



# TENT POLE SCENES OUTLINE

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*Use this short summary to see the big picture for your project*

The concept is pretty simple—think of these key scenes as the poles that are holding up the story tent you’ve just pitched. Remove any one of them and your tent collapses.

This is your stripped-down narrative arc. For memoir, it’s the stripped-down arc of the journey YOU, as the protagonist, are taking in this story. For fiction, it’s the arc for your main character / protagonist.

You may decide to expand this outline once you get into drafting, but start here first to make sure you have a solid big-picture.



## ELEMENTS OF THE OUTLINE

The Tent Pole Scenes Outline is based on Rule No. 4 in the [Pixar Rules of Storytelling](#), a simple formula that hides some very complex concepts:

- Once upon a time there was \_\_\_\_.
- Every day, \_\_\_\_\_. One day \_\_\_\_\_.
- Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_.
- Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_.
- But then, \_\_\_\_\_.
- Until finally\_\_\_\_\_.
- And ever since that day\_\_\_\_\_.

Let's break this formula down:



## STEP ONE: ONCE UPON A TIME

Once upon a time there was \_\_\_\_.

A story is about a person at a particular point in time. A person who wants something they can't easily get, and who is willing to go through fire to get it. We need to know who this person is and what they want. So that's where you start.



## STEP TWO: EVERY DAY X UNTIL ONE DAY Y

Every day, \_\_\_\_\_. One day \_\_\_\_\_.

*Every good story is about something that changes. The change that really matters—particularly in memoir—is the one that goes on inside the protagonist. The change that matters most, in other words, is internal. That's why you can write a story that turns on the tiniest flicker of a gaze between two people – because maybe what is changing is the level of trust they have for each other, or maybe what is changing is that a friendship has turned to love.*

*This simple notion that every day something was happening and then one day something ELSE happened is very profound because it is setting up the critical change. Something is going to change. Something out of the ordinary is going to happen and when it does, your protagonist is going to react. They are going to make a decision to try to get what they want. So in this step, you need to define the status quo of the protagonist's world, and then define what happens to force it to change.*

## STEP THREE: BECAUSE OF THAT

*Because of that\_\_\_\_\_.*

When the protagonist acts, there must be consequences. Remember high school science? Every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The same is true in story. When something changes, something happens as a result. Usually that something is not something that the protagonist particularly wants to have happen. In fact, it's usually something the protagonist really wants to avoid. In this step, you are defining the first consequence.

## STEP FOUR: BECAUSE OF THAT

*Because of that\_\_\_\_\_.*

With every subsequent action, the stakes get raised. The protagonist is in a situation that tests them, challenges them, and forces them to grow in ways they wouldn't naturally have grown. The basic equation for that process is action > reaction > decision – all the way from beginning to end. Think of a row of dominoes. You tap one, and they all go down. Things keep getting worse and worse for the protagonist, until they come face to face with the big lesson they have to learn.

Think about your protagonist and what they want, why they want it, and what they fear. A better use of your time is to write about THOSE things, rather than just plot things. This writing may or may not take the form of scenes. This writing may or may not even make it into your book. But it will do everything to help you understand what your story is driving to, and what needs to happen to allow your character to experience the thing you want to prove.

## STEP FIVE: DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

*But then \_\_\_\_\_. And it was awful.*

Protagonists often have a moment just before the climax when it seems that all is lost. Despite all their best efforts, the bad guys have the upper hand and it seems that there is no way for the hero to succeed. It's a truly awful moment, often referred to as the Dark Night of the Soul, and yet, the hero usually learns something here that allows them to move on to save the day.

## STEP SIX: UNTIL FINALLY

*Until finally \_\_\_\_\_.*

At the end of a long road, the protagonist arrives at a resolution to whatever problem changed everything for them. The reader wants to arrive somewhere. We want to feel a sense of understanding. We crave a story that delivers that meaning and that lets us experience a satisfying resolution.

## STEP SEVEN: UNTIL FINALLY

*And ever since that day \_\_\_\_\_.*

This step is simply about the fact that story is about change. Something changes from “once upon a time” until this point in the story. This step should capture that change.

## TAKE ACTION

Now create your own Tent Pole Scenes Outline and answer the following questions:

1. Can you identify each of your tent pole scenes?
2. Can you identify the cause-and-effect between the scenes—the “because of that” vs. “and then this happened, and this happened.”
3. Can you identify both the external arc (the plot level) and the internal arc (the change happening inside the protagonist) within the tent pole scenes?

If the answer is “no” to any of these questions, you’ve got more work to do on your big picture before you draft!

**Note:** Julie is an Author Accelerator™ certified founding book coach. The material in this section includes pieces adapted from Jennie Nash’s *Blueprint for a Nonfiction Book* in addition to their own materials and are used with permission. For more information, see [authoraccelerator.com](https://authoraccelerator.com).



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