a backdrop. Act I turns civilian, recruit or unit toward battle; Act II exposes the strategic, bodily and moral realities of combat; Act III resolves the mission and the protagonist's relationship to sacrifice, obedience and survival. Pro-war and anti-war designs differ in the value finally placed on combat, not simply in whether the protagonist wins.

7. Social Drama

Social Drama identifies a structural harm in family, politics, medicine, education, environment or another social field. Act I makes the harm personal and legible; Act II reveals how the system reproduces it and defeats individual fixes; Act III tests a cure, reform, exposure or act of solidarity. The ending may be partial, but it should distinguish personal relief from systemic change.

Transformation plots

8. Maturation Plot

The Maturation Plot turns on an action that demonstrates movement from immaturity to adulthood or fuller responsibility. Act I shows the protections and limitations of the childlike position; Act II brings experiences that invalidate it; Act III requires an adult choice that accepts cost, ambiguity or responsibility. McKee's *analysis of Moonlight* is especially useful on designing an act of maturity rather than merely announcing growth.

9. Redemption Plot

Redemption moves the protagonist's moral condition from destructive to life-giving. Act I shows the harm and the possibility of another path; Act II tests reform, often through relapse or costly responsibility; Act III demands an action that repairs, protects or sacrifices without guaranteeing forgiveness. Redemption is proven by conduct, not by remorse alone.

10. Punitive Plot

The Punitive Plot tracks a protagonist who moves from relative good or tolerable compromise into wrongdoing and suffers the consequence. Act I makes the temptation understandable; Act II rewards the transgression enough to deepen it; Act III brings exposure, punishment or self-destruction. The structure should reveal the protagonist's agency, not treat punishment as arbitrary fate.

11. Testing Plot

The Testing Plot places willpower against pressure to surrender a defining value or purpose. Act I establishes the commitment; Act II increases temptation, exhaustion and rational reasons to quit; Act III removes external reassurance and asks whether the protagonist continues. Change may be limited: the structural focus is the revelation and cost of endurance.

12. Education Plot

The Education Plot changes the protagonist's understanding of life, self or others from a constricted or negative view toward a more meaningful one. Act I demonstrates the impoverished worldview; Act II supplies experiences the old interpretation cannot contain; Act III turns new understanding into changed relation or action. McKee's [comparison of education and disillusionment](#) clarifies their opposite value directions.

13. Disillusionment Plot

Disillusionment moves from experienced meaning toward the collapse of a sustaining belief. Act I establishes the belief's emotional necessity; Act II accumulates contradictions and evasions; Act III makes the truth undeniable. The climax is often a recognition rather than a victory, but it must still change the protagonist's condition irrevocably.

Point of view, investigation and comic attack

14. Comedy

[Comedy](#) organises conflict around a target of comic attack: hypocrisy, vanity, bureaucracy, manners, desire, status or the body's unruliness. Act I establishes the social rule and the character's blind spot; Act II compounds error, disguise and exposure; Act III brings recognition, reintegration, expulsion or a final escalation of absurdity. Tone varies from generous romantic comedy to lethal satire.

15. Crime

[Crime](#) changes structure according to point of view. A murder mystery privileges the investigator, a caper the criminal, a thriller or revenge tale the victim, a courtroom story the advocate, and a prison drama the inmate. Act I defines the crime and the viewpoint's objective; Act II controls information while danger and moral compromise grow; Act III converts hidden causality into proof, escape, punishment or unresolved corruption.

Fact, time and representational form

16. Historical Drama

Historical Drama uses a past period as a mirror for present human conflict. Act I establishes the historical order without burying the reader in research; Act II makes the protagonist's desire collide with period-specific constraints; Act III resolves the personal action while allowing history's larger movement to remain complex. Accuracy supplies pressure and possibility, not decoration.

17. Biography

Biography selects and interprets a life through a central value and genre. Act I finds the desire and conditions that organise the subject's life; Act II chooses episodes that create causal progression rather than chronology alone; Act III locates the action or recognition that gives the life narrative meaning. A birth-to-death inventory is not yet a story.

18. Docudrama

Docudrama dramatises recent or documented events while shaping them into a coherent causal experience. Act I establishes the factual disturbance and viewpoint; Act II arranges evidence, conflict

and competing accounts; Act III offers a consequential interpretation. Ethical structure makes clear where compression, invention or uncertainty enters.

19. Mockumentary

Mockumentary imitates documentary authority in order to expose institutions, vanity or the instability of fact. Act I establishes the apparently credible frame; Act II lets contradictions accumulate between what the frame claims and what it shows; Act III collapses, weaponises or perversely preserves the fiction. The structure depends on disciplined control of audience knowledge.

20. Musical

The Musical presents a world in which song and movement can carry decisive action, emotion and value change. In prose, analogous heightened forms might include verse, refrain, typography or embedded performance. Act I teaches the reader the expressive rules; Act II complicates what can and cannot be spoken directly; Act III lets the heightened form deliver or fail at the decisive communication. The musical mode usually combines with another central genre.

Speculative, athletic and supra-genres

21. Science Fiction

Science Fiction alters technology, society or cosmology to test human values under hypothetical conditions. Act I teaches the governing innovation through conflict; Act II reveals second-order consequences and the systems built around it; Act III forces a choice that answers the human question beneath the speculation. The imagined world is usually the pressure chamber for another genre such as Modern Epic, Crime, Love Story or Disillusionment.

22. Sports

The Sports genre uses training, competition and embodied performance as a crucible for character. Act I establishes the arena and the deficit; Act II converts practice and competition into tests of identity, loyalty and will; Act III makes the decisive contest meaningful beyond the scoreboard. Winning without inner consequence is spectacle; losing with transformed value can be a complete climax.

23. Fantasy

Fantasy changes the laws of nature, time, space or the supernatural. Act I introduces the impossible and its rules; Act II explores powers, prices and political consequences; Act III requires the protagonist to act within the deepest cost of the invented order. Like science fiction, fantasy is often a world-bearing supra-genre combined with quest, love, maturation, political drama or horror.

24. Animation

Animation, in McKee's film taxonomy, allows universal metamorphosis: anything may become anything else. For novelists, the useful structural principle is radical plasticity of body, object and world. Act I establishes what transformations are possible; Act II turns metamorphosis into complication and meaning; Act III makes the final transformation resolve character and value, not merely display invention.

25. Art Film / Art Novel

The Art Film is a supra-genre embracing Minimalism and Antistructure. Its prose relative, the art novel, may use open endings, passivity, fractured time, ambiguity or self-conscious form. Act design can be muted or deliberately disrupted, but each movement still needs an aesthetic function: intensifying perception, destabilising causality, or changing the reader's relation to the work.

How to combine genres without making structural soup

Name one **primary genre** that supplies the central climax. Then name a **character-change genre** and, if needed, a **world or form genre**.

For example:

- Primary: Crime, because the climax resolves who committed the murder and whether the truth becomes public.
- Character change: Education, because the investigator moves from cynicism to a more demanding form of trust.
- World/form: Historical Drama, because colonial law and archival absence create the constraints.

Now assign each genre a value and climax test. Crime may turn ignorance/knowledge; Education, meaninglessness/meaning; Historical Drama, exclusion/recognition. The final sequence should resolve these lines together or show precisely why they cannot all be resolved.

9. The ten *Save the Cat!* transformation genres

The *Save the Cat!* genres classify stories by transformation pattern rather than bookstore category. The official [genre overview and mapper](#) provides tools and examples; the [method overview](#) lists the ten types. A fantasy romance can therefore be a Golden Fleece, a Buddy Love or an Out of the Bottle depending on the engine of change.

These summaries are original and are designed to help novelists find the act turns.

Buddy Love

An incomplete protagonist meets a counterpart whose difference creates the possibility of wholeness. Act I forms the reluctant or desired bond; Act II deepens mutual dependence while a complication divides them; Act III asks each person to choose the relationship without the illusion that love erases difference.

Dude with a Problem

An ordinary or unprepared person is thrown into sudden danger with primal stakes. Act I traps the protagonist; Act II turns resourcefulness into survival while the threat expands; Act III forces a confrontation for which experience has made the once-ordinary person newly capable.

Fool Triumphant

An underestimated outsider enters an establishment whose insiders mistake innocence or unconventionality for weakness. Act I establishes exclusion; Act II lets the fool's methods expose institutional absurdity; Act III reverses status and reveals who was truly foolish.

Golden Fleece

A journey toward a prize becomes a journey of change. Act I launches the road and defines the apparent reward; Act II uses companions and obstacles to transform the traveller; Act III tests whether the prize, the return or the new self matters most.

Institutionalized

A protagonist confronts the identity and cost of belonging to a group. Act I introduces the institution's promise; Act II reveals its rules, rewards and damage; Act III requires a choice to join, reform, leave, expose or destroy the system, usually through sacrifice.

Monster in the House

A transgression brings a monster into a bounded space. Act I reveals the house, sin and threat; Act II tightens enclosure and makes the cost of the sin visible; Act III confronts the monster and addresses, repeats or refuses the underlying transgression.

Out of the Bottle

A wish or extraordinary intervention disrupts ordinary life under specific rules. Act I grants or triggers the magic; Act II explores comic or dangerous fulfilment and its price; Act III requires the protagonist to accept the lesson, master the rules or relinquish the wish.

Rites of Passage

A universal life transition creates pain the protagonist initially attacks in the wrong way. Act I establishes the passage and denial; Act II exhausts evasions; Act III turns on acceptance of the hard truth that the protagonist, not the whole world, must change.

Superhero

A special power, gift or mission comes with a curse and an equal or greater nemesis. Act I establishes the gift and price; Act II tests whether power can be used without corruption or isolation; Act III requires acceptance, sacrifice or rejection of the exceptional identity.

Whydunit

The investigation moves beyond who or how toward the darkness of motive. Act I opens the secret; Act II pulls investigator and reader deeper into the moral world behind it; Act III reveals why the crime became possible and what pursuit of that truth costs.

A practical genre sentence

Complete this before outlining:

This is primarily a [genre] in which [protagonist] moves from [opening condition] to [ending condition] by confronting [genre-specific force], and the climax proves the change when they [decisive action].

If the sentence cannot name an ending condition and an action, the genre may still be only atmosphere.

10. An original worked example: *The Salt Archive*

Consider an invented 90,000-word literary mystery called *The Salt Archive*. Mara, a risk-averse municipal archivist in a coastal town, discovers that flood-compensation files have been systematically altered. Her late mother's signature appears on the approvals. Mara wants to protect the archive and her mother's reputation; she needs to accept that love does not require preserving a false version of someone.

The primary genre is **Crime** from the investigator's point of view. The character-change genre is **Education**. The world genre is **Social Drama**, because the fraud distributes safety and danger according to class and political influence.

Act I: the record begins to speak — 0 to 21 per cent

Opening Image: Mara repairs a water-damaged file so meticulously that the original tear becomes invisible. The image embodies her belief that care means erasing damage.

Theme Stated: A retired clerk tells her, “A clean record can be the dirtiest thing in the room.” Mara treats the remark as cynicism.

Set-Up: We see her controlled routines, her strained relationship with an activist brother, the town's approaching storm season, and the council's plan to digitise and destroy paper files.

Catalyst: A displaced resident brings in a compensation letter whose archive copy shows a different property-risk classification.

Debate: Mara assumes an indexing error, quietly compares files, and discovers a pattern. Reporting it could close the archive, implicate her mother and jeopardise current claims. Her brother wants immediate publication.

Break into Two: Mara steals the destruction schedule, enters the sealed flood basement after hours, and begins an unofficial investigation. She crosses from neutral custodian to participant.

Act II, first movement: the pleasure and danger of discovery — 21 to 50 per cent

B Story: Mara reluctantly works with Leila, a lawyer representing displaced residents. Their methods and class positions clash, but Leila challenges Mara's belief that neutrality is innocent.

Fun and Games: They reconstruct missing files from accession numbers, salt stains, council minutes and retired staff memories. Each discovery delivers the archive-mystery premise. Partial victories also expose Mara: someone changes her access permissions; a witness retracts a statement; her brother publishes a fragment too early.

Midpoint: Mara finds proof that the alterations redirected flood risk from a wealthy development onto an older neighbourhood. She also finds her mother's private note objecting to the plan. This is a false victory—her mother may be innocent—but the note reveals a deadline: the originals will be pulped in forty-eight hours. The stakes become public and urgent.

Act II, second movement: the old strategy destroys what it tries to protect — 50 to 80 per cent

Bad Guys Close In: Mara hides the note to protect it, refuses Leila's demand to release everything, and tries to persuade the council archivist privately. Her secrecy makes her look complicit. Leila withdraws. The council announces that Mara's mother designed the reclassification system. A storm closes the road and water enters the basement.

All Is Lost: Mara discovers the note was a draft never sent. Her mother did sign the final approvals. The basement pumps fail, and the boxes containing the original sequence begin to dissolve. The identity Mara was protecting cannot survive intact.

Dark Night of the Soul: Reading her mother's marginalia, Mara recognises a more painful truth: her mother objected, yielded to pressure, then spent years making small reparations without confessing. Mara sees the same pattern in herself—private care used as a substitute for public responsibility.

Act III: preservation becomes truthful action — 80 to 100 per cent

Break into Three: Mara realises the archive's value is not the survival of pristine paper but the preservation of verifiable relationships among records. She contacts Leila and her brother, releases the catalogue logic, and turns residents' photographs into corroborating evidence.

Finale: The group rescues key boxes, streams the council's destruction order, and presents a chain of evidence at an emergency hearing. When offered a deal that protects the archive if she attributes the fraud to a dead official, Mara refuses. She publicly submits her mother's approvals and her own concealment. The decisive action risks career, inheritance and reputation.

Climax: The hearing orders an independent review and freezes evictions. This is not total systemic victory, but the central value turns from **controlled false record** to **contested public truth**.

Final Image: Mara mounts a repaired file with the water line still visible and adds a note documenting the repair. The damage is preserved as part of the truth. The image answers the invisible mend of the opening.

Why the example holds together

The outer plot and inner arc share a governing metaphor: preservation. Each act changes what preservation means. Act I equates it with concealment, Act II exposes concealment as complicity,

and Act III redefines it as transparent custody of damaged truth. Genre, beat and character are therefore not separate layers. They are different descriptions of the same causal design.

11. Building your own three-act outline

Start with acts, then sequences, then scenes. Planning every chapter before the central value and climax are clear often produces detailed but directionless material.

Step 1: write the ending value first

Complete two sentences:

1. At the beginning, the central value is **[positive/negative condition]**.
2. After the climax, the central value is **[changed condition]** because the protagonist **[decisive action]**.

If you cannot state the change, you may have a situation rather than a story.

Step 2: design the crisis choice

The crisis is the story's most concentrated dilemma. Avoid a choice between obvious good and obvious evil. Create competing values: save the evidence or save the witness; tell the truth or protect the child; accept love or retain control; win the case by repeating the institution's injustice or lose honestly.

McKee's [crisis-decision page](#) describes crisis as the point of greatest tension before the next action answers how events will turn out. Write both sides of the choice so that each carries a real cost.

Step 3: design the climax as action

What does the protagonist *do*? A discovery can create the crisis, but a climax normally requires action or refusal. The action should be:

- **caused** by what came before;
- **difficult** because major values conflict;
- **character-revealing** under maximum pressure;
- **irreversible** in its central consequence; and
- **thematically legible** without a lecture.

Step 4: work backward to the Act II collapse

What must fail so the climactic action becomes possible? Design All Is Lost as the death of the old strategy. If the protagonist can reach the climax without losing anything, the middle may not have challenged the governing misbelief.

Step 5: design the midpoint

What event changes the meaning of the goal? Choose a revelation, intimacy, reversal, exposure, deadline or apparent success that creates a different second half. The midpoint should not merely divide pages; it should divide understandings.

Step 6: design the Act I commitment

What choice enters the central arena? Give it agency and cost. If the protagonist is physically abducted, forced, drafted or trapped, find the decision within the coercion: whom do they trust, what rule do they break, what objective do they adopt?

Step 7: design the catalyst and opening baseline

Now make the catalyst disturb the exact arrangement that the Act I commitment abandons. Build the opening around selective details that the later structure will transform.

Step 8: create progressive complications

Between the major turns, list attempts using this causal chain:

Because the protagonist does X, the counterforce does Y; **therefore** the protagonist tries Z; **but** Z reveals or creates a more difficult problem.

If several scenes can be reordered without changing meaning, strengthen causality.

Step 9: add the relationship and thematic line

Identify the person, group or secondary plot through which the protagonist's need becomes experiential. Let this line affect the main plot. A subplot that can be removed without changing any choice, resource, reversal or meaning is not yet integrated.

Step 10: convert structure into chapters

Only now decide where chapters begin and end. A chapter is a reading unit, not necessarily a scene or beat. It can contain several scenes, end before a scene completes, or juxtapose viewpoints. Use chapter breaks to manage question, contrast, rhythm and revelation.

12. Scene and sequence practice

The five-line scene card

For every major scene, write:

1. **Desire:** What does the viewpoint character want now?
2. **Counterforce:** Who or what resists, and what does that force want?
3. **Expectation:** What does the viewpoint character think the action will produce?
4. **Turn:** What unexpected but caused result changes the value?
5. **Next necessity:** What must happen because of this turn?

This prevents scenes that contain polished dialogue and atmosphere but leave the story where it began.

The sequence ladder

Group three to six scenes around a provisional objective. For example: obtain the guest list; persuade the sister to testify; cross the winter pass; conceal the affair during the wedding. The sequence climax should settle that local objective while opening a larger problem.

Label each sequence with a verb and a value turn:

- **Recruit the witness:** isolation → alliance
- **Test the alibi:** certainty → doubt
- **Enter the institution:** outsider freedom → compromised belonging
- **Protect the secret:** control → exposure

Then order sequences so that consequences grow and alternatives shrink.

The act-climax audit

At each act break, answer:

- What has the protagonist chosen?
- What has become irreversible?
- Which value has turned most strongly?
- What new question now pulls the reader forward?
- How must the protagonist's strategy change?
- What would be missing if the act ended one chapter earlier?

If the answers are vague, search for the decisive action. Do not strengthen an act break by adding weather, shouting or a cliff-edge unless those elements alter value and causality.

13. Common structural problems and repairs

The novel starts before the story

Symptoms: multiple chapters of biography, world explanation or routine; the central disturbance arrives late; early scenes establish facts but do not turn.

Repair: begin near the last day the old equilibrium can continue. Convert background into conflict-bearing detail. Let the reader learn the world as the protagonist tries to do something within it.

The catalyst is vivid but creates no desire

Symptoms: a dramatic event occurs, then the protagonist continues as before; another event must restart the plot.

Repair: clarify why this disturbance matters to this protagonist. Connect it to a concrete object of desire, obligation or fear.

The Act I break is only a change of location

Symptoms: the protagonist travels, starts a job or meets the cast, but remains strategically uncommitted.

Repair: add a choice that closes an alternative, creates liability or announces a goal. Make the protagonist responsible for entering the new phase, even under constraint.

The middle repeats instead of progresses

Symptoms: similar arguments, clues, attacks, dates or failures; chapters could be rearranged; stakes are described as rising but choices remain equally easy.

Repair: vary the level and kind of conflict. Let one complication damage a relationship, another remove legal protection, another reveal self-deception. Make success generate consequence.

The midpoint is invisible

Symptoms: the second half feels like more of the first; urgency and focus do not change.

Repair: create a public result, revelation, intimacy, betrayal, possession, loss or deadline that alters the protagonist's interpretation and narrows the goal.

All Is Lost feels manipulative

Symptoms: a sudden misunderstanding, random accident or preventable silence manufactures defeat.

Repair: make the collapse the accumulated result of the protagonist's strategy and the antagonist's adaptation. The audience should be surprised by the form of defeat but able to trace its causes.

The protagonist learns but does not change

Symptoms: the character explains the theme, apologises or has an insight, then solves the climax using the same behaviour as before.

Repair: design a final action that the opening version of the character would refuse, misunderstand or be incapable of performing.

The climax belongs to someone else

Symptoms: a mentor, lover, police officer, coincidence or hidden document resolves the central question while the protagonist watches.

Repair: another character may supply information or aid, but reserve the decisive value-changing choice for the protagonist unless the novel deliberately dramatises failed agency.

The ending continues after the value has settled

Symptoms: repeated explanations, several farewell chapters, a new conflict after the central climax.

Repair: resolve necessary consequences, answer promised questions and reach the final image. If a late event creates a new primary dramatic question, it may belong to another book or require earlier integration.

The beat sheet flattens originality

Symptoms: characters perform labels instead of desires; every beat has the same scale; scenes feel selected to satisfy a diagram.

Repair: return to value, genre and causality. Brody explicitly writes, “I’m here to enhance your process.” Use the beat sheet to diagnose missing functions, then invent the most specific expression your characters and world demand.

14. A revision workflow for an existing draft

You do not need to be a plotter to use structure. Brody's official excerpt makes room for both plotters and discovery writers; structure can be developed before drafting or discovered in revision.

Pass 1: write a reverse outline

For each chapter, record viewpoint, location, immediate desire, principal conflict, value at start, value at end, revelation and consequence. Use one or two lines per field. Do not summarise beautiful prose; capture dramatic function.

Pass 2: mark the five major turns

Identify catalyst, Act I break, midpoint, Act II collapse/crisis and climax. If you have several candidates, ask which event most strongly changes value and strategy. Note the manuscript percentage of each.

Pass 3: trace causality

Draw arrows using **because/therefore**, not **and then**. Where an arrow cannot be drawn, decide whether a scene is thematic counterpoint, necessary preparation or expendable material. Counterpoint can be valuable, but accidental disconnection drains momentum.

Pass 4: trace value lines

Choose three values—central, relationship and inner—and mark their charge after each sequence. A perfectly upward line is usually less interesting than progress through reversal. Look for long flat stretches.

Pass 5: trace the protective strategy

Find where the protagonist uses the old strategy successfully, where it begins to fail, where doubling down causes damage, where a new possibility appears and where the climax tests the new action. If the misbelief has no behavioural pattern, the arc may remain abstract.

Pass 6: audit genre promises

List five experiences readers expect from the primary genre. Mark where the draft fulfils, delays, reverses or innovates each one. Genre conventions are not clichés until they are expressed without specificity or surprise.

Pass 7: compress or expand

Compress duplicated functions. If three scenes all show mistrust without changing it, keep the strongest or make each turn differently. Expand underdeveloped thresholds: commitment, midpoint reinterpretation, crisis decision and climax often need more space than their draft currently receives.

Pass 8: rewrite transitions after the turns are sound

Only after structural movement works should you perfect bridges, chapter endings and pacing sentences. Good transitions cannot repair a weak causal chain, but they can make a strong chain feel inevitable.

15. A compact planning template

Story promise

Primary genre:

Character-change genre:

Central value: from _____ to _____

Controlling thematic proposition:

Protagonist

Conscious want:

Unconscious need:

Misbelief:

Protective strategy:

Climactic action that proves change or failed change:

Act I — disturbance and commitment

Opening baseline:

Theme planted:

Catalyst / inciting incident:

Legitimate debate:

Act I break — decision, irreversibility and value turn:

Act II — experiment, reversal and collapse

B Story / thematic relationship:

Promise-of-premise sequences:

Midpoint — new meaning, stakes or deadline:

Progressive complications after midpoint:

All Is Lost — death of the old strategy:

Crisis dilemma — best bad choice or irreconcilable goods:

Act III — synthesis and proof

New plan born from insight:

Finale stages:

Climax — irreversible action and value change:

Resolution:

Final Image answering the opening:

16. Final principles

Three-act structure works when it is felt as consequence rather than seen as scaffolding. The reader does not need to name the Break into Two or the crisis. The reader needs to experience a threshold, mounting necessity, a narrowing of options and a final action that could only emerge from this sequence of pressures.

Keep these principles beside the manuscript:

- **Structure is change organised by causality.**
- **An act ends when the protagonist's strategy and circumstances must change.**
- **Conflict is resistance with its own desire, logic or force.**
- **Escalation changes the kind and cost of the problem.**
- **The midpoint changes meaning, not merely pace.**
- **Character is revealed by difficult choice and transformed through changed action.**
- **Genre supplies promises; originality supplies their particular form.**
- **The beat sheet is a diagnostic map, not a substitute for invention.**
- **The climax resolves the central value through action.**
- **The final image lets the reader feel what all that action has changed.**

Sources and further reading

Robert McKee

- [*STORY: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* — official book page](#)
- [*“Do Your Scenes Turn?”* — official excerpt from Story](#)
- [*“Your Inciting Incident”*](#)
- [*“Your Object of Desire”*](#)
- [*“Forces of Antagonism”*](#)
- [*“Your Crisis Decision”*](#)
- [*“The Climax”*](#)
- [*CHARACTER* — official book page](#)
- [*“Understanding Your Genre”*](#)
- [*“The Differences Between Redemption, Education, Degeneration and Disillusionment Plots”*](#)
- [*McKee on 45 Years: one-act design, Education and Disillusionment*](#)
- [*McKee on Moonlight: Maturation Plot and Act Three*](#)
- [*McKee Action genre page*](#)
- [*McKee Crime Thriller genre page*](#)
- [*McKee Love Story genre page*](#)

Save the Cat! Writes a Novel

- [*Jessica Brody, Save the Cat! Writes a Novel* — official author page](#)
- [*Official excerpt from Save the Cat! Writes a Novel*](#)
- [*Official Save the Cat! Writes a Novel book page*](#)
- [*Official fifteen-beat and ten-genre method overview*](#)
- [*Free official Beat Sheet Mapper*](#)
- [*Free official Genre Mapper*](#)

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