VOLUME ONE

THE ILLUSTRATED SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX



THE AI
ELEPHANT DRAFTS.

THE WRITER
MONKEY DECIDES.

THE READER
CAT JUDGES.

JESSE ALEXANDER

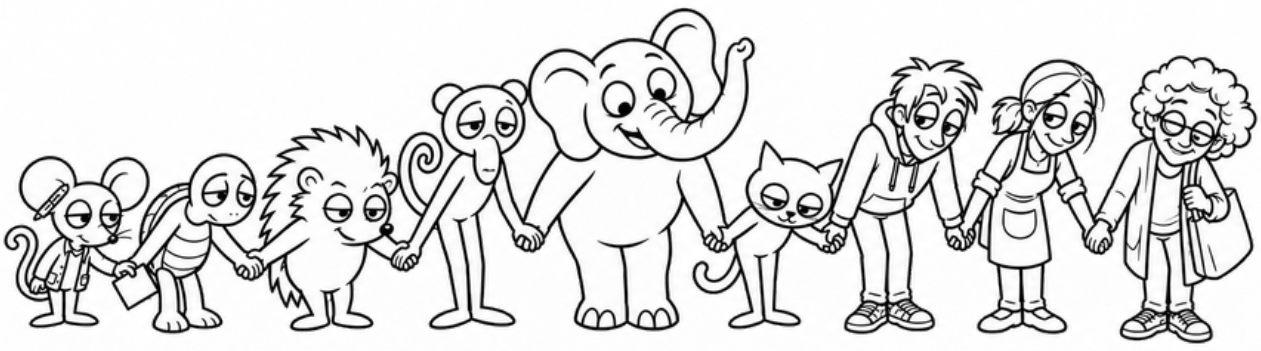
A FREE BOOK

VOLUME ONE

THE ILLUSTRATED SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX

TOOLS FOR WRITING FOR THE SCREEN, WITH OR WITHOUT AI

JESSE ALEXANDER



The Illustrated Scribbler's Toolbox, Volume One

© 2026 Jesse Alexander

This book is free.

Print it. Copy it. Pass it on.

LICENSE · CREATIVE COMMONS BY-NC 4.0

This book is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0). In plain words:

SHARE	You may copy this book and pass it on, in any form.
ADAPT	You may change it, translate it and build on it.
CREDIT	You must name the author and the book, link to the license, and say if you changed anything.
NO SALE	You may not sell it or use it to make money.

The full license: `https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/`

Ideas this book credits to other writers and teachers remain theirs. See "Where These Tools Came From" at the back. Film titles belong to their owners.

The examples in this book are films. The Room drawer borrows how TV writers' rooms work, because it's a good way to work with any group, or with AI, on any script. TV examples wait for Volume Two.

Every film example was checked against the published script where one exists, and against reference sources listed at the back. Check anything that matters to you.

How this book was made, including how AI was and was not used, is told in "How This Book Was Made" at the back.

First edition, 2026.



Contents

Eight drawers, sixty-nine tools: twelve FULL and fifty-seven QUICK. Each drawer opens with a two-page map. A **FULL** tool runs eight pages; every other tool is a QUICK tool, two facing pages. Open any drawer: every tool stands on its own.

0 Front of the Book

How This Toolbox Works		8
How to Read This Book		9
Meet the Cast		10
Start Here: Six Sessions		12
Find a Tool for This Problem		14
Know What You Want	FULL	16

1 Starting

FROM A BLANK PAGE TO A STORY YOU CAN SAY IN ONE SENTENCE.

Opener: the road map		24
The Question on a Sticky Note	FULL	26
Let It Suck (For Now)		34
Collect First, Connect Later		36
What Else Could Be True?		38
Start From What You Love		40
Do, Not Feel		42
Turn It Up to Eleven		44
Choose a Size		46
Say It Out Loud First		48

2 Scenes

EVERY SCENE IS A PURSUIT THAT ENDS SOMEWHERE NEW.

Opener: the scene as a tug of war		50
Scene and Sequel	FULL	52
Who Holds the Upper Hand	FULL	60
Every Fix Makes a Problem	FULL	68
Build It Like a Song		76
Do the Worst Thing		78
Start Late, Leave Early		80
The Room Pushes Back		82
Whose Eyes Are We In?		84
Explain While Moving		86
Put a Clock on It		88
A Pop Every Thirty Seconds		90
Pay the Cost on Screen		92
The Face Tells Us		94

3 People

CHARACTERS ARE WHAT THEY DO.

Opener: the cast lineup, each with one goal		96
Want Makes Opinions	FULL	98
The Gift That Trips Them	FULL	106
Play the Try		114
Emotional Sense Beats Logic		116
Something They Love		118
First Look Makes a Promise		120
Read the Wear		122
The Costume Test		124
The Villain's Plan Hits Home		126
Find the Love Story		128
Everyone Has a Job		130

4 Words on the Page

WHAT THE READER SEES, HEARS AND FILLS IN.

Opener: the parts of a script page		132
Dialogue: Said and Meant	FULL	134
Specifics	FULL	142
Leave It in the Gutter		150
Cause Before Effect		152
Break Up the Talking Heads		154
Read Only the Pictures		156

5 Shape

HOW SCENES ADD UP TO A STORY.

Opener: the story in four Reels		158
The Spine, Not "And Then"	FULL	160
A Prop Isn't a Plant	FULL	168
Name the Verb		176
Curious, Then Hunted		178
Pay Rent on Every Mystery		180
Show Us the Danger		182
Care Before Danger		184
Small Wrong Things		186
Give the Old Beat a New Job		188
Make the Present Matter		190

6 Rewriting

FIXING WHAT YOU WROTE WITHOUT LOSING WHAT YOU MEANT.

Opener: the draft in layers 192
Realign or Remove 194
Cut What Changes Nothing 196
Protect the One Thing 198
Name the Problem, Not the Fix 200
The Missing Word 202
One Scene, Start to Finish (a worked example, not a tool) 204

7 The Room

WORKING WITH OTHERS, AND WITH AI AS A TOOL ON THE TABLE.

Opener: the room's map, then a four-page lesson 210
Competent Isn't Alive FULL 216
Bring the Want First 226
Pitch That Builds 228
Talk It Out, Then Decide 230
Three Versions, Pick One 232
Your Rewrite Teaches the Rules 234
Fake Readers, Then Real Ones 236
Rehearse on a Stand-In 238

8 Keep Going

THE HABITS THAT GET THE NEXT PAGE WRITTEN.

Opener: a month of writing 240
Bored or Stuck? 242
What Did You Make Today? 244
Keep a Fix-It List 246
The Pile Is the Apprenticeship 248
Box Up Your Old Tricks 250
The Story You Keep Telling 252
Last page: Keep Your Voice (a goodbye, not a tool) 254

+ Back of the Book

Worksheets 256
Sixteen full-page drawn worksheets to copy: one for each FULL tool, and four for QUICK tools.

Room Talk 258
Sixteen spreads that sit among the worksheets. The writers' room talks over one real film scene that uses a tool.

With a Mentee 304
How to use the book with a new writer, a class or a writing group, plus a copy of Find a Tool to keep by your desk.

Tool Cards 308
Every tool's card in one place: its rule and its question.

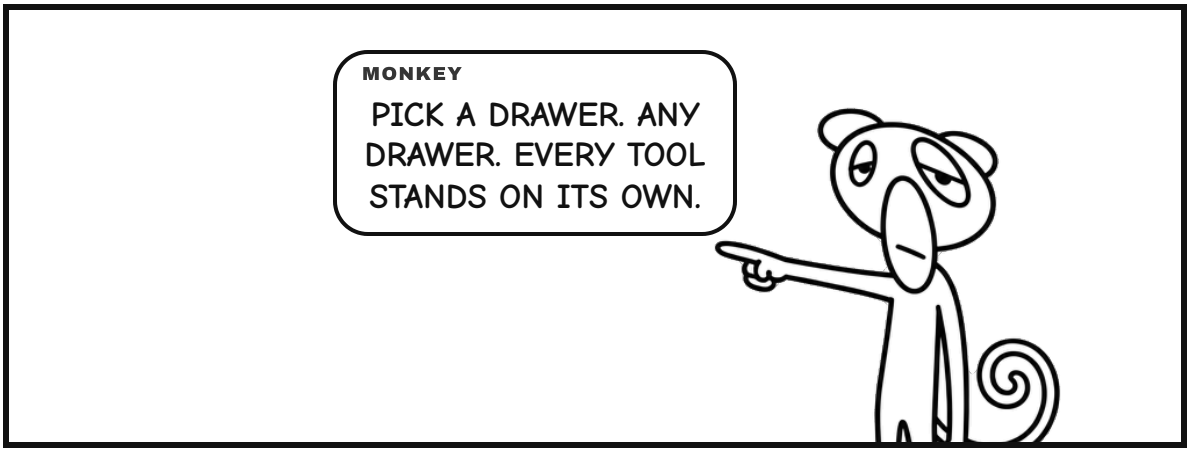
The Brief 321
The blank form you fill in before anyone drafts a scene.

Glossary 322
Every craft word in the book, in plain words.

Where These Tools Came From 328
Credits for the ideas this book borrows.

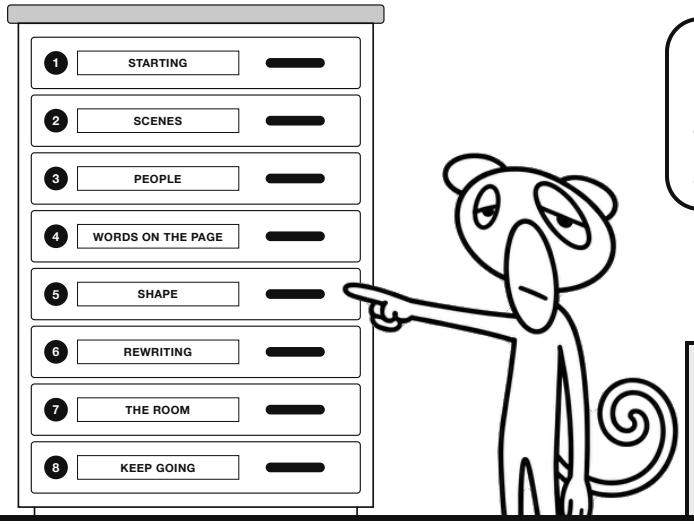
How This Book Was Made 334
Including how AI was and was not used.





How This Toolbox Works

This book teaches you to write scenes for movies. Each **tool** in it is one small trick you can use again and again: a question you ask about a scene, or a check you run on it. Every tool works with a pencil. Most also show you how to ask an AI writing tool for help.



MONKEY
OPEN ANY DRAWER, IN ANY ORDER. BUT START WITH KNOW WHAT YOU WANT. IT SITS UNDER ALL THE OTHERS.

THE TOOLS SIT IN EIGHT DRAWERS, SORTED BY WHEN A WRITER NEEDS THEM. SIXTY-NINE TOOLS IN ALL: TWELVE FULL AND FIFTY-SEVEN QUICK.

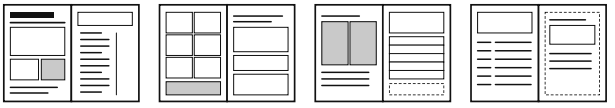
THE THREE SKILLS UNDER EVERY TOOL



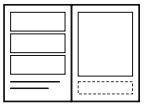
Every tool helps with one or more of these steps. You go around the circle until the Cat (your reader) stays awake. Know What You Want, the first tool, is step 1.

TWO SIZES OF TOOL

FULL TOOL
8 pages: the whole lesson



QUICK TOOL
2 pages: one idea



A **FULL** tool teaches one big idea over eight pages: an example scene, the tool, a practice test, a brief, a worksheet and a card. A **QUICK** tool fits one idea on two facing pages. The next page shows the parts of each.

MONKEY DECIDES. ELEPHANT DRAFTS. CAT JUDGES.

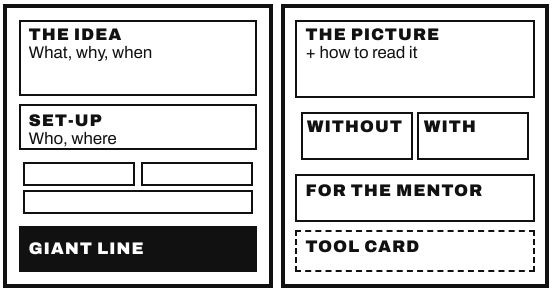
MEET THE CAST
TWO PAGES ON

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Every tool is built from the same parts, in the same order. Learn them once and you can find your way around any tool. **The examples in this book are films.** The Room drawer borrows how TV writers' rooms work, because it's a good way to work with any group, or with AI, on any script. TV examples wait for Volume Two.

A FULL TOOL · EIGHT PAGES, IN THIS ORDER

1. **THE MISS**
   The Elephant drafts a scene. It reads fine, and the Cat falls asleep.
2. **THE SCENE ON PAPER**
   Ben and Jo's scene as a script page, with notes in the margin.
3. **THE SCENE ON SCREEN**
   The same scene, drawn in panels.
4. **THE TOOL**
   Named, with its parts, in plain words.
5. **SPOT THE MISS**
   Two drafts of one scene. Say which misses, and why. In four tools it's a close call: two good drafts that do different things.
6. **ASK FOR IT** AI
   A **brief**: the short list of instructions you write before anyone drafts a scene, for the Elephant or for yourself.
7. **TRY IT BY HAND**
   A worksheet for your pencil. A full-size one, and a Room Talk on a real film, wait at the back.
8. **THE TOOL CARD**
   The rule and its questions, on one page to keep.

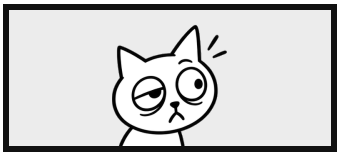


A QUICK TOOL · TWO FACING PAGES

Left page: the idea in a box, a set-up caption, three panels that show the problem, and one giant line that states the rule.

Right page: one picture, the same Ben and Jo moment written **without** the tool and **with** it, a question for the mentor, and the tool card.

GREY = THE CAT



A grey panel means the Cat is reacting: you, in the audience's seat. Every other panel is white, and so is all of Room Talk.

UPSIDE DOWN

Answers. 1: Read both drafts before you turn the book.

Answers print upside down, so you don't see them by accident. Turn the book, or in a PDF use Rotate twice. Tips for the mentor print right side up.

THE AI NOTE AI

AI NOTE

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

A tip on using AI writing tools. The stamp means it was true in October 2026. Apps change fast: test it on yours.

TEACHING EXAMPLE This tag marks the Elephant's draft at the start of a tool. **We wrote those drafts to show each point clearly; real AI output varies. One real, unedited AI draft is in Competent Isn't Alive 216.**

NO AI? PENCIL-ONLY ROUTE

Skip only the AI notes. Still fill in the brief on the Ask-for-it page: it's your own plan. Both carry this tab: AI

DRILL

DRILL: a strict rule for practice, tagged on a tool's big rule and its card. Pros break it on purpose, once they can do it on purpose.

PAGE NUMBERS

They count the whole book, from the cover. Stuck on a word? Try the Glossary at the back.

Meet the Cast

A small cast acts out every lesson. Three of them are on almost every page.



IRONIC MONKEY

The writer.

YOUR GUIDE THROUGH THE BOOK. HE DECIDES WHAT EACH SCENE IS FOR. HIS FULL NAME IS IRONIC MONKEY BECAUSE HE'S DRY: HE SAYS THE TRUE THING WITH A STRAIGHT FACE. EVERYONE CALLS HIM THE MONKEY.

THE ELEPHANT

The AI. A tool.

AN AI WRITING TOOL: YOU TYPE A REQUEST, AND IT WRITES A DRAFT BACK. EAGER, FAST AND PROUD OF EVERYTHING IT MAKES. IT LEARNED FROM A HUGE AMOUNT OF WRITING, AND IT CAN SAY SOMETHING WRONG JUST AS SMOOTHLY AS SOMETHING RIGHT. IT DRAFTS. IT NEVER DECIDES.





THE CAT

The reader.

SHE STANDS IN FOR YOUR AUDIENCE. SHE HAS READ FOUR HUNDRED SCRIPTS THIS YEAR. WHEN A PAGE MISSES, SHE FALLS ASLEEP. WHEN IT WORKS, SHE WAKES UP. HER PANELS ARE GREY.

MONKEY DECIDES. ELEPHANT DRAFTS. CAT JUDGES.

PENCIL FIRST. ELEPHANT LATER.

THE WRITERS' ROOM

In the Room drawer and the Room Talk pages, three more writers join the Monkey at the table. The Monkey is the **showrunner**, who makes the final call, and the Cat is the **reader**, who says where she got bored. These are parts people play in any room, whatever their titles.



THE MOUSE

The assistant.

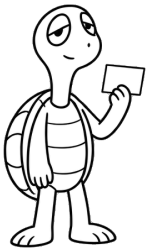
KEEPS THE BOARD AND THE FACTS. REMEMBERS WHAT THE ROOM DECIDED.



THE HEDGEHOG

The killer.

THE ONE WHO FINDS THE HOLE IN THE STORY, BEFORE AN AUDIENCE DOES.



THE TURTLE

The quiet one.

SAYS LITTLE. THEN HAS THE IDEA NOBODY ASKED FOR.

AND THE ELEPHANT?

It sits on the table, not in a chair. It's the room's pitch machine: forty ideas before lunch. It can't tell you which three are good. That's the room's job. It can be right. It still doesn't decide.

THE EXAMPLE: BEN, JO AND MOM

Every tool plays one small moment from their story, in rough order. Ben asks Jo for $500 and loses his apartment anyway. He sleeps on her couch, finds a job, starts paying back his old IOUs one twenty at a time, and finds a place of his own. You can still read the tools in any order.

BEN

JO'S YOUNGER BROTHER, EARLY 30S. CHARMING, BROKE AND UNRELIABLE. HIS CHARM GETS HIM OUT OF TROUBLE, AND INTO IT.



JO

HIS OLDER SISTER, LATE 30S. TIRED AND GENEROUS. SHE KEEPS EVERY IOU BEN EVER WROTE HER IN THE DRAWER BY THE STOVE.



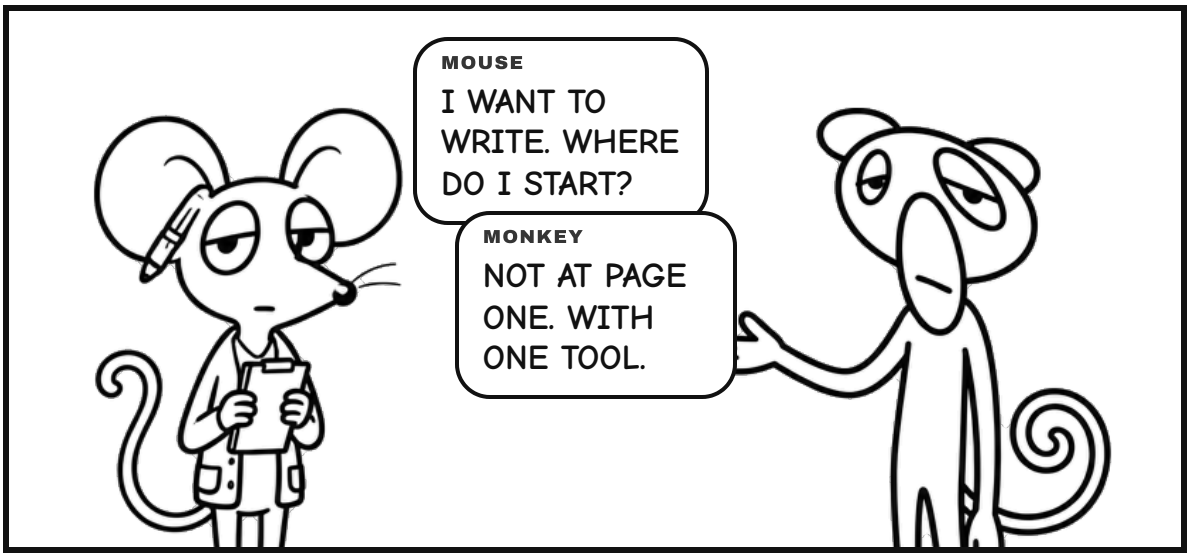
MOM

THEIR MOM, MID 60S. SMALL, QUICK AND WARM. SHE NOTICES EVERYTHING.



Start Here: Six Sessions

New to writing scenes? Don't start at page one, and don't read straight through. Work through six tools, in this order, one per session: an evening, or a week. Each one builds on the one before. First you say what a scene is for, then what your whole story keeps asking. Then you learn how a scene moves, turns, talks and looks. The path works for a writer reading on their own, and for a mentor working with a new writer (the mentee).



Every session runs the same way. Pick the column that fits you.

ON YOUR OWN

1. Read the tool, out loud if you can. It takes about ten minutes.
2. Do its Spot the Miss page before you turn the book around to read the answers.
3. Fill in the tool's full-size worksheet, at the back of the book, with your own story, not Ben and Jo's.
4. Write one page with the tool in mind.
5. The next day, read the page out loud and mark the spot where you got bored. That's where the Cat fell asleep. Start the next session there.

WITH A MENTEE

1. Read the tool together, out loud. You don't need to be a writer yourself: the pictures do the explaining.
2. Cover the upside-down answers on Spot the Miss. Ask which draft works, and why.
3. Your mentee fills in the tool's worksheet with their own story.
4. They bring one page next time.
5. Read it together and ask the Cat check questions at the bottom of the worksheet (yes-or-no questions about whether the reader stays awake). Say where you got lost or bored; let your mentee find the fix.

BRING EVERY TIME A pencil, this book, a notebook, and one story you'd like to tell. A sentence about it is enough to begin. From session 2 on, bring the page from last time too.

THE SIX SESSIONS

Each session names its tool and the page where it starts, what to do, and what to bring. Your story stays the same all the way through, so by session 6 you have a scene revised through several tools.

1 Know What You Want 16

FRONT OF THE BOOK · WORKSHEET: THE DARTBOARD

DO Pick one scene from your story. Say in one sentence what it should do to the audience. Write that sentence three ways (it starts "I want the audience to..."), then circle one.

BRING A scene you'd like to write, in a line or two. Any idea will do.

2 The Question on a Sticky Note 26

STARTING DRAWER · WORKSHEET: THE CLOTHESLINE

DO Find the one question your whole story keeps asking. Write it on a sticky note, then hold each scene idea up to it.

BRING Your circled sentence, a sticky note, and a list of five scenes you can picture in your story.

3 Scene and Sequel 52

SCENES DRAWER · WORKSHEET: THE CHAIN

DO Write one scene where someone wants something now and runs into a "no." Then write the sequel: how they react, with no dialogue.

BRING Your sticky note, and one scene from your list of five.

4 Who Holds the Upper Hand 60

SCENES DRAWER · WORKSHEET: THE SEESAWS

DO Read your scene and ask: what changed from start to end? Power, knowledge, commitment, danger, or the relationship? If nothing did, that's where to work.

BRING The scene you wrote in session 3.

5 Dialogue: Said and Meant 134

WORDS ON THE PAGE · WORKSHEET: NON-LINE JAIL

DO Under each line, write what the person really means. Where someone says a feeling out loud, try a line that hides it.

BRING The same scene, rewritten after session 4.

6 Specifics 142

WORDS ON THE PAGE · WORKSHEET: OPEN THE FRIDGE

DO Find one general detail, like "a messy room," and swap it for one that could only belong to this person.

BRING The same scene again, and ten small things you noticed in a real room this week.

AFTER SESSION 6

Choose your own next tool. Turn the page: **Find a Tool for This Problem** lists problems in plain words, each with a tool to try. Or open any drawer. Every tool stands on its own. To watch several tools work on one scene, read **One Scene, Start to Finish** 204, after the Rewriting drawer.



Find a Tool for This Problem

Find the problem that sounds like yours, in your own words. Then try the tool next to it; the number is the page where the tool starts. If a tool doesn't help, try the next one in the same group. A copy of this guide sits at the back of the book, after With a Mentee, so you can copy it and keep it by your desk.

GETTING STARTED		
"I CAN'T SAY WHAT MY STORY IS ABOUT."	**The Question on a Sticky Note**	26
"THE PAGE IS BLANK, AND IT STAYS BLANK."	**Collect First, Connect Later**	36
"MY IDEA ALREADY FEELS BORING."	**Let It Suck (For Now)**	34
"MY IDEA IS FINE, BUT NOBODY LEANS IN."	**Turn It Up to Eleven**	44
"MY HERO JUST WANTS TO FIND THEMSELVES."	**Do, Not Feel**	42

SCENES		
"MY SCENE IS FLAT. NOTHING CHANGES."	**Scene and Sequel**	52
"THEY ARGUE THE WHOLE TIME, AND NOTHING MOVES."	**Who Holds the Upper Hand**	60
"MY HERO GETS A YES ON THE FIRST TRY."	**Every Fix Makes a Problem**	68
"THE READER GOT BORED ON PAGE 3."	**A Pop Every Thirty Seconds**	90
"MY SCENE TAKES FOREVER TO GET GOING."	**Start Late, Leave Early**	80

PEOPLE		
"MY CHARACTER IS BUSY, WITH NO OPINIONS."	**Want Makes Opinions**	98
"MY CHARACTER EXPLAINS HER FEELINGS OUT LOUD."	**Play the Try**	114
"READERS SAY MY LEAD IS COLD."	**Something They Love**	118
"HE'S 'CHARMING,' BUT IT NEVER COSTS HIM A THING."	**The Gift That Trips Them**	106

WORDS ON THE PAGE		
"EVERYONE SAYS EXACTLY WHAT THEY FEEL."	**Dialogue: Said and Meant**	134
"HER APARTMENT COULD BE ANYBODY'S."	**Specifics**	142
"HALF A PAGE OF TALK, AND NOBODY MOVES."	**Break Up the Talking Heads**	154
"MY PAGE SHOWS EVERY STEP, FROM A TO B TO C."	**Leave It in the Gutter**	150

SHAPE		
"MY STORY IS 'AND THEN, AND THEN, AND THEN.'"	**The Spine, Not "And Then"**	160
"THE BIG SAVE COMES OUT OF NOWHERE."	**A Prop Isn't a Plant**	168
"THE MIDDLE FEELS SLOW."	**Curious, Then Hunted**	178
"MY BIG MOMENT LANDS, AND NOBODY FLINCHES."	**Care Before Danger**	184
"I CAN GUESS THE NEXT LINE OF MY OWN SCENE."	**Give the Old Beat a New Job**	188

REWRITING		
"MY NOTES CONTRADICT EACH OTHER."	**Name the Problem, Not the Fix**	200
"THE DRAFT FEELS LONG AND CROWDED."	**Cut What Changes Nothing**	196
"READERS DRIFT IN THE PART I'M PROUDEST OF."	**Realign or Remove**	194
"I'M SCARED A REWRITE WILL LOSE WHAT I LOVE."	**Protect the One Thing**	198
"MY DRAFT IS ABOUT NOTHING IN PARTICULAR."	**The Missing Word**	202
"I HAVE NOTES AND DON'T KNOW WHAT TO FIX FIRST."	**One Scene, Start to Finish**	204

WORKING WITH OTHERS AND AI		
"IT WORKS, BUT IT FEELS DEAD."	**Competent Isn't Alive**	216
"THE AI GAVE ME NICE. NOT WHAT I WANTED."	**Bring the Want First**	226
"THE AI MAKES ALL MY CHARACTERS SOUND THE SAME."	**Your Rewrite Teaches the Rules**	234
"MY HEAD IS FULL, AND THE PAGE IS STILL EMPTY."	**Talk It Out, Then Decide**	230
"MY FIRST IDEA IS THE ONE EVERYBODY HAS."	**Three Versions, Pick One**	232
"MY DRAFT IS READY TO SHOW, AND I'M NERVOUS."	**Fake Readers, Then Real Ones**	236

KEEPING GOING		
"I'M STUCK."	**Bored or Stuck?**	242
"I KEEP GOING BACK TO FIX PAGE 3."	**Keep a Fix-It List**	246
"I WAS BUSY ALL DAY AND FINISHED NOTHING."	**What Did You Make Today?**	244
"I GOT ANOTHER REJECTION."	**The Pile Is the Apprenticeship**	248
"A READER SAW MY BIG MOMENT COMING."	**Box Up Your Old Tricks**	250



MONKEY

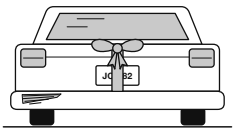
PROBLEM NOT ON THE LIST? SAY IT IN PLAIN WORDS FIRST. THEN OPEN THE DRAWER IT BELONGS TO: EACH DRAWER STARTS WITH A MAP OF ITS TOOLS.

Know What You Want

BEN BORROWED HIS OLDER SISTER JO'S CAR. TODAY HE BRINGS IT BACK. THE MONKEY ASKS THE ELEPHANT, HIS AI, TO WRITE THAT SCENE.



TEACHING EXAMPLE Here are the three versions, the way the Elephant might write them. Each one is a tiny script. A name in capitals is who speaks, and the indented line under it is what they say. The other lines describe what we see.



Ben hands over the keys.

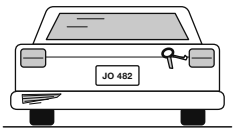
BEN
Full tank. And it's detailed.

JO
There's a bow on my car.

BEN
You're welcome.

Jo laughs.

1 · FUNNY



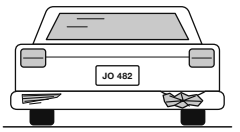
Ben leaves the keys on the trunk.

JO
Thanks.

BEN
Yeah.

Neither one moves. Then he goes.

2 · SAD



Jo finds a new dent.

JO
That's new.

BEN
That was there.

She looks at him.

3 · TENSE



THREE GOOD SCENES. NO IDEA WHICH ONE YOU WANTED.

The Monkey never said what the scene was for. So nothing tells him which version is right, and the Cat dozes off.



MONKEY
I NEVER DECIDED WHAT THIS SCENE WAS FOR. SO NOW I'LL SAY IT, IN ONE SENTENCE.

THE WANT

I want the audience to suspect Ben is lying.

That sentence is the Monkey's **want**: what he wants the scene to do to the audience. It points to version 3, the tense one. Here it is, written out as a full script page.

SCENE HEADING	**ACTION LINES**	**NAME, THEN DIALOGUE**
Where and when. EXT. means outside (INT. means inside).	Plain paragraphs that say what we see.	Who speaks, then the words they say.

The notes in the right margin point out each clue that Ben is lying.

EXT. JO'S DRIVEWAY - MORNING

Jo's car pulls in. Ben gets out with the keys already held out.

BEN
Full tank. I even washed it.

TOO EARLY
Keys out before she asks. Why the hurry?

TOO NICE
A favor nobody asked for.

JO
You washed it.

She walks around the car. He follows, smiling.

THE SMILE
Charm, to keep her calm.

At the back bumper she stops. A fresh dent. She runs her hand over it.

THE DENT
We see it. He never mentions it.

JO
That's new.

TOO FAST
No pause. No look.

BEN
That? That was there.

JO
It wasn't.

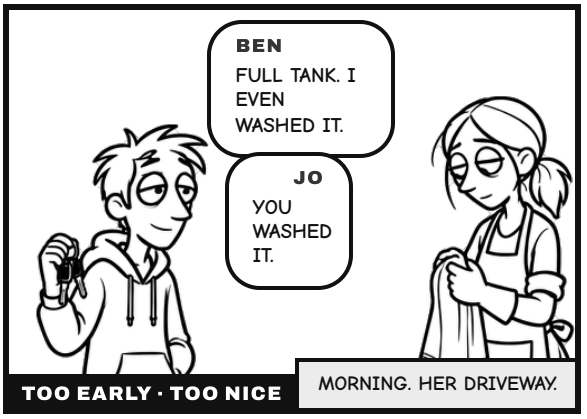
TWO STORIES
It was there. Then someone else did it. Pick one.

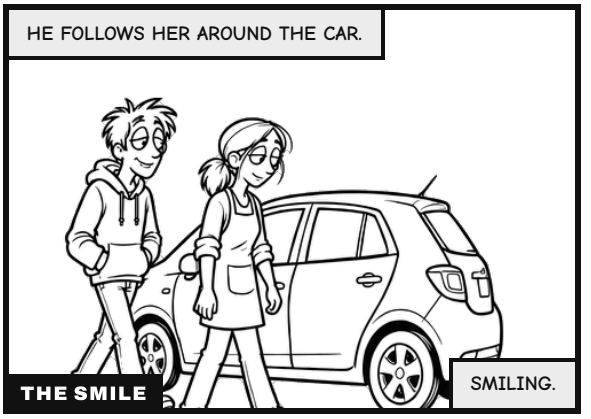
BEN
Some guy in the grocery lot. I wasn't even in it.

He drops the keys in her hand and goes. Jo looks at the dent. Then at his back.

END
Nobody says "liar." We think it.

THE SAME SCRIPT PAGE, DRAWN THE WAY IT WOULD PLAY ON SCREEN. WATCH HOW BEN ACTS, NOT ONLY WHAT HE SAYS. EACH PANEL'S LABEL MATCHES A NOTE ON THE PAGE BEFORE.











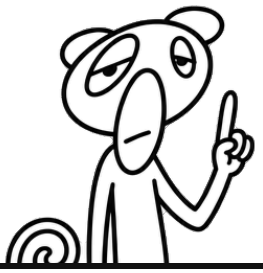




KNOW WHAT YOU WANT BEFORE ANYONE WRITES. DRILL

THIS TOOL IS STEP 1 OF THE THREE SKILLS





MONKEY

BEFORE YOU WRITE, OR THE ELEPHANT DOES, SAY WHAT THE SCENE MUST DO TO THE AUDIENCE. IN ONE SENTENCE.

IF YOU CAN'T SAY IT, YOU CAN'T ASK FOR IT: NOT FROM THE ELEPHANT, AND NOT FROM YOURSELF.

THE WANT, IN ONE SENTENCE

In this scene, I want the audience to _____.

Your **want** is what the scene should do to the audience: what we feel, think or suspect when it ends. It's your want as the writer. What a character is trying to get is their **goal**. Some writers find the want by drafting first.

THE PICK TEST

Put three versions side by side. Does your sentence help you explain which drafts serve your purpose, and why?

BUT IT'S ABOUT THE AUDIENCE

Not what happens. What it does to us.

PLOT (WHAT HAPPENS)	"Ben returns the car." All three versions do that.
WANT	*"I want the audience to suspect Ben is lying."* Only one does that.



SPOT THE MISS: A CLOSE CALL.

Here are two drafts of the same scene, Ben bringing back Jo's car with a new dent in it. **Both are well written.** They do different things to the audience. The box says what this scene is for. Read both drafts, then answer the questions below.

THE WANT FOR THIS SCENE

I want the audience to suspect Ben is lying.

Ben's goal: hand back the car and get out of trouble.

DRAFT A

Jo walks around her car. Ben stays by the driver's door, jingling the keys.

JO
You vacuumed it.

BEN
Figured I owed you.

At the back bumper she stops. A fresh dent. She looks at him.

BEN
That bumper's always been soft.

He sets the keys on the roof. He's already walking.

DRAFT B

Ben meets Jo at the curb before she can reach the car.

BEN
Before you see the back: I parallel parked. The car lost.

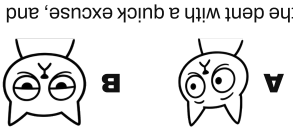
JO
Ben.

BEN
I'll pay for it. All of it.

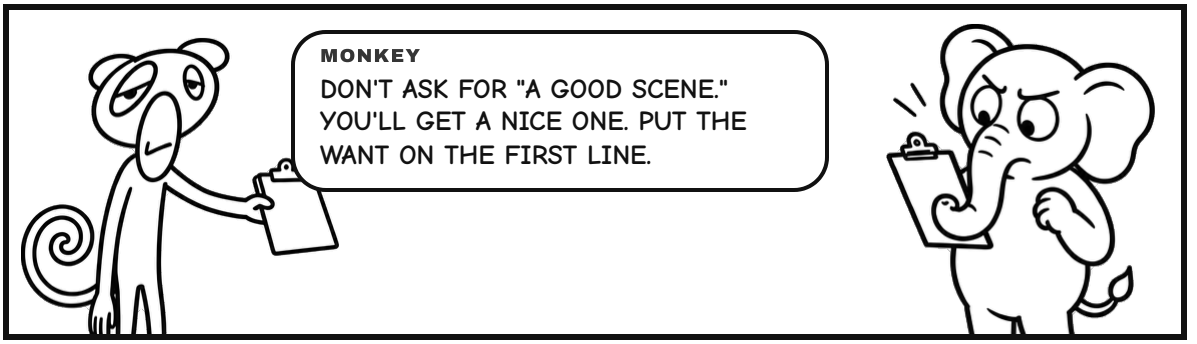
Jo looks at the dent, then at him. She almost laughs.

JO
It lost badly.

1. WHICH ONE SERVES THE WANT THIS SCENE STATES?
2. WHAT DOES EACH ONE GIVE UP?
3. WOULD YOU KEEP EITHER ONE, AND WHY?



Answers. 1: Draft A. Ben is too helpful, skips past the dent with a quick excuse, and leaves fast, so we suspect him. Draft B is just as good, but it serves a different want: Ben owns up before Jo even looks, so we like him and trust him. 2: A gives up our warmth for Ben; we start to doubt him. B gives up the suspicion, and the doubt is what this scene was for. 3: Keep A here. Save B: if a later scene needs the audience to love Ben right before he lets Jo down, B is that scene. The want doesn't pick the better draft. It picks the right one.



Before anyone drafts, write the **brief**: your short list of instructions. Here is the brief behind the script page at the start of this tool. The labels on the left say what each line is for.

THE BRIEF AI	**BEN, JO, THE CAR**
THE WANT What the scene must do to the audience.	***The audience suspects Ben is lying.***
SCENE Who, where, and how long.	Ben brings Jo's car back. Her driveway. One minute.
GOAL What the main character is trying to get.	Ben wants to hand back the car and get away before she looks.
SHOW IT One thing we see that carries the want.	A new dent he never mentions.
HIS TELLS Small slips that give away a liar.	Too helpful. Answers too fast. Two stories.
END How the scene should land.	Nobody says it. We think it.
FORBID What must not happen.	~~a confession~~ · ~~a fight~~ · ~~"You're lying!"~~

WANT FIRST. EVERY OTHER LINE SERVES IT.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

Leave the want out of your request and it can fill the gap with the most average choice: warm, polite, a little sad, maybe a hug at the end. It isn't wrong. It just isn't yours. So put the feeling you're after on the first line. When the draft comes back, ask the Elephant what it thinks the scene makes the audience feel, then **check that yourself**. It can be wrong about its own work.



TRY IT BY HAND

Say it three ways. Keep one.

PICK A SCENE YOU WROTE, OR ONE YOU WANT TO WRITE. FINISH THE SENTENCE BELOW THREE DIFFERENT WAYS, SO THAT EACH ENDING WOULD MAKE A DIFFERENT SCENE. THEN CIRCLE THE ONE YOU WANT.

FOR EXAMPLE · BEN BRINGS THE CAR BACK

1. *I want the audience to laugh at him.*
2. *I want the audience to feel how far apart they've drifted.*
3. *I want the audience to suspect he's lying.*

THE SCENE
Who, where, what happens _____

IN THIS SCENE, I WANT THE AUDIENCE TO...

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

THE PICK TEST · IF THE ELEPHANT WROTE THREE VERSIONS, WOULD THE SENTENCE YOU CIRCLED HELP YOU EXPLAIN WHICH ONES SERVE YOUR PURPOSE, AND WHY?

YES · IT'S A WANT	NO · MAKE IT SHARPER, THEN TEST AGAIN



THEN GIVE THE ELEPHANT THE SENTENCE YOU CIRCLED. IT GOES ON THE FIRST LINE OF YOUR BRIEF.

Full-size worksheet at the back of the book: The Dartboard. Then Room Talk: The Night Dive (*Jaws*) 258.

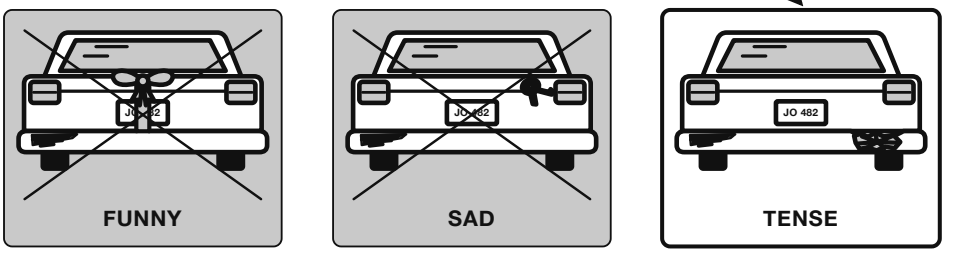
TOOL CARD · FRONT OF THE BOOK

Know What You Want

SAY WHAT THE SCENE IS FOR, BEFORE ANYONE WRITES IT **DRILL**

THE WANT

I want the audience to suspect Ben is lying.



CAN'T SAY IT? CAN'T ASK FOR IT.

Before you write a scene, or ask the Elephant to, answer these four questions.

1. WHEN THE SCENE ENDS, WHAT SHOULD THE AUDIENCE FEEL, THINK OR SUSPECT?
2. CAN YOU SAY IT IN ONE SENTENCE?
3. DOES YOUR SENTENCE HELP YOU EXPLAIN WHICH DRAFTS SERVE YOUR PURPOSE, AND WHY?
4. IS IT ABOUT THE AUDIENCE, AND NOT JUST WHAT HAPPENS?



CAT
I DON'T TRUST BEN. GOOD.



Starting

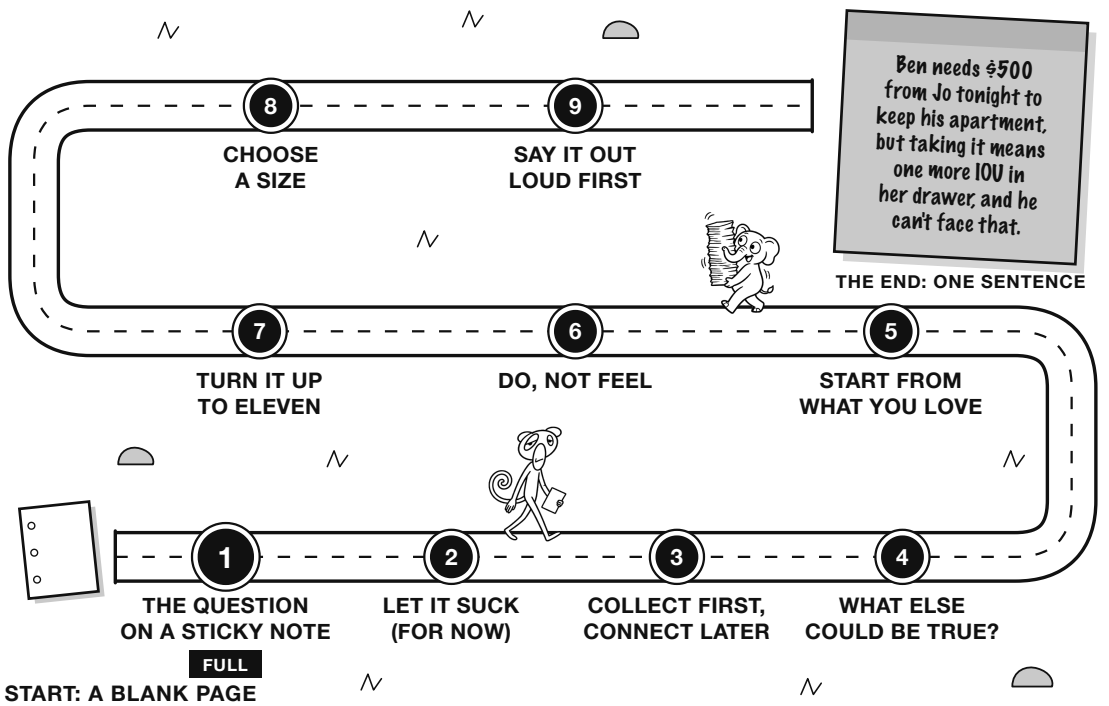
From a blank page to a story you can say in one sentence.

WHAT STARTING A STORY MEANS

Most stories begin as a blank page and something you can't stop thinking about: a person, a place, a strange little moment. **Starting** is the work of turning that into a story. You collect odd bits, ask questions, try ideas you might throw away, and keep going.

You're done starting when you can say the whole story in **one sentence**: who is after what, and what's in the way. That sentence tells you you're ready to plan scenes. Until you have it, you're still starting, and that's fine.

THE MAP · A ROAD FROM A BLANK PAGE TO ONE SENTENCE



How to read this map: start at the blank page, bottom left, and follow the road up. Each numbered station is one tool in this drawer, in the usual order. The road ends at a sticky note with Ben and Jo's whole story in one sentence. (The Spine, in the Shape drawer, builds the whole story from this sentence.) Skip ahead or circle back; the road is a guide, not a rule.

FULL tools run about eight pages: a scene, a test, a brief and a worksheet. **QUICK** tools are one spread you can read in about two minutes.

IN THIS DRAWER

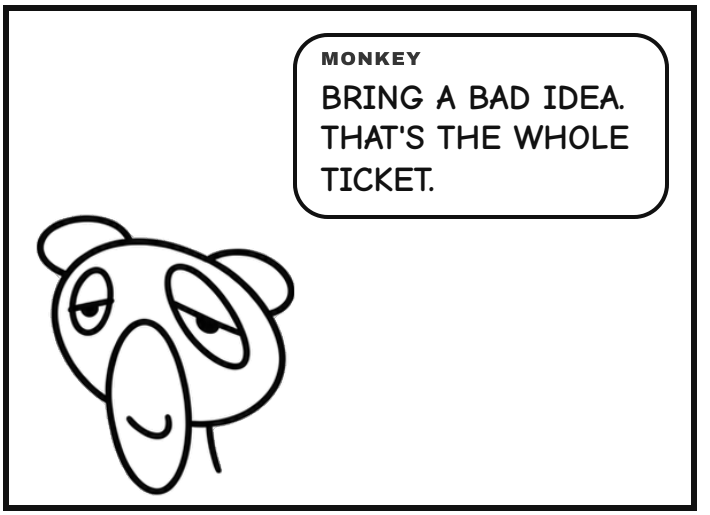
NINE TOOLS.

1	**The Question on a Sticky Note**	Write the one emotional question your story keeps testing, short enough for a sticky note.	FULL
2	**Let It Suck (For Now)**	Give a half-formed idea time to grow before you judge it.	QUICK
3	**Collect First, Connect Later**	When stuck, list loose things you love without making them fit. Look for connections later.	QUICK
4	**What Else Could Be True?**	When something puzzles you, don't explain it away. Ask what else could be true, and there's a story.	QUICK
5	**Start From What You Love**	Start from the stories you love and what only you have found, not from what you think will sell.	QUICK
6	**Do, Not Feel**	Do the story math (person + situation = a problem they can't ignore), then give the hero something concrete to do, a cost for failing, and someone in the way.	QUICK
7	**Turn It Up to Eleven**	Ask whether you're holding the idea back, and try the boldest version on purpose.	QUICK
8	**Choose a Size**	Short, feature or series: the same idea in a different container.	QUICK
9	**Say It Out Loud First**	Say in one line what changes, then talk the scene out loud before you type it.	QUICK

WHERE TO START

With **The Question on a Sticky Note**. Every other tool here points back at that note. Then walk the road in order, a station or two a day, using the quick tools as you need them. Got to the end of the week with no sentence? That's normal. Go back to **Collect First, Connect Later**, gather a little more, and come up the road again.





DRAWER CARD · STARTING

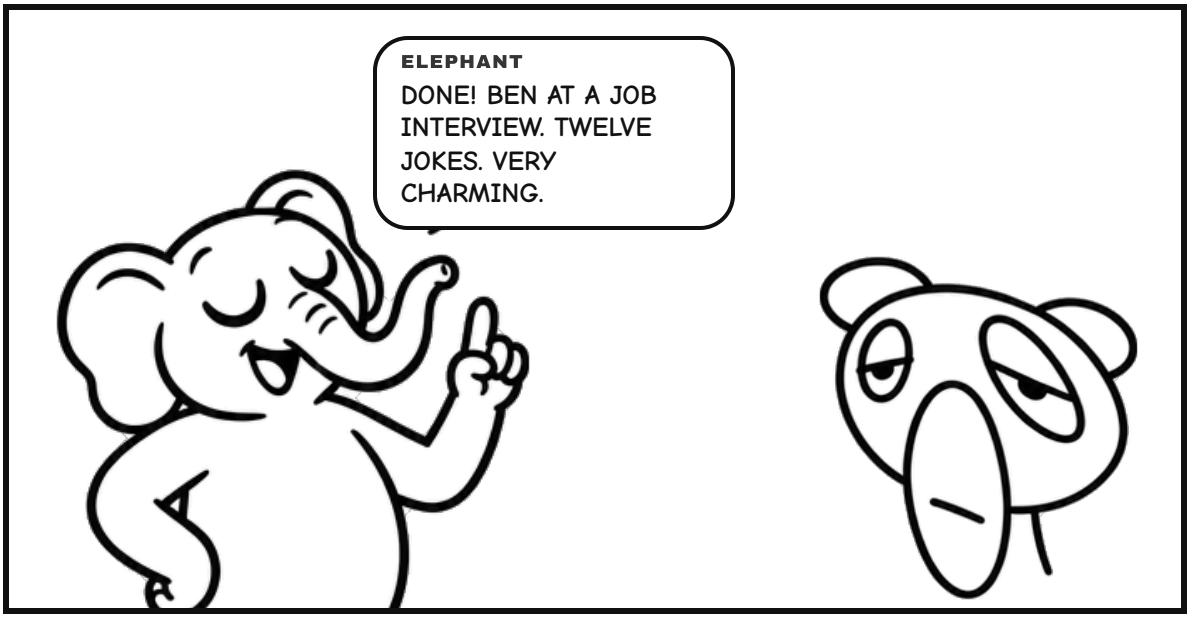
Start messy.
End with one sentence.

?

CAN YOU SAY YOURS OUT LOUD, RIGHT NOW?

The Question on a Sticky Note

Ben (see Meet the Cast) is charming, broke, and not great at keeping his word. Today he has a job interview. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it.



TEACHING EXAMPLE A script page. The name in capitals says who talks. The line under it is what they say.

```
              INTERVIEWER
       So, Ben. Why should we hire you?

              BEN
       I'm great with people. Ask my ex.
       Ask her lawyer.

The interviewer laughs.

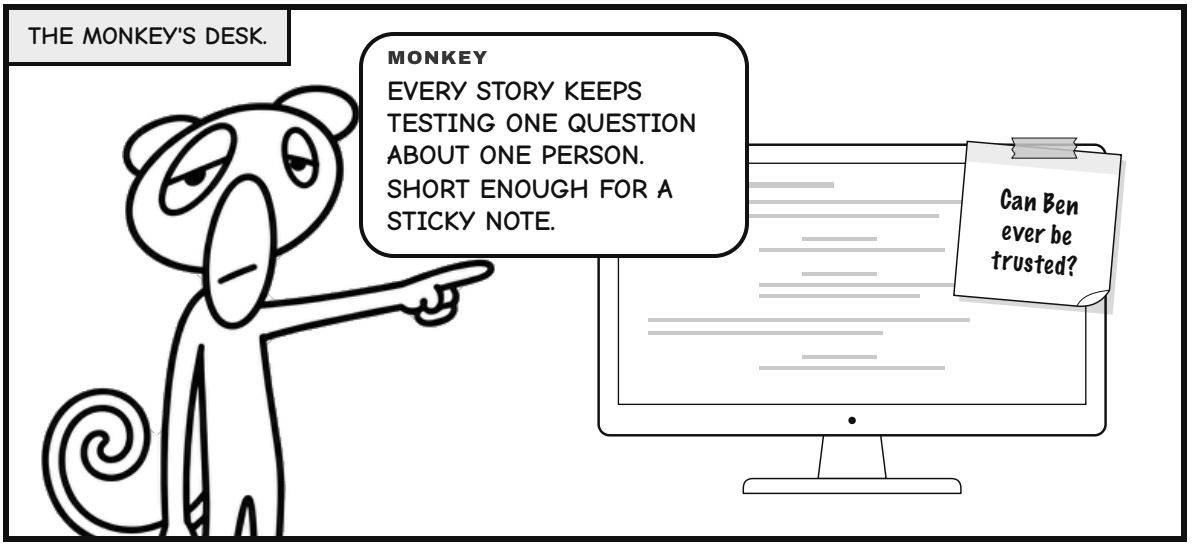
              INTERVIEWER
       You're funny. When can you start?

              BEN
       Monday. Unless somebody funnier
       calls.
```



FUNNY SCENE. WRONG STORY.

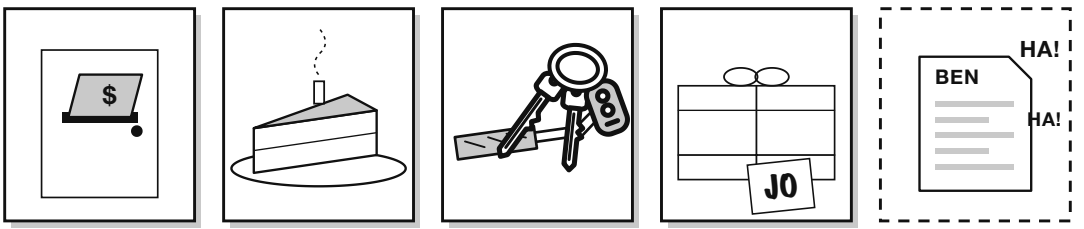
The jokes work. But Ben's story keeps asking one thing: can he be trusted? Nothing in this scene tests that, so the reader drifts off. Turn the page to see how to tell.



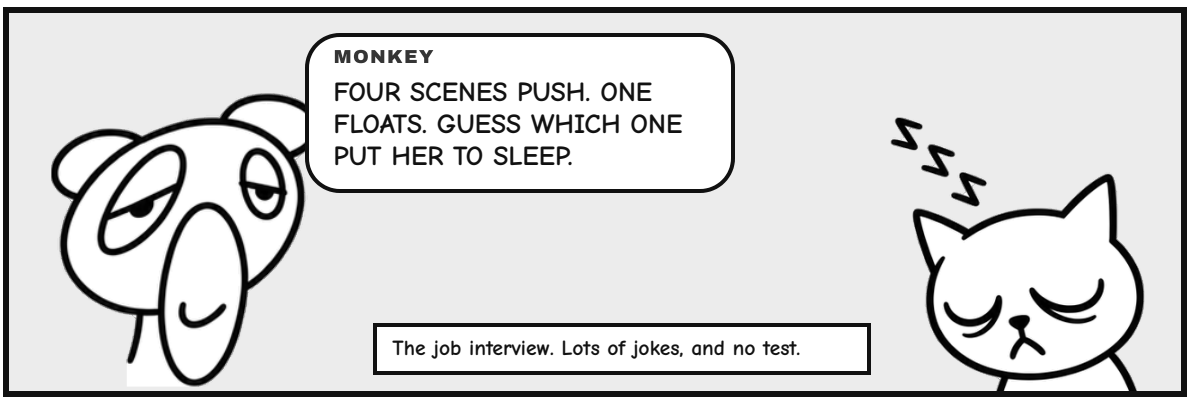
That's your story's One Emo Q, short for its one emotional question. It's about how we feel about one person, and it can only be answered yes or no. Ben's is on the note: Can Ben ever be trusted?

HOLD EVERY SCENE UP TO IT.

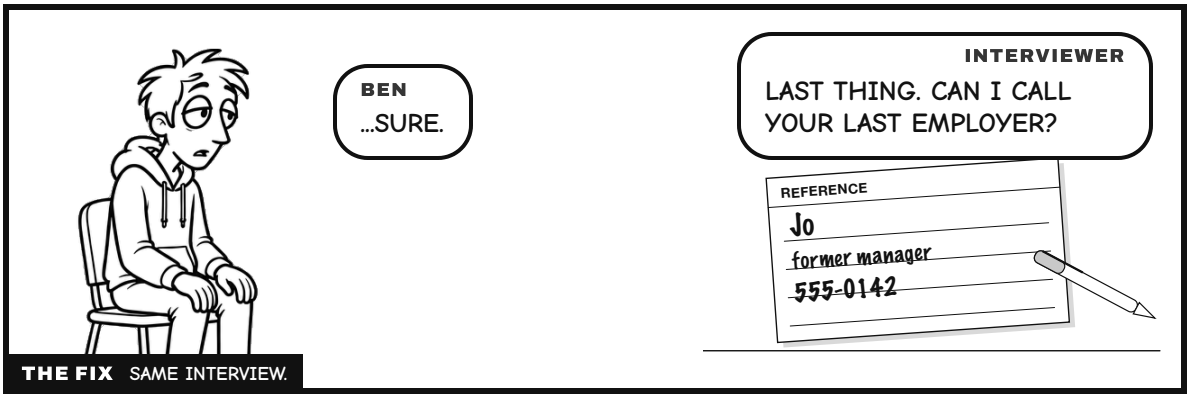
Five scenes from Ben's story. Under each: does it make us lean toward YES, he can be trusted, or NO? A scene that doesn't touch the question DRIFTS.



He slips the $500 back.	He missed her birthday.	He leans on her for the keys.	He saves her a cake.	Twelve jokes at a job interview.
⬆ YES	⬇ NO	⬇ NO	⬆ YES	↘ DRIFT



The fix: the same job interview, written again with the sticky note in mind. Can Ben ever be trusted? We never see the interviewer. We only hear him.



INT. OFFICE - DAY

An INTERVIEWER across a desk. Ben, all smiles.

INTERVIEWER
You're funny.

BEN
I get that a lot.

INTERVIEWER
Last thing. Can I call your last employer?

Ben's smile stays. His hands go still.

BEN
Sure.

He writes on a card. Slides it across.

The card: REFERENCE. Jo. Former manager. A phone number.

INTERVIEWER
I'll call her today.

BEN
Call after six.

SCENE HEADING
Where and when. INT. means inside. Under it, the action: what we see.

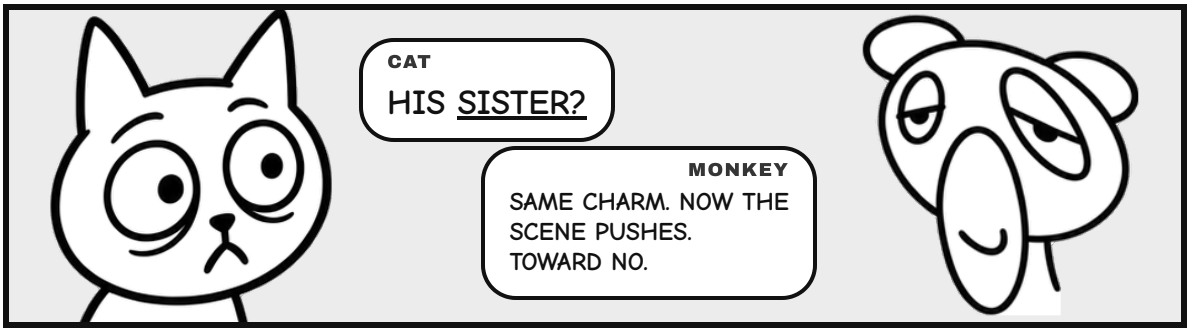
CHARM
Fine, but it doesn't touch the question yet.

THE TEST
A stranger asks, in other words, the question on the note: can Ben be trusted?

THE PAUSE
He says yes, but a moment too late. We notice.

THE ANSWER
Jo is his sister, not a manager. He's lying. The scene pushes toward NO.

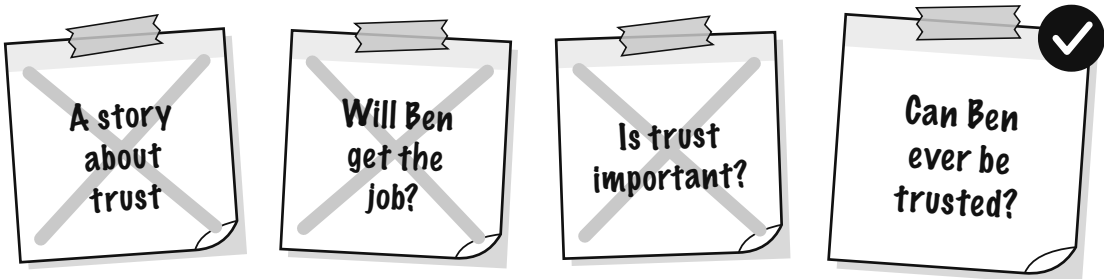
NEXT
He needs time to reach Jo first.



Same Ben, same charm. What changed: one moment puts the question on the line, and Ben's answer, a lie about Jo, makes us lean toward no.

ONE PERSON. ONE QUESTION. YES OR NO.

Not every question works. Three of these notes fail. The reason is under each one.

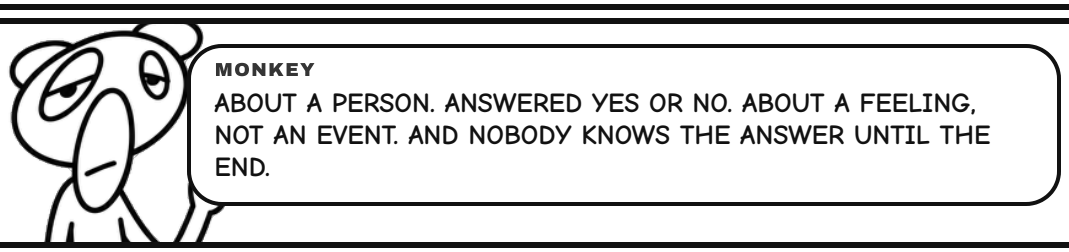


A TOPIC
No person in it.

PLOT
Not a feeling.

A LECTURE
Everyone says yes.

A PERSON.
Yes or no.
A feeling. Open.



BUT THE ANSWER ISN'T THE PLOT

Ben can get the job. The answer can still be no.

The plot is what happens: does Ben get the job? The question is how we feel about Ben. Each scene leans one way, and none settles it. Once the answer is settled, the story is over.



SPOT THE MISS.

Two drafts of another scene. Jo has bought a used sofa bed, and Ben is helping her carry it up her porch steps. Read both, and hold each one up to the sticky note: Can Ben ever be trusted?

DRAFT A

JO
Pivot. PIVOT.

BEN
I am pivoting. The couch is not.

JO
Who buys a sofa bed this big?

BEN
You. I said it wouldn't fit.

JO
It'll fit.

BEN
It'll fit. The door won't.

They laugh. The pizza arrives.

DRAFT B

Jo's purse sits on the porch rail.

JO
I'll get the dolly from the truck.

She goes. Ben looks at the purse. Picks it up. Walks it out to the truck.

BEN
You forgot this.

Jo opens it. Counts the cash. All there.

JO
Thanks.

1. WHICH DRAFT TESTS THE QUESTION "CAN BEN EVER BE TRUSTED?"
2. IN THAT DRAFT, DOES THE SCENE PUSH TOWARD YES OR TOWARD NO?
3. WHAT DOES JO DO AT THE END THAT KEEPS THE QUESTION OPEN?

Answers: 1. Draft B. Ben is left alone with Jo's purse, so we wonder if he'll take her money. Draft A is funny, but any brother and sister could play it, and it never touches trust. 2. Toward yes. He brings her the purse with all the cash still in it. 3. She counts the cash. She still isn't sure of him, so the question stays open.





A brief is the short set of instructions you give an AI, or yourself, before you write a draft. Here is the brief for Ben's job interview. Each line says one thing the scene must do.

THE BRIEF AI	**BEN, THE INTERVIEW**
THE WANT What the scene must do to the audience.	We start to doubt Ben.
QUESTION The sticky note, word for word. Every time.	***Can Ben ever be trusted?***
THIS SCENE Which scene, and which way it should push.	The job interview. Push toward NO.
GOAL What the main character is trying to get.	Ben wants the job.
THE TEST The moment that puts the question on the line.	One moment where trusting Ben could cost someone.
SHOW IT What we can see, not what someone says.	Something we can see: a card, a pause, his hands.
FORBID Things the draft must not do.	~~jokes that don't touch the question~~ · ~~speeches about trust~~ · ~~"I've changed."~~

QUESTION FIRST. THEN ASK WHICH WAY EACH SCENE LEANS.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You type your want and the question, every time, then: `End the scene with one word, YES, NO or DRIFT, and one sentence on why.` **Back comes** a scene with a verdict, sometimes a YES for jokes that drift. **You** check the verdict yourself, and cut what doesn't touch the question.



TRY IT BY HAND

Write it. Stick it. Test it.

Think of a story you want to write. Who is it about? Write the question your story keeps asking about that person, three different ways. Keep the one that is short enough for a sticky note, and stick it where you write.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

TICK WHAT YOUR PICK HAS

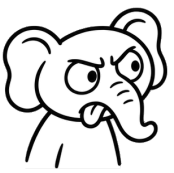
A good question needs all four. If a box is empty, try again.

☐ **A PERSON** One person it is about.	☐ **YES OR NO** Only yes or no can answer it.	☐ **A FEELING** About a feeling, not an event.	☐ **OPEN TILL THE END** Nobody knows until the last scene.

YOUR LAST THREE SCENES

Name each scene in a few words. Tick YES if it makes us lean toward yes, NO if it leans toward no, DRIFT if it doesn't touch the question.

_____	☐ YES	☐ NO	☐ DRIFT
_____	☐ YES	☐ NO	☐ DRIFT
_____	☐ YES	☐ NO	☐ DRIFT



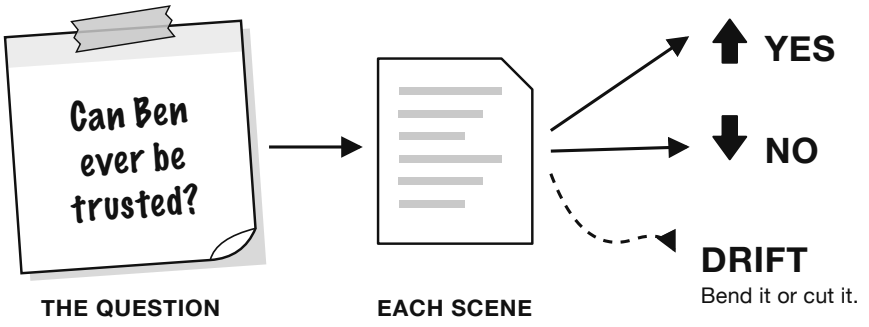
Did a scene drift? Change it so it pushes toward yes or no, or cut it.

Full-size worksheet at the back of the book: The Clothesline.

TOOL CARD · STARTING

The Question on a Sticky Note

Your story keeps asking one question about one person. Write it on a sticky note. Every scene should push the answer toward yes or toward no.



EVERY SCENE PUSHES YES OR NO. OR IT DRIFTS. DRILL

A scene can rest on purpose, as a breath before a big moment. A story with a second plot line (a B-story) can carry a second note.

1. CAN YOU WRITE YOUR QUESTION ON A STICKY NOTE RIGHT NOW?
2. IS IT ABOUT A PERSON, AND IS IT YES OR NO?
3. DOES THIS SCENE PUSH TOWARD YES, OR TOWARD NO?
4. IS THE ANSWER STILL OPEN UNTIL THE END?

Full-size worksheet at the back of the book: The Clothesline. **Then Room Talk:** Can Marlin Let Go? (***Finding Nemo***) 260







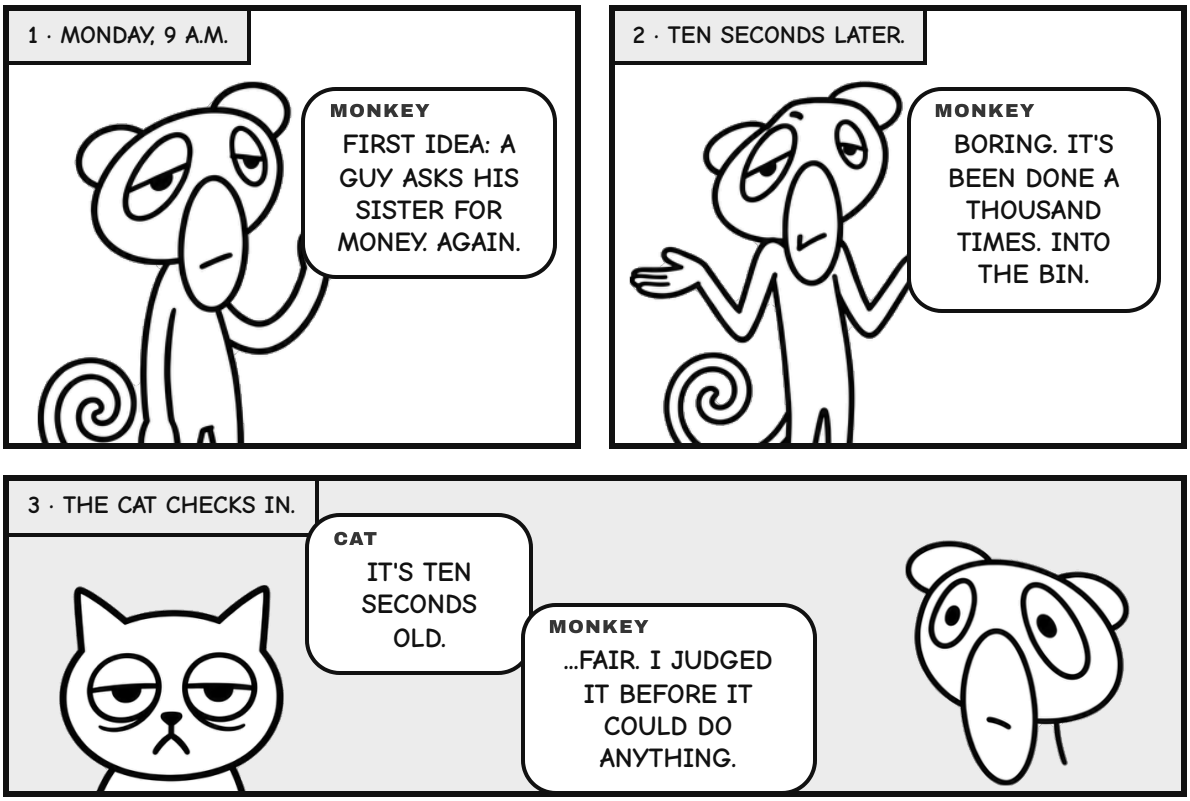
Let It Suck (For Now)

THE IDEA

A new idea almost always starts out weak: one flat line, a bit dull, a lot like something you've seen before. That's normal. **Letting it suck for now** means you don't judge it yet. You keep it for a few days and ask it one question a day, such as "Why?" or "What if?"

Ideas get good by growing, and growing takes time. Reach for this tool the moment you hear yourself call an idea "boring" on the day you thought of it.

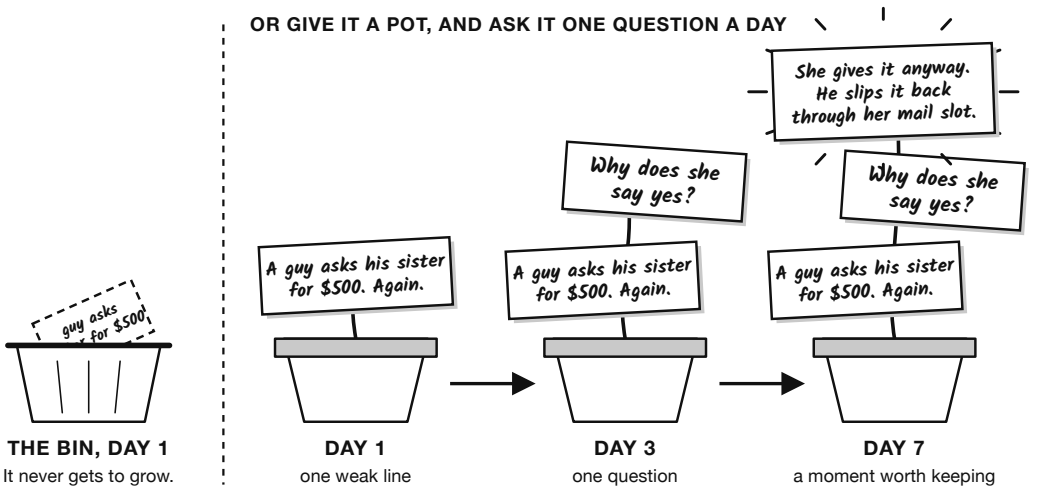
The scene: the Monkey is starting a brand-new script. All he has is one line on a sticky note: the very first version of what will become Ben and Jo's story. The Monkey wants a great idea by lunch. The Cat, his first reader, just wants to be surprised.



DON'T JUDGE A SEED. GIVE IT A WEEK.

A half-formed idea is supposed to look bad. Keep it, ask it one question a day, and decide later.

THE PICTURE · THE BIN, OR THE POT



How to read this picture: on the left, the note is binned on day one, and nobody learns what it could become. On the right, the same note goes in a pot, and each day's question grows a new leaf. By day seven the weak line has grown a moment worth keeping.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

DAY 1: BORING. DELETE.

~~**INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT**~~

~~**BEN** Can I borrow $500?~~

~~**JO** Again?~~

~~**BEN** Rent's due.~~

~~**JO** Fine. Here.~~

What's wrong: the page was judged the day it was born, while it was only a seed. Deleted, it never got the chance to grow.

WITH THE TOOL

DAY 7: KEPT IT. ASKED WHY SHE SAYS YES.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Rent's due. $500.

JO Again?

She counts it out anyway.

EXT. JO'S DOOR - LATER

Alone, Ben slips it back through her mail slot.

What changed: the same flat "yes" got a week of questions and grew into the moment readers remember.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHEN YOU GOT THIS IDEA, HOW LONG DID YOU KEEP IT BEFORE YOU DECIDED IT WAS BAD?

For the mentor: If the answer is a day or less, the idea wasn't judged; it was thrown out. Put it back. For one week, ask it one question a day ("Why?", "What if?", "What happens next?"). Then decide.

TOOL CARD · STARTING

Don't judge it today. Give it a week.

2

ARE YOU THROWING OUT AN IDEA TOO SOON?

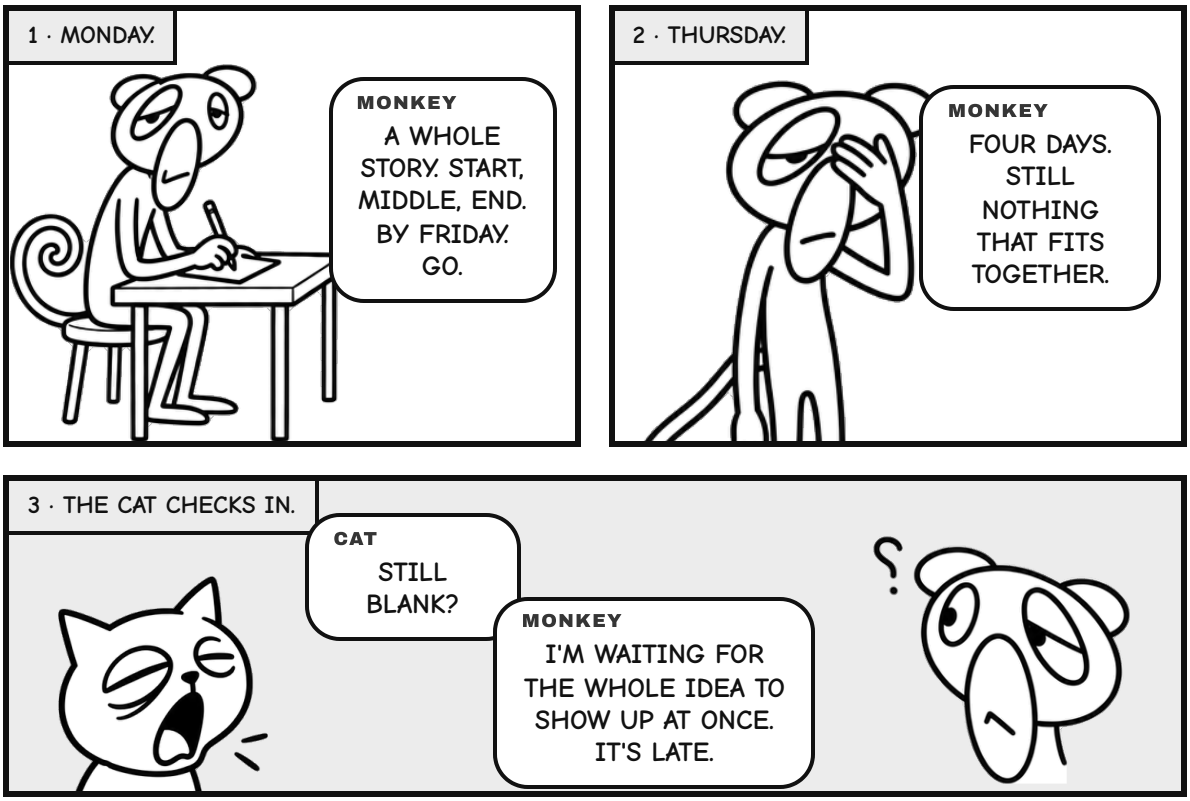
Collect First, Connect Later

THE IDEA

When you're stuck, it's tempting to wait for the whole story to arrive at once: who, where, what happens and how it ends. It almost never does. **Collect first** means you make a long, loose list of things you love (objects, places, people, habits) without trying to make them fit.

Connect later means that a week on, you read the list again and look for two or three items that click. That click is a story starting. Reach for this tool whenever the page is blank and stays blank.

The scene: before there was any Ben or Jo, the Monkey sat down to find a whole story in one go. He wants a beginning, a middle and an end by Friday. The Cat wants something, anything, to read.

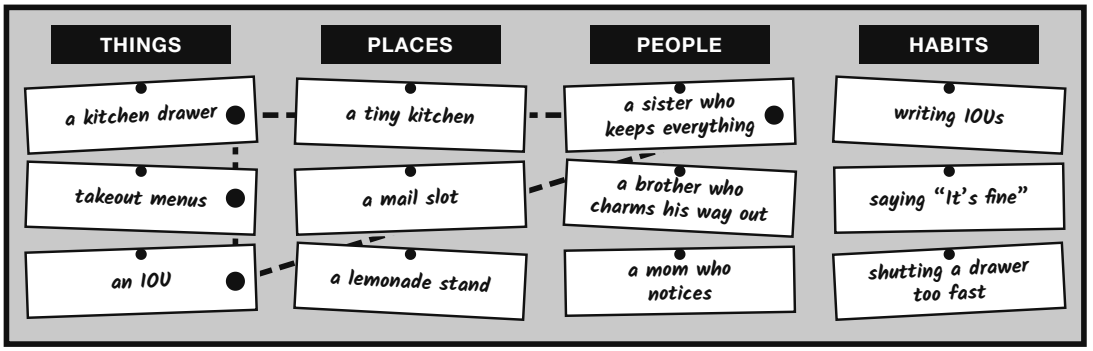


LIST WHAT YOU LOVE. MAKE IT FIT LATER.

The list idea comes from Ray Bradbury, who kept long lists of nouns and found his stories in them.

THE PICTURE · THE MONKEY'S BOARD, TWO WEEKS

WEEK 1 · COLLECT. Pin up anything you love. No string.



WEEK 2 · CONNECT. String the ones that click.

Most cards stay loose. That's fine.

→ *She keeps every IOU he ever wrote, in the kitchen drawer, under the menus.*

How to read this picture: in week one the writer pins up anything they love, in four columns, and connects nothing. In week two they read the board again and run string between the few cards that click. Here four loose cards became the heart of Ben and Jo's story.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Ben runs in with a lemonade pitcher.
BEN   Jo! Mom saw the car!
JO    It's fine. Takeout?
BEN   I wrote you an IOU.
She shuts a drawer, too fast.
```

What's wrong: the writer jammed every card on the board into one scene, on day one. It's a pile of stuff, not a scene. Nothing connects, so nothing matters.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
BEN   Rent's due. I'll pay you back.
Jo opens the drawer by the stove. She
lifts the takeout menus.
Under them: every IOU he ever wrote
her.
```

What changed: only the four cards that clicked made it in: a drawer, the menus, an IOU and a sister who keeps everything. Together they make one picture.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? BEFORE YOU STARTED THIS STORY, DID YOU LIST EVERYTHING YOU LOVE THAT MIGHT BELONG IN IT? SHOW ME THE LIST.

For the mentor: No list usually means the writer is waiting for the whole idea at once. Ask for twenty loose things in ten minutes: objects, places, people, habits. Don't connect them today. Next week, circle the two or three that click.

TOOL CARD · STARTING

Collect first. Connect later.

3

DID YOU LIST EVERYTHING THAT MIGHT BELONG?

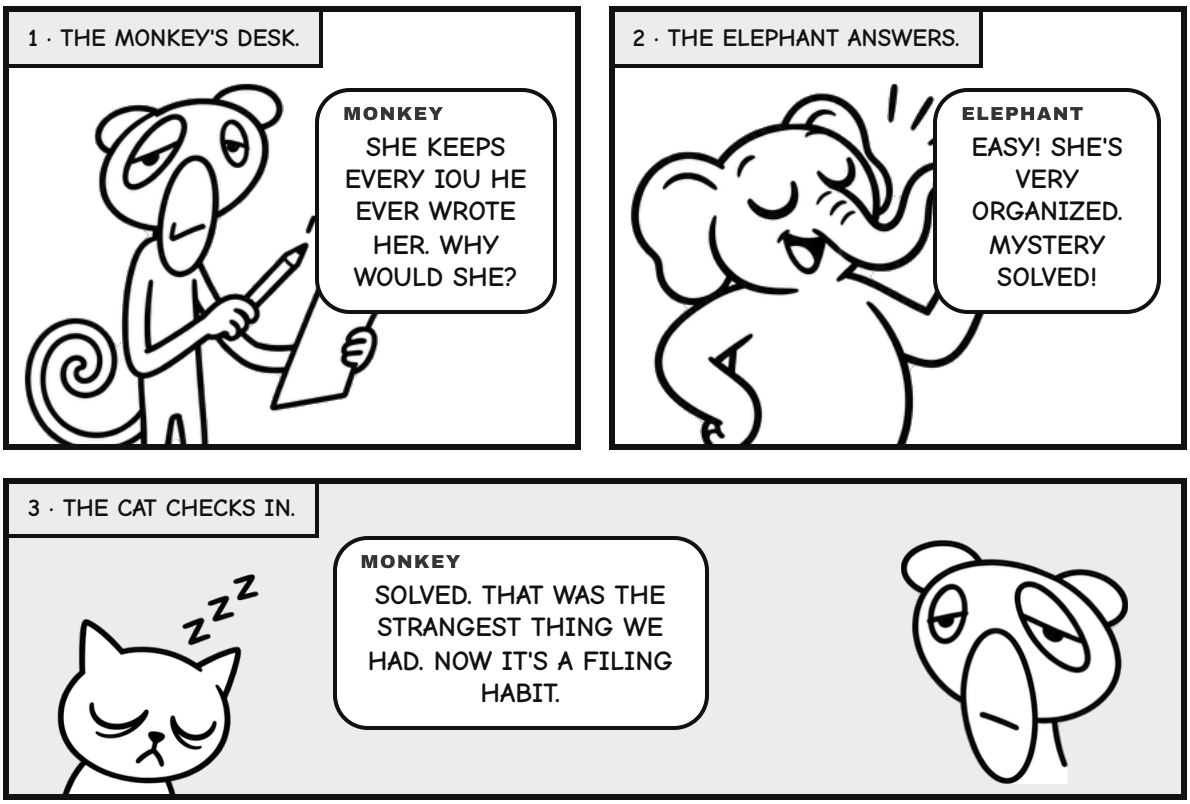
What Else Could Be True?

THE IDEA

Stories often start with something that doesn't add up: a shoe in the road, a drawer shut too fast, a sister who keeps every note her brother wrote her. The easy move is to explain it away with the first dull reason that fits. Don't.

Ask **what else could be true?** and write down three or four answers. Each answer is a different story. Reach for this tool whenever something in your idea, or in your day, makes you stop and think, "Huh."

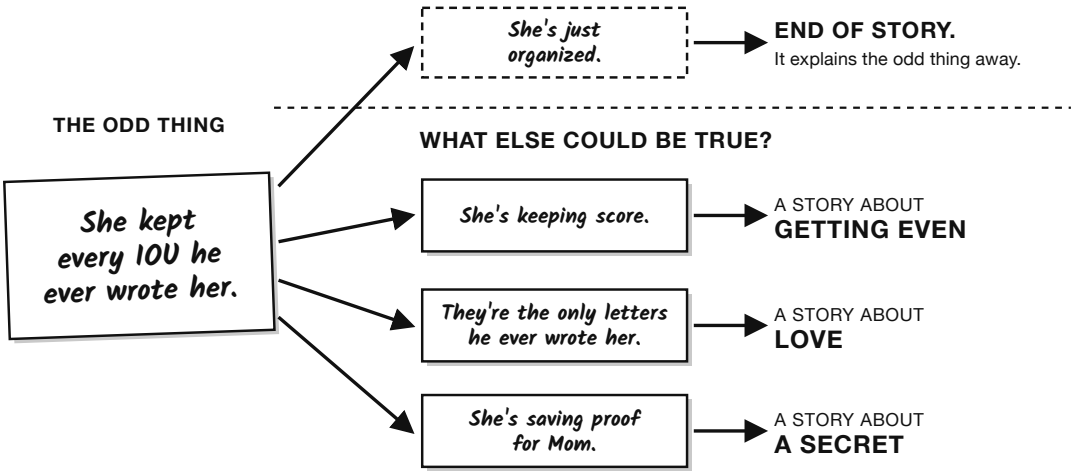
The scene: the Monkey's early Ben and Jo idea has one odd fact. Jo keeps every IOU her brother Ben ever wrote her, in a kitchen drawer. The Monkey asks the Elephant, his AI, why she would. The Monkey wants a story. The Elephant wants to help, fast.



DON'T EXPLAIN IT AWAY. ASK WHAT ELSE COULD BE TRUE.

Every odd thing has more than one answer. Write three. Each one is a different story.

THE PICTURE · ONE ODD THING, FOUR ANSWERS



How to read this picture: the card on the left is the odd thing. The top arrow is the first dull reason, and it ends the story on the spot. The arrows below it answer "what else could be true?" Each one points to a different story you could write. You don't have to pick one yet.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Ben lifts the takeout menus. IOUs. Dozens.

BEN You kept these?

JO I keep everything. Receipts, menus, all of it.

BEN Ha. Course you do.

He drops the menus back.

What's wrong: the odd thing gets a dull reason the second it appears. Ben stops wondering, and so does the Cat.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Ben lifts the takeout menus. IOUs. Dozens.

BEN You kept these?

JO Forty-one.

BEN You counted them?

JO Every one.

His grin goes.

What changed: the writer found several things that could be true and let the scene hold all of them. Jo won't say which. Ben wonders, and so does the Cat.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT'S THE STRANGEST THING IN YOUR STORY? WHY IS IT LIKE THAT? NOW GIVE ME THREE OTHER ANSWERS.

For the mentor: The first answer is usually the dull one that closes the question. Look for the answer that surprises the writer, or one they'd be a little afraid to write. That one is usually the story.

TOOL CARD · STARTING

Don't explain it away. Ask what else could be true.

4

WHAT ELSE COULD BE TRUE HERE?

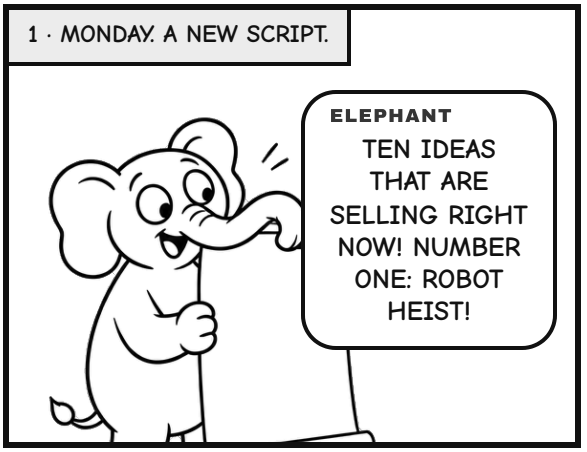
Start From What You Love

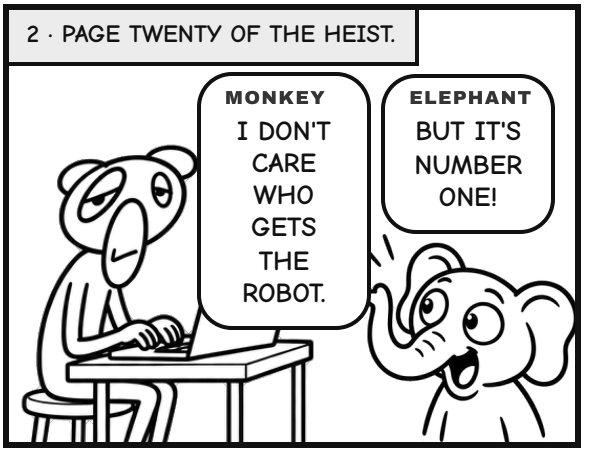
THE IDEA

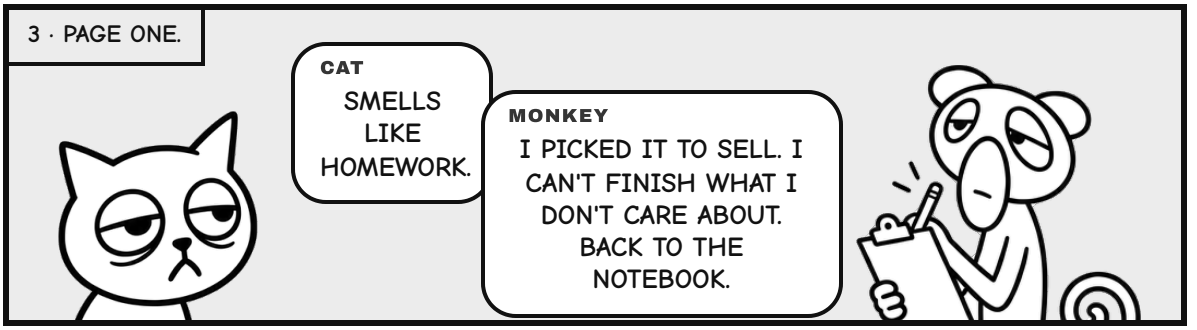
Start a new story from what you already love: the kinds of stories you watch twice, and the things **only you** have noticed, like a habit, a place or a person nobody has put on screen yet. Don't start from a guess about what will sell.

A script takes months. You'll finish the one you care about, and what only you found is the part nobody else can write. Reach for this tool before you pick an idea, or when the idea you picked starts to feel like homework.

The writer: the Monkey wants to start a new script. The Elephant, our AI, has made a list of ideas that are selling right now. The Monkey also keeps a notebook of things he can't stop thinking about, like a sister who kept every IOU her brother ever wrote her.



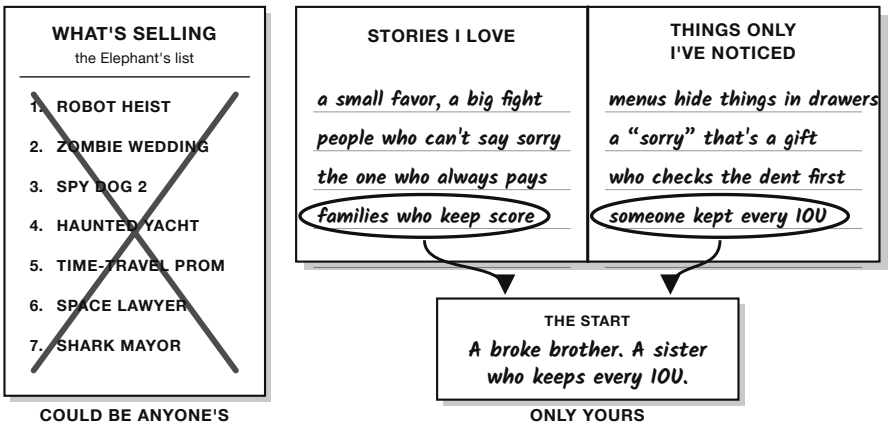




START WITH WHAT YOU LOVE. ADD WHAT ONLY YOU FOUND.

What you love tells you where to dig. What only you noticed is what you dig up.

THE PICTURE · TWO PLACES TO START



How to read this picture: on the left is the Elephant's list of what's selling. Any writer could pick from it, so it's crossed out. On the right is the Monkey's notebook: stories he loves, and things only he has noticed. Circle one on each page. Where the arrows meet is the start of Ben and Jo.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

FROM THE HOT LIST: ROBOT HEIST.

INT. BANK VAULT - NIGHT

BEN Sis. One last job.

JO The robot?

BEN The robot.

JO I'm in.

They crack the vault.

What's wrong: it's a premise (a story's starting point in one line) off a list, so it could be anyone's script. The lines are fine. Nothing in them came from the writer.

WITH THE TOOL

FROM THE NOTEBOOK.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Love the new menus.

JO Same menus. What do you need?

BEN Rent's due. Five hundred.

She lifts the menus. His IOUs, underneath.

Ben stops smiling.

What changed: the drawer of IOUs came from the notebook. Ben's charm runs straight into his own history, and no other writer would have found it.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR IDEAS

? OF THE IDEAS YOU'RE CHOOSING BETWEEN, WHICH ONE WOULD YOU STILL BE WRITING IN SIX MONTHS IF IT NEVER SOLD?

For the mentor: Start that one. If none of them, ask what stories they watch twice, and what they've noticed about people that they've never seen on screen. Pair one of each, like the Monkey's two circles.

TOOL CARD · STARTING

Start from what you love. Add what only you found.

5

WHAT WOULD YOU WRITE IF IT COULD NEVER SELL?

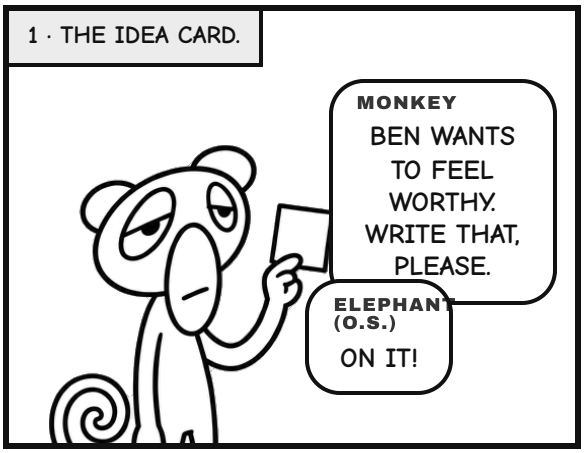
Do, Not Feel

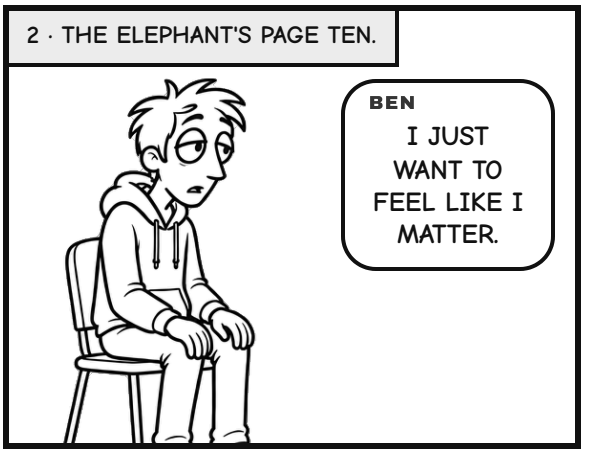
THE IDEA

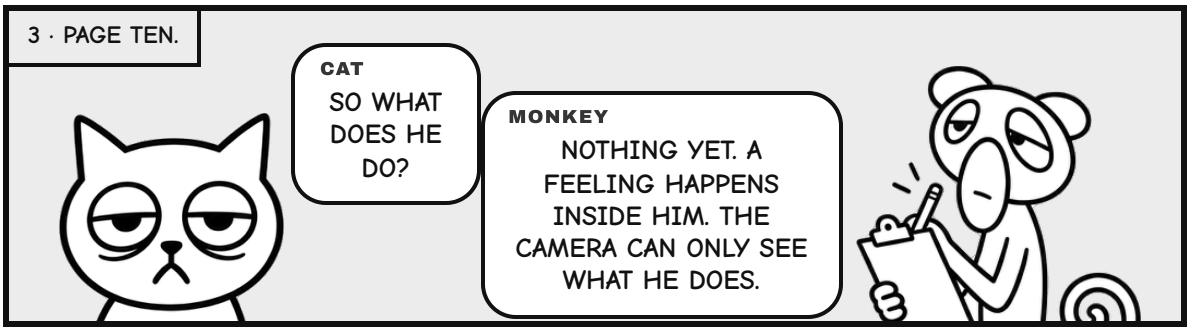
Start with the **story math**: a **person** plus a **situation** makes a **condition**, a problem pressing on that person that they can't ignore. Then the condition gives the hero three things: something **concrete** to do (a goal we could watch them reach: find, fix, pay, win), a **cost** if they fail, and **someone in the way** who wants something else.

A feeling like "wants to feel worthy" is real, but a camera can't film it, and we can't tell if the hero is winning. Keep the feeling and give it a job. Reach for this tool when your hero "wants to find themselves."

The idea so far: Ben gave Jo's $500 back, lost his apartment, and now sleeps on her couch. The Monkey's idea card says "Ben wants to feel worthy." The Elephant starts writing from that card.



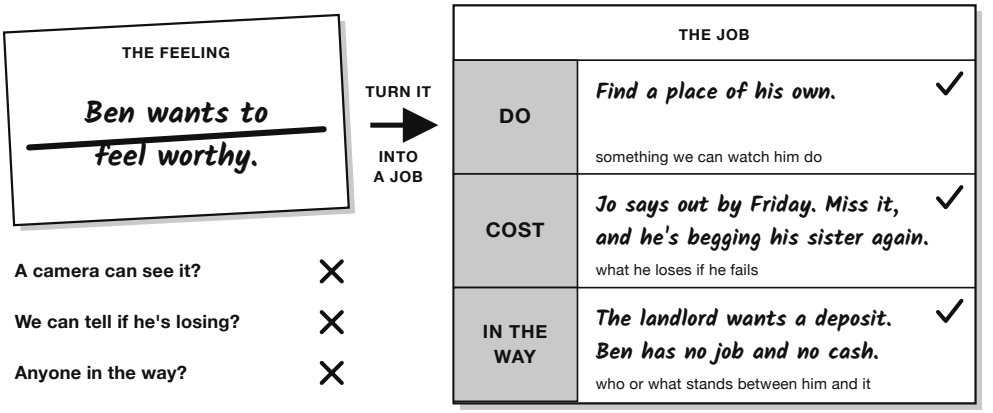




GIVE THE HERO A JOB, NOT A FEELING.

A job is something to do, a price for failing, and someone in the way.

THE PICTURE · TURN THE FEELING INTO A JOB



How to read this picture: the left card is a feeling. No camera can see it, we can't tell if Ben is losing, and nobody is in his way. The right card keeps the feeling underneath but gives it a job: something to do, a deadline, and someone in the way: a landlord who wants a deposit Ben doesn't have. Every box on it could be filmed.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Ben on the couch. Jo folds laundry.

BEN I just want to feel like I matter.

JO You matter, Ben.

BEN Then why do I feel so small?

JO Believe in yourself.

They sit in silence.

What's wrong: everyone talks about the feeling. Nobody can win or lose anything, so there's nothing to watch.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Ben on the couch, circling apartment ads. Jo taps the calendar: FRIDAY.

JO Friday.

BEN I know.

He circles one. Dials.

BEN The one-room? Can I see it tomorrow? First thing.

What changed: Ben has a job (a place) and a clock we can see (Friday). Every line is a step toward it, and the feeling shows anyway.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR HERO

? WHAT MUST YOUR HERO GET DONE? WHAT HAPPENS IF THEY FAIL? WHO IS IN THE WAY?

For the mentor: If an answer is a feeling ("to be loved," "to feel worthy"), ask what the hero would do to get it. "Feel worthy" becomes "find his own place by Friday." If nobody is in the way, add one person who wants the same thing.

TOOL CARD · STARTING

Something to do. A price for failing. Someone in the way.

6

WHAT MUST YOUR HERO GET DONE, AND BY WHEN?

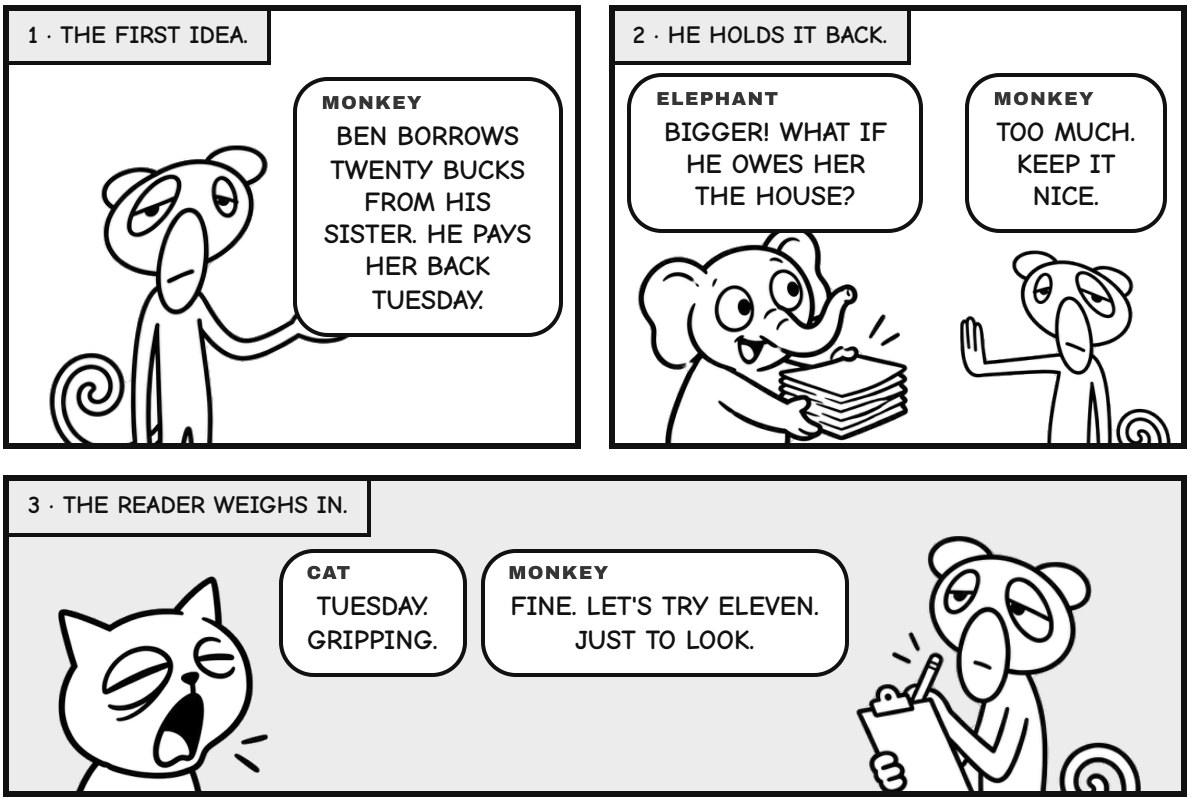
Turn It Up to Eleven

THE IDEA

A **premise** is your story's starting point in one line: who is in what trouble. First premises are often held back. They come out small and polite, because the bold version feels like too much.

This tool is a test. Turn the idea all the way up, to eleven on a dial that stops at ten, and look at what you get. Bold doesn't mean louder. It means more is at **stake**: more that someone could lose. Reach for it when your idea is fine but nobody leans in, you included.

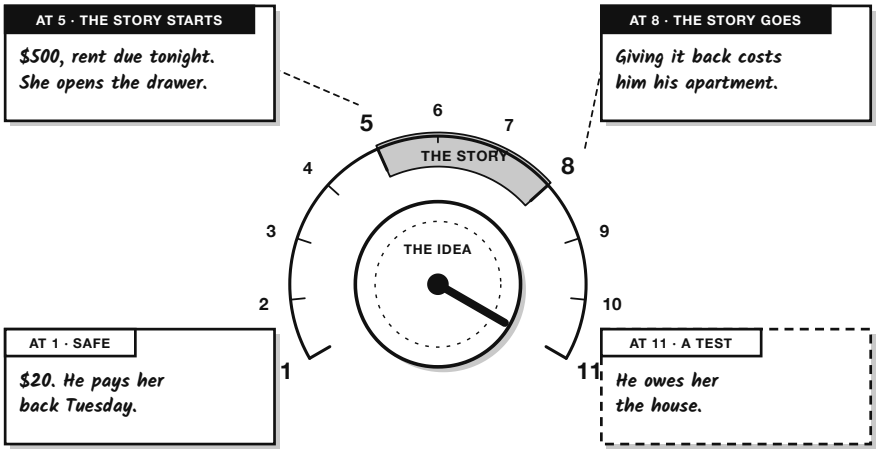
The writer: the Monkey has a first idea for Ben and his older sister Jo. It's fine. It's also small. The Elephant, his AI, is eager to help. The Cat has read four hundred scripts this year.



TRY THE BOLDEST VERSION. ON PURPOSE.

You don't have to keep it. Turn it back down to a number you believe, and keep what eleven showed you.

THE PICTURE · ONE IDEA ON A DIAL



Same idea, four settings. Try 11 on purpose, then pick the number you believe.

How to read this picture: each card is the same Ben and Jo idea at a different setting. The grey band is the story this book tells, from the $500 to the apartment it costs him. The dashed card is a test: the Monkey tried eleven to see how big the story could go, then turned it back down.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

DIAL AT 1. SAFE.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Can I borrow twenty?

JO Sure.

She hands it over.

BEN Tuesday. Promise.

JO Okay.

What's wrong: nothing can be lost. By morning nobody remembers it, the Cat included.

WITH THE TOOL

DIAL AT 11. A TEST ONLY.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

A bank letter on the table: FINAL NOTICE.

JO I put up my house for you.

BEN I'll fix it.

JO You said that about the car.

She opens the drawer by the stove. His IOUs.

What changed: now Jo could lose her home. Too much? Maybe. But now you know the story is about what Jo risks by trusting Ben. Keep that at $500.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT'S THE BOLDEST VERSION OF YOUR IDEA, THE ONE THAT SCARES YOU A LITTLE?

For the mentor: Write it in one line, even if it sounds silly. Then ask who could lose the most now. Turn the dial back down to a number you believe, and keep that answer.

TOOL CARD · STARTING

Turn it up to eleven. Then pick your number.

7

ARE YOU HOLDING YOUR IDEA BACK?

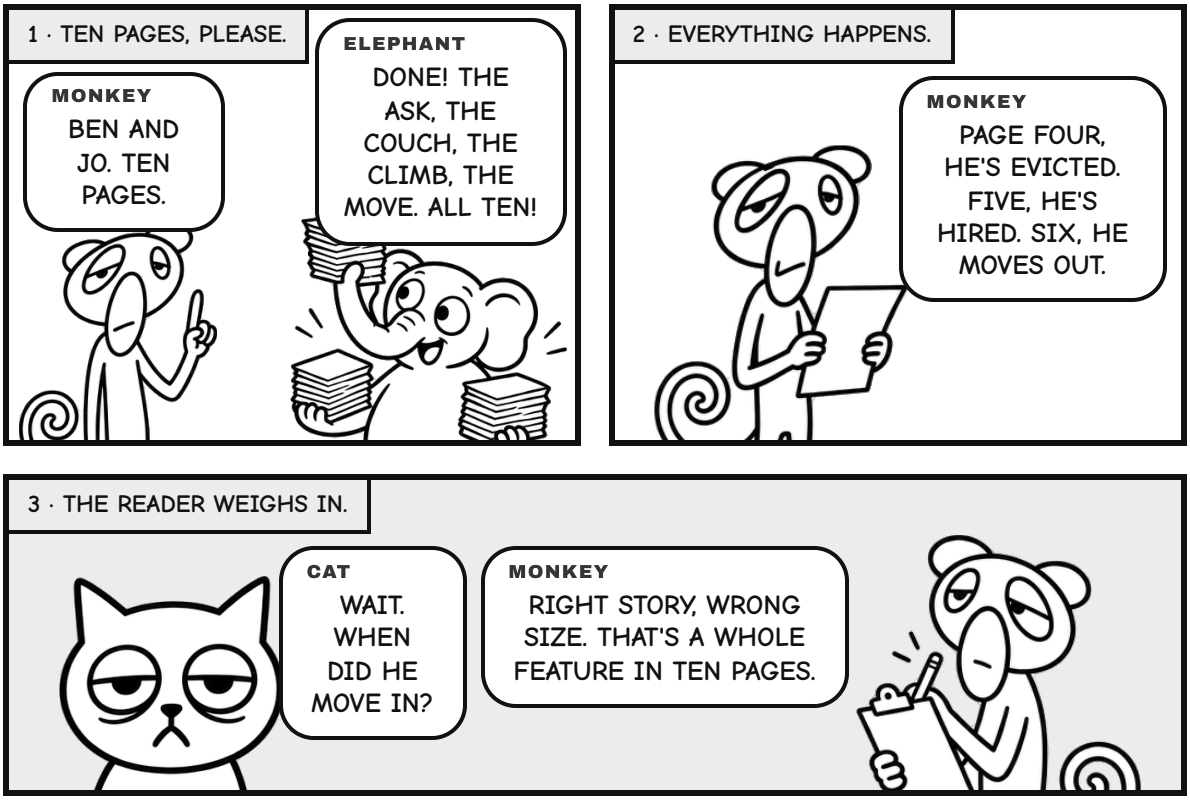
Choose a Size

THE IDEA

One idea can be told at different sizes. A **short film** is a whole movie that runs about 5 to 20 minutes: one moment, one turn. A **feature film** is the kind you see in a theater, about 90 minutes to two hours: one big change, start to finish. A **TV series** is many episodes, 30 or 60 minutes each, that keep one question open for weeks or years.

The size is your **container**. It decides how much story fits and where it has to stop. Reach for this tool once you can say your story in one sentence, and before you plan any scenes.

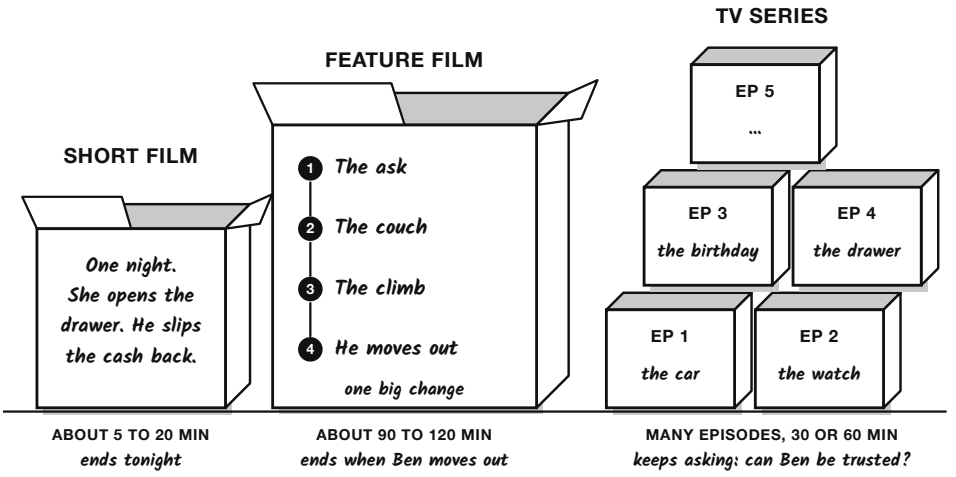
The writer: the Monkey has his one sentence: "Ben needs $500 from Jo tonight to keep his apartment, but taking it means one more IOU in her drawer, and he can't face that." He wants a ten-page short. The Elephant, his AI, will happily write any size, and it hasn't been told which.



PICK THE SIZE FIRST. THEN FILL IT.

Same idea, different container. The size tells you how much fits, and where to stop.

THE PICTURE · BEN AND JO IN THREE BOXES



How to read this picture: the same Ben and Jo, packed three ways. The short holds one night. The feature holds the whole road, from the ask to moving day. The series is a stack of episodes that never quite answers its question. Series and other sizes get a book of their own: Volume Two.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

A FEATURE, CRAMMED INTO A SHORT.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Can I borrow $500?

JO Fine.

Ben loses his apartment. He moves onto her couch.

He gets a new job.

He moves out.

What's wrong: four big events in a few lines. Each one gets a sentence, so none of them can land.

WITH THE TOOL

A SHORT. ONE NIGHT.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Rent's due. Five hundred.

JO Again?

She opens the drawer: his old IOUs. She counts out the cash anyway.

EXT. JO'S PORCH - LATER

Ben slips it back through her mail slot.

What changed: one night, one turn. It stops when he gives the money back. The rest waits for a feature. (callback: Let It Suck (For Now) 34)

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? HOW LONG DOES YOUR STORY'S QUESTION TAKE TO ANSWER?

For the mentor: One night: write a short. One big change, start to finish: a feature. A question that keeps asking, week after week: a series. Pick one, and say why.

TOOL CARD · STARTING

Same idea, different box. Pick the size first.

8

WHICH SIZE IS YOUR STORY, AND WHY?

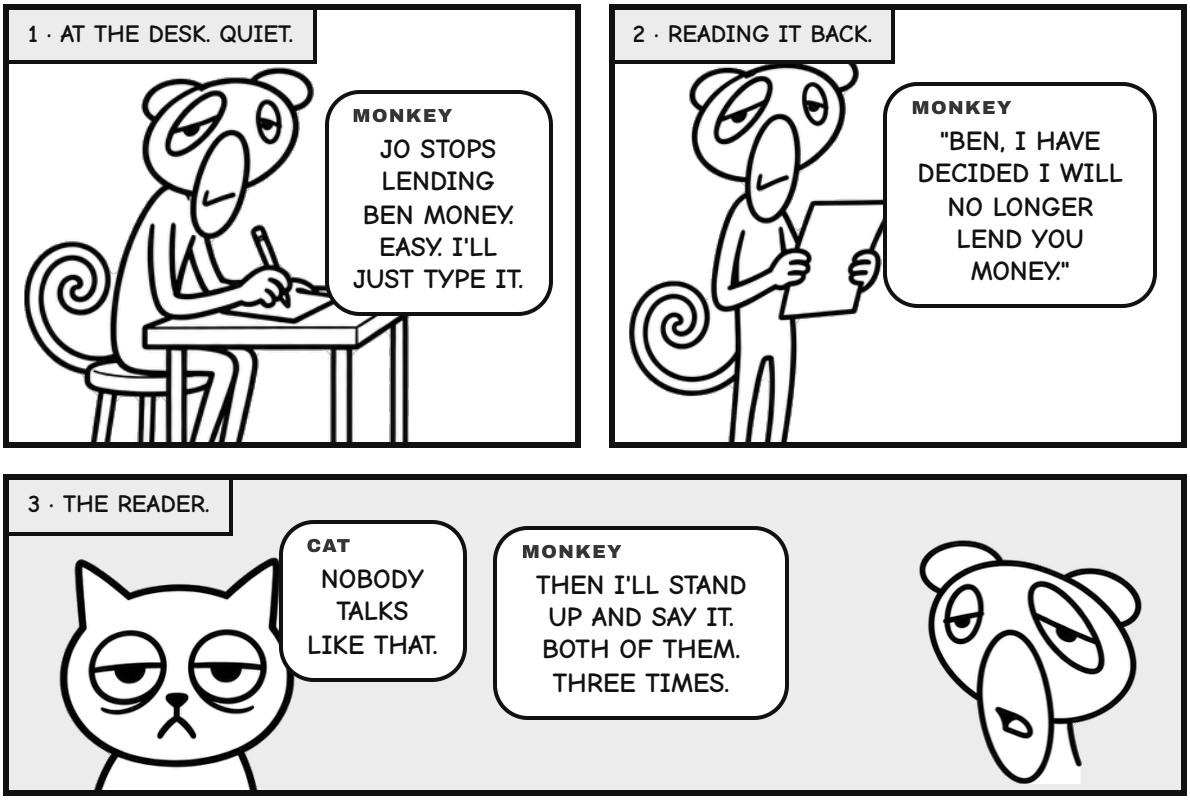
Say It Out Loud First

THE IDEA

Dialogue typed in silence comes out like a letter: full sentences, polite turns, everyone saying exactly what they mean. So before you type a scene, say in **one line** what it changes: who is after what, and what's different when it ends. Then stand up and act out both people, out loud, **three times** without stopping to fix anything. Take one finds the fight, take two turns up the heat, take three commits to the **turn** (the moment the scene changes direction). Then type what you heard.

Real people cut in on each other. **Runway words** are the little words that let them: look, listen, hang on, wait, yeah, but. Writing lines so they overlap on purpose goes back to the director Howard Hawks, who had his dialogue written to overlap and encouraged his actors to add lines on set. Reach for this when your dialogue reads fine but sounds stiff.

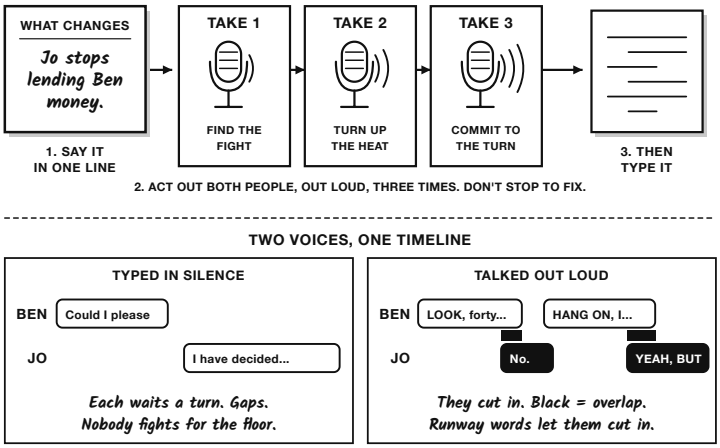
The scene: Ben is out of work and staying at his big sister Jo's place. He needs forty dollars for a bus pass to get to job interviews. Jo has lent him money his whole life and kept every IOU in the drawer by the stove. Ben's goal is the forty. Jo's goal is to stop lending. The Monkey knows what the scene changes, and types it in silence.



SAY WHAT CHANGES IN ONE LINE. THEN SAY THE SCENE OUT LOUD.

Three takes, both people, no fixing. Type it after.

THE PICTURE · ONE LINE, THREE TAKES, THEN TYPE



How to read this picture: go left to right along the top. Write the change on a card, say the scene three times (each take a little louder and surer), then type. The bottom shows why it works: typed in silence, Ben and Jo take polite turns. Said out loud, they cut in on each other, and the black marks show where they overlap.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Ben enters. Jo is washing dishes.

BEN Jo, could I please borrow forty dollars for a bus pass?

JO Ben, I have decided I will not lend you money anymore.

BEN I understand. That's fair.

What's wrong: typed in silence. Each waits a turn and says exactly what they mean. Nobody fights.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo scrubs a pan. Ben opens the drawer by the stove for a pen.

BEN Look, forty bucks. I'll write you a...

JO No.

BEN Hang on, I'm already...

JO Yeah, but the drawer's full.

She bumps it shut with her hip.

What changed: said out loud, it became a fight. They cut in, and it ends on a choice we can see.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? STAND UP AND READ ME YOUR SCENE OUT LOUD, PLAYING BOTH PEOPLE. WHERE DID YOU TRIP, OR STOP SOUNDING LIKE A PERSON?

For the mentor: Stiff spots are full sentences, polite turns and lines that say exactly what they mean. Have them say it three times without fixing, then type what they said, rough edges and all. Can't say in one line what the scene changes? Start there.

TOOL CARD · STARTING

Say what changes in one line. Then say the scene, three times.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: **THREE TAKES.**
THEN ROOM TALK: **TALKING OVER EACH OTHER** (*HIS GIRL FRIDAY*)
264

9

DID YOU SAY IT BEFORE YOU TYPED IT?

Scenes

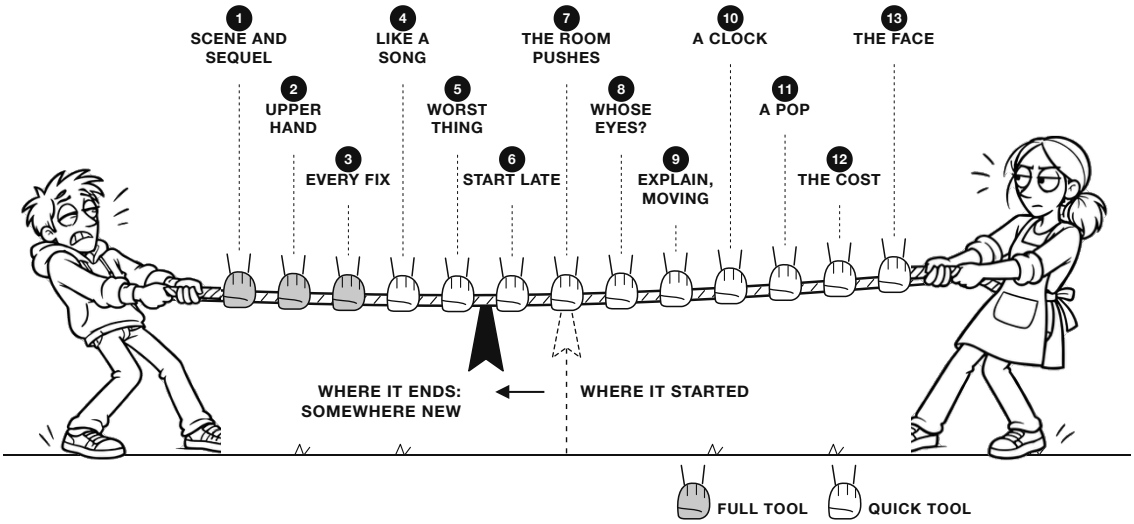
Every scene is a pursuit that ends somewhere new.

WHAT A SCENE IS

A **scene** is one piece of a story that happens in one place, in one stretch of time. Inside it, someone **wants** something, and someone or something is **in the way**. They pull against each other with words and actions.

When the scene ends, something has changed: who has the power, what someone knows, what someone has promised, how much danger they're in, or how they stand with each other. If nothing changed, it isn't a scene yet. It's people in a room.

THE MAP · A TUG OF WAR



How to read this map: Ben pulls for what he wants. Jo pulls back. Each hand on the rope is one tool in this drawer, numbered in the order you'll meet them: one more way to make the pull stronger, or to show us who is winning. The ribbon is the scene. By the end it should sit somewhere new.

FULL and **QUICK** tools work here as in every drawer (see How to read this book, at the front).

IN THIS DRAWER

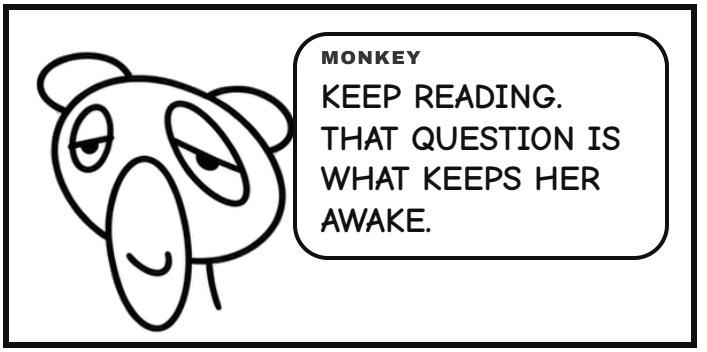
THIRTEEN TOOLS.

1	**Scene and Sequel**	A scene is a push for something; the sequel shows what it cost.	FULL
2	**Who Holds the Upper Hand**	Ask what changed from start to end: power, knowledge, commitment, danger, or the relationship?	FULL
3	**Every Fix Makes a Problem**	Block the easy way out, so each try makes the next problem.	FULL
4	**Build It Like a Song**	A big chase or fight builds like a hit song: set the beat, change it, go bigger.	QUICK
5	**Do the Worst Thing**	Ask what's the worst thing that could happen right now. Then let it happen.	QUICK
6	**Start Late, Leave Early**	Come in on a move already in play. Leave the moment it lands.	QUICK
7	**The Room Pushes Back**	Pick a place that puts pressure on people and forces them to act.	QUICK
8	**Whose Eyes Are We In?**	Ask whose experience we share. If it's two people at once, pick one.	QUICK
9	**Explain While Moving**	Facts go down easier when the people saying them are busy doing something hard.	QUICK
10	**Put a Clock on It**	A deadline we can see makes every second count.	QUICK
11	**A Pop Every Thirty Seconds**	Keep giving the audience something new: a surprise, a reveal, a jolt.	QUICK
12	**Pay the Cost on Screen**	When something harmful looks fun or cool, show its price in the same scene.	QUICK
13	**The Face Tells Us**	The reaction can matter more than the moment. Hold on the face.	QUICK

WHERE TO START

With **Scene and Sequel**. It names the parts every other tool here works on: a goal, a push, a change, and a cost. Then try **Who Holds the Upper Hand** on a scene you wrote; it is the fastest test of whether anything moved. Read the quick tools in any order, when a scene needs one.





DRAWER CARD · SCENES

Someone pulls. Someone pulls back.
It ends somewhere new.

?

WHAT IS DIFFERENT AT THE END OF YOUR SCENE?

Scene and Sequel

Ben and Jo (see Meet the Cast). Ben is broke, and his rent is due. It's late, and he has come to Jo's kitchen to ask her for $500.

Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. A few lines of its draft are below.

TEACHING EXAMPLE



BEN
Rent's due Friday. I need five hundred.

JO
Again, Ben?

BEN
Two weeks. I swear.

Jo writes him a check.

BEN
You're a lifesaver.

CUT TO: THE LANDLORD. Ben pays, whistling.



HE GOT THE MONEY. WE NEVER SAW IT LAND.

Ben asks, Jo gives, and we cut straight to the landlord. The lines are fine. But Jo barely pushes back, the money costs Ben nothing, and we never see how taking it hits him. So the Cat, our reader, fell asleep. The fix comes in two parts. In a **scene**, someone goes after what they want, someone stands in the way, and it ends with a turn. In the **sequel** right after, they react, face a hard choice, and decide. (The writing teacher Dwight V. Swain named the pair.)



MONKEY

SAME KITCHEN, SAME NIGHT, SAME $500. WATCH WHAT BEN TRIES, AND WHAT IT COSTS HIM.

HERE IS THE SCENE REWRITTEN WITH THIS TOOL

It reads like every script page in this book (Know What You Want, at the front, shows how). The labels on the right are ours, not part of the script. They name each part of the scene as it happens.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo scrubs a pan. Her brother BEN leans in the doorway, all smiles.

BEN
Love the new menus.

JO
Same menus. What do you need?

BEN
Rent's due. Five hundred.

JO
Again?

BEN
It's a loan. Two weeks. I'll pay you back.

JO
You said that in March.

BEN
Who else can I ask?

Jo stops scrubbing. Dries her hands. Opens the drawer by the stove and lifts the takeout menus.

Underneath: folded notes in Ben's handwriting. IOU. IOU. IOU.

Ben stops smiling. She counts five hundred dollars onto the pile.

JO
Take it.

Ben doesn't move.

GOAL

What a character is trying to get. Ben's goal: $500, tonight.

TACTIC 1

A **tactic** is one way of trying. Charm, then he asks. Jo balks. She is the **opposition**: the person in his way.

TACTIC 2

When one way fails, he tries another. A promise. She remembers March.

TACTIC 3

Guilt. He makes Jo his last door: if she says no, whatever happens is on her.

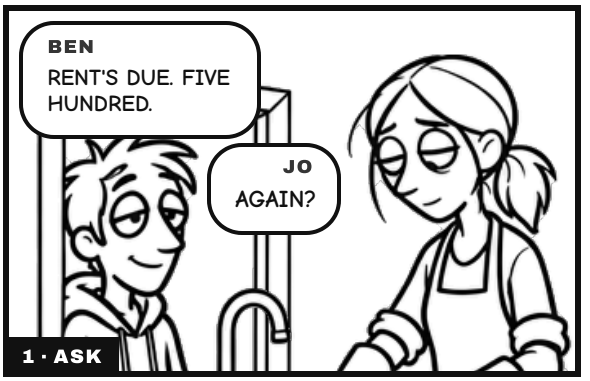
TURN

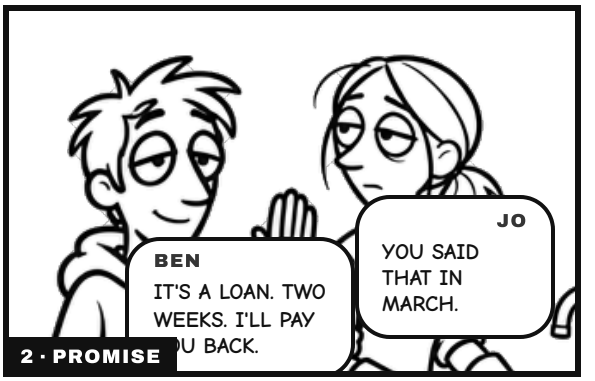
The moment the scene changes direction. He wins, and sees every time he won before.

CHANGE

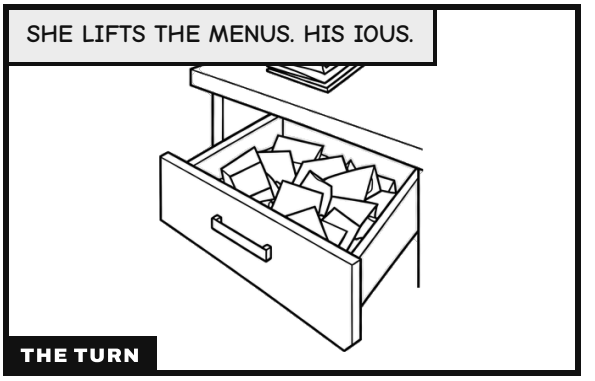
He has the money. He can't pretend anymore that he'll pay it back.

The same scene, drawn. Each black tag names the part you're watching: Ben's three tactics, the turn, and the change.



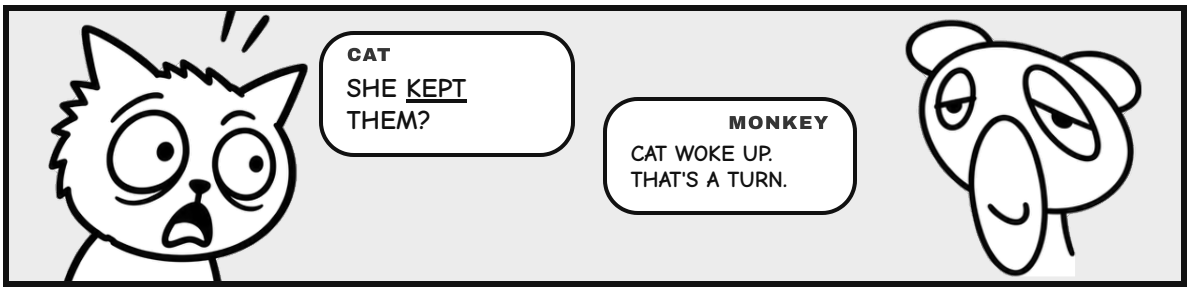








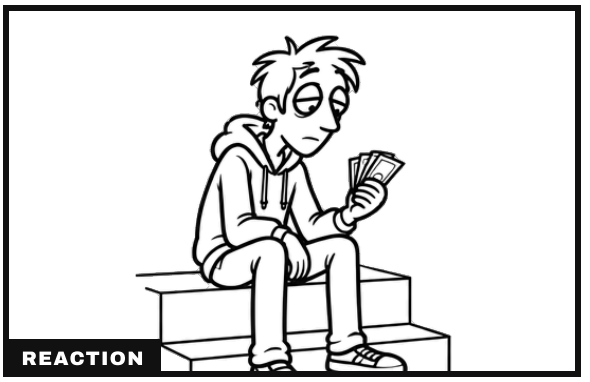




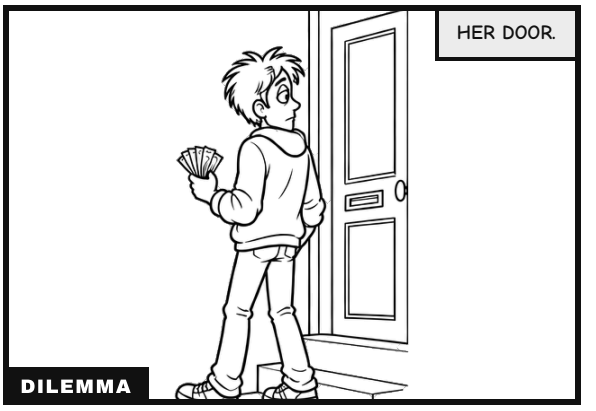
Why the scene turned: Ben gets exactly what he came for, and it hurts. Every IOU in that drawer is a time he promised to pay Jo back and didn't. Jo doesn't say a word about them. She just counts the money onto the pile.

THEN THE COST.

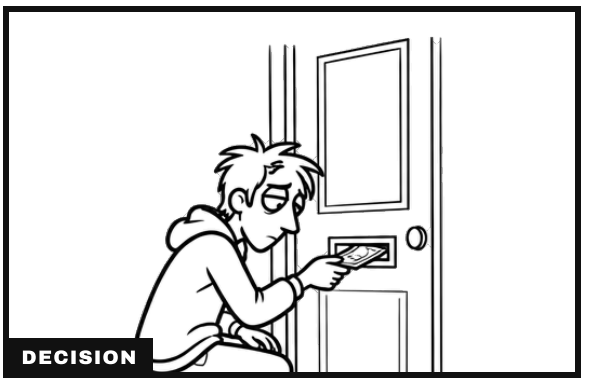
Right after a scene comes its sequel: the character deals with what the scene cost him. Ben is outside now, alone, holding Jo's money. There is no dialogue.



How the result hits him. He sits on her steps, holding the cash.



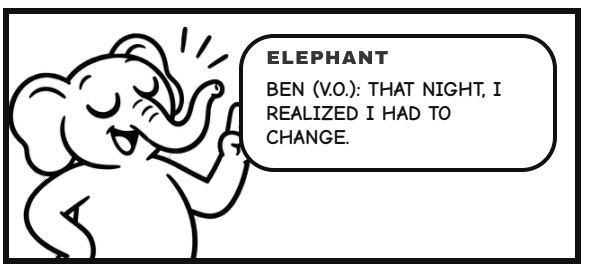
Two choices, both hard. Keep the money, or give it back?

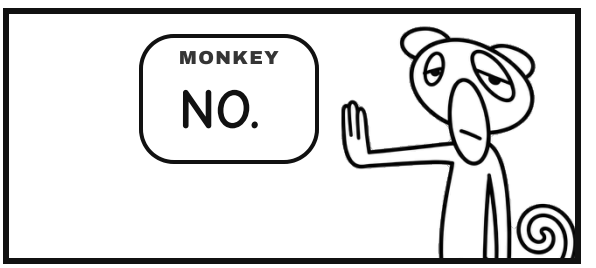


He chooses, and we see it. He pushes the cash through her mail slot.



His choice sets up his goal in the next scene: rent money, from somewhere else.





DON'T SAY IT. SHOW THE CHOICE. DRILL

V.O. means voice-over: a voice we hear over the pictures. Here, Ben tells us he changed. The mail slot already showed us. When we see a choice, we believe it.

WHEN VOICE-OVER HELPS. Show the choice first. Then you'll know when a voice-over adds something the pictures can't, like a joke against what we see, or a thought we could never guess.

SPOT THE MISS. WATCH WHAT COMES AFTER.

Two drafts of the same scene: Ben asks Jo for $500. One is the Elephant's first try. The other was written with this tool.

Read both. Watch what happens right after Ben gets the money, and ask what it costs him. Then answer the questions below.

DRAFT A

BEN
Rent's due. Five hundred.

JO
Again?

BEN
Who else can I ask?

Jo lifts the menus in the drawer: his IOUs. She counts the money onto the pile.

JO
Take it.

Later. Ben sits on her steps with the cash for a long time. Then he pushes it back through her mail slot.

DRAFT B

BEN
Rent's due Friday. I need five hundred.

JO
Again, Ben?

BEN
Two weeks. I swear.

JO
You swore in March.

BEN
Then I'll swear better.

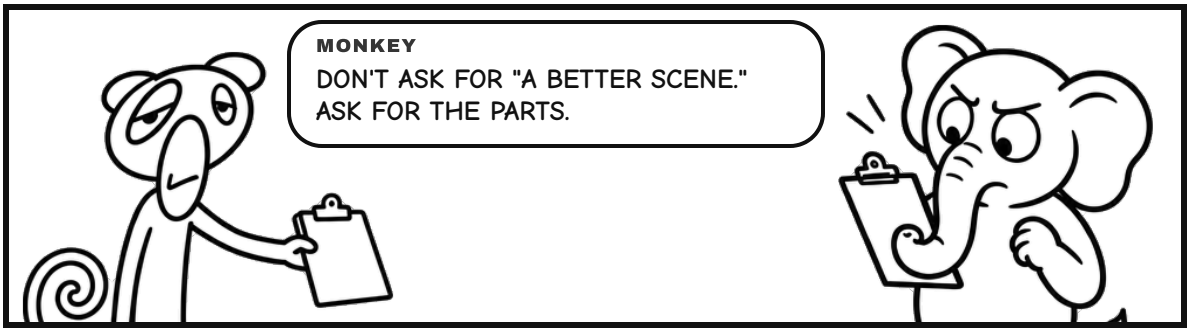
Jo almost smiles. She writes him a check.

CUT TO: INT. LANDLORD'S OFFICE - DAY. Ben hands over the check, whistling.

1. IN EACH DRAFT, WHAT HAPPENS RIGHT AFTER BEN GETS THE MONEY?
2. IN WHICH DRAFT DOES GETTING THE MONEY COST BEN SOMETHING?
3. IN WHICH DRAFT DOES BEN FACE A HARD CHOICE AFTERWARD, AND WHAT DOES HE DECIDE?

Draft A  Draft B 

Answers. 1: In Draft A, we stay with Ben: he sits on her steps with the cash. That's the sequel's reaction. In Draft B, we cut straight to the landlord. 2: Draft A. The drawer of IOUs shows him every time he never paid her back. In Draft B the money is free: a joke, a check, and he's gone. 3: Draft A. Keep the money or give it back? He gives it back, and we see him do it. Draft B skips the sequel, so there's no reaction, no choice and nothing for the next scene to grow from. Draft B is the Elephant's.



Here is the brief for Ben and Jo's scene: the short instructions you give the AI, or yourself, before anyone writes (Know What You Want, at the front, explains it). Each line names one part this scene and its sequel need.

THE BRIEF AI	**BEN, JO, THE $500**
THE WANT What should the audience feel?	We should feel what the money costs Ben, and watch him decide.
GOAL What is he trying to get?	Ben gets $500 from Jo tonight.
OPPOSITION Who stands in the way, and why?	Jo. She's lent before and never been paid back.
TACTICS The ways he tries, in order.	Ask. Promise. Guilt.
TRUE AT THE END What is different when it ends?	He has the money and wishes he didn't.
THE SEQUEL What he decides after, and how we see it.	He gives it back. We see him do it.
PROTECT The one thing the draft must keep.	The drawer of IOUs.
FORBID What the draft must not use.	~~naming a feeling~~ · ~~cutting straight to the next scene~~ · ~~voice-over~~

A BRIEF GIVES THE WANT AND THE LIMITS. NEVER THE LINES.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

Before you ask the Elephant to write, use it as a **cold reader**: someone reading your scene with no explanation from you. Paste in a scene of your own (only your own pages) and ask: **what is Ben's goal, where does it turn, and what does he decide after?** If the AI can't say, a human reader probably can't either. When it drafts, keep only what you would have written yourself.



TRY IT BY HAND

Pencil first. Elephant later.

Think of someone who wants something from a person who keeps saying no. Fill in the scene lines first, then the sequel lines. Then write the scene, one page long, by hand, and draw or describe the sequel with no dialogue.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE CHAIN

THE SCENE

GOAL
What they're after _____

OPPOSITION
Who says no, and why _____

TACTICS
Three ways they try _____

TURN
Where it changes direction _____

THE SEQUEL

REACTION
How the result hits them _____

DILEMMA
Two choices, both hard _____

DECISION
What we see them do _____

NEXT GOAL
What the next scene is about _____

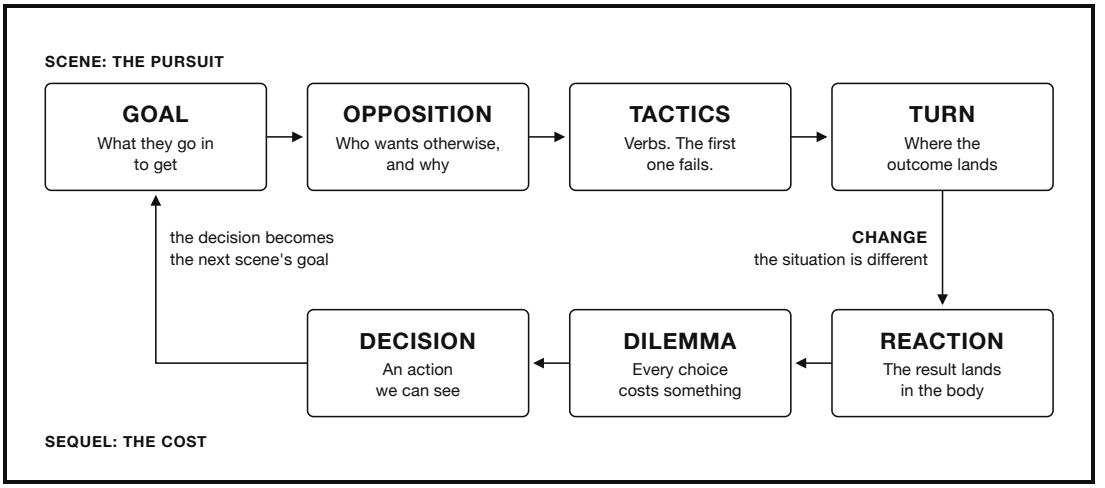


CAN YOU SEE THE DECISION HAPPEN, WITHOUT ANYONE SAYING IT? IF NOT, SHOW IT.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Scene and Sequel

A SCENE ENDS ON A TURN. THE SEQUEL SHOWS THE COST, AND THE CHOICE.



In a **scene**, someone wants something, someone says no, they try different tactics, and it turns. In the **sequel**, they react, face a hard choice and decide. The decision is the goal of the next scene, so the loop starts again.

DON'T SAY IT. SHOW THE CHOICE. DRILL

1. WHAT IS EACH PERSON'S GOAL IN THIS SCENE?
2. WHERE DOES THE SCENE TURN?
3. AFTERWARD, WHAT DO THEY DECIDE, AND HOW DO WE SEE IT?

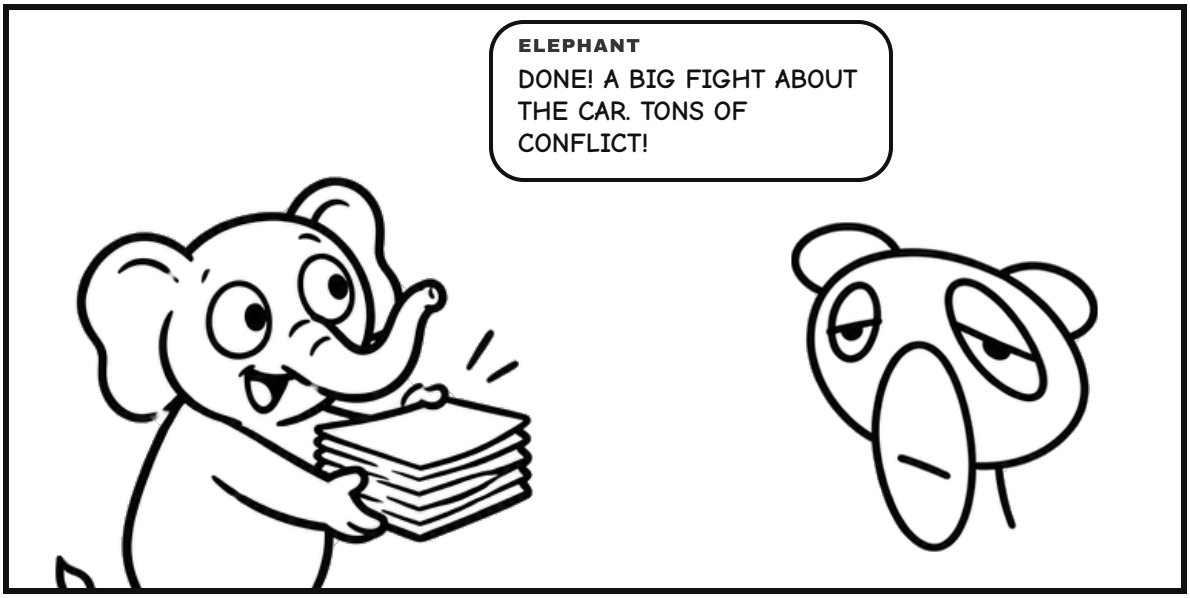
FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE CHAIN
ROOM TALK, A REAL FILM SCENE THAT USES THIS TOOL: THE BRIDGE, THEN THE HILL (THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING), 266





Who Holds the Upper Hand

Ben and Jo (see Meet the Cast). Tonight Ben wants to borrow her car. Jo needs it in the morning. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. Its **draft** (a first written try) is below. In a script, a name in capitals says who is talking, and their words sit under it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



BEN
Please, Jo. I really need the car tonight.

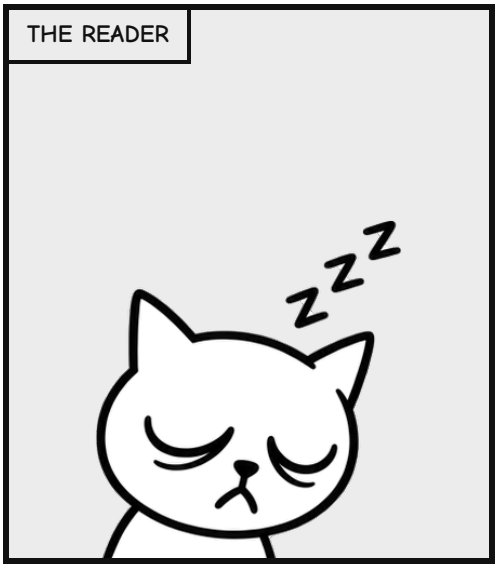
JO
I said no. I need it in the morning.

BEN
You never trust me.

JO
You never give me a reason to.

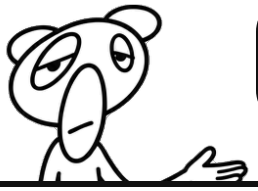
BEN
Fine. Whatever.

Jo keeps the keys.



THEY FOUGHT THE WHOLE TIME. JO STILL HAS THE KEYS.

Jo started with the **upper hand**: she was in control, because she had what Ben needed. She still has it at the end. Lots of shouting, but nothing changed. So the Cat, our reader, fell asleep.



MONKEY

SAME TWO PEOPLE. ONE CAR. WATCH WHO HOLDS THE KEYS IN THE FIRST LINE. THEN WATCH THE LAST.

HERE IS THE SCENE REWRITTEN WITH THIS TOOL

The notes on the right are ours, not part of the script. (New to script pages? Know What You Want, at the front of the book, shows how to read one.)

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo at the sink. Her car keys on the counter. Ben in the doorway.

BEN
Can I borrow the car tonight?

JO
No.

She picks up the keys. Closes her fist.

BEN
I'll fill the tank.

JO
You said that last time.

Ben sets something on the counter: a mailbox flag. Red. Bent.

BEN
Found this at Mom's. Her mailbox is leaning.

Jo looks at the flag. Doesn't touch it.

BEN
Funny. Your bumper has a red scrape.

Jo opens her fist. Holds out the keys.

JO
Don't tell Mom.

BEN
Back by midnight.

He takes the keys. Leaves the flag.

START

Her car, her keys. Jo holds the **upper hand**: she has what Ben needs.

THE ASK

Ben wants the car. Jo says no, and we see her close her fist on it.

PUSH

He tries again with words. Talk alone moves nothing.

LEVERAGE

Leverage: something you can use to push someone. Ben noticed something.

THE TURN

The turn: the moment the scene changes direction. Here, the upper hand changes sides. The red scrape says Jo hit Mom's mailbox and kept quiet.

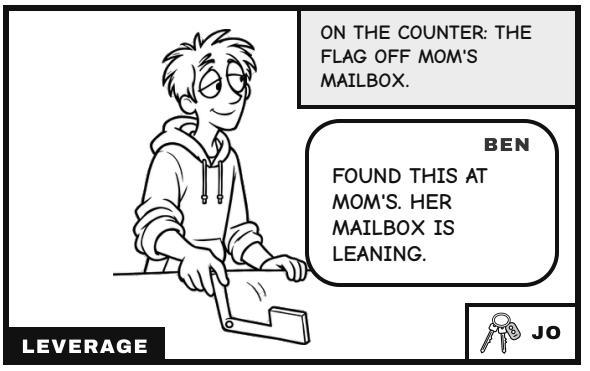
END

Ben holds it. Now Jo needs him to keep her secret.

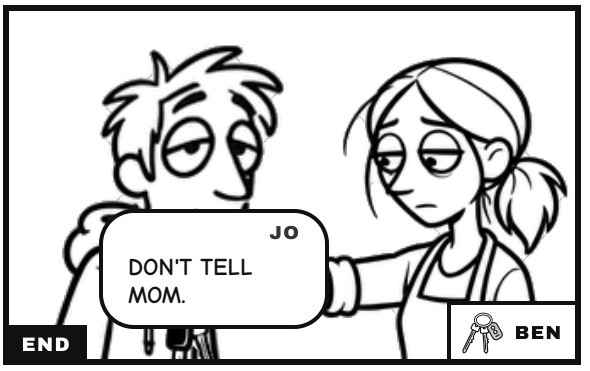
The same scene, drawn. The key tag in each panel's bottom corner shows who holds the upper hand at that moment.



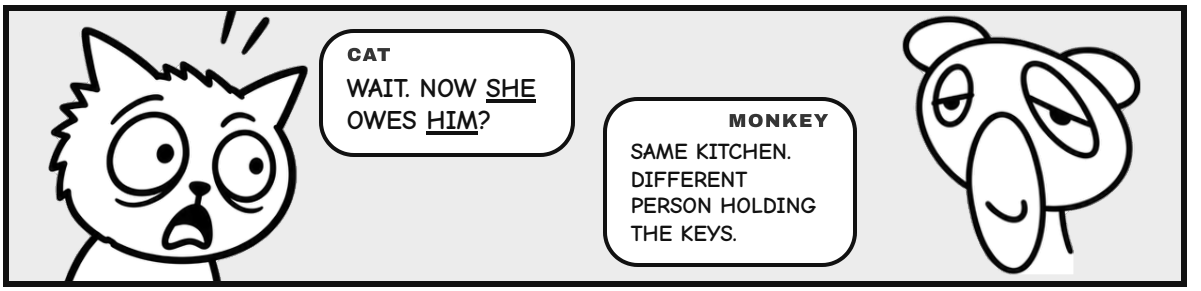






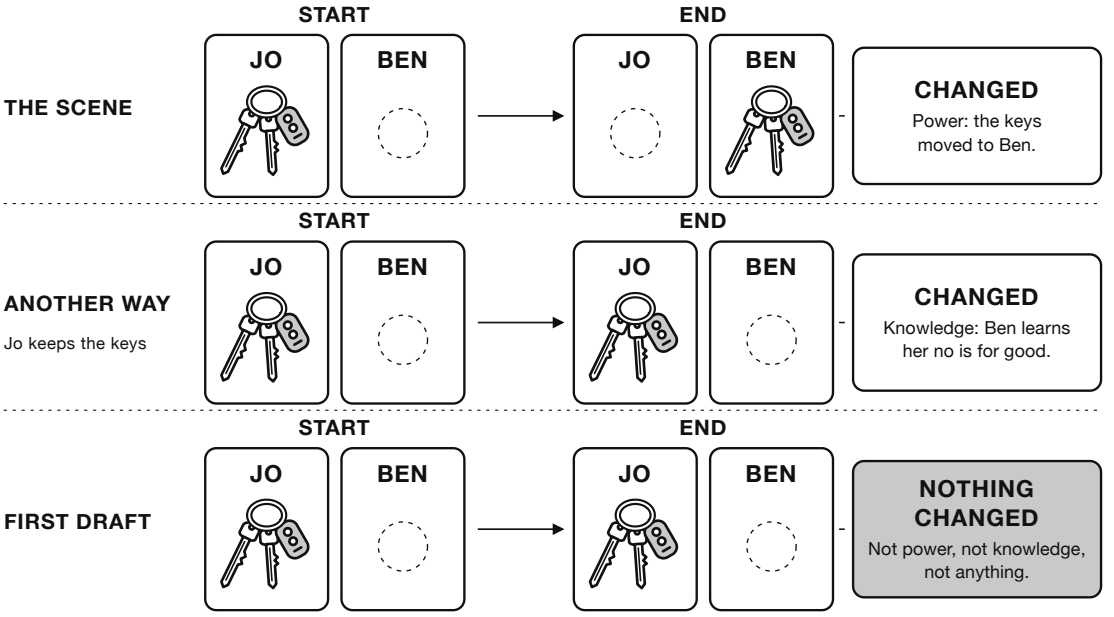




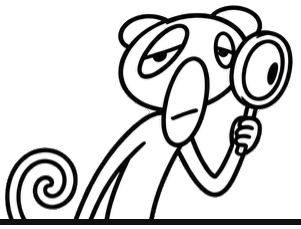


Why the keys moved: the scrape on Jo's bumper is red, like the flag from Mom's bent mailbox. Jo hit the mailbox and never told anyone. Ben worked it out, so now Jo needs him to keep quiet. That's what gives him the upper hand.

CHECK THE START. CHECK THE END.



How to read this chart: each card is a person, and the keys show who holds the upper hand. Top row: Ben and Jo's scene from two pages back. Middle row: another way it could go. Jo keeps the keys, and she takes the spare off its hook too. Ben stops asking: now he knows her no is for good. The keys never moved, but what Ben knows did, so the scene still works. Bottom row: the Elephant's draft from the first page of this tool.



MONKEY

WHO'S ON TOP AT THE START? AT THE END? THEN ASK: WHAT CHANGED? POWER, KNOWLEDGE, COMMITMENT, DANGER, OR THE RELATIONSHIP. POWER CHANGING SIDES IS ONE CLEAR ANSWER. WHAT MATTERS IS A MEANINGFUL CHANGE.

THE THUMB TEST

Put your thumb over the middle of the scene. Read only the first beat and the last one. (A **beat** is one small moment: one move and the answer to it.) If you can't tell what changed, neither can the reader.

BUT IT ISN'T ABOUT WHO'S LOUDER

Look for the thing someone needs.



The upper hand belongs to whoever has what the other person needs: the keys, a secret, a yes. Shouting doesn't move it. Then check the **reverse angle**: run the test again from the other person's side of the room. What is their goal, and do they reach it?

SPOT THE MISS: A CLOSE CALL.

Two good versions of the same scene, and both change something. They just change different things. **The want:** we should watch Ben win the car tonight, because the story needs him to drive off in it. · **Ben's goal:** Jo's car, tonight.

Read both. In each, find who holds the keys at the start and at the end, and what else changed. Then answer the questions below.

VERSION A · QUIET

BEN
Can I borrow the car tonight?

JO
No.

Ben sets a bent red mailbox flag on the counter.

BEN
Found this at Mom's. Funny. Your bumper has a red scrape.

Jo holds out the keys.

JO
Don't tell Mom.

VERSION B · LOUD

BEN
Can I borrow the car tonight?

JO
No.

BEN
I'll fill the tank!

JO
Like last time? Empty. With a dent!

BEN
Some guy in the grocery lot hit it!

JO
I never believed the guy! I said yes so we wouldn't have this fight!

BEN
So now I'm the bad guy?

JO
No! When I say no, *I'm* the bad guy! Every time!

Ben grabs the door to slam it. Stops.

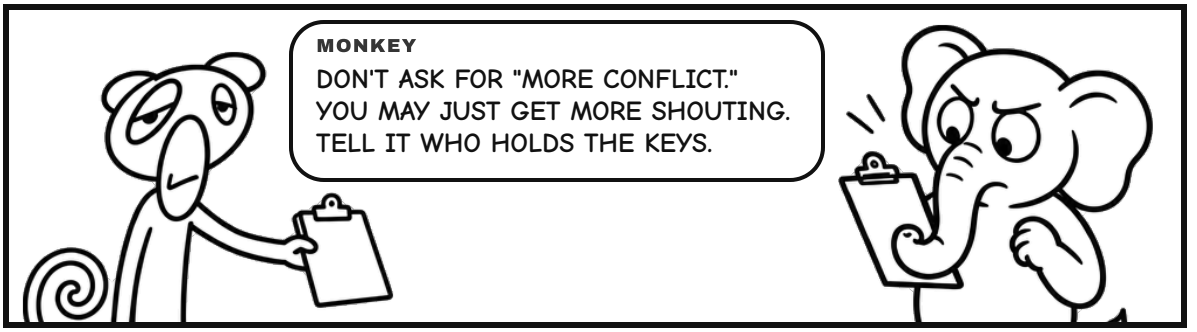
BEN
...Keep the car.

1. WHICH ONE SERVES THE WANT THIS SCENE STATES?
2. WHAT DOES EACH ONE GIVE UP?
3. WOULD YOU KEEP EITHER ONE, AND WHY?





Answers. 1: Version A. It ends with Ben holding the keys, which is what this scene is for. In B, Jo keeps them. 2: A gives up the noise: it's quick and quiet, and nobody says what's been building between them. B gives up the car. Power never moves, but knowledge and the relationship do: Ben learns she never believed his story, and that saying no makes her feel like the bad guy. 3: Keep A here, because this story needs Ben in the car. Keep B for a different scene, one whose job is for Ben to find out how Jo sees him. Neither is a miss. The question is which change this scene needs. Why loud works in B: every shout hands Ben a fact he didn't have, so the noise is doing the work. The Elephant's fight on the first page of this tool told him nothing new.



THE BRIEF AI

BEN, JO, THE CAR

Your **brief** (the instructions you write before anyone drafts; more in Know What You Want). The left side of each row says what to fill in.

THE WANT What should the audience feel?	We should see Ben win the car, and wonder what Jo is hiding.
GOAL What is he trying to get?	Ben gets Jo's car tonight.
START Who holds the upper hand as the scene begins?	Jo holds the upper hand. Her car, her keys.
END Who holds it when the scene ends?	Ben holds it. Jo asks him a favor.
LEVERAGE What will make it change sides?	One thing Ben noticed that Jo can't argue with.
SHOW IT What will we see move from one person to the other?	Something we can see changes hands.
FORBID What to keep out of the draft.	~~a fight that ends where it started~~ · ~~"Fine. Whatever."~~ · ~~apologies~~ · ~~speeches~~

NAME THE START. NAME THE END. LET THE ELEPHANT FIND THE MIDDLE.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You type the brief, with the start and the end in it. Ask only for "more conflict" and the AI can just turn up the volume. **Back comes** a draft, sometimes with sharper lines and the same person on top at the end. **You ask** it who holds the upper hand at the first beat and the last, then **check its answer yourself**. An AI can say a scene turned when it didn't.



TRY IT BY HAND

Find the keys.

Pick a scene you wrote, or a scene from a movie you like. Cover the middle with your thumb and read only the first beat and the last one. Then fill in each line below: who is on top at the start, who is on top at the end, and what flipped it.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE SEESAWS

THE SCENE _____

START · WHO IS ON TOP? _____

HOW DO WE SEE IT? _____

MIDDLE · WHAT FLIPPED IT? _____

END · WHO IS ON TOP? _____

HOW DO WE SEE IT? _____

WHAT CHANGED? TICK EVERY ONE THAT DID.

- ☐ **POWER** — who's on top
- ☐ **KNOWLEDGE** — what someone learns
- ☐ **COMMITMENT** — what someone promises
- ☐ **DANGER** — what's at risk
- ☐ **THE RELATIONSHIP** — how they stand

Power changing sides is one clear answer. What matters is a meaningful change. Ticked none? Then nothing has happened yet. Give someone something to find, learn or do that changes one of them.

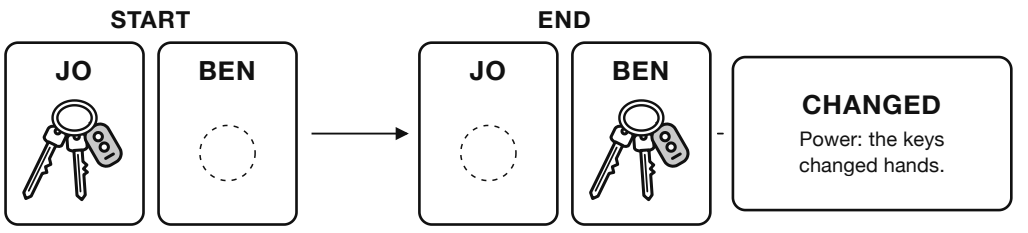


THEN RUN THE TEST AGAIN FROM THE OTHER PERSON'S SIDE. WHAT IS THEIR GOAL, AND DO THEY REACH IT?

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Who Holds the Upper Hand

THE QUICK TEST FOR THE TURN: WHAT CHANGED BETWEEN THE FIRST BEAT AND THE LAST?



The **upper hand** belongs to whoever has what the other person needs: the keys, a secret, a yes. Not whoever is loudest.

WHAT CHANGED? POWER, KNOWLEDGE, COMMITMENT, DANGER, OR THE RELATIONSHIP?

1. WHO HOLDS THE UPPER HAND WHEN THE SCENE STARTS?
2. WHO HOLDS IT WHEN IT ENDS?
3. CAN WE SEE IT CHANGE HANDS?
4. IF IT DIDN'T CHANGE HANDS, WHAT DID CHANGE: KNOWLEDGE, COMMITMENT, DANGER, OR THE RELATIONSHIP?
5. HOW DOES THE SCENE LOOK FROM THE OTHER PERSON'S SIDE?

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE SEESAWS
ROOM TALK, A REAL FILM SCENE THAT USES THIS TOOL: THE BATTLE OF WITS (THE PRINCESS BRIDE), 270



Every Fix Makes a Problem

Ben and Jo (see Meet the Cast). Ben wants to buy a used car, but the bank won't lend him the money alone. He needs someone to **co-sign** the loan: to sign it too, and promise to pay if he doesn't. He wants that someone to be Jo.

Here's the scene where Ben asks, the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. Its **draft** (a first written try) is below. A name in capitals says who is talking. TEACHING EXAMPLE




```
                BEN
        The bank wants a co-signer for my
        car loan. Will you?

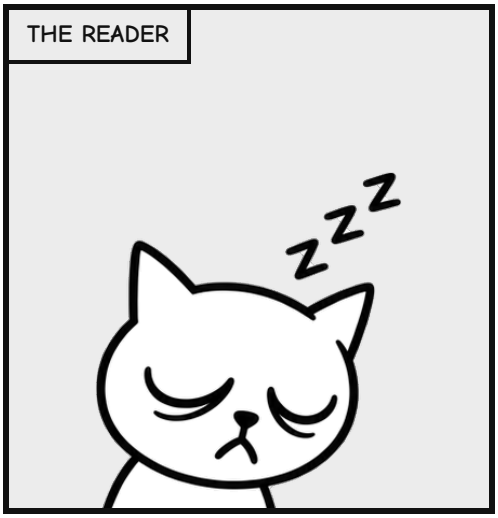
                JO
        How much a month?

                BEN
        Not much. I can cover it.

Jo reads the form. Clicks her pen. Signs.

                BEN
        I owe you.

                JO
        Add it to the list.
```



HE ASKED. SHE SAID YES. SCENE OVER.

Ben got what he wanted on his **first try**. Nothing stood in his way, so he never had to try anything else, and we never saw what he would do when pushed. The **easy way out** (the simple yes) was left open. So the Cat, our reader, fell asleep.



MONKEY

SAME ASK. THIS TIME JO DOESN'T MAKE IT EASY. WATCH EACH FIX BEN TRIES MAKE HIS NEXT PROBLEM.

HERE IS THE SCENE REWRITTEN WITH THIS TOOL

The notes on the right are ours, not part of the script. (How to read a script page: see Know What You Want, at the front of the book.) Each **try** is one **tactic**: one way of going after what you want.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo at the sink. Bills stacked on the counter. Ben in the doorway with a loan form.

BEN
Will you co-sign my car loan?

JO
I'm busy.

BEN
I'll pay your gas for a month.

JO
With what money?

He lays a job offer on her bills, his job application clipped behind it.

BEN
I start Monday. Real pay.

Jo flips to the application. Stops.

JO
"Reference: Jo. Former manager"?

Ben sets his phone on the papers. A number on the screen.

BEN
My new boss. Call him. Tell him.

Jo doesn't touch the phone.

JO
He called me yesterday. I said you were the best I ever had.

She initials the form. Opens a drawer. Drops it in, on top of his old IOUs.

JO
Bank's at ten.

GOAL

Ben wants Jo to co-sign. The bank won't lend to him alone: that easy way out is shut.

1 · TRY

He asks nicely. **New problem:** she won't even listen.

2 · TRY HARDER

He offers her something. **New problem:** now she's thinking about how broke he is.

3 · RAISE IT

Proof he can pay. **New problem:** his application holds a lie, with her name on it.

4 · ALL IN

He risks everything: one call from Jo and the job is gone.

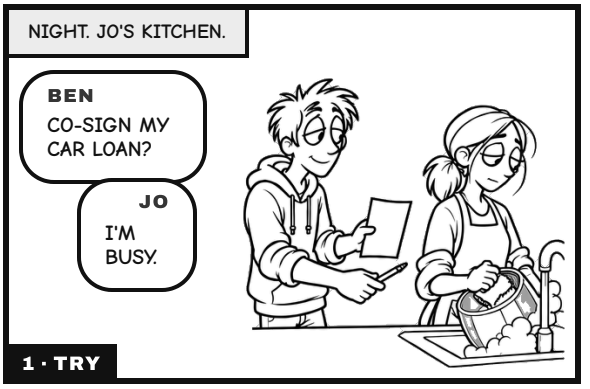
THE TWIST

Twist: a surprise that flips the scene. Jo already lied for him.

THE COST

He got his yes. Tonight it sits in the drawer with every IOU he ever wrote her.

The same scene, drawn. The tag in each panel's bottom corner says which step of the staircase Ben is on.



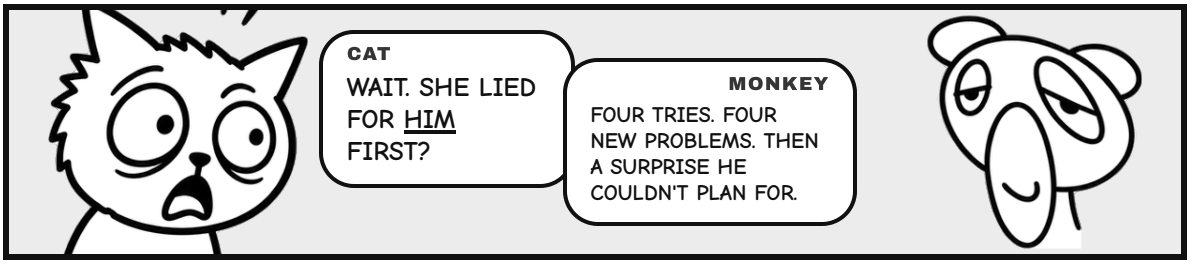






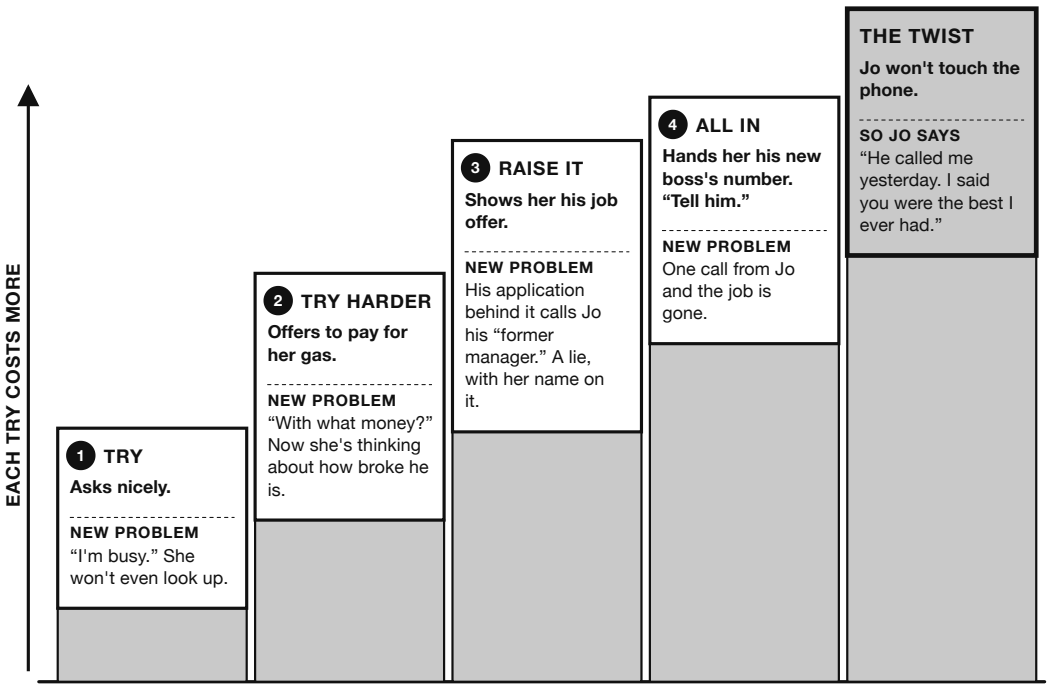






Why it works: every fix Ben tries makes a new problem, so his next try has to be bigger. Asking gets ignored; offering money reminds Jo he's broke; the application behind the job offer shows his lie; handing her the phone bets his job on her. Then the twist: Jo was a step ahead the whole time.

SHUT THE EASY WAY OUT. MAKE EVERY FIX COST MORE. DRILL



How to read this chart: each step is one of Ben's tries from the script two pages back, with the new problem it made. Each try costs Ben more: his time, then money, then the truth, then his job.



MONKEY

IF THE FIRST TRY WORKS, THE SCENE IS OVER. SHUT THAT DOOR. THEN MAKE EVERY ANSWER A NEW PROBLEM.

THE FIRST-TRY TEST

Read only your character's first try and the answer to it. Could they have walked away with what they wanted, right there? Then that is the **easy way out**. Close it: give the other person a reason to say no.

BUT A NEW TRY ISN'T ENOUGH

Each step has to cost more.

Ten polite asks in a row are flat ground, not stairs. Each try must be bigger or riskier than the last. Writers call this **escalation**. At the top comes a **twist**: a surprise that changes what the scene was about.



SPOT THE MISS. COUNT THE TRIES.

Two drafts of the same scene: Ben wants Jo to co-sign his car loan. One is the kind of draft an AI might write when you ask for "a scene where Jo helps Ben." The other was written with this tool.

Read both. In each one, count how many times Ben has to try, and notice what each "no" pushes him to do next. Then answer the questions below.

DRAFT A

BEN
I need a favor. The bank wants a co-signer for my car loan.

JO
Show me.

She reads the form. Ben waits.

BEN
I start the new job Monday. I can cover it.

JO
Okay. Pen?

She signs.

DRAFT B

BEN
Will you co-sign my car loan?

JO
I'm busy.

BEN
I'll pay your gas.

JO
With what money?

He shows her a job offer. His application behind it calls her his "former manager." He puts his phone on it.

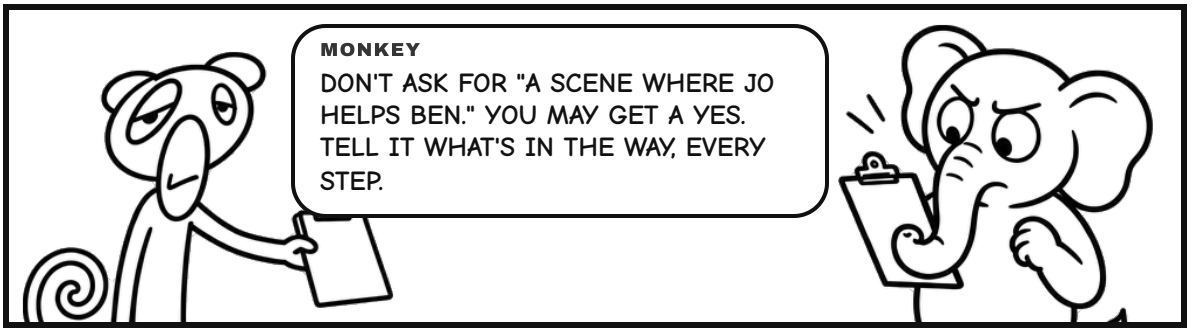
BEN
My boss. Tell him.

JO
He called. I said you were the best I ever had.

1. IN EACH DRAFT, HOW MANY TIMES DOES BEN HAVE TO TRY?
2. IN DRAFT B, WHAT NEW PROBLEM DOES EACH TRY MAKE?
3. WHAT DOES DRAFT B SHOW ABOUT BEN AND JO THAT DRAFT A NEVER DOES?

Draft A  Draft B 

Answers. 1: In Draft A, once. Jo says yes right away, so the scene is over at its first line. In Draft B, four times, and each try is bigger than the last. 2: Asking gets "I'm busy," so he offers gas money. That reminds her he's broke, so he shows the job offer. The application behind it shows his lie, so he hands her his boss's number. 3: Draft B shows that Ben will risk his new job to be trusted, and that Jo had already lied to protect him. Draft A is polite and believable, but it never tests either of them: Jo says yes before Ben has to risk anything, so we learn nothing about what they'd do for each other. Draft A is the Elephant's.



THE BRIEF AI

BEN, JO, THE LOAN

Your **brief** (the instructions you write before anyone drafts; more in Know What You Want). The left side of each row says what to fill in.

THE WANT What should the audience feel?	We should watch Ben risk more with every try, then be surprised by Jo.
GOAL Who is after what, from whom?	Ben wants Jo to co-sign his car loan, tonight.
BLOCKED What shuts the easy way out?	The bank won't lend to Ben alone. Jo is tired of bailing him out.
TRIES How many, and how do they grow?	Four, each bigger: ask, offer, prove, risk it all.
NEW PROBLEM What must each answer do?	Each "no" makes a new problem the next try has to fix.
TWIST What surprise lands at the top?	Something Jo knew all along.
FORBID What the draft must not use.	~~a yes on the first try~~ · ~~"Of course!"~~ · ~~signing before anyone pushes~~ · ~~speeches about family~~

SHUT THE EASY DOOR. COUNT THE STAIRS. LET THE ELEPHANT CLIMB.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You type the brief: what blocks the easy way out, and how many tries. Ask only for "a scene where someone asks a favor" and the AI can be too kind. **Back comes** a draft, sometimes with a yes on the first try. **You ask** it to list each try and the new problem it makes, then **check the list yourself**. If the first try works, or a try makes no new problem, send it back.



TRY IT BY HAND

Climb the stairs.

Pick a scene you wrote where someone wants something from someone else. Write the goal and who says no. Then write each try, starting with the easiest, and the new problem each answer makes. Every try has to be bigger or riskier than the one before it. End with a twist.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE TACTIC STAIRCASE

GOAL · WHO IS AFTER WHAT? _____

WHO SAYS NO? _____

1 · TRY _____

NEW PROBLEM _____

2 · TRY HARDER _____

NEW PROBLEM _____

3 · RAISE IT _____

THE TWIST _____

COULD THE FIRST TRY HAVE WORKED?

YES · SHUT THAT DOOR	NO · KEEP CLIMBING

Ticked "yes"? Give the other person a reason to say no, then write the next try.

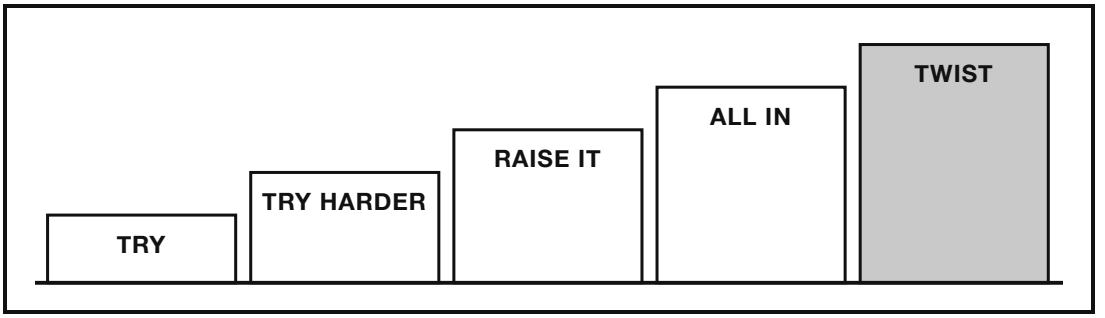


THEN CHECK EACH STEP: DOES THIS TRY COST MORE THAN THE ONE BELOW IT?

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Every Fix Makes a Problem

BLOCK THE EASY WAY OUT, SO EACH THING A CHARACTER TRIES MAKES THE NEXT PROBLEM



A **tactic** is one way of trying to get what you want. Each one should climb: bigger or riskier than the last. A **twist** is the surprise at the top that changes what the scene was about.

FIRST TRY WORKS? SCENE OVER. DRILL

1. WHAT SHUTS THE EASY WAY OUT?
2. WHAT NEW PROBLEM DOES EACH TRY MAKE?
3. DOES EACH TRY COST MORE THAN THE LAST, ALL THE WAY UP TO A TWIST?

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE TACTIC STAIRCASE
ROOM TALK, A REAL FILM SCENE THAT USES THIS TOOL: OUT THE WINDOW (TOY STORY), 272







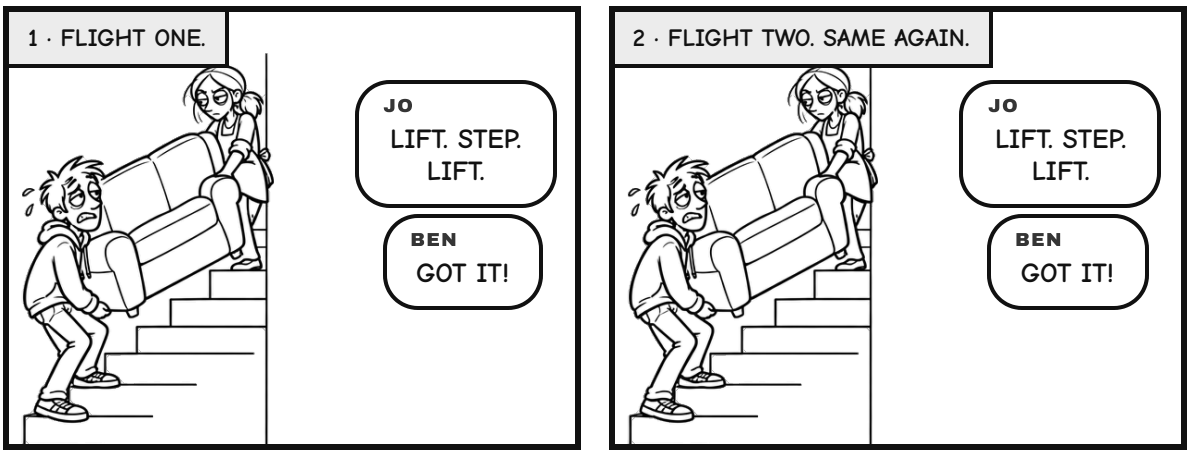
Build It Like a Song

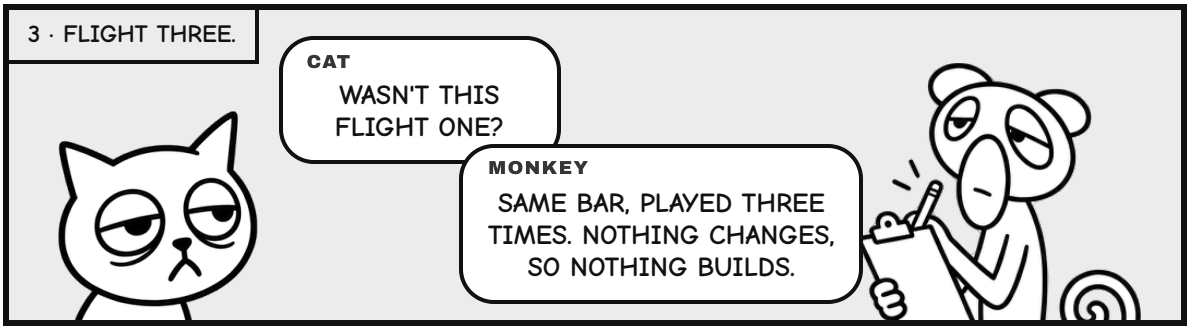
THE IDEA

A **set piece** is a big stretch of action: a chase, a fight, a dance, a heist, any long physical sequence. Build it the way a hit song is built, one short part after another. A short part of a song is called a **bar**, and this tool uses ten. Every bar changes something: the danger, the place, the plan or the feelings.

Two bars matter most. Bar 6, the **reset**, is a short pause. Bar 8, the **signature move**, is the one moment people remember. Reach for this tool when a big sequence feels like the same hit, over and over.

The scene: Ben and his sister Jo carry Mom's couch up three flights of stairs. Ben wants to prove he can finish a job. Jo wants the couch up there in one piece. Here's the set piece the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE

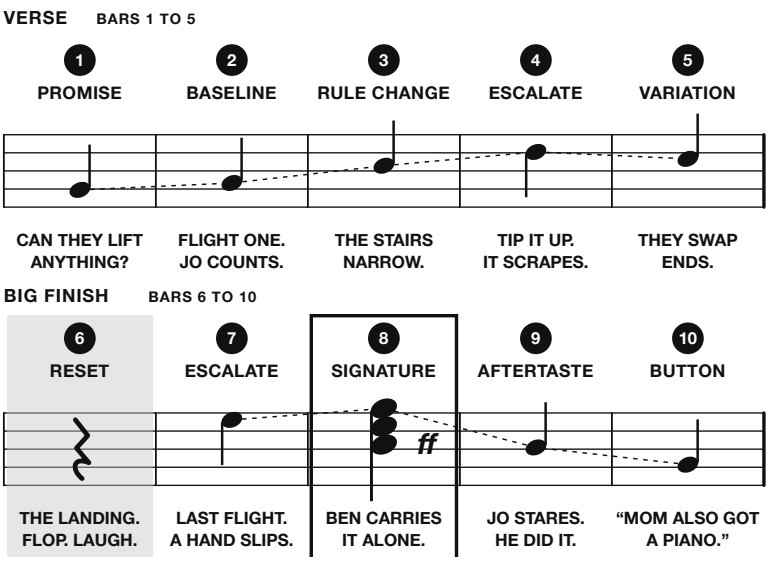




CHANGE EVERY BAR. DRILL
PAUSE BEFORE THE BIG HIT.

That pause is the **reset**: a breath, a look, a stumble. It isn't slowing down. It loads the next hit.

THE PICTURE · THE COUCH, IN TEN BARS





Bar 6, the reset. They flop onto the couch. A breath. A laugh.



Bar 8, the signature. Ben carries it alone.

How to read this picture: each bar is one beat of the couch; the higher the note, the bigger the beat. Bars 1 to 5, the **verse**, build up. Bar 6 rests, so bar 8 lands as the highest hit. Bar 9, the **aftertaste**, shows what it meant. Bar 10, the **button**, clicks the scene shut.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. STAIRWELL - DAY
Flight two. They lift. They climb.
Flight three. Lift. Climb.
BEN   Almost there!
JO    Keep going!
They set the couch down at the top.
BEN   Done.
```

What's wrong: every bar is the same bar. Nothing changes and nothing pauses, so the last flight feels just like the first.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. STAIRWELL - DAY
JO    Lift, step, LIFT!
Ben sings it back like a rock anthem.
Soon they're both singing, badly. A
neighbor's door opens. Louder.
Landing: they flop on it, laughing.
Ben lifts it alone. Jo cheers.
```

What changed: each bar adds fun: a chant, a song, an audience, a laugh, then Ben alone. **Joy can be the point:** nobody's in danger, and the fun is what builds.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? POINT TO THE QUIET MOMENT JUST BEFORE THE BIGGEST HIT IN YOUR SET PIECE. IS THERE ONE?

For the mentor: If there isn't, add one: a breath, a look, a stumble. Without a pause, the biggest moment feels like more of the same.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Change every bar. DRILL
Pause before the big hit.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: TEN BARS

4 WHERE IS YOUR RESET?

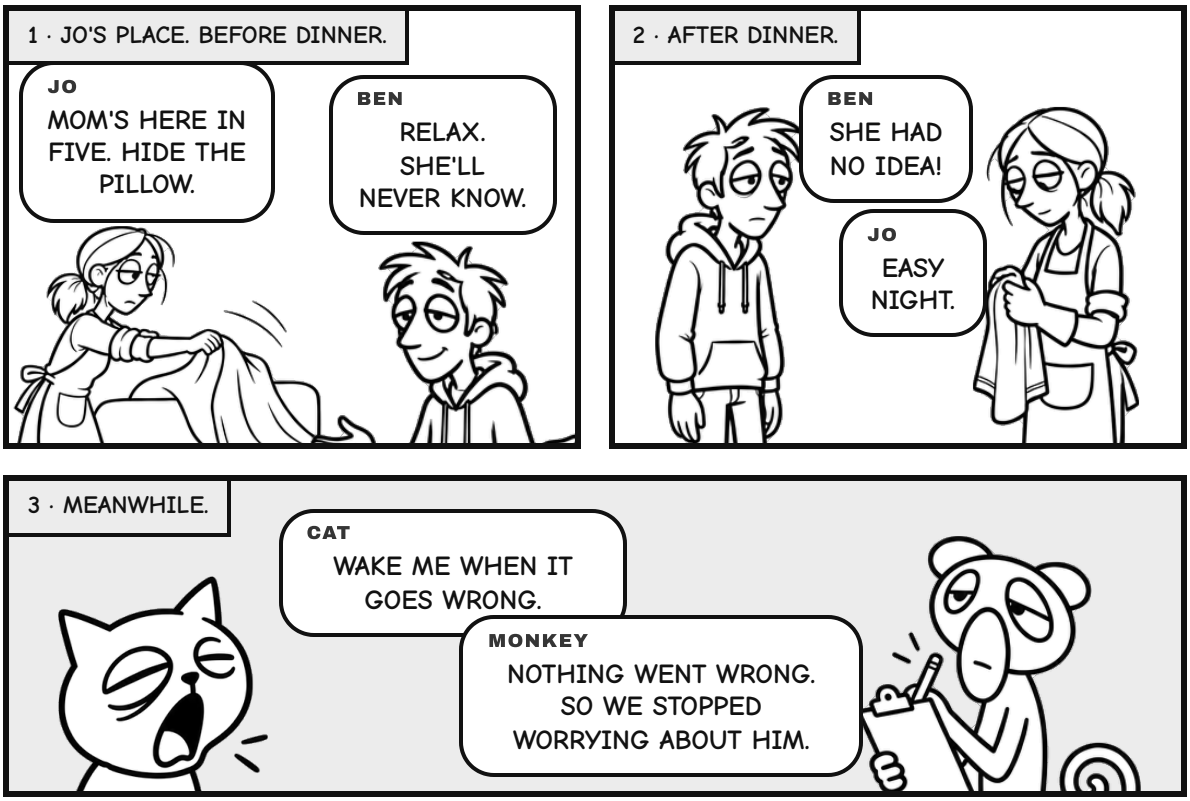
Do the Worst Thing

THE IDEA

Ask one question about your main character: **what's the worst thing that could happen to them right now?** Then let it happen. Not the worst thing in the world: the worst thing for this person, here, today. It's usually the thing they're working hardest to hide or protect.

Writers like their characters, so they keep them safe. But we only lean in when someone is in trouble. Reach for this tool when a scene goes just the way your character hoped.

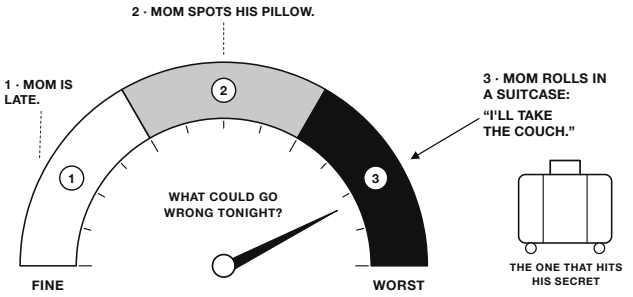
The scene: Ben lost his apartment and sleeps on his sister Jo's couch. He hasn't told Mom. Tonight Mom comes to Jo's for dinner, and Ben wants it to go smoothly so she never finds out. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE

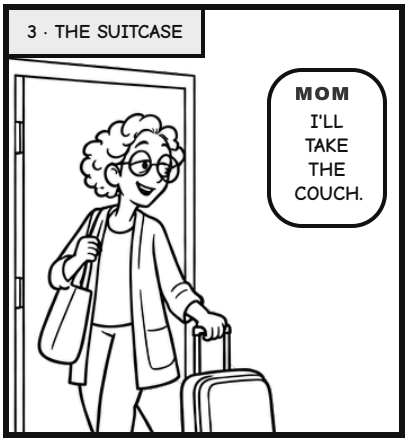


FIND THE WORST THING. THEN LET IT HAPPEN.

Then write what they do next. That's usually your scene.

THE PICTURE · WHAT COULD GO WRONG TONIGHT





How to read this picture: each number is something that could go wrong at dinner, from fine to worst. Mom being late is only a nuisance. The suitcase is the worst one for Ben, because it walks straight into his secret. Write that one.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A blanket hides the couch. The doorbell.

MOM Something smells wonderful!

BEN Mom! You look great.

MOM How's the apartment?

BEN Great. Really great.

MOM Good. Pass the potatoes.

What's wrong: Ben's lie works the first time. Nothing pushes on it, so we stop worrying about him.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The doorbell. Mom rolls in a suitcase.

MOM They're painting my place. I'll take the couch.

Jo looks at Ben.

MOM Unless someone's using it?

BEN Nobody uses it.

What changed: the worst thing for Ben walks in the door. Lie bigger, or tell the truth? We can't look away.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT IS YOUR MAIN CHARACTER WORKING HARDEST TO KEEP FROM HAPPENING IN THIS SCENE? DOES IT HAPPEN?

For the mentor: If it doesn't, try letting it happen, early. Then ask what they do next. Someone who has to answer for the worst thing is someone we can't stop watching.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Find the worst thing for them, now. Then let it happen.

5

WHAT'S THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN RIGHT NOW?

Start Late, Leave Early

THE IDEA

Begin a scene after it has already started, in the middle of a **move**: something one person is doing right now to get what they want from the other. End it the moment that move **lands**, on the line or action that settles who got what.

Hellos, small talk and goodbyes feel polite, but they make the reader wait. Reach for this tool when a scene takes a while to get going, or keeps talking after its point.

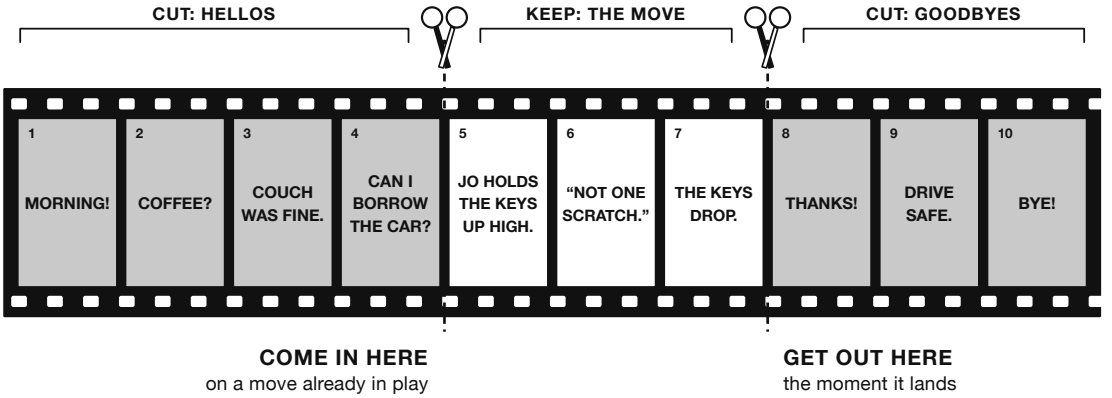
The scene: Ben lost his apartment and sleeps on his sister Jo's couch. He has a new job now, and this morning he needs to borrow her car again to get there. Jo wants it back without a scratch. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



COME IN LATE. LEAVE THE SECOND IT LANDS.

Writers call that landing the **button**: the last beat of a scene, where it clicks shut.

THE PICTURE · THE WHOLE MORNING, CUT DOWN TO THE SCENE



How to read this picture: each frame is one beat of the morning, left to right. The grey frames are the hellos and goodbyes. The scissors show where to cut in and where to cut out. The white frames are the scene you keep.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

BEN Morning!

JO Morning. Coffee?

BEN Please. Couch was fine.

BEN So. Can I borrow the car?

JO Sure. Here.

BEN Thanks! Really.

JO Drive safe. Good luck.

BEN Thanks. Okay. Bye!

What's wrong: it starts before anyone wants anything and keeps going after the yes. The only real moment, the keys, is one line in the middle, and nothing pushes on it.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Jo holds her car keys up high. Ben, in a new work shirt, reaches for them.

JO Say it.

BEN Full tank.

JO And?

BEN Not one scratch. Not one.

She drops the keys into his hand.

What changed: we arrive mid-bargain, the ask already made, and leave the second the keys drop. Every line is part of the pull, so the Cat stays awake.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? COVER THE FIRST THREE LINES AND THE LAST THREE LINES OF YOUR SCENE. DOES IT STILL MAKE SENSE? IS IT BETTER?

For the mentor: If it still makes sense, those lines were hellos and goodbyes. Cut them. Start on the first line where someone is already pushing, and stop on the line or action that settles it.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Come in on a move. Get out when it lands.

6

WHERE DOES YOUR SCENE REALLY START?

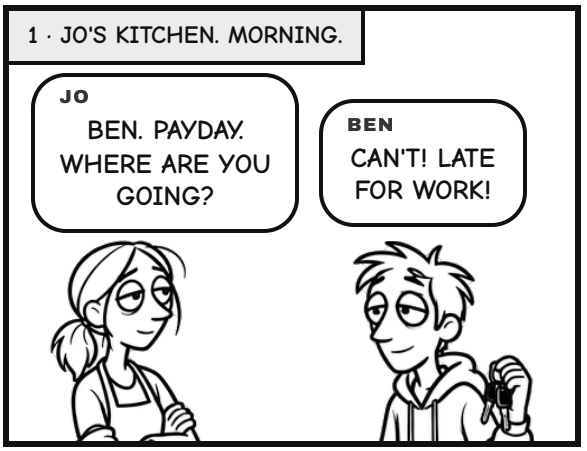
The Room Pushes Back

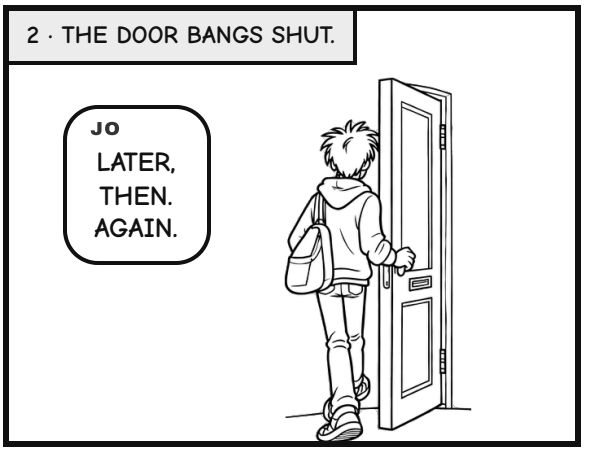
THE IDEA

Every scene happens somewhere. Pick a place that **puts pressure** on the people in it: a place that traps them, rushes them, or lets someone overhear. Then the place does part of the work, and forces them to act.

This isn't about how a place looks or smells (that's the Specifics tool). It's about what the place won't let them do. Reach for this tool when your characters could simply walk away, or put the hard talk off again.

The scene: Ben sleeps on his sister Jo's couch, and now that he has a job, she wants him **out by his second payday**. That's two days away. Jo wants to hear his plan: where will he go? Ben keeps dodging the question. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE





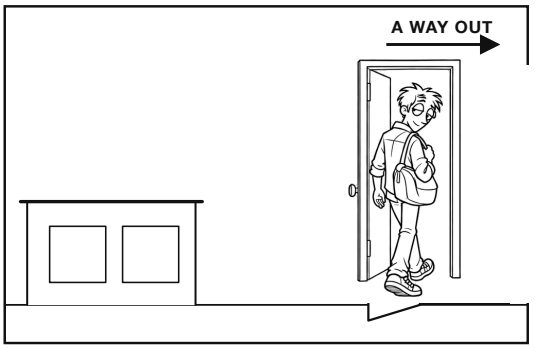


PUT THEM WHERE THEY CAN'T WALK AWAY.

A place with pressure traps people, rushes them, or lets someone listen in. Then they have to act.

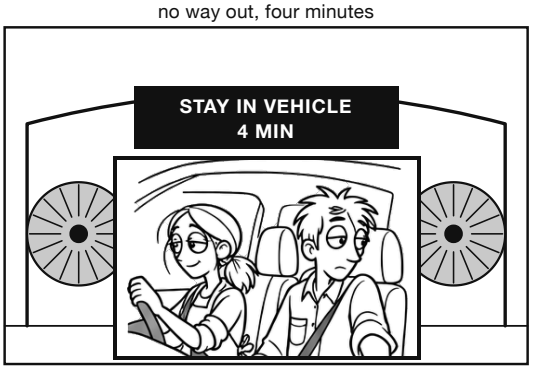
THE PICTURE · THE SAME TALK, TWO PLACES

THE KITCHEN
there's a door



HE WALKS OUT. NO TALK.

THE CAR WASH
no way out, four minutes



THE TALK HAS TO HAPPEN.

How to read this picture: same two people, same question, two places. The kitchen has a door, so Ben uses it. In the car wash they can't get out for four minutes. Only the place changed, and now the talk has to happen.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

JO Ben. Payday. Where are you going?

BEN Can't. Late. Love you!

He grabs his bag. The door bangs shut.

Jo looks at the couch.

JO Later, then.

What's wrong: the kitchen has a door, so Ben uses it. Nothing in the place pushes back, and the talk slips away again.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S CAR - CAR WASH - MORNING

Jo drives Ben to work, by way of the car wash. The car rolls onto the track. Brushes slap the windows. A sign: STAY IN VEHICLE. 4 MIN.

JO Payday. Where are you going?

Ben's hand goes to the handle. A brush slams his window. He lets go.

BEN I have options.

JO Name one. You've got three minutes.

What changed: the talk moved somewhere Ben can't leave. The brushes and the clock do half the work, so Ben finally has to answer.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? COULD THIS SCENE HAPPEN ANYWHERE ELSE JUST AS WELL?

For the mentor: If yes, the place isn't pushing. Move it somewhere that traps them, rushes them, or lets someone overhear. Then see what they're forced to say or do.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Pick a place that pushes. Make it hard to walk away.

7

WHAT DOES THIS PLACE FORCE THEM TO DO?

Whose Eyes Are We In?

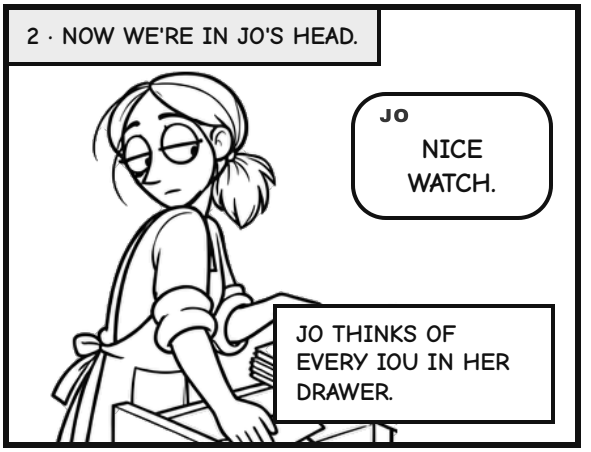
THE IDEA

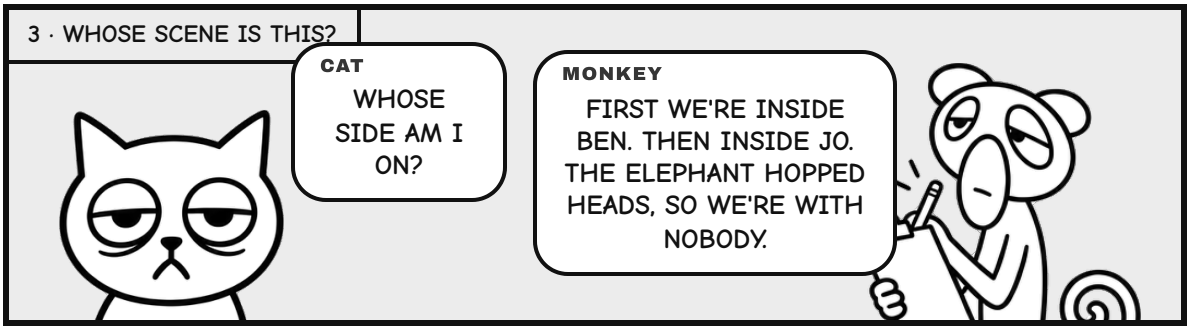
Every scene is lived through someone. That person is the scene's **point of view** (POV): we see what they see, learn things when they learn them, and feel what they feel about it. If the scene jumps from one person's head to another's, the point of view **wobbles**, and the audience stops knowing whose side to be on.

When a scene confuses readers, ask whose eyes we're in. If the answer is "two people's, at once," pick the one with the most to lose and stay with them. Reach for this tool when a scene confuses readers, or tells us what two people think at once.

The scene: Ben sleeps on his sister Jo's couch. His old IOUs sit in her drawer by the stove, under the takeout menus. Tonight he comes home from his first payday wearing a brand-new watch. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE







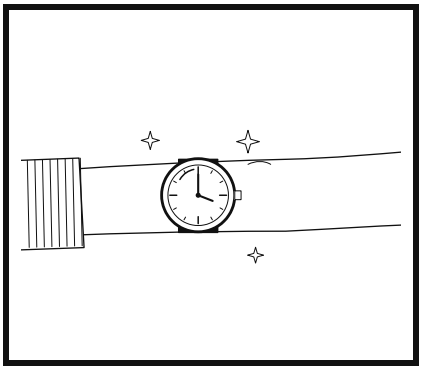
PICK ONE PERSON. STAY BEHIND THEIR EYES. DRILL

Usually that's the person with the most to lose in the scene. Here, it's Jo.

THE PICTURE · LOOK, SEE, REACT



1 · SHE LOOKS



2 · WHAT SHE SEES



3 · HOW SHE TAKES IT

How to read this picture: these three steps put us behind one person's eyes. Show her look. Show what she sees, as if we were standing where she stands. Then show how she takes it. Keep repeating the steps with the same person, and the audience stays with her.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - EVENING
Ben walks in, proud of his new watch.
JO    Nice watch.
Ben wonders why she sounds sad. Jo
thinks of every IOU in her drawer.
BEN   First paycheck!
He thinks he's earned it. She decides
he's forgotten the drawer.
```

What's wrong: the camera can't film a thought, and these thoughts belong to two people. We're told what both of them think, so we're with neither one.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - EVENING
Jo, at the drawer by the stove,
counts Ben's old IOUs. Keys in the
door. She shoves them under the
menus.
Ben walks in. A new watch on his
wrist.
BEN   First paycheck!
Jo looks at the watch. Then at the
drawer.
JO    Nice watch.
```

What changed: we start with Jo and never leave her. We see the IOUs, then the watch, so we feel the sting without being told. Ben's side can be its own scene.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? PICK ONE OF THEIR SCENES. WHOSE EYES ARE WE IN? NOW POINT TO EVERY LINE THAT TELLS US WHAT SOMEONE ELSE IS THINKING.

For the mentor: If they can't name one person, or the thoughts belong to two people, the scene wobbles. Choose the person with the most to lose. Cut what only the other one could know, or turn it into something we can see them do.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Pick one person. See what they see. DRILL

8

WHOSE EYES ARE WE IN, AND DO WE EVER LEAVE?

Explain While Moving

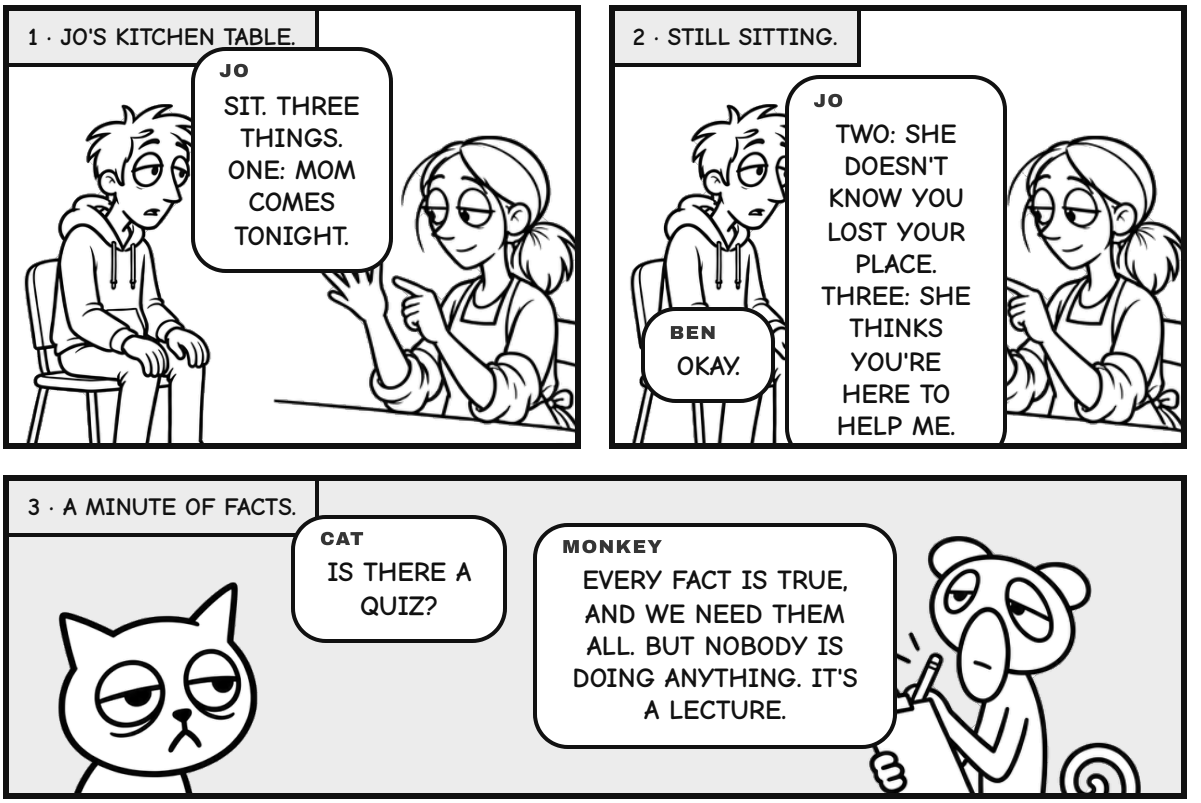
THE IDEA

Exposition is the information the audience needs to follow the story: what happened before, who is who, what the rules are, and what's at stake. Facts said sitting still feel like homework.

So give the people saying them a hard job to do at the same time. We watch the job and soak up the facts. Reach for this tool when a scene exists mostly to explain something.

The scene: Ben lost his apartment and sleeps on his sister Jo's couch. Mom is coming for dinner tonight, and Jo has to tell Ben three facts before she arrives. That same afternoon, the two of them have to carry a used sofa bed up Jo's porch steps. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it.

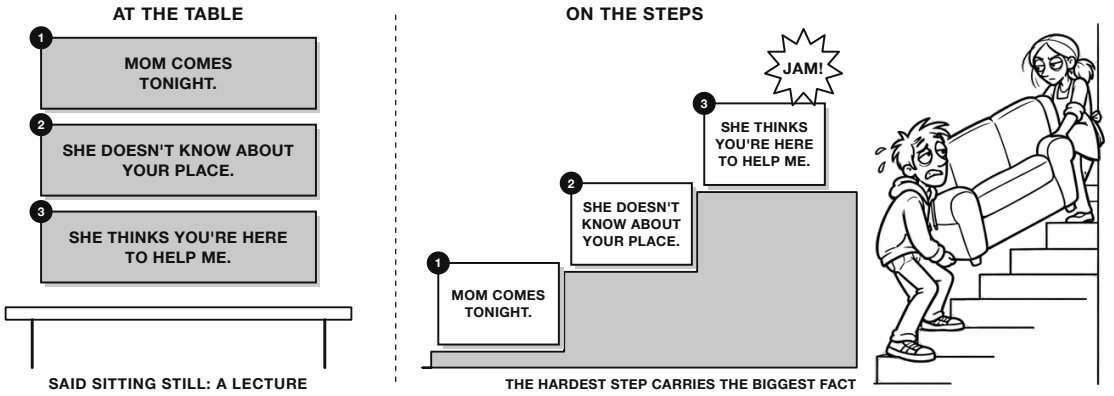
TEACHING EXAMPLE



GIVE THEM A JOB. THEN LET THEM TALK.

Make the job hardest at the moment the biggest fact comes out.

THE PICTURE · THE SAME THREE FACTS, TWICE



How to read this picture: on the left, the facts pile up at a table, said sitting still. On the right, each fact rides one step of a hard job. The biggest fact lands on the hardest step, the moment the couch jams.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - DAY

Jo sits across from Ben.

JO Mom comes tonight.

BEN Okay.

JO She doesn't know you lost your place.

BEN Okay.

JO She thinks you're here to help me.

BEN Okay.

What's wrong: the facts are right, but they arrive one by one with nothing pushing on them. Ben's "Okay" tells us he's bored too.

WITH THE TOOL

EXT. JO'S PORCH STEPS - DAY

Ben and Jo haul a sofa bed up the steps.

JO Mom. Tonight. Lift!

BEN Does she know I lost my place?

JO No. Turn it!

The sofa bed jams in the front door.

JO She thinks you're here to help ME.

Ben looks at the stuck couch. Pushes.

What changed: the same facts, said in gasps between orders. The couch jams on the biggest one, and it's funny because he really is helping her, right now.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? FIND A SCENE WHERE SOMEONE EXPLAINS SOMETHING. WHAT ARE THEIR HANDS DOING WHILE THEY TALK?

For the mentor: If the answer is "nothing," give them a hard job: cooking for ten, changing a flat tire, moving a couch. Keep the facts the same. Let the job get hardest when the biggest fact comes out.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Busy hands. Biggest fact, hardest step.

9

WHAT ARE THEIR HANDS DOING WHILE THEY EXPLAIN?

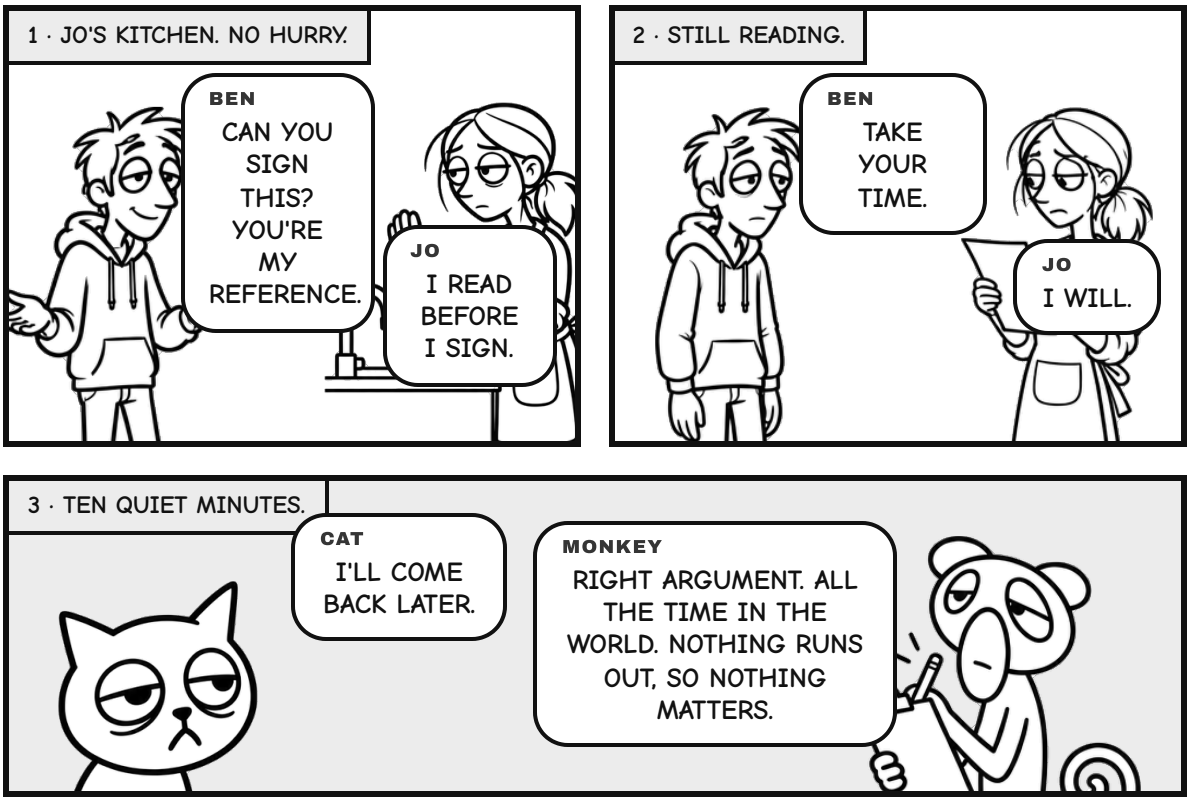
Put a Clock on It

THE IDEA

A **ticking clock** is a deadline the audience can see: a time, a countdown, a number that keeps climbing. When time is running out, every pause and every argument costs something, so we lean in.

If the danger has no face, give it a **gauge** we can watch: rising water, a phone battery, a fuel needle. Reach for this tool when a scene has the right argument but could happen any time at all.

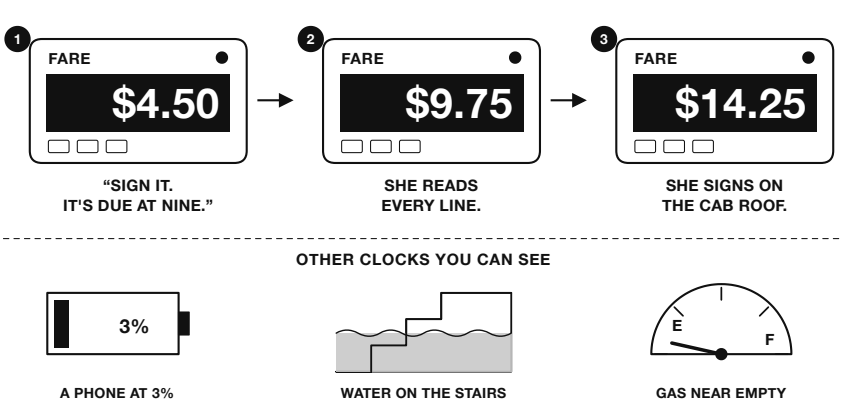
The scene: Ben still sleeps on his sister Jo's couch, and Jo wants him out. He has found a small apartment, but the application needs a signed reference by nine this morning, and Jo is his reference. Jo never signs anything she hasn't read. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE

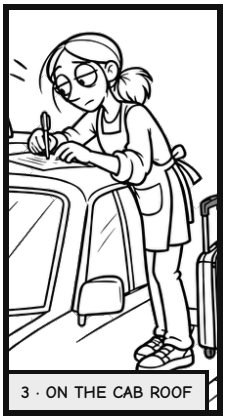


SHOW THE CLOCK. THEN SHOW IT CLOSER.

Each time we see it again, there should be less time left, or more money gone.

THE PICTURE · A CAB METER RUNNING





How to read this picture: the top row is the same scene with a cab waiting outside, meter running. Each time we cut back to the meter, the number is higher, so every line Jo reads costs her money. The bottom row shows other clocks to use when there's no deadline anyone says out loud.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Ben slides a form across the table.

BEN You're my reference. Sign?

JO I read before I sign.

She reads. All of it.

BEN Take your time.

She signs.

What's wrong: nothing is running out. Jo could read for an hour and nothing would change, so the Cat can leave and come back.

WITH THE TOOL

EXT. JO'S HOUSE - MORNING

A cab at the curb, meter running: $4.50. Jo hurries out with a suitcase. Ben chases her with a form.

BEN Sign it. It's due at nine.

JO I read before I sign.

She reads. The meter: $9.75.

BEN You want me out by payday?

$14.25. She signs on the cab roof.

What changed: a clock we can see. Every line she reads costs her money, and Ben turns her own wish (him gone by payday) into pressure.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT RUNS OUT IN THIS SCENE IF THEY TAKE TOO LONG? WHERE CAN THE AUDIENCE SEE IT?

For the mentor: If nothing runs out, add a deadline or a gauge. Show it early. Then show it again, closer to the end, at least twice. If the clock lives only in the dialogue, put it on screen where we can watch it.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Show the clock. Show it again, closer.

10

WHAT RUNS OUT IF THEY TAKE TOO LONG?

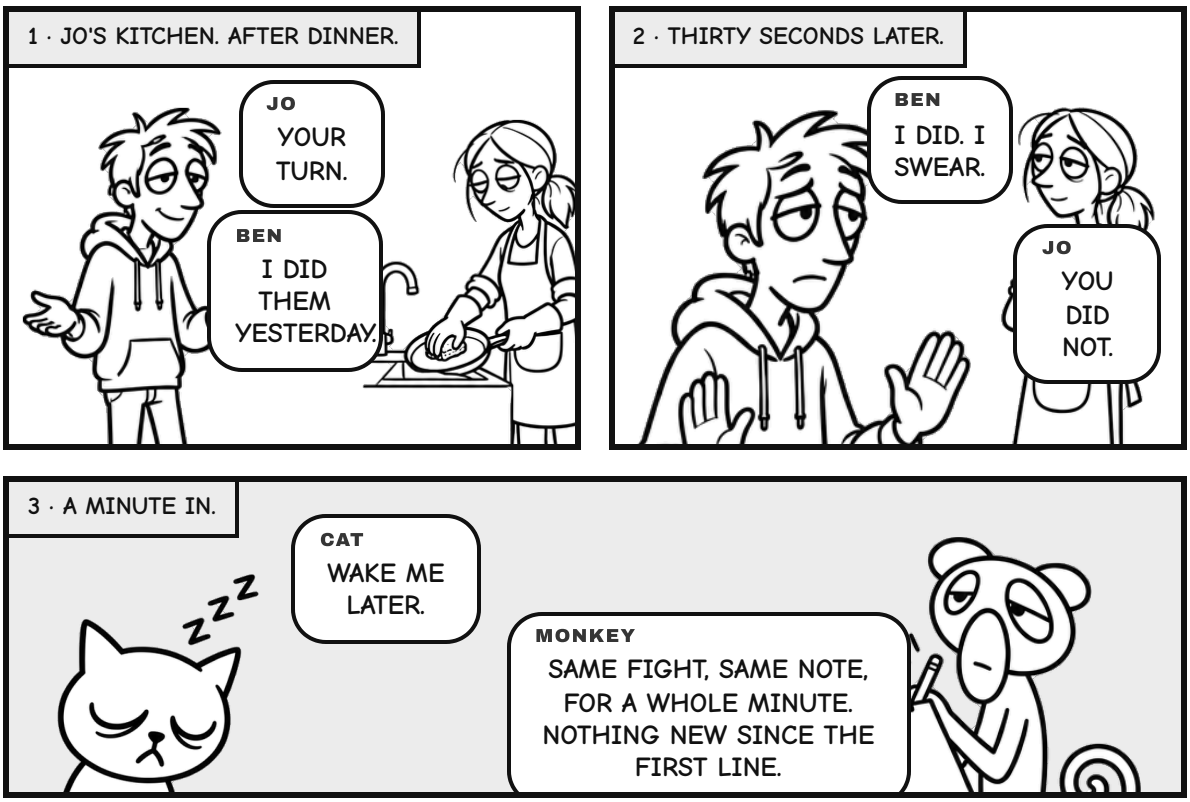
A Pop Every Thirty Seconds

THE IDEA

A **pop** is anything new the audience gets: a **small reveal** (a fact we didn't know), a **surprise** (something nobody saw coming) or a **jolt of feeling** (someone is suddenly moved, and so are we). People keep watching while something keeps changing. A stretch with nothing new is where their attention leaks away.

Reach for this tool when a scene repeats one note, or when a reader says it drags. Thirty seconds on screen is about half a page of script. Treat the number as a rough guide for checking your pages, not a stopwatch.

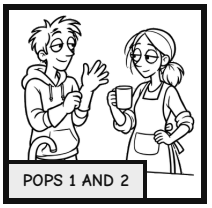
The scene: Ben lost his apartment and sleeps on his sister Jo's couch. He has just started a new job, and he has begun paying back his old IOUs, a twenty at a time. Tonight the sink is full. Jo wants Ben to do the dishes, and Ben wants to get out of them. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it.
TEACHING EXAMPLE

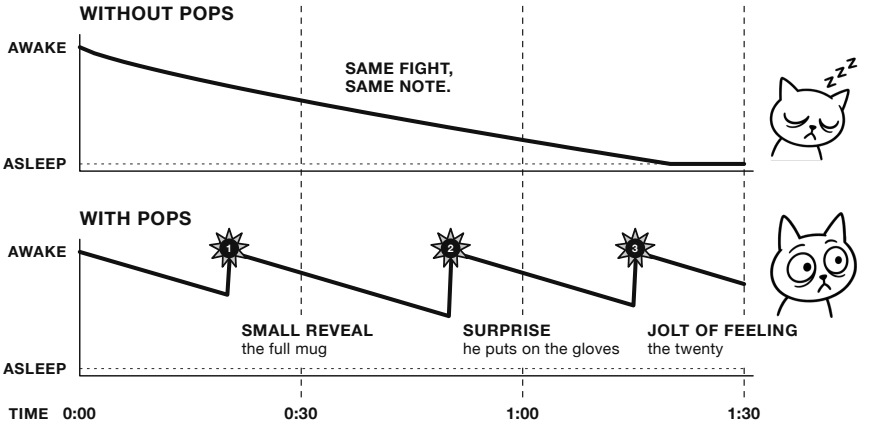


EVERY THIRTY SECONDS, GIVE US SOMETHING NEW.

It can be small: a fact, a surprise, a feeling. It only has to be **new**.

THE PICTURE · HOW AWAKE THE CAT IS, SECOND BY SECOND





How to read this picture: the line is how awake the Cat is, from the start of the scene (left) to the end (right). Each dashed line marks thirty seconds. On top, the fight repeats and she drifts off. Below, each star is a pop: her attention sags, then something new jolts it back up.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

JO Your turn.

BEN I did them yesterday.

JO You did not.

BEN Did too.

JO Your turn, Ben.

BEN Fine. Tomorrow.

JO You said that yesterday.

What's wrong: seven lines, one note. After line one we learn nothing new, so why stay awake?

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

JO Your turn.

BEN I did them yesterday.

Jo lifts yesterday's full mug. (1)

BEN Most of them.

Ben pulls on her yellow gloves. (2)

JO Who are you?

He tucks a twenty marked "2 of 25" under her takeout menus. Jo stops drying. (3)

What changed: same fight, but something new every few lines: a reveal (1), a surprise (2), a feeling (3). The Cat can't drift.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? DRAW A LINE ACROSS YOUR PAGES EVERY HALF PAGE. BETWEEN TWO LINES, WHAT DOES THE AUDIENCE LEARN OR FEEL THAT IS NEW?

For the mentor: If the answer is "nothing," that stretch repeats one note. Add one pop there: a small reveal, a surprise or a jolt of feeling. It can be as small as a full coffee mug.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Something new. Every thirty seconds.

11

WHAT'S NEW ON THIS HALF PAGE?

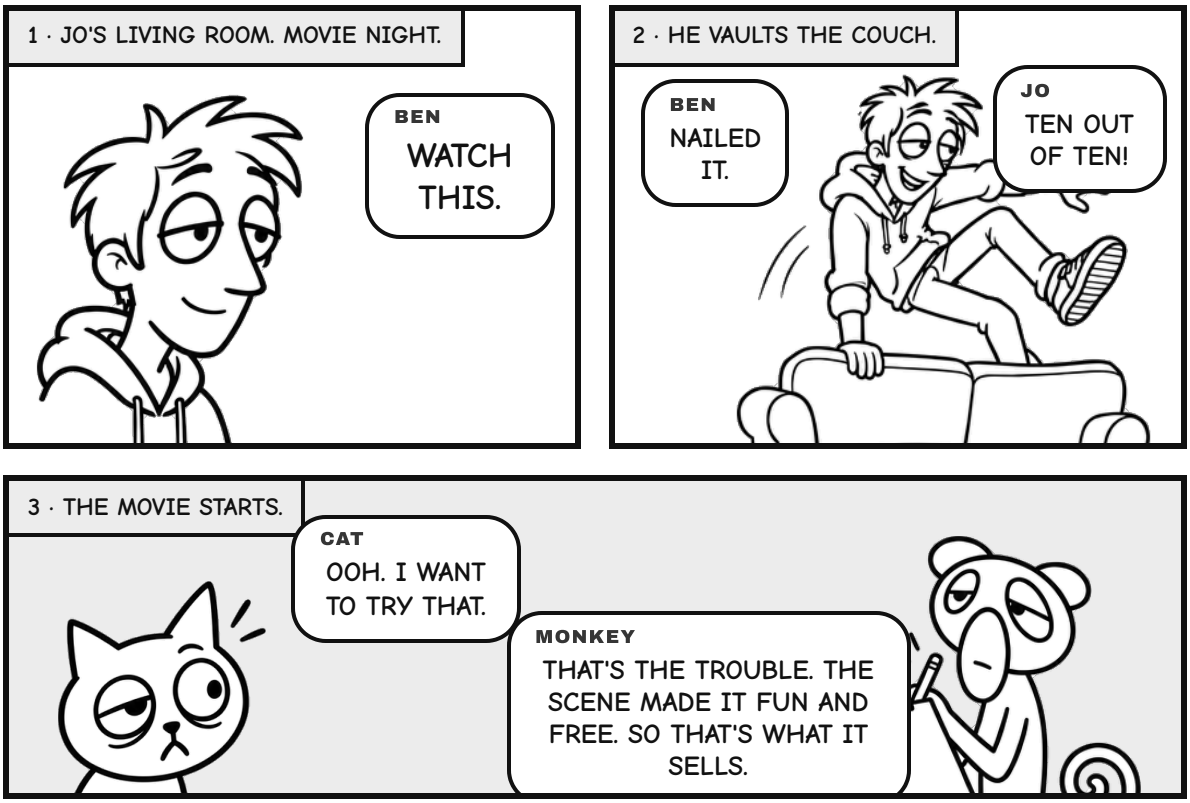
Pay the Cost on Screen

THE IDEA

Some things look fun on screen but hurt people in real life: a stunt, a prank, a reckless shortcut. If a scene shows only the fun, it quietly sells the stunt, whatever the story means. People remember the rush, not a price paid three scenes later.

So show the **cost**, what the fun takes from someone, in the same scene, where we can see it. A stunt that costs nothing has no stakes. Reach for this tool when a character does something risky and the scene treats it as free.

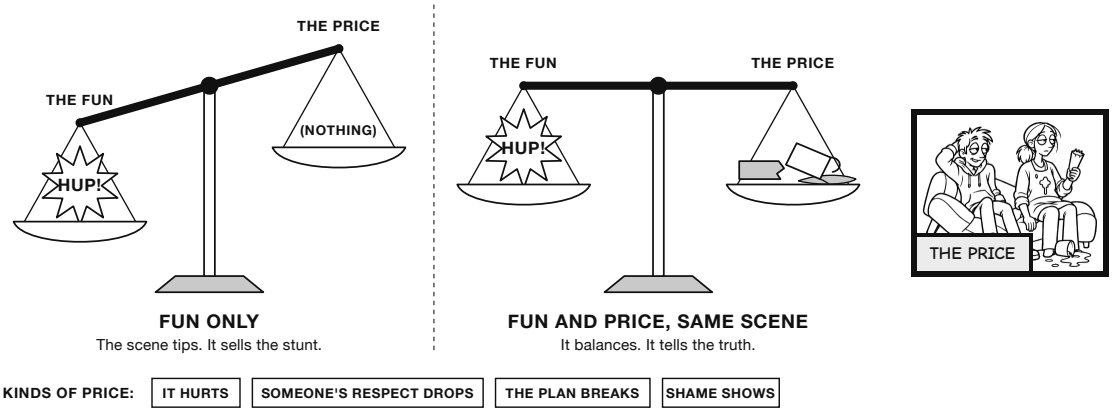
The scene: Ben sleeps on his sister Jo's couch. It's movie night, and Jo is settled in with a mug of tea. She wants a quiet night. Ben wants to look cool. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



IF IT LOOKS FUN, SHOW WHAT IT COSTS. DRILL

Show it in the same scene, where we can see it.

THE PICTURE · THE FUN ON ONE SIDE, THE PRICE ON THE OTHER



How to read this picture: the fun goes on one side of the scale and the price on the other. With only the fun on screen, the scene tips toward the stunt. Put a price we can see in the same scene, and it balances. The boxes along the bottom are kinds of price you can use.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Jo on the couch with her tea. Ben runs, vaults the back of the couch and lands beside her. Perfect.

BEN Nailed it.

JO Ten out of ten!

They clink mugs. The movie starts.

What's wrong: the vault is the best moment in the scene, and it costs nothing. Anyone watching learns one thing: do it.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Ben vaults the couch. Lands. CRACK. His end of the couch drops. Jo's tea is all down her sweater.

BEN ...Nailed it?

Jo holds up a snapped couch leg.

JO That was your bed.

What changed: the vault is still fun to watch. But the price lands before the scene ends, on Jo's sweater and on Ben's bed, so the scene tells the truth about it.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT IS THE MOST FUN THING A CHARACTER DOES IN YOUR PAGES THAT WOULD HURT SOMEONE IN REAL LIFE? WHO PAYS FOR IT, AND DO WE SEE IT?

For the mentor: If the price comes later, offscreen or never, the scene is selling the stunt. Keep the fun, and add one price we can see before the scene ends: it hurts, someone's respect drops, the plan breaks, or shame shows.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

If it looks fun, show the price. Same scene. DRILL

12

WHO PAYS FOR THE FUN, AND WHERE?

The Face Tells Us

THE IDEA

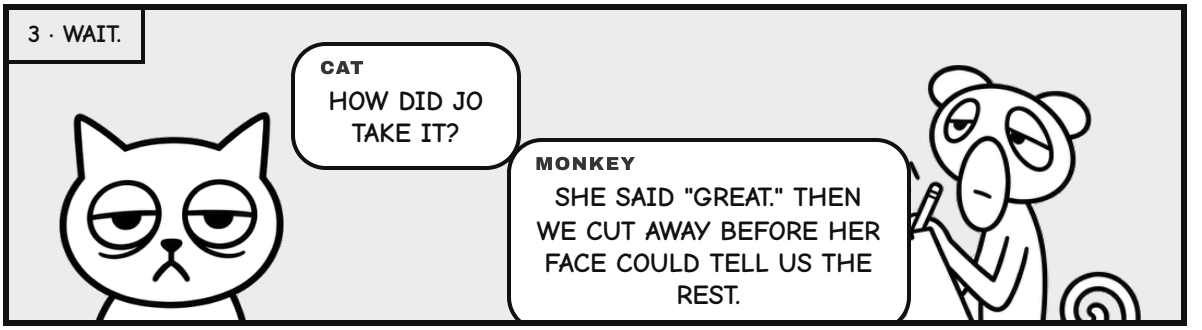
A **reaction shot** is a shot of someone's face as they take in what just happened. The reaction often matters more than the moment, because the face tells us what the moment means. So hold on it. Let the person go still for a beat: holding still costs them something, and we watch them pay it.

Then give one small **receipt** before you cut. Reach for this tool when something big happens and the scene rushes on, or when a character explains their feelings out loud.

The scene: since Ben lost his apartment, he has slept on his sister Jo's couch, and she wants him out by payday. Tonight Ben has news: he found a room of his own, and he can move in on Saturday. He wants Jo to be glad. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



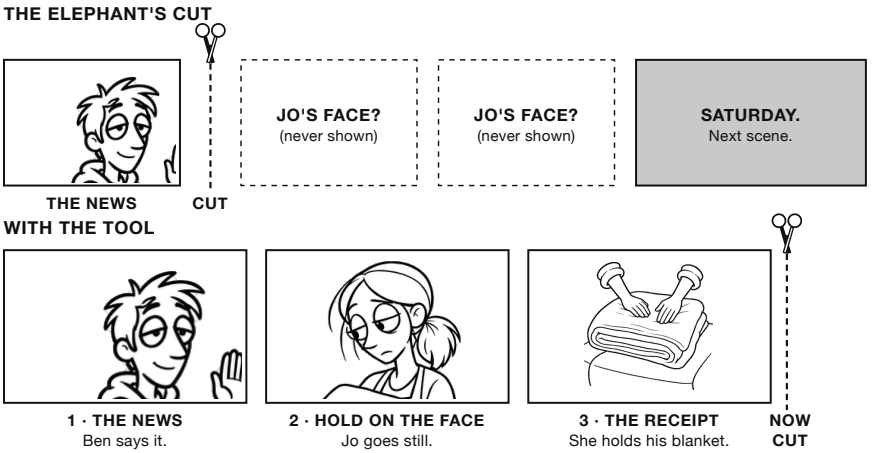




HOLD ON THE FACE. THEN ONE SMALL PROOF.

That proof is the **receipt**: one small action that shows the moment touched them.

THE PICTURE · THE SAME NEWS, CUT TWO WAYS



How to read this picture: each box is one shot, in order, left to right. On top, the Elephant cuts away right after the news, so we never see Jo take it. Below, the scene holds on Jo's face, shows her receipt, and only then cuts.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Jo folds Ben's couch blanket.

BEN I found a room. I move out Saturday.

JO Saturday? That's great, Ben.

BEN Thanks, Jo.

CUT TO: SATURDAY.

What's wrong: Jo says the polite thing, and we cut away before her face can tell us the rest. The news never lands on anyone.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Jo folds Ben's couch blanket.

BEN I found a room. I move out Saturday.

Jo stops. Holds still. Folds the blanket again. It was folded.

JO Okay.

She holds it against her chest.

What changed: one word. Her stillness and the extra fold show what she feels; holding the folded blanket is the receipt. Now we can cut.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? FIND THE BIGGEST MOMENT IN YOUR SCENE. WHOSE FACE DO WE SEE RIGHT AFTER IT, AND FOR HOW LONG?

For the mentor: If we cut away, or they explain how they feel, the moment hasn't landed. Hold on the person it hits hardest. Let them go still, give one small action that proves it touched them, then cut.

TOOL CARD · SCENES

Hold on the face. One small receipt. Then cut.

13

WHO DOES THIS MOMENT HIT HARDEST?

People

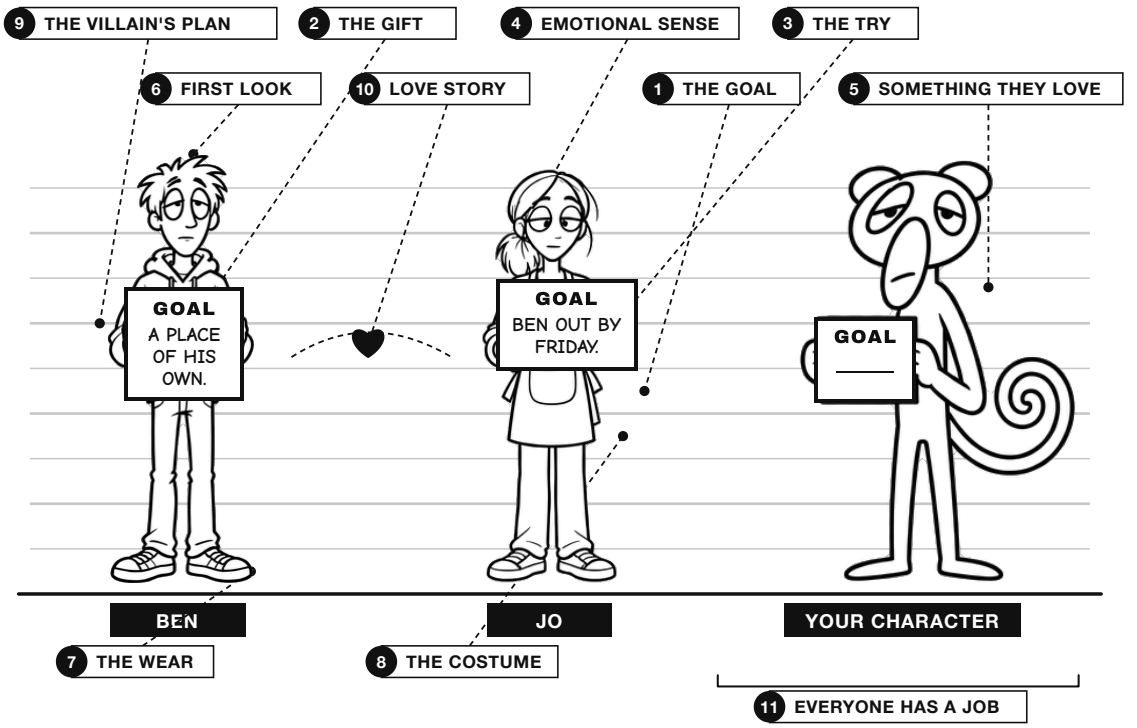
Characters are what they do.

WHAT A CHARACTER IS

A **character** is a person in your story. We can't see inside their head, so we only know them by what they **do**: what they reach for, what they hide, what they choose when it costs them something.

It starts with a **goal**: the one thing they are after right now. Give a person a goal and every move they make starts to mean something. A list of traits (funny, kind, stubborn) isn't a character yet. It's a name tag.

THE MAP · THE CAST LINEUP



How to read this map: each person holds a card with one **goal**, the thing they are after right now. The numbered tags are the tools in this drawer. Each points at the part of a person that tool works on: the goal, the body, the clothes, the choices, the people around them. The last slot is yours. Fill in the card for your own character.

FULL and **QUICK** tools work the same way in every drawer. How to Read This Book, at the front, shows the parts of each.

IN THIS DRAWER

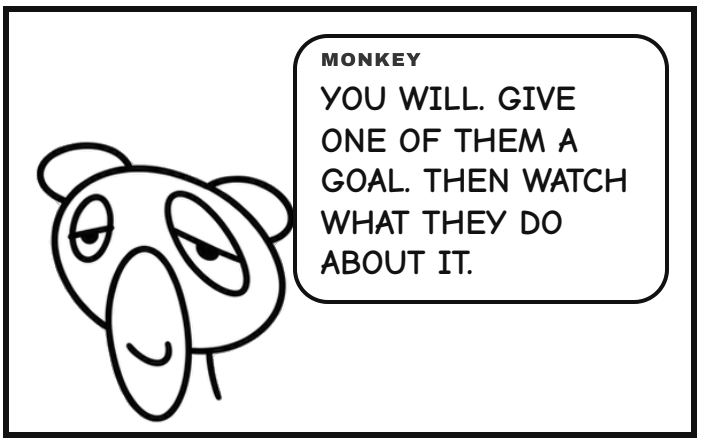
ELEVEN TOOLS.

1	**Want Makes Opinions**	Once a character wants something, they can't be neutral about anything in the room.	FULL
2	**The Gift That Trips Them**	Make a character's best quality the reason things go wrong when it matters most.	FULL
3	**Play the Try**	Show a feeling by what a person does to hide or handle it: body, then a choice, then (maybe) words.	QUICK
4	**Emotional Sense Beats Logic**	A choice doesn't have to be logical, only emotionally true for that person.	QUICK
5	**Something They Love**	Give a character something they love, and even a prickly one becomes someone we root for.	QUICK
6	**First Look Makes a Promise**	A character's first moment should show, by an action, who they are.	QUICK
7	**Read the Wear**	Clothes and things show who someone is, who they're trying to look like, and the gap between.	QUICK
8	**The Costume Test**	If a fan could dress as your character with two or three pieces and be recognized, the character is distinct.	QUICK
9	**The Villain's Plan Hits Home**	The opponent's goal should land directly on the hero's life.	QUICK
10	**Find the Love Story**	Whatever the genre, find the connection between people inside the premise.	QUICK
11	**Everyone Has a Job**	In a group, each person does one job that only they can do.	QUICK

WHERE TO START

With **Want Makes Opinions**. Every other tool here needs a goal to work on: it's what a person hides, what trips them, what they dress for. Then read **The Gift That Trips Them**, which turns a good quality into trouble. Read the quick tools in any order, whenever a character feels flat.





DRAWER CARD · PEOPLE

Give them a goal.
Watch what they do.

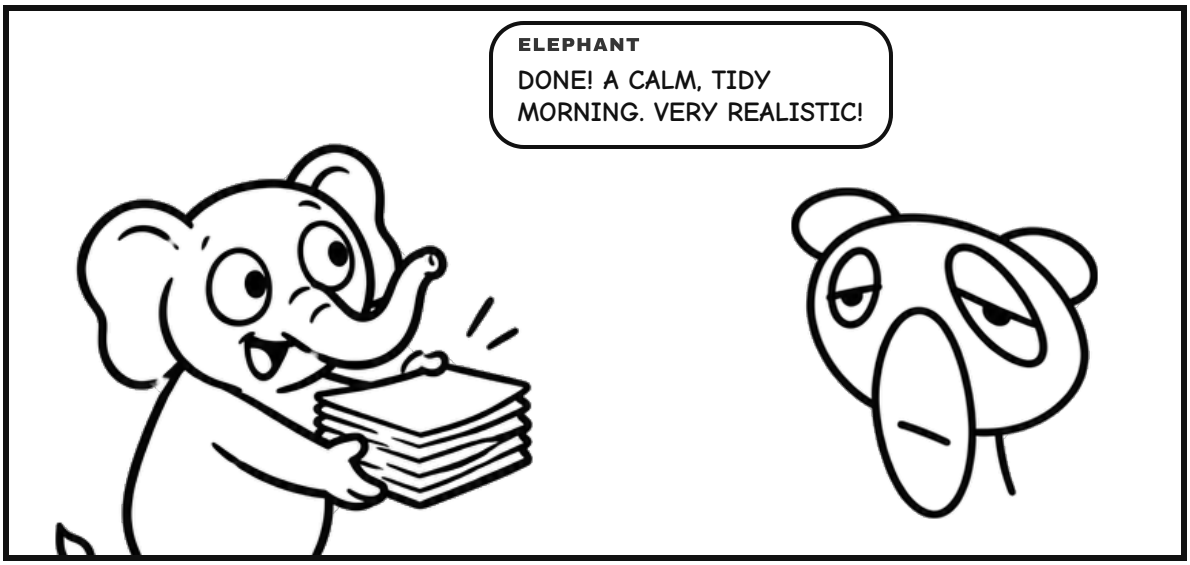
?

WHAT IS YOUR CHARACTER'S GOAL RIGHT NOW?

Want Makes Opinions

Ben and Jo (see Meet the Cast). Last week Ben lost his apartment, so now he sleeps on Jo's couch, and **Jo** would like her living room back.

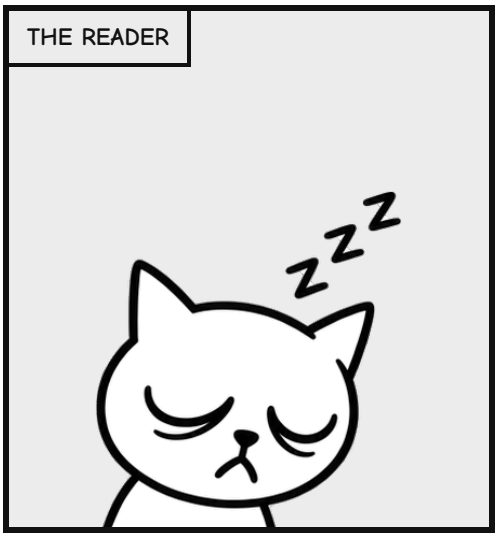
Here's a short scene, Jo walking through her living room one morning, the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



Jo walks through her living room. Ben's blanket is bunched on the couch. She folds it. His sneakers by the door: she lines them up. She fills the kettle. On the wall, a calendar.

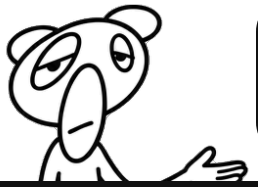
BEN
Morning.

JO
Morning. Coffee's on.



JO TIDIES THE WHOLE ROOM. SHE HAS NO OPINION ABOUT IT.

Every line is fine, and Jo is busy. But she handles Ben's blanket and shoes the way a visitor would: **neutral**, with no opinion about any of it. She wants her living room back, and nothing she does shows it. So there is nothing to watch, and the Cat, our reader, fell asleep.



MONKEY

SAME ROOM. THIS TIME JO WANTS ONE THING: BEN OUT BY FRIDAY. WATCH WHAT SHE THINKS OF EVERYTHING SHE SEES.

HERE IS THE SCENE REWRITTEN WITH THIS TOOL

The notes on the right are ours, not part of the script. (New to script pages? How to read one is explained at the front of the book.) A **goal** is what a character is after right now. A **tag** is our name for what the goal makes her think of one thing in the room: does it **help** her get it, or **block** her?

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - WEDNESDAY MORNING

Ben's pillow and blanket on Jo's couch. On the wall, a calendar: this Friday circled hard in red marker.

Jo stops at the couch. A dent in the cushion, the shape of Ben. She glares at it.

She trips on his sneakers. Kicks them at the door. Shakes the kettle. Empty.

Ben leans in the bathroom doorway.

BEN
Morning!

JO
Friday.

Jo's phone buzzes. A text from MOM: "Coming by tonight! Can't wait to see you!"

JO
Ben. Throw a blanket on that.

She flips the calendar to next month.

JO
Shoes. Kettle. Vacuum.

BEN
So you want me here?

JO
Tonight.

THE GOAL
Jo wants Ben out by Friday. The red circle shows it without a word.

TAG 1 · THE COUCH
"His bed now. Still has his dent." It **blocks** her goal.

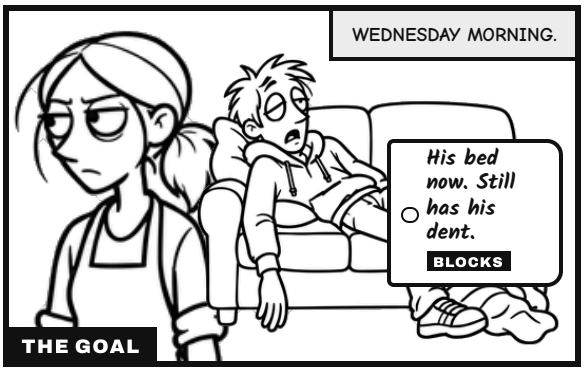
TAGS 2 AND 3
His shoes are in her way. He emptied her kettle again. Both **block**.

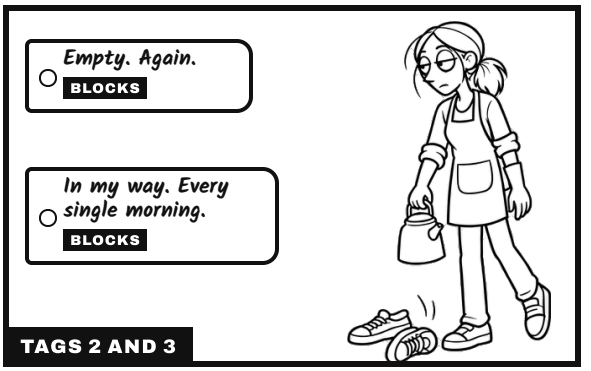
A PERSON, TOO
People get tags. Ben is the biggest blocker in the room.

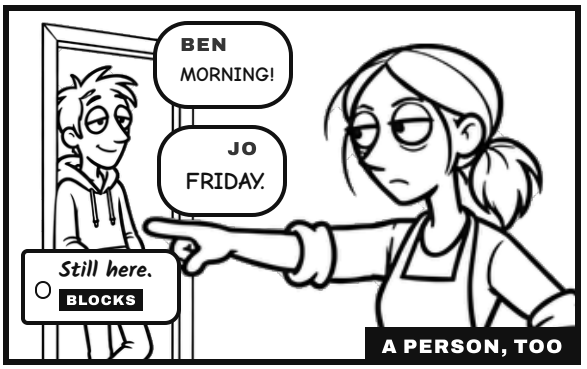
NEW GOAL
Now Jo also wants to impress Mom. Same room. Watch the tags.

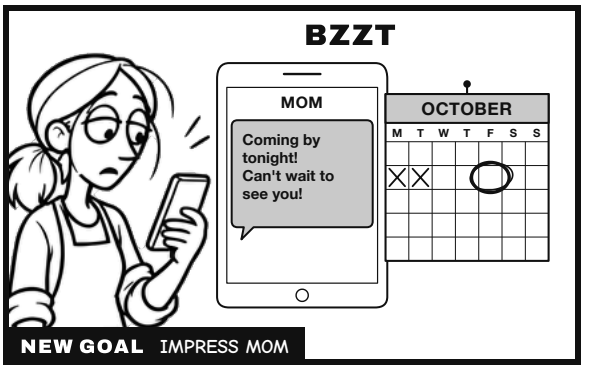
THE FLIP
Every tag changes. The couch needs hiding, and so does the red circle. Ben, the blocker, is now her help.

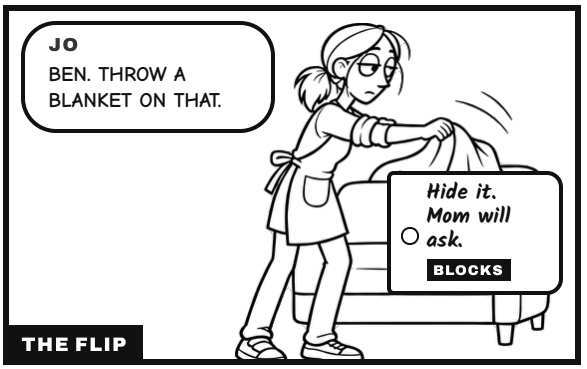
The same scene, drawn. The paper tags show what Jo thinks of each thing at that moment. She never says them out loud. We see them in what she does.

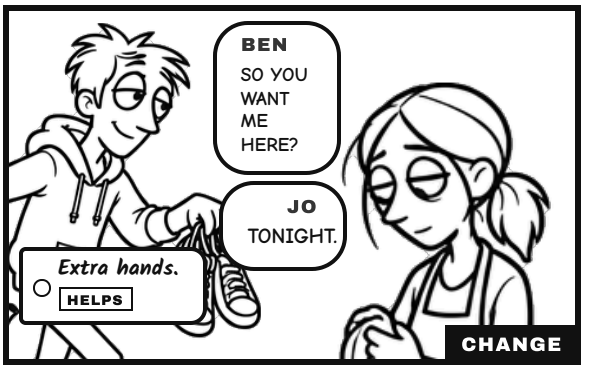


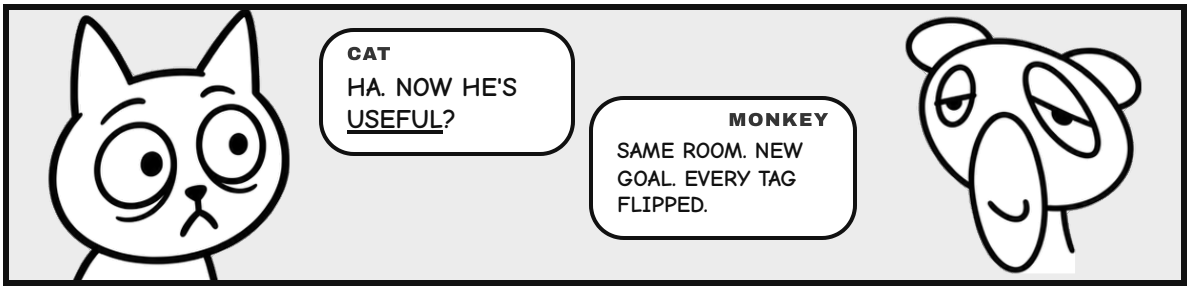






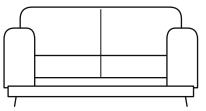
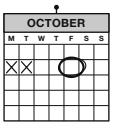




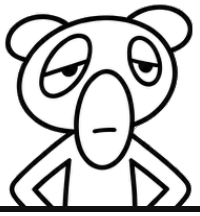


Why the tags flipped: nothing in the room changed, and Jo didn't change her mind about Ben. Her goal changed. With Mom coming tonight, the couch is a mess to hide, the red circle is a question Mom would ask, and her brother is a spare pair of hands. Friday still stands.

WANT SOMETHING? THEN NOTHING IN THE ROOM IS JUST A THING.

THE ROOM				
NO GOAL THE ELEPHANT'S DRAFT	*a couch*	*shoes*	*a calendar*	*my brother*
GOAL BEN OUT BY FRIDAY	*His bed now.* BLOCKS	*In my way.* BLOCKS	*Friday. Circled.* HELPS	*Still here.* BLOCKS
NEW GOAL IMPRESS MOM	*Throw a blanket on it.* BLOCKS	*Hide them.* BLOCKS	*Flip it. Mom will ask.* BLOCKS	*Extra hands.* HELPS

How to read this chart: the top row is four things in Jo's living room. Each row below is one goal. With no goal (the Elephant's draft at the start of this tool), everything is **neutral**: just a couch, just shoes. With a goal, each thing gets a tag. Change the goal, and the calendar goes from help to trouble while Ben goes from trouble to help.



MONKEY

GIVE SOMEONE A GOAL, AND THEY'LL HAVE AN OPINION ABOUT EVERY CHAIR IN THE ROOM. NO OPINIONS? THEN NO GOAL.

THE TAG TEST

Point at anything in your scene, a thing or a person. Ask: what does this character think of it right now, and does it help or block what they want? If the honest answer is "nothing," either the character doesn't want anything yet, or that thing doesn't need to be in the scene.

QUIET: SHOW THE TAG.

A glare, a kick, a point.

The tags are what Jo thinks, not what she says. We see each one in something she does: she glares at the couch, kicks the shoes, points at the calendar. Ben gets a tag too.

LOUD: LET IT POUR OUT

JO

That couch isn't a couch anymore. It's a fossil of you. Your shoes live in my doorway now. My kettle is empty every single morning. And that calendar? I circled Friday so hard I went through to Saturday.

Why a speech works here: every line is an opinion about a thing in the room, and every one aims at the same goal, Ben out. It's the tag test said out loud. A speech of feelings ("I'm so frustrated") would have no room in it.

SPOT THE MISS. FIND THE TAGS.

Two drafts of the same scene: Ben sleeps on Jo's couch, and Jo wants him out by Friday. One draft was written with this tool. The other is a calm, tidy draft, the kind anyone (or any AI) can write before deciding what Jo wants.

Read both. In each one, look at the couch and ask what Jo thinks of it. Then answer the questions below.

DRAFT A

Ben's pillow on Jo's couch. A dent the shape of Ben. Jo glares at it. Kicks his sneakers at the door. Points at the calendar: Friday, circled.

JO
Friday.

Her phone buzzes. MOM: "Coming by tonight!"

JO
Ben. Throw a blanket on that.

DRAFT B

Jo crosses her living room. A couch with a pillow on it. A pair of sneakers. A kettle. A calendar.

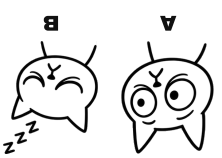
She sets the sneakers on the mat.

BEN
Morning.

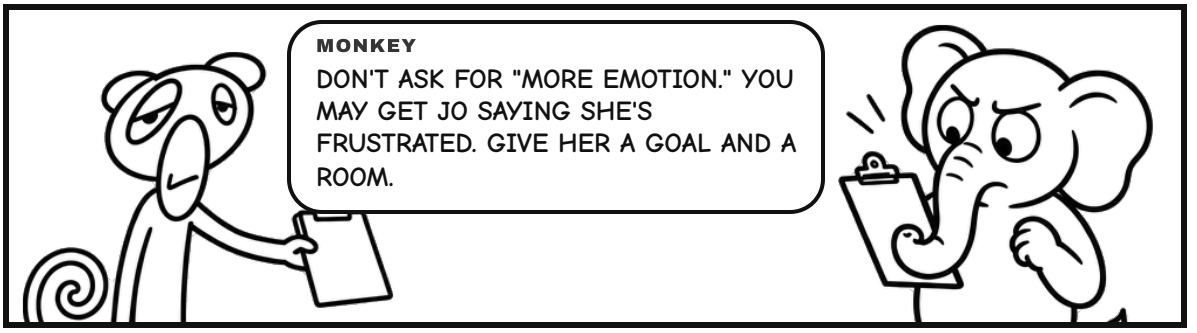
JO
Morning. There's coffee.

Her phone buzzes: Mom. She reads it and puts the phone away.

1. WHAT DOES JO THINK OF HER COUCH IN EACH DRAFT?
2. MOM TEXTS IN BOTH DRAFTS. WHAT CHANGES IN THE ROOM AFTER THE TEXT IN DRAFT B?
3. IN DRAFT A, WHY DOES THE COUCH NEED A BLANKET ALL OF A SUDDEN?



Answers. 1: In Draft B, nothing. It is "a couch with a pillow on it," the way a visitor would see it. In Draft A, it is Ben's bed now, with his dent in it, and she glares at it. 2: Nothing. She reads the text and puts the phone away, and the room stays just as it was. With no goal, there is no opinion for a new goal to flip. In Draft A the same text sends her hiding the couch. 3: Mom's text gives Jo a new goal, to impress Mom. The couch didn't change; her goal did, so the same couch gets a new tag: hide it.



THE BRIEF AI

JO, THE COUCH, FRIDAY

The **brief**: the instructions you hand the AI, or yourself, before anyone writes (Know What You Want, at the front, explains it in full). The left side of each row says what to fill in.

THE WANT Your want: what should the audience feel, think or suspect?	We should feel Jo's patience run out, then smile when one text flips the whole room.
GOAL Whose scene is it, and what are they after right now?	Jo. Ben out of her place by Friday.
THE ROOM Which things, and people, are in the room with them?	The couch Ben sleeps on, his sneakers, the kettle, the calendar, Ben.
TAGS What does the goal make them think of each one? Help or block?	Couch: his bed now (blocks). Calendar: Friday, circled (helps).
NEW GOAL Optional: what changes the goal partway through?	Mom texts that she's coming tonight. Now the couch needs hiding.
SHOW IT What will they do to each thing, so we see the tag?	A glare, a kick, a point at the calendar.
FORBID What the draft must not use.	~~"I'm frustrated"~~ · ~~a "cozy" room~~ · ~~sighs~~ · ~~speeches about feelings~~

NAME THE GOAL. LIST THE ROOM. LET THE ELEPHANT HANG THE TAGS.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

Rooms are where a draft goes flat. Ask the Elephant for "more emotion" and it can have people announce their feelings ("I'm so frustrated") while the room around them stays a neutral list of furniture. Give it her goal and the things in the room, and ask it to show what the character thinks of each one through what they do. When the draft comes back, point at three things in it and ask: what does she think of this? **Check the answer yourself**. The AI will happily say every object has an opinion when it doesn't.



TRY IT BY HAND

Hang the tags.

Pick a scene you wrote, or a scene from a movie you like. Write down whose scene it is and their goal right now: what they're after. Then pick four things in the room, people included. For each one, write what that character thinks of it and tick whether it helps or blocks the goal. Last, give them a new goal and see which tag flips.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: TAG THE ROOM

WHO · WHAT GOAL? _____

THING 1 · WHAT DO THEY THINK OF IT? _____ **HELPS** **BLOCKS**

THING 2 · WHAT DO THEY THINK OF IT? _____ **HELPS** **BLOCKS**

THING 3 · WHAT DO THEY THINK OF IT? _____ **HELPS** **BLOCKS**

THING 4 · WHAT DO THEY THINK OF IT? _____ **HELPS** **BLOCKS**

NEW GOAL _____

WHICH TAG FLIPS, AND TO WHAT? _____

Did any tag say "nothing" or "it's fine"? Then make the goal stronger, or take that thing out of the scene.

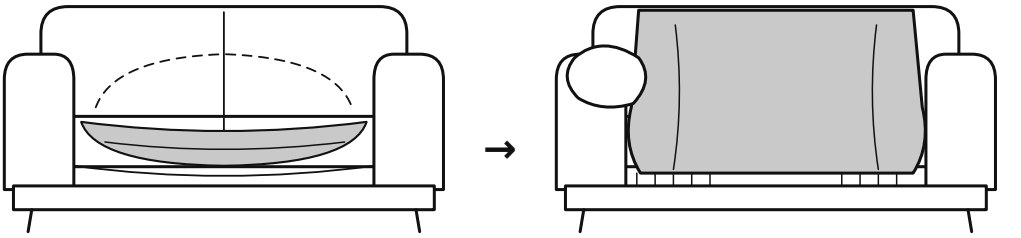


THEN TAG THE ROOM AGAIN FOR THE OTHER PERSON. WHAT DOES BEN THINK OF THAT SAME COUCH?

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

Want Makes Opinions

ONCE A CHARACTER WANTS SOMETHING, NOTHING IN THE ROOM IS NEUTRAL



His bed now.
○ **GOAL: BEN OUT BY FRIDAY**

Throw a blanket on it.
○ **GOAL: IMPRESS MOM**

A **goal** is what a character is after right now. It gives them an opinion about every thing and every person in the room: it **helps** or it **blocks**. Change the goal, and the opinions change with it.

WANT SOMETHING? NOTHING IS NEUTRAL. DRILL

1. WHAT IS THIS CHARACTER'S GOAL RIGHT NOW?
2. PICK ANYTHING IN THE ROOM. WHAT DO THEY THINK OF IT, AND DOES IT HELP OR BLOCK?
3. GIVE THEM A NEW GOAL. WHICH OPINIONS FLIP?

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: TAG THE ROOM
ROOM TALK AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE BAR SCENE **(THE SOCIAL NETWORK)** 278



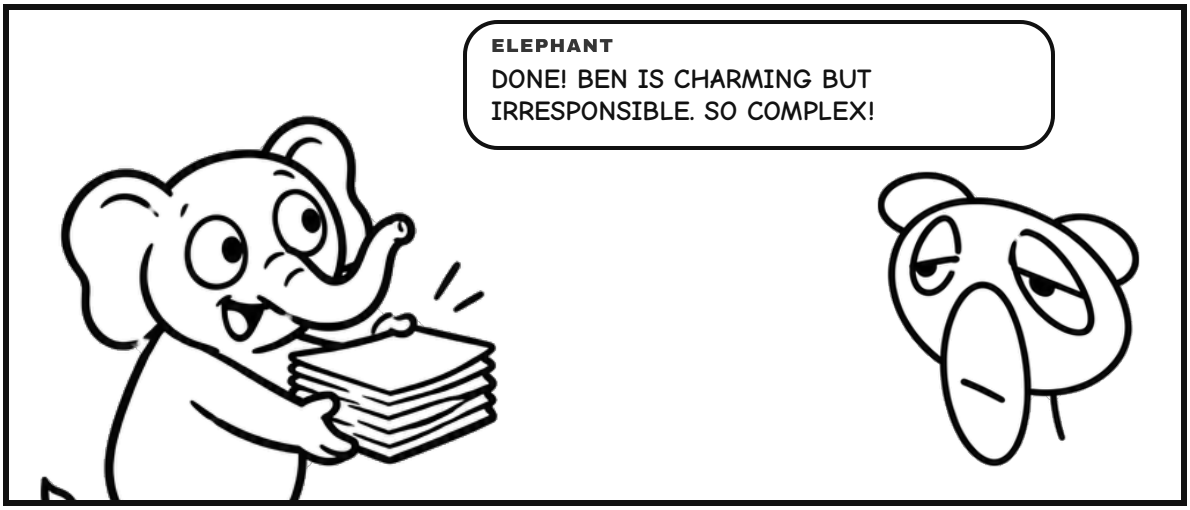
CAT
EVERY COUCH HAS A TAG. I'M UP.



The Gift That Trips Them

Ben and Jo (see Meet the Cast). On Jo's birthday, Ben came hours late. (That night plays out in Dialogue, in the Words on the Page drawer.) Now, on a later night, he comes to her kitchen to say sorry.

Here's that scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it, with Ben as a **flawed hero** (a main character with a real weakness). TEACHING EXAMPLE




```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

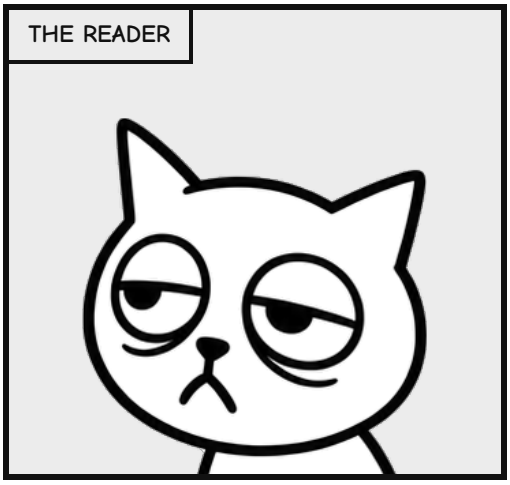
BEN (30s), charming but irresponsible,
leans in with gas-station flowers.

              BEN
      Happy belated to the best sister
      in the county.

              JO
      You came at midnight.

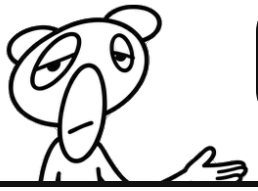
              BEN
      Fashionably.

Jo fights a smile. Loses. Takes the
flowers.
```



"CHARMING" IS A STICKER. IT NEVER COSTS HIM A THING.

A **sticker** is a label stuck on a character that never changes what happens. The draft calls Ben charming, and the charm works, the way it always does. It never costs him anything, so nothing is at stake (nothing can be lost), and the Cat, our reader, is bored.



MONKEY
BEN'S GIFT IS CHARM. HE CAN TALK ANYONE INTO ANYTHING. WATCH IT GET IN THE WAY.

HERE IS THE SCENE REWRITTEN WITH THIS TOOL
This time Ben truly means his apology. The notes on the right are ours, not part of the script. (New to script pages? How to read one is explained at the front of the book.)

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo at the sink. Ben in the doorway. The smile is already on.

BEN
Birthday girl! Belated.

JO
Ben.

BEN
I know. I'm the worst. Put it on my tab.

JO
Your tab's full.

He opens his palms. The smile.

BEN
Jo. I mean it. I'm sorry.

JO
That's your getting-out-of-a-ticket voice.

She turns back to the sink.

Nothing charming comes. He sets a bakery box on the counter. A sticky note: JO. He doesn't leave.

Jo's hands stop in the water. She doesn't tell him to go.

THE GIFT
His **gift**: the thing he's best at. Charm has never failed him.

AT WORK
The easy line. The joke. It usually works.

IT MATTERS
This time he means every word.

THE TRIP
The gift trips him: Jo has heard that charm too often to trust it.

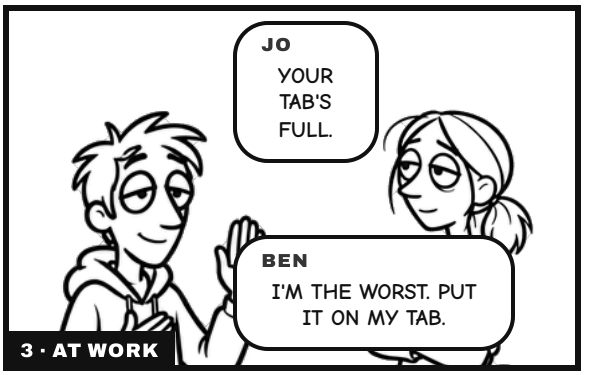
THE CHANGE
No smile. No line. He stops performing and gives her something.

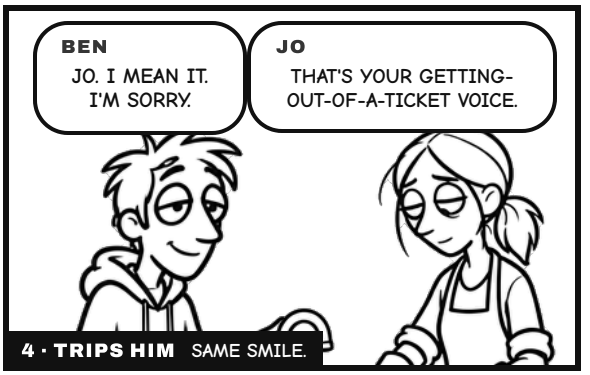
HEARD
Not forgiven yet. But this time she listens.

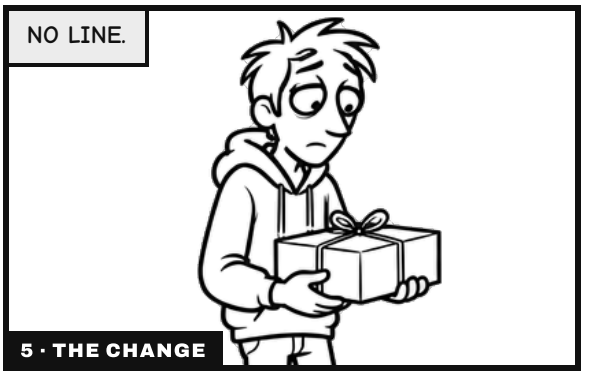
The same scene, drawn, with one extra panel first: last month, when Ben's charm worked on Jo.



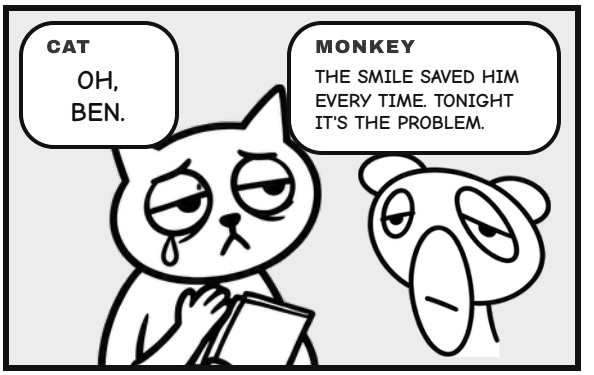












What to notice: in panel 1 the gift saves Ben. In panel 4 the same gift trips him: Jo can't tell a real apology from his usual charm. In panel 5 he stops talking and does something instead, and in panel 6 she finally listens.

HIS BEST THING TRIPS HIM.

Ben's **gift**, the thing he's best at, is charm. When little is at stake, it saves him. When it matters most, it swings back and trips him.



THE GIFT
charm

WHEN IT DOESN'T MATTER →

SAVES HIM
Talks his way past a late fee.
Talks Jo into lending him her car.

WHEN IT MATTERS MOST →

TRIPS HIM
He means it. She hears the charm, not the man.



MONKEY
FILL IN THE BLANKS. BECAUSE ____ IS SO GOOD AT ____, THEY CAN'T ____ WHEN IT MATTERS MOST.

BEN'S VERSION: Because Ben is so good at charming people, he can't be believed when he means it.



MONKEY
THE STICKER TEST. PEEL THE FLAW OFF. DOES THE SCENE CHANGE? NO? THEN IT WAS A STICKER.

Imagine the scene with the flaw deleted. If it plays exactly the same, the flaw was only a label.

BUT SHOW IT WORKING FIRST

It saves them before it sinks them.

Show the gift winning first, so we know what Ben stands to lose. If we never see the charm work, losing it costs nothing. And when a character changes, show it with something they do, like Ben setting down the box, not a speech about how they've grown.



SPOT THE MISS. ASK FOR "A FLAWED HERO."

Two drafts of the same moment: Ben is saying sorry to Jo for coming hours late to her birthday. One draft was written with this tool. The other is a smooth, likable draft, the kind you can get (from an AI, or from yourself) when you ask for "a flawed hero."

Read both. Look for whether Ben's charm, his gift, ever causes him trouble, and whether saying sorry is hard for him. Then answer the questions below.

DRAFT A

BEN
I'm the worst. Put it on my tab.

JO
Your tab's full.

BEN
Jo. I mean it.

JO
That's your getting-out-of-a-ticket voice.

She turns back to the sink. He sets a bakery box on the counter. He doesn't leave.

DRAFT B

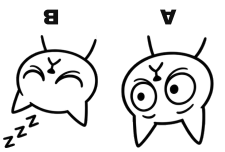
BEN
I know, I know. Charming but irresponsible. I'm working on the second part.

JO
Are you?

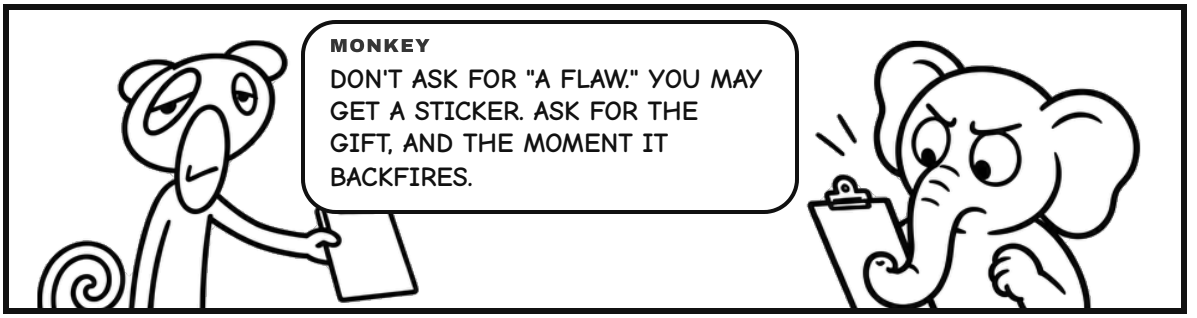
BEN
I'm here, aren't I? I brought cake.

She laughs in spite of herself. Gets two forks.

1. IN WHICH DRAFT DOES BEN'S CHARM CAUSE THE TROUBLE?
2. IN DRAFT A, ON WHICH LINE DOES THE CHARM STOP WORKING?
3. IN DRAFT A, WHAT DOES BEN DO INSTEAD OF MAKING A SPEECH?



Answers. 1: Draft A. In Draft B, Ben names his own flaw, and the charm wins again: Jo laughs and gets the forks. The flaw is a sticker. It never costs him a thing. 2: At "Jo. I mean it." Jo hears the same charm she has heard before, so she can't believe him. 3: He stops talking, sets a bakery box on the counter, and stays. He shows he's sorry with an action.



THE BRIEF AI

BEN SAYS SORRY

The **brief**: the instructions you hand the AI, or yourself, before anyone writes (Know What You Want, at the front, explains it in full). The left side of each row says what to fill in.

THE WANT Your want: what should the audience feel, think or suspect?	We should believe Ben this time, and ache when Jo can't.
THE GIFT What is this person best at?	Charm. He can talk anyone into anything.
IT SAVES HIM When has the gift worked for him before?	Past a late fee. Out of trouble, every time.
GOAL What is he after tonight, when it matters most?	To say sorry to Jo, mean it, and be believed.
THE TRIP How does the gift get in the way this time?	Because he charms everyone, she can't believe him.
THE CHANGE What does he do differently?	He stops performing. One plain action.
FORBID What the draft must not use.	~~"charming but"~~ · ~~a speech about growing~~ · ~~a hug~~

NAME THE GIFT. NAME THE MOMENT IT TRIPS THEM.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

Labels are an easy first move. Ask the Elephant for "a flawed character" and it can stick on a label, like "stubborn" or "has trust issues," then never use it again. So ask for the strength first, then for the one scene where it backfires. When the draft comes back, run the sticker test: delete the flaw and see whether the scene changes.



TRY IT BY HAND

Trip your hero.

Pick a character from your story. Write down the thing they're best at: that's their gift. Then write a time the gift saves them, and the night it trips them instead. Finish the sentence, then run the sticker test.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: FLIP THE COIN

WHO _____

THE GIFT · WHAT ARE THEY BEST AT? _____

IT SAVES THEM · WHEN? _____

IT TRIPS THEM · WHEN IT MATTERS MOST? _____

THE SENTENCE

Because _____ is so good at _____,

they can't _____ when it matters most.

THE STICKER TEST · IMAGINE THE SCENE WITHOUT THE FLAW. DOES IT PLAY DIFFERENTLY?

YES · IT'S A GIFT	NO · IT'S A STICKER

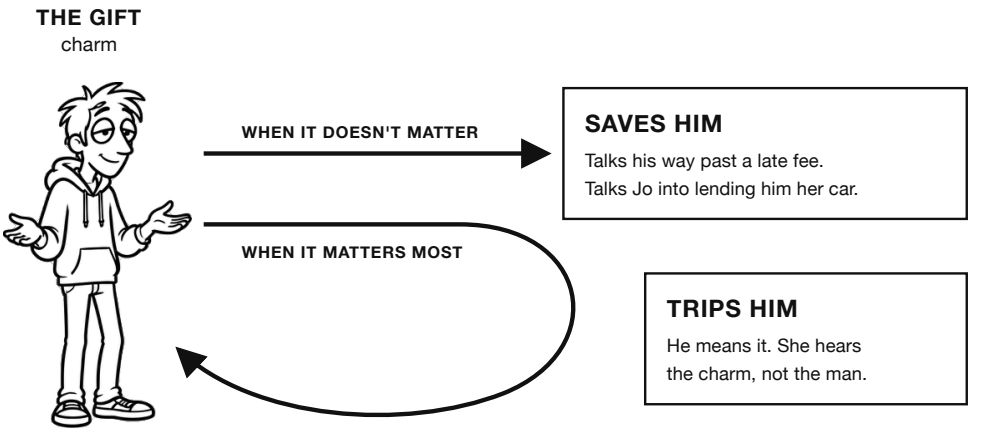


THEN TRY YOUR VILLAIN. WHAT ARE THEY BEST AT, AND WHEN DOES IT TRIP THEM?

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

The Gift That Trips Them

THEIR BEST QUALITY IS THE TROUBLE

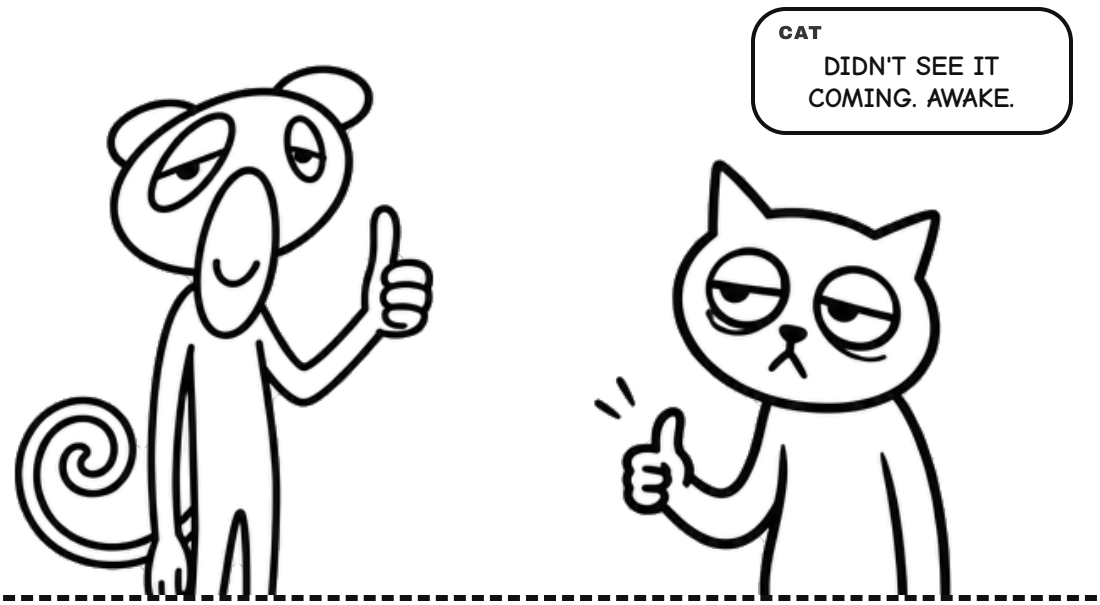


A character's **gift** is the thing they're best at. This tool makes that gift the cause of their worst moment.

IT SAVES THEM. THEN IT SINKS THEM.

1. IS YOUR HERO GREAT AT SOMETHING SPECIFIC?
2. DOES THAT VERY THING GET THEM INTO TROUBLE?
3. DID WE SEE IT WORK BEFORE IT FAILED?
4. WHEN THEY CHANGE, DO WE SEE IT IN AN ACTION, NOT A SPEECH?

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: FLIP THE COIN
ROOM TALK AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: JOY LETS GO **(INSIDE OUT)** 282



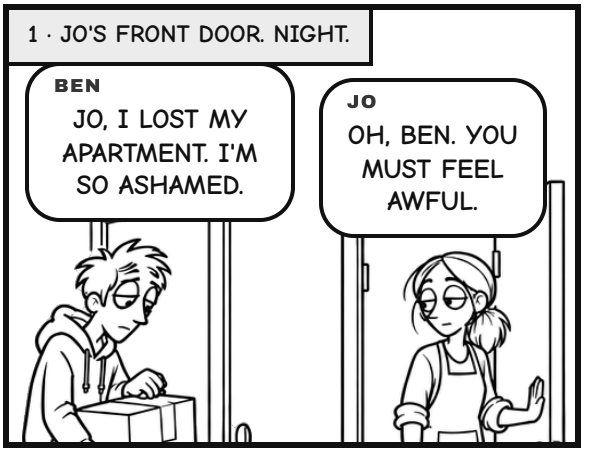
Play the Try

THE IDEA

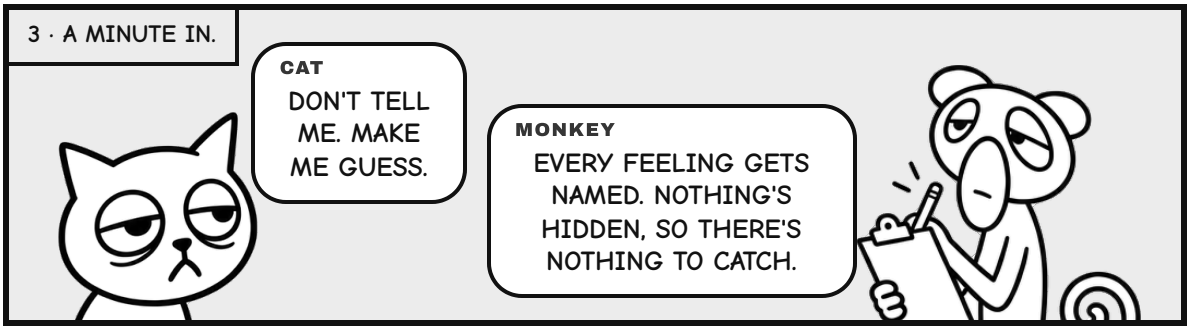
A feeling we watch someone **try** to hide moves us more than a feeling they name. So instead of having a character say "I'm ashamed," show them trying not to be: hiding it, or handling it.

Real people go in this order: first the **body** (what it does before they can stop it), then a **choice** (what they decide to do about it), and only then, maybe, **words**, often about something else. Reach for this tool when a character explains their feelings out loud.

The scene: Ben gave back the $500 his sister Jo lent him, so he couldn't pay his rent. Tonight he lost his apartment. He's at Jo's front door with a box of what he could carry. He wants a place to sleep without having to say why. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



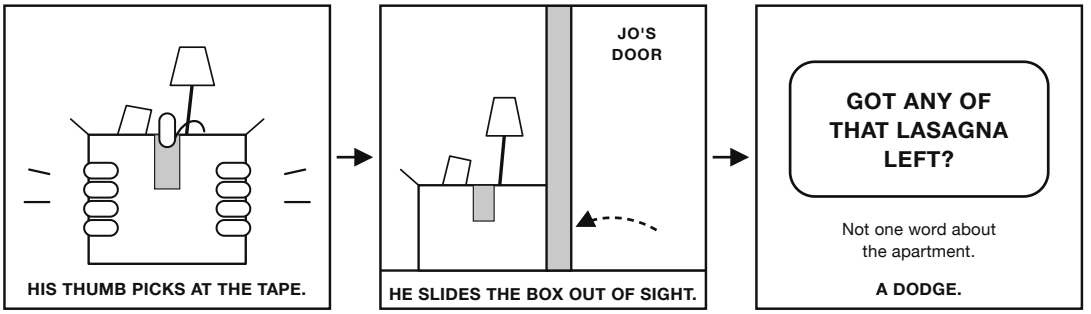




DON'T NAME THE FEELING. PLAY THE TRY.

The **try** is what a person does to hide or handle a feeling: body first, then a choice, then (maybe) words. (The order comes from the writing teacher Dwight V. Swain.)

THE PICTURE · BEN'S TRY, IN THREE BEATS



1 · BODY
what it does before he can stop it

2 · A CHOICE
what he decides to do about it

3 · WORDS (MAYBE)
and they talk about something else

UNDER ALL THREE: SHAME. NOBODY SAYS IT.

How to read this picture: read left to right. Each frame is one beat of Ben's try, in the order real people go. The dashed line underneath is the feeling. It runs under all three beats, but it never turns into a word.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

EXT. JO'S FRONT DOOR - NIGHT

Ben holds a box.

BEN Jo, I lost my apartment.

BEN I'm so ashamed. I feel like a failure.

JO Oh, Ben. You must feel awful.

BEN I do. Can I stay here?

JO Of course.

What's wrong: Ben says the feeling, so there is nothing to watch for. An actor has nothing to play but the words, and the Cat has nothing to figure out.

WITH THE TOOL

EXT. JO'S FRONT DOOR - NIGHT

Ben holds a box. A lamp sticks out. His thumb picks at the tape.

The lock turns. He slides the box out of sight.

BEN Got any of that lasagna left?

Jo looks past him, at the box.

JO I'll get a pillow.

What changed: Ben never says "ashamed." We see it in his thumb, in the box he hides, and in a line about lasagna. Jo sees it too, and lets him keep his pride. That's her try.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? FIND A LINE WHERE A CHARACTER SAYS HOW THEY FEEL. COVER IT. WHAT COULD THEIR BODY DO, AND WHAT COULD THEY CHOOSE, TO TRY TO HIDE IT?

For the mentor: Give the actor a try: one thing the body does before they can stop it, one choice about it, then a line about something else. If we still understand the feeling, the line you covered can go.

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

Body first. Then a choice. Then, maybe, words. DRILL

3

WHAT IS YOUR CHARACTER TRYING NOT TO SHOW?

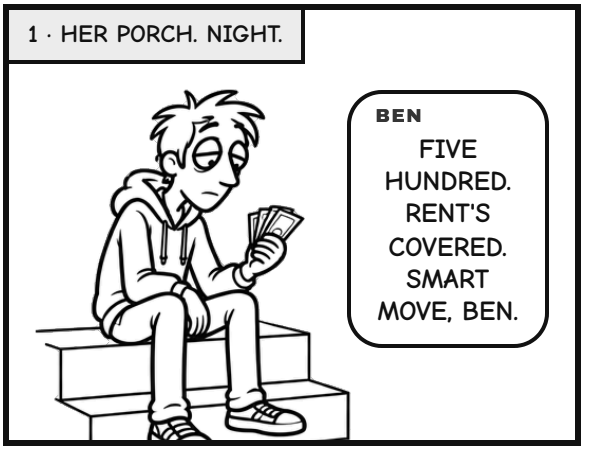
Emotional Sense Beats Logic

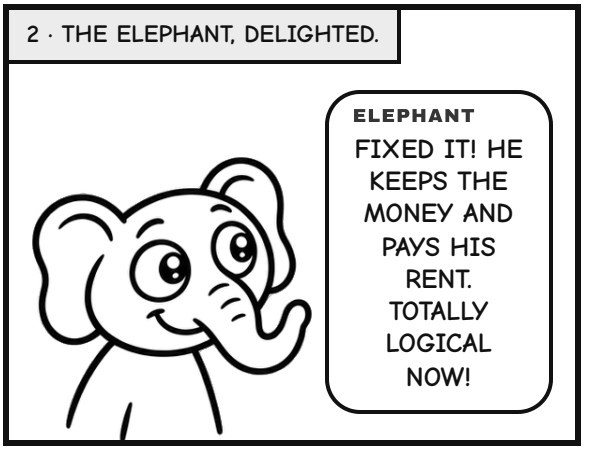
THE IDEA

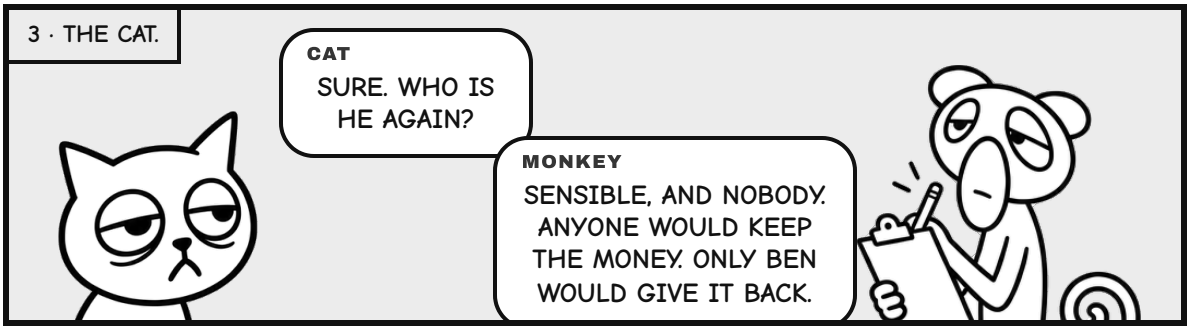
People rarely choose the sensible thing. They choose what fits how they feel: an old hurt, a fear, a love, a grudge. A choice on the page works when it makes **emotional sense**: it is true to how that person feels right now, even if it's the worst move on paper.

Reach for this tool when someone asks "Why would she do that?", or when your characters act like calm, sensible robots. Don't make the choice logical. Make the feeling behind it visible.

The scene: Ben's rent is due at nine tomorrow, so he begged his sister Jo for $500. She opened a kitchen drawer full of every IOU he ever wrote her, then gave him the money anyway. Now he's alone on her porch with the cash. Here's the kind of fix the Elephant, our AI, might give a writer who asks, "Would Ben really give it back? He needs it." TEACHING EXAMPLE



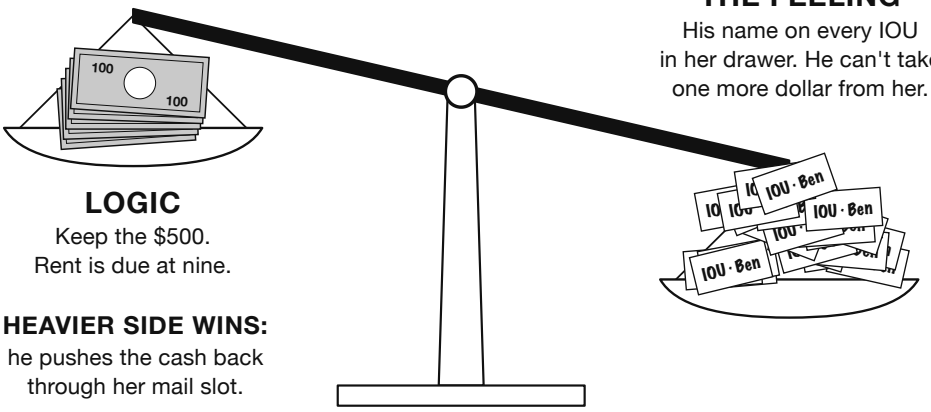




NOT LOGICAL? FINE. MAKE IT TRUE.

True to how **that person** feels. Readers forgive a bad decision. They don't forgive a character who could be anybody.

THE PICTURE · LOGIC ON ONE SIDE, THE FEELING ON THE OTHER



How to read this picture: the left pan holds the sensible reason. The right pan holds the feeling. For Ben, the feeling weighs more, so his choice goes that way. Your job is to put the heavy pan where the reader can see it.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

EXT. JO'S PORCH - NIGHT

Ben counts the cash. Five hundreds.

BEN Rent's covered.

He pockets it and heads for the bus.

What's wrong: it's the smart move, so anyone would make it. It tells us nothing about Ben, and nothing changes between him and Jo.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

The drawer by the stove is open. Under the menus: IOUs, all signed "Ben."

JO Take it.

EXT. JO'S PORCH - LATER

Ben looks at the cash. Then he pushes it through her mail slot.

What changed: giving it back is a terrible money choice. But we saw the drawer, so we feel why: he can't take one more dollar from her. Now the choice shows us who Ben is. (callback: Scene and Sequel 52)

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? POINT TO A CHOICE A READER MIGHT CALL "NOT LOGICAL." WHAT FEELING MAKES IT TRUE, AND WHERE ON THE PAGE CAN WE SEE THAT FEELING?

For the mentor: If you can name the feeling but it isn't on the page, put it there before the choice: an object, a look, a moment we watch. Don't fix the choice into a sensible one. Make the feeling visible, and the reader will follow.

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

Not smart? Fine. True to them? Must be.

4

WHAT FEELING MAKES THIS CHOICE TRUE?

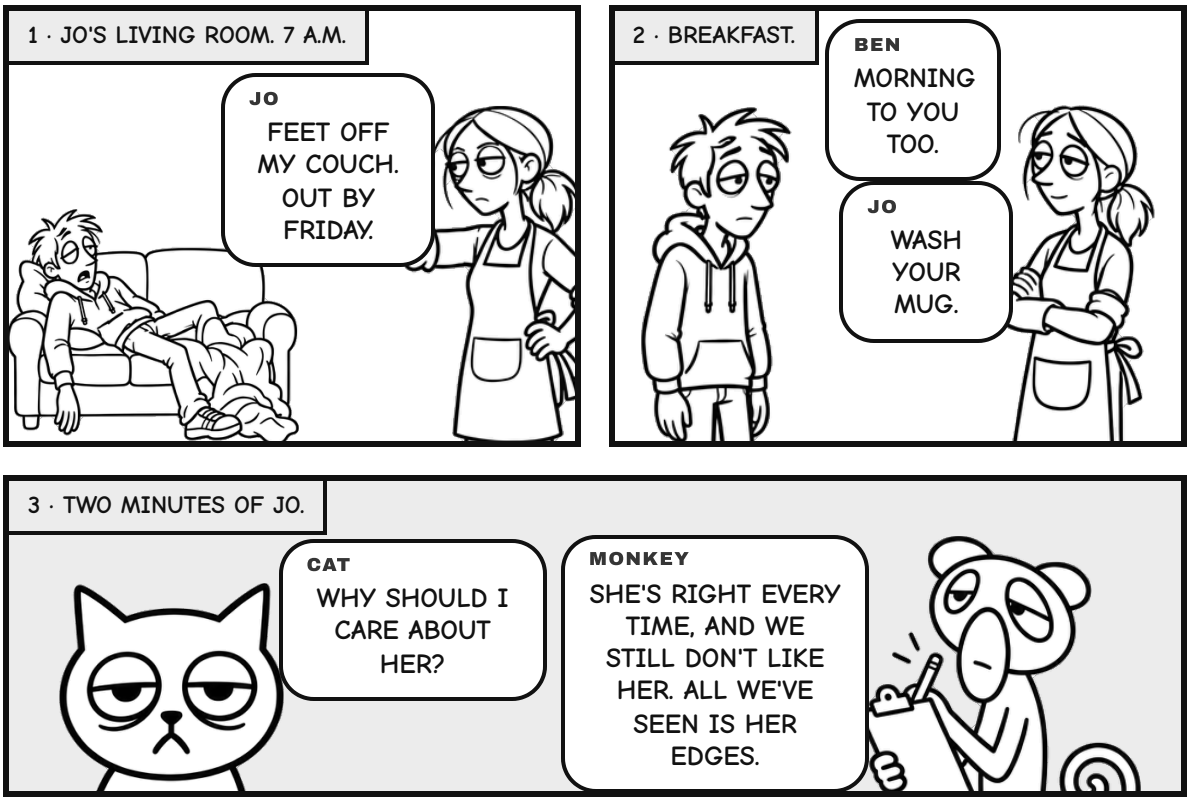
Something They Love

THE IDEA

Give your characters something they **love**: a person, a pet, a plant, a beat-up old thing they won't give up on. When we watch someone take care of something, we start to care about them, even if they're prickly the rest of the time.

Writers call that feeling **rooting interest**: wanting a character to get what they want. Reach for this tool when a reader says a character is cold or unlikable, or when a hard person in your story is all edges and no heart.

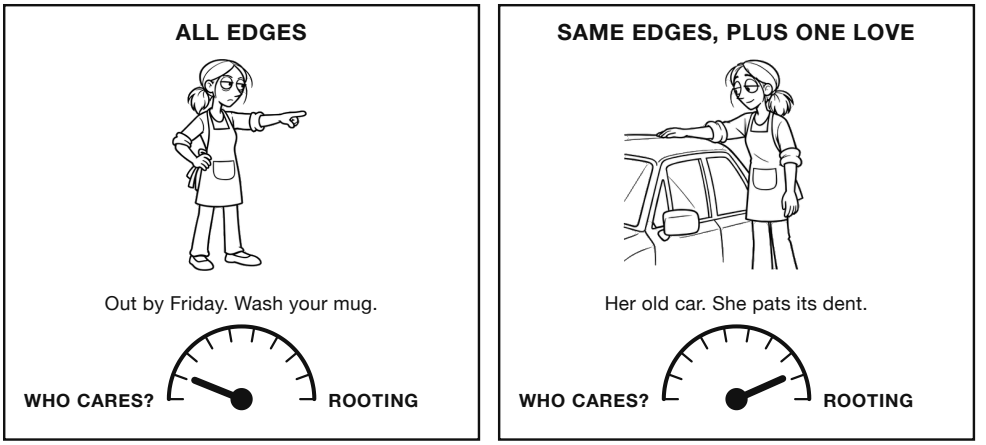
The scene: Ben lost his apartment and sleeps on his sister Jo's couch. Jo has had enough. She wants him out by Friday, and she says so every morning. Here's Jo the way the Elephant, our AI, might write her.
TEACHING EXAMPLE



SHOW US WHAT THEY LOVE. WE'LL ROOT FOR THEM.

Show it early, before their worst moment, so we're already on their side when it comes.

THE PICTURE · THE SAME JO, PLUS ONE THING SHE LOVES



How to read this picture: the gauge shows how much we want Jo to win. On the left she only gives orders, and we don't care. On the right she still gives orders, but we've also seen her with her old car, gently checking its dent. Same Jo. Now we're rooting for her.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Jo yanks the blanket off Ben.

JO Out by Friday.

BEN Morning to you too.

JO And wash your mug.

She slams the door on her way out.

What's wrong: every line is fair, and every line is a jab. We only ever see Jo push, so she reads as mean, and we stop caring whether she gets her way.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Jo yanks the blanket off Ben.

JO Out by Friday.

EXT. JO'S DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Jo stops at her old car. She runs a thumb over the dent in its bumper.

JO Not your fault, old girl.

She pats the roof twice. Gets in.

What changed: Jo is just as tough. But ten seconds with something she loves shows she's tender with battered things, so now we're on her side.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? PICK THE HARDEST PERSON IN YOUR PAGES. WHAT DO THEY LOVE? DO WE EVER SEE THEM WITH IT?

For the mentor: If the answer is "nothing," or "it's in their backstory," give them one thing to love and put it on screen: a pet, a plant, a car, a person. Show them taking care of it, early, before their worst moment.

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

Give them one thing to love. Show it early.

5

WHAT DOES THIS PERSON LOVE?

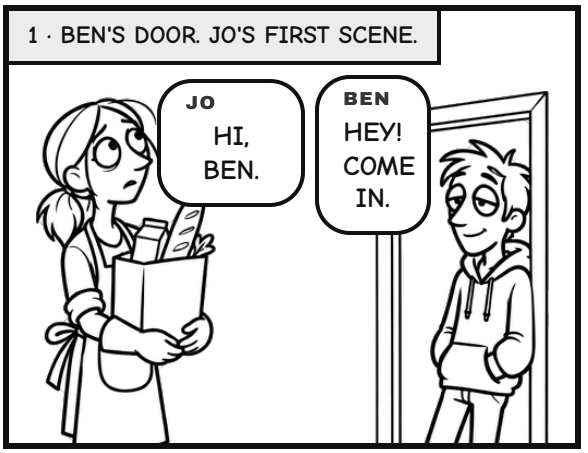
First Look Makes a Promise

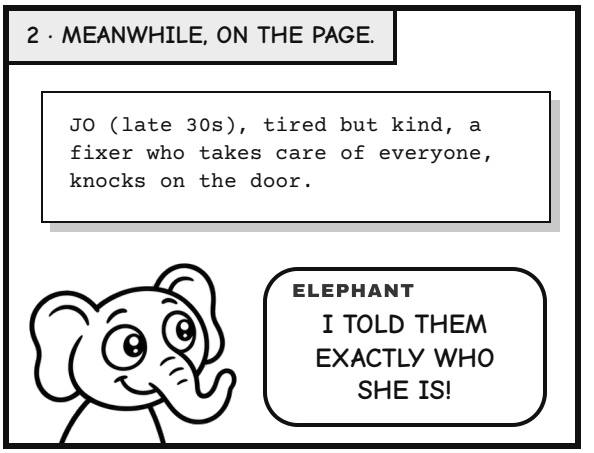
THE IDEA

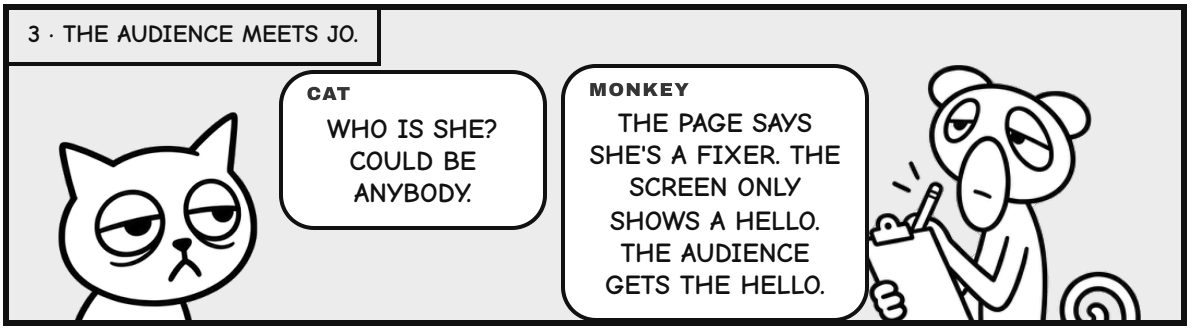
A character's **introduction** is the first moment we see them on screen, and we decide who they are fast. So make that moment an **action**: something they do that only this person would do. A description in the script only helps the reader; the audience never sees it.

That first look is a **promise** about who this person is. The story keeps it, or breaks it on purpose. Reach for this tool when a character walks in, says hello and could be anybody.

The scene: Imagine Ben and Jo's story as a movie. This is the very first time we see Jo. She is visiting her little brother at his studio apartment, back before he lost it. Here's her entrance the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. ("(late 30s)" after her name is her age.) TEACHING EXAMPLE



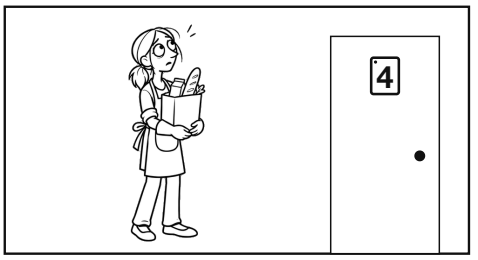




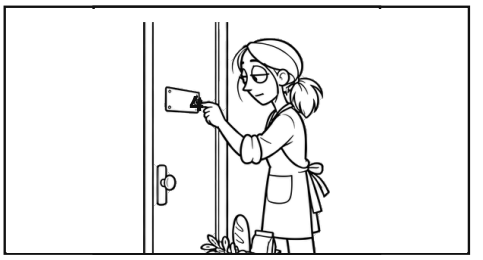
THEIR FIRST MOVE TELLS US WHO THEY ARE.

Don't describe it. Let us see them do it, the first time we meet them.

THE PICTURE · TWO FIRST LOOKS AT JO



1 · SHE SAYS HELLO
"Hi, Ben." Could be anybody.



2 · SHE FIXES IT BEFORE SHE KNOCKS
His loose door number, a coin from her pocket.

THE PROMISE: SHE FIXES THINGS. EVEN BEN.

How to read this picture: on the left, Jo arrives and says hello, which anyone could do. On the right, before she knocks, she sees her brother's door number hanging from one screw and fixes it with a coin from her pocket. That small action is the promise: she fixes things, even Ben.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. BEN'S STUDIO - DAY

JO (late 30s), tired but kind, a fixer who takes care of everyone, knocks.

BEN opens the door.

BEN Jo! Hey.

JO Hi, Ben. How are you?

BEN Good. Come in.

What's wrong: the script tells the reader she's a fixer, but nobody can film a description. On screen, all Jo does is knock and say hi.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. BEN'S BUILDING - DAY

JO (late 30s) climbs the stairs, a grocery bag on her hip.

Ben's door number hangs from one screw. She sets the bag down, fishes out a coin, and screws it back on straight.

Then she knocks.

BEN (O.S.) It's open!

JO Of course it is.

What changed: we watch her fix something before she says a word, so we know who she is. "Of course it is" tells us who Ben is, too.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? FIND YOUR MAIN CHARACTER'S FIRST SCENE. COVER THEIR DESCRIPTION. WHAT DO THEY DO THAT TELLS US WHO THEY ARE?

For the mentor: If all they do is arrive, say hello or stand there, give them one action only this person would do: a habit, a fix, a small cheat, a kindness nobody sees. Make it the first thing we watch them do.

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

Their first move is who they are.

6

WHAT DO THEY DO FIRST?

Read the Wear

THE IDEA

Clothes and belongings are evidence. Some things show who a person really is: **the wear**, meaning scuffs, tape, patches, things worn smooth. Other things show who they're trying to look like: the new, the shiny, the bought for show.

The interesting part is the **gap** between the two. Reach for this tool when a description says only "well dressed" or "casual," when everything a character owns says the same thing, or when two of your characters could swap closets and nobody would notice.

The scene: Ben still sleeps on his sister Jo's couch, but he has a new job, and yesterday was his first payday. It's a workday morning, and he's dressing for the office. Here's how the Elephant, our AI, might describe him. TEACHING EXAMPLE



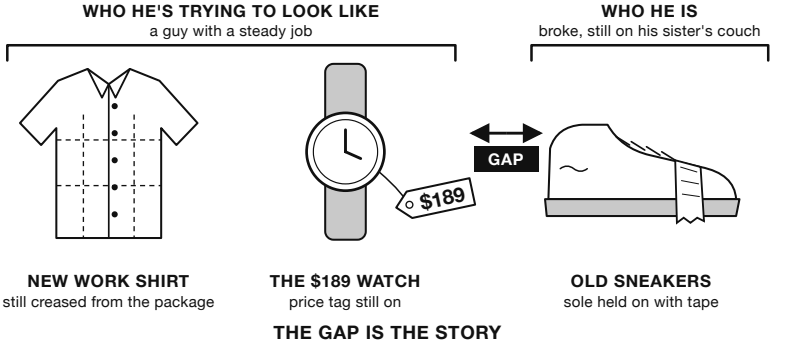




WHO THEY ARE. WHO THEY WANT TO BE.

Dress your people in both. Then let someone notice the gap, because that's where the story is.

THE PICTURE · WHAT BEN WEARS TO WORK





Someone notices. Jo tucks the tag into his cuff.

How to read this picture: these are three things Ben has on. The shirt and the watch, both new, are who he's trying to look like. The old taped sneakers are who he is. Read across from one side to the other: the space in between is the story.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Ben buttons a crisp new work shirt. Fastens a gleaming new watch. A man who has made it.

BEN How do I look?

JO Nice.

BEN Big day.

What's wrong: every detail is specific, and every one says the same thing: new, shiny, made it. We see who Ben wants to be, not who he is, so there's no gap to notice.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - MORNING

Ben buttons a new work shirt, still creased from the package. The new watch: the price tag still dangles.

Below: his old sneakers, one sole taped on.

BEN How do I look?

Jo sees the tag. She tucks it into his cuff.

JO Go. You'll be late.

What changed: the shirt and watch show who he's trying to be; the sneakers show who he is. Jo hides the tag without a word, so we know she's on his side.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? NAME THREE THINGS YOUR MAIN CHARACTER WEARS OR CARRIES. WHICH ONE SHOWS WHO THEY ARE? WHICH SHOWS WHO THEY WANT TO BE?

For the mentor: If all three say the same thing, or nothing at all ("jeans, T-shirt"), change one. Give them one worn thing (scuffed, taped, worn smooth) and one thing for show. Then let someone notice the gap.

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

One thing that's worn. One thing for show.

7 WHAT GIVES THEM AWAY?

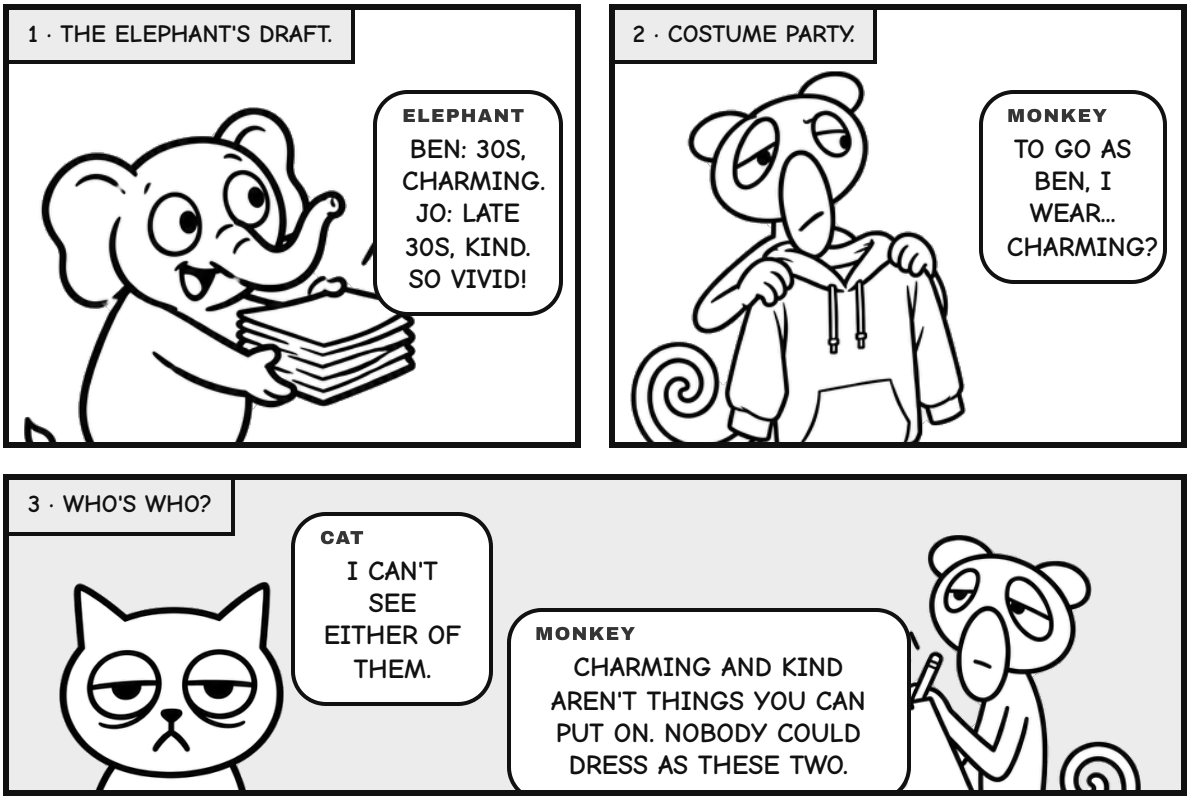
The Costume Test

THE IDEA

Picture a fan at a costume party, dressed as your character with just two or three **pieces**: things the character always wears or carries. Would people know who it is? If they would, the character is **distinct**: easy to picture, and impossible to mix up with anyone else.

Words like "charming" or "kind" describe a feeling, and nobody can wear a feeling. Reach for this tool when you introduce a character, or when a reader mixes up two of your people.

The scene: the night Ben comes to Jo's kitchen to ask her for $500. Here is how the Elephant, our AI, might introduce the two of them, and what happens when the Monkey tries to dress as Ben. TEACHING EXAMPLE



COULD A FAN DRESS AS THEM?

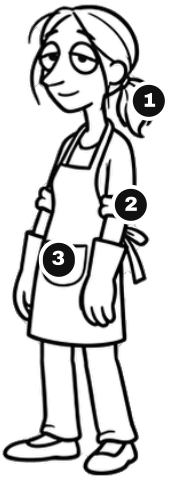
Two or three pieces they wear or carry. If a fan in just those pieces gets recognized, the character is distinct.

THE PICTURE · THREE PIECES EACH



BEN

1. Messy hair, like he just got up
2. An old hoodie
3. Sneakers, never tied, one sole taped on



JO

1. A low ponytail
2. Sleeves rolled up
3. An apron, even at home

How to read this picture: each number marks one piece a fan would need. Three for Ben, three for Jo. Cover their faces with your thumbs and you still know who is who. And each piece says something: he never quite grew up; she is always the one cleaning up.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
BEN (30s), charming and handsome, comes in.
JO (late 30s), kind but tired, looks up.
BEN   Hey, Jo.
JO    Hey yourself.
```

What's wrong: "charming," "handsome," "kind" and "tired" are opinions. A reader can't picture them, and an actor can't wear them.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
BEN (early 30s) slouches in: old hoodie, messy hair, sneakers untied, one sole taped on.
JO (late 30s), apron on, sleeves rolled, hair in a low ponytail, scrubs a pan.
BEN   Hey, Jo.
JO    Hey yourself.
```

What changed: same lines, but now we can see them, and only Ben would have that taped sole.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WITHOUT SAYING THE NAME, DESCRIBE YOUR MAIN CHARACTER WITH TWO OR THREE THINGS THEY WEAR OR CARRY. COULD A FRIEND GUESS WHO IT IS?

For the mentor: If the pieces are feelings ("charming," "kind"), nobody can see the character yet. Pick pieces you could hand a fan, and make each one say something about the person.

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

Two or three pieces. Could a fan go as them?

8

WHAT WOULD A FAN WEAR TO BE YOUR CHARACTER?

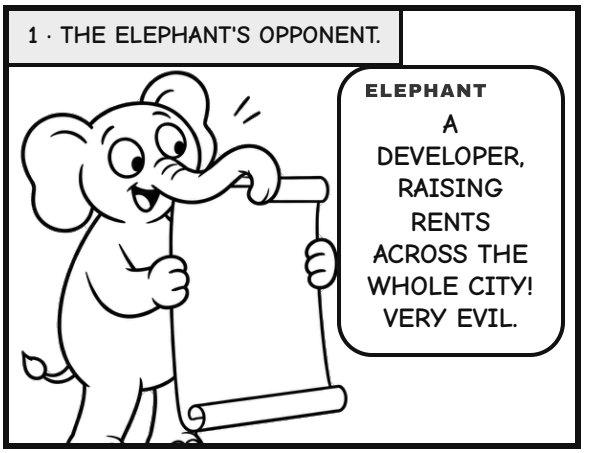
The Villain's Plan Hits Home

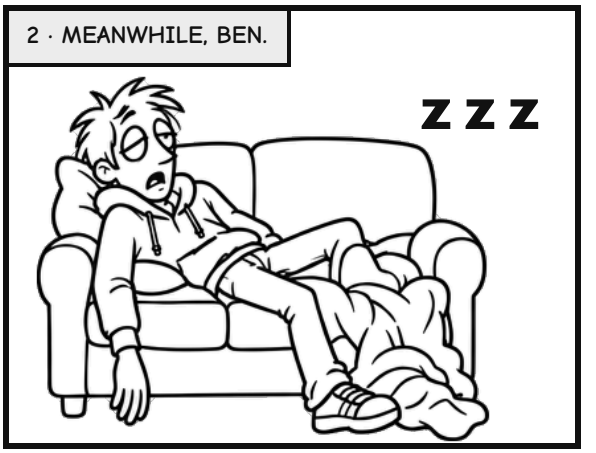
THE IDEA

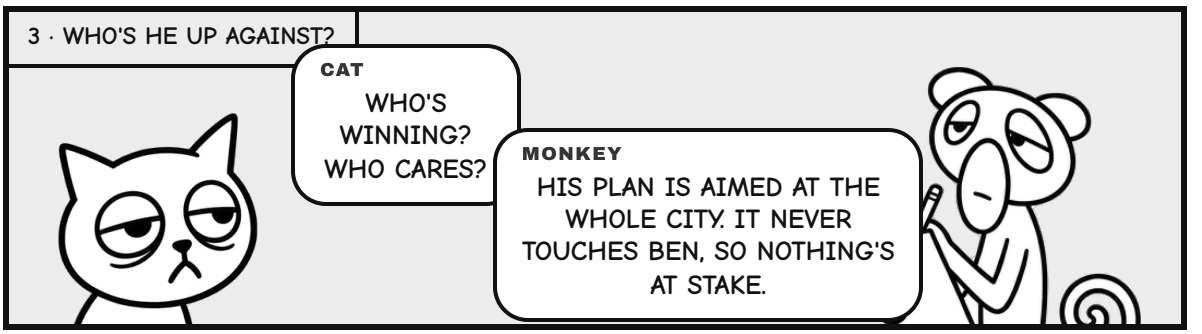
An **opponent** is anyone whose goal gets in the hero's way. The main one is called the **antagonist**. An antagonist doesn't have to be evil: a boss, a neighbor or a rival will do.

What matters is that the opponent's plan lands on the hero's own life: a home, a job, someone they love. An evil plan aimed at "the city" can leave the hero untouched, and then we don't care who wins. Reach for this tool when your opponent feels far away, or the hero could just walk off.

The scene: Ben lost his apartment and sleeps on his sister Jo's couch. He has a new job now, and Jo has moved her deadline: she wants him out by payday. So he is hunting for a small place of his own. Here's the kind of opponent the Elephant, our AI, might write him. TEACHING EXAMPLE



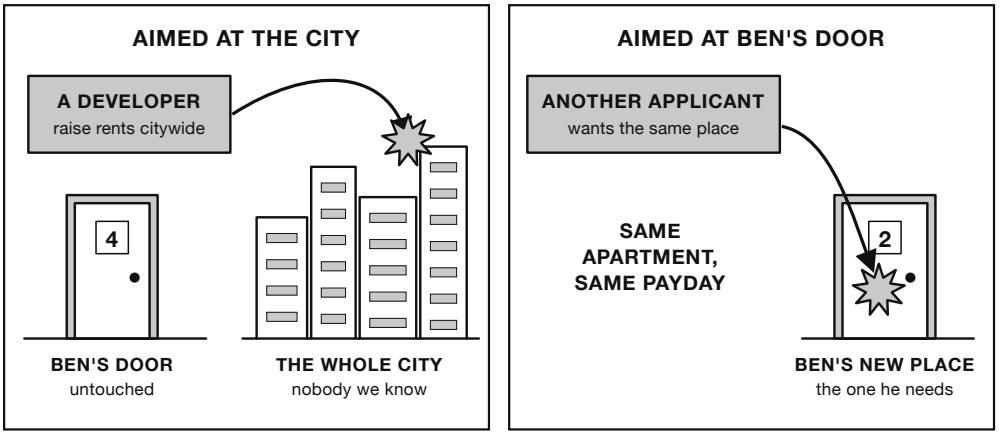




AIM THE OPPONENT'S PLAN AT THE HERO'S DOOR.

The opponent can be ordinary. Their goal just has to land on the hero's own life.

THE PICTURE · TWO OPPONENTS, TWO AIMS



How to read this picture: each arrow is an opponent's plan; the star is where it lands. Left: the developer's plan hits the city and misses Ben's door. Right: an ordinary person wants the very apartment Ben needs, so her plan lands on him.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. SMALL APARTMENT - DAY

The LANDLORD shows Ben a bare room.

LANDLORD Rents are up all over. Developers.

BEN Crazy.

LANDLORD Fill this out if you want it.

Ben takes the form. Easy.

What's wrong: the developers are out there somewhere. Nothing they do touches this room, so there's no fight.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. SMALL APARTMENT - DAY

A WOMAN in a blazer, here first, hands the LANDLORD a folder.

WOMAN Three months up front.

LANDLORD Can you beat that?

Ben looks at the room. At his sneakers.

BEN Give me till payday.

What changed: she isn't evil; she wants the same room. Her goal lands on Ben's life, so now we care.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT IS THE GOAL OF THE OPPONENT IN YOUR STORY? IF THEY GOT IT TOMORROW, WHAT WOULD CHANGE IN YOUR HERO'S LIFE?

For the mentor: If nothing would change, the opponent's plan misses the hero. Aim it at something the hero needs: a home, a job, a person, a deadline.

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

The opponent's plan lands on the hero's life.

9

IF THE OPPONENT WINS, WHAT DOES THE HERO LOSE?

Find the Love Story

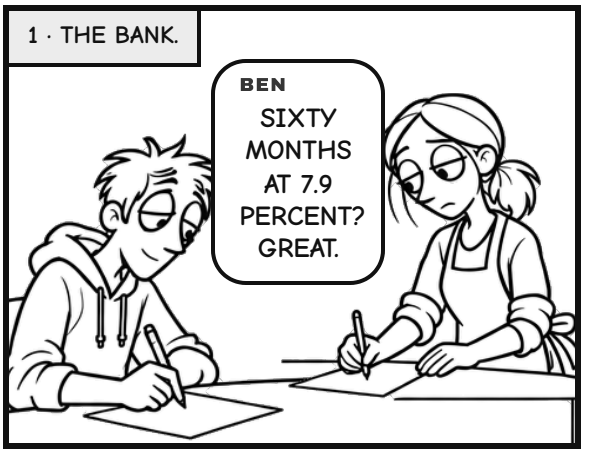
THE IDEA

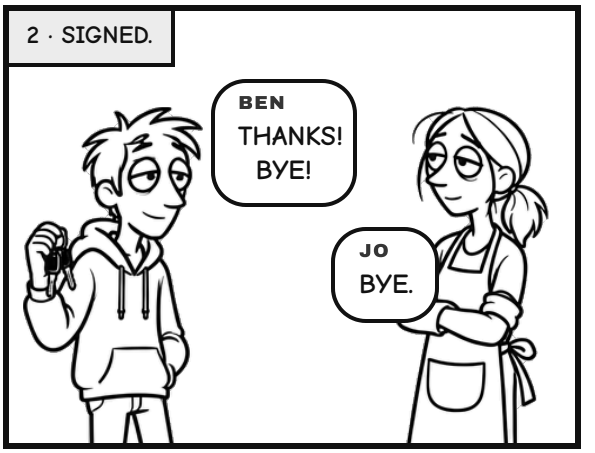
Every story has a **premise**: the situation it's about, such as a monster, a heist or a car loan. Inside the premise, find the connection between two people. Here, a **love story** means any bond: brother and sister, best friends, partners, even rivals. It doesn't have to be romance.

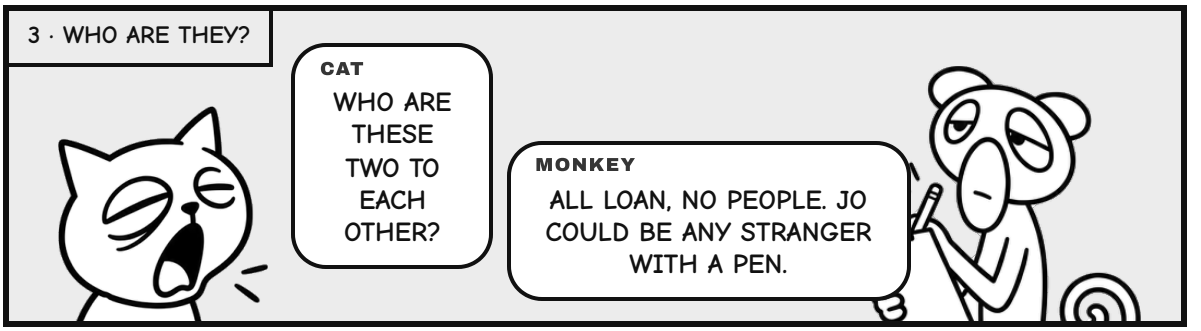
The premise gets us in the door; the bond is what we care about. Reach for this tool when a draft is all plot, or when a big genre story has nobody to root for.

The scene: Ben has a new job and needs a car to get there. The bank won't lend to him alone, so his sister Jo agrees to **co-sign**: if Ben stops paying, she has to pay. In her kitchen she initialed the form and said, "Bank's at ten." Now they're at the bank to sign. Here's the signing the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it.

TEACHING EXAMPLE



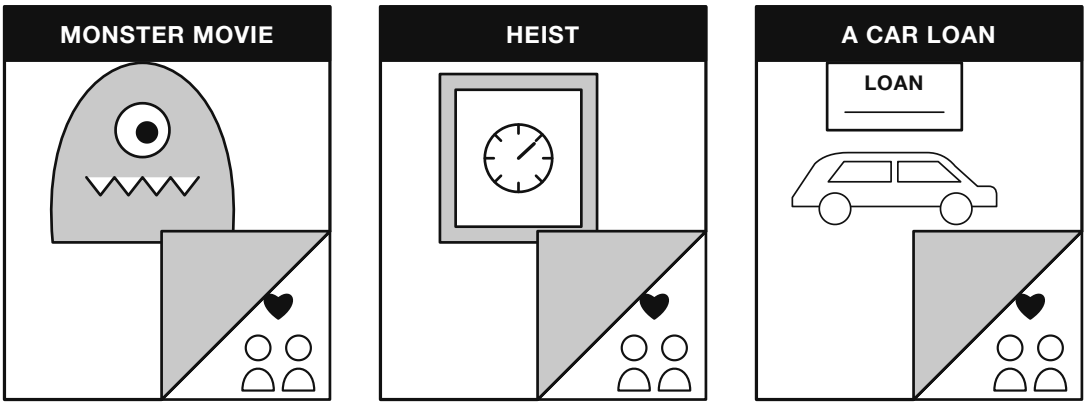




FIND THE LOVE STORY.

Here "love story" means any bond between people: family, friends, partners, rivals. Not only romance.

THE PICTURE · THREE PREMISES, PEELED BACK



UNDERNEATH:
two strangers
who must trust each other

UNDERNEATH:
a crew that
becomes a family

UNDERNEATH:
a sister deciding
to trust her brother

How to read this picture: each poster is a premise, what the story is about on the outside. Peel back the corner and underneath are two people and the bond between them. The premise changes from poster to poster. What keeps us watching doesn't.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. BANK - DAY
OFFICER   Sixty months at 7.9
          percent.
BEN       Great.
OFFICER   Co-signer signs here.
Jo signs.
OFFICER   Congratulations on the car.
BEN       Thanks!
```

What's wrong: it's all about the loan. Swap Jo for any stranger with a pen, and nothing changes.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. BANK - DAY
OFFICER   Co-signer signs here.
Jo's pen stops over the line.
JO        Miss one payment, it's my
          name.
BEN       I know.
JO        Do you?
Ben takes the pen. Signs his line
first. Then she signs.
```

What changed: the same signature, but now it's a sister deciding to trust her brother. That's the love story inside a car loan.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? SET THE PLOT ASIDE. WHICH TWO PEOPLE IN YOUR STORY MATTER MOST TO EACH OTHER, AND WHICH SCENE SHOWS IT?

For the mentor: If they can't name a pair, the story is all premise. Find two people the premise pushes together, and give them one moment where the bond itself is at stake.

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

Inside every premise, find the bond.

10

WHO HERE MATTERS TO WHOM?

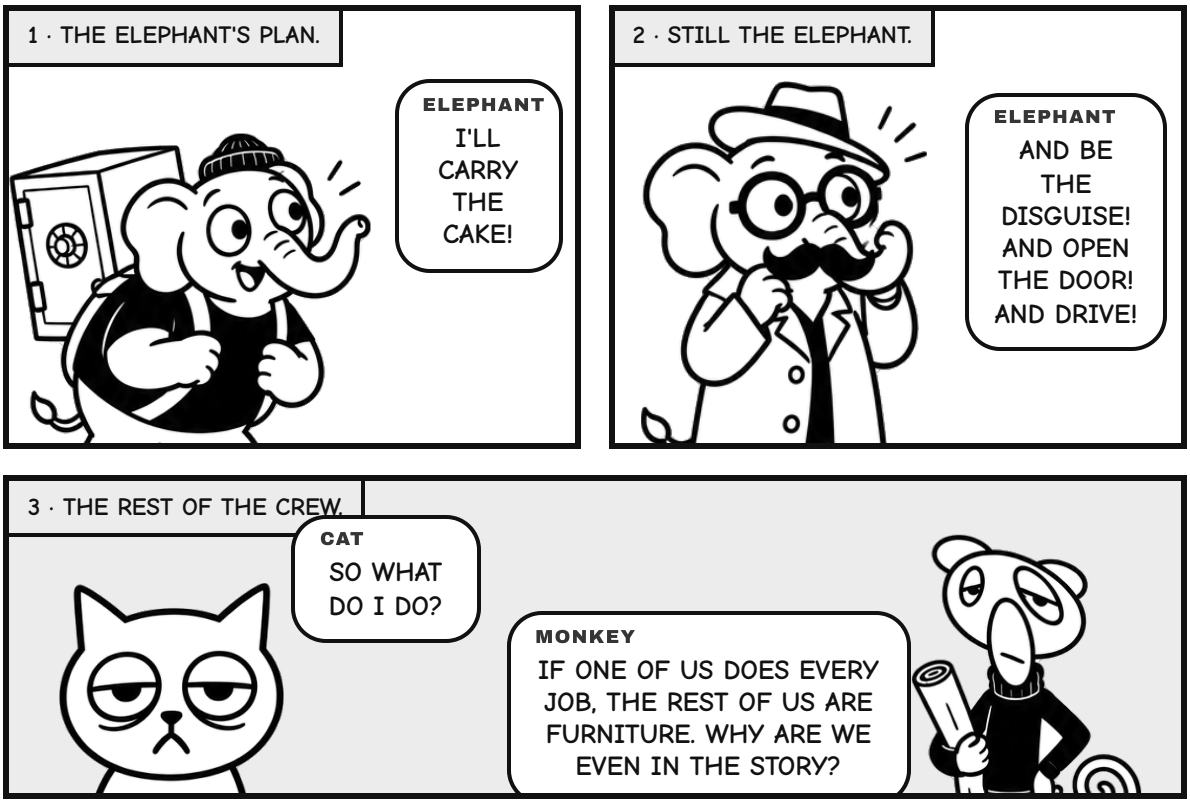
Everyone Has a Job

THE IDEA

An **ensemble** is a story with a group of main characters instead of one hero: a crew, a team, a family. In a heist story the group is the **crew**, and each member has a role: the planner, the muscle, the inside person.

Give each person one job only they can do. If two people do the same job, one is extra; if one person does every job, the rest are scenery. Reach for this tool when people in a group scene just stand around.

The scene: it's the Hedgehog's birthday. He sits in the writers' room and notices everything. The Monkey, the Elephant and the Cat want to sneak a cake into the room while he's at lunch. Here's the plan the way the Elephant might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



ONE JOB EACH. ONLY THEY CAN DO IT.

Take anyone out, and the plan should fail. That's how you know they belong.

THE PICTURE · THE CREW, ONE JOB EACH



THE PLANNER · MONKEY
Knows the Hedgehog leaves for lunch at noon and is back at one.



THE MUSCLE · ELEPHANT
Carries a cake for twelve without a wobble.



THE INSIDE PERSON · CAT
Already sits in the room. Nobody looks twice at her.

How to read this picture: each card is one member of the crew and the one job only they can do. Cover any card with your hand. If the plan falls apart, that person belongs. If it wouldn't, they don't have a job yet.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. OFFICE HALLWAY - 12:50 P.M.

ELEPHANT I'll carry it. And get the door. And keep watch!

MONKEY What do I do?

ELEPHANT Help!

CAT And me?

ELEPHANT Also help!

All three tiptoe in together.

What's wrong: the Elephant does every job, so the Monkey and the Cat just stand there. Cut them and nothing changes.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. OFFICE HALLWAY - 12:50 P.M.

MONKEY He's back at one. Ten minutes.

The Elephant lifts a cake for twelve. Not a wobble.

The writers' room door opens a crack. The Cat, already inside.

CAT Clear.

They slip in. The door clicks shut at 12:59.

What changed: three people, three jobs: the plan, the lifting, the way in. Take any one away and the cake never gets there.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? LIST THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE GROUP. NEXT TO EACH NAME, WRITE THE ONE JOB ONLY THAT PERSON CAN DO.

For the mentor: Two names on one job: merge them, or give one a new job. A name with no job: cut that person, or find what only they can do, and give them a moment to do it.

TOOL CARD · PEOPLE

One job each. Only they can do it. DRILL

11

WHAT CAN ONLY THIS PERSON DO?

Words on the Page

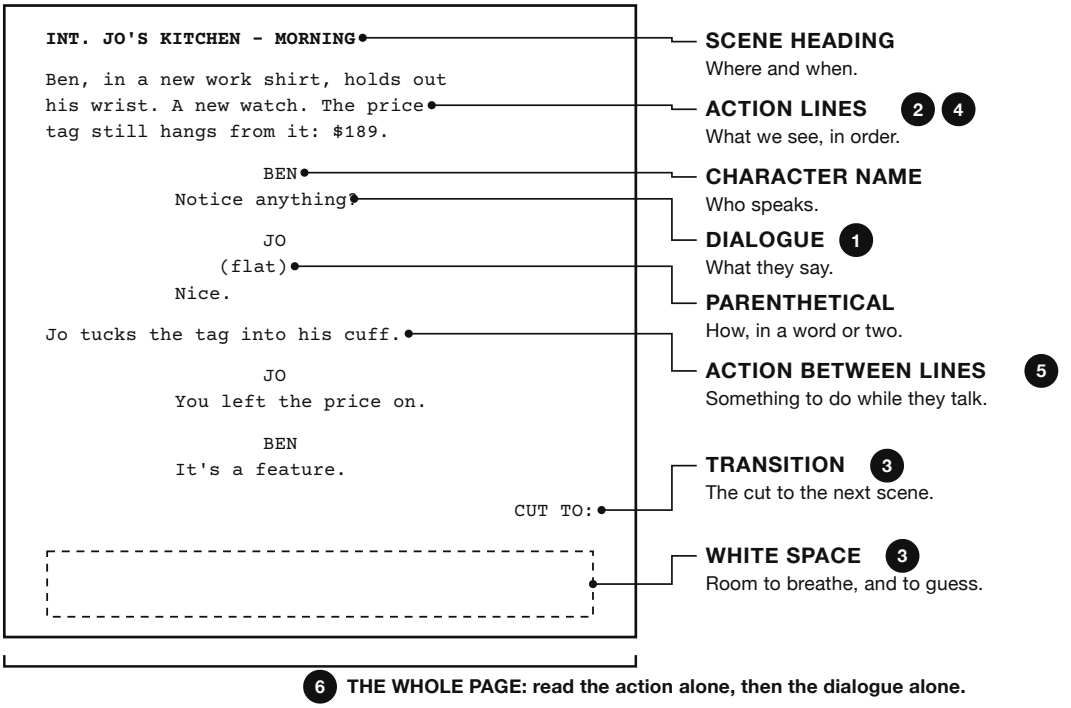
What the reader sees, hears and fills in.

WHAT A SCRIPT PAGE IS

A **script** (or **screenplay**) is a plan for a movie or a show, written down before anyone films it. Long before an audience sees your story, a **reader** sees your page: a producer, an actor, a friend, a mentor. The page is all they get.

A script page holds only two things: what we will **see** and what we will **hear**. Everything else, the reader fills in. The tools in this drawer help you choose those words, and leave the right things out.

THE MAP · ONE SCRIPT PAGE, TAKEN APART



6 **THE WHOLE PAGE: read the action alone, then the dialogue alone.**

How to read this map: this is one page of Ben and Jo, the morning after his first payday. He bought a watch, and he forgot the price tag. Each label names one part of a script page. The numbered tags are the tools in this drawer; each points at the part of the page it works on.

FULL and **QUICK** tools work the same way in every drawer. How to Read This Book, at the front, shows the parts of each.

IN THIS DRAWER

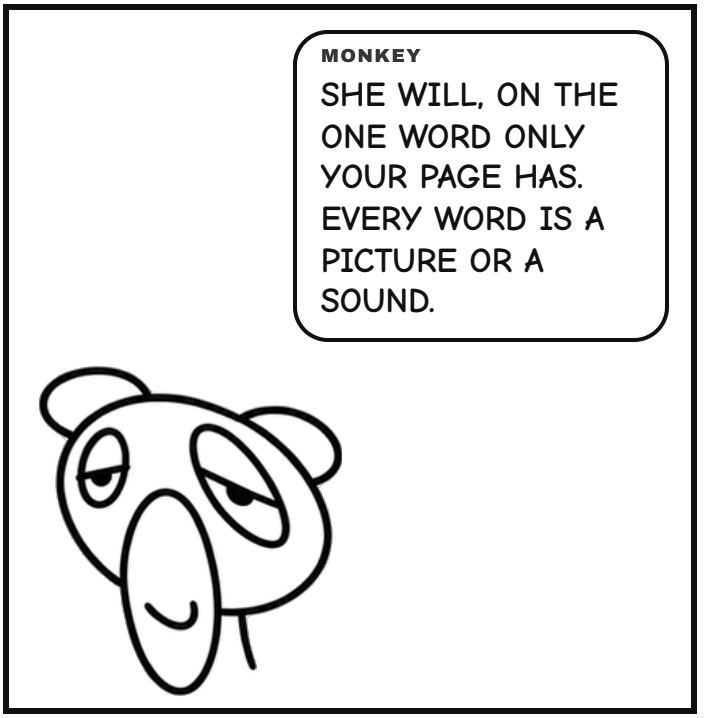
SIX TOOLS.

1 **Dialogue: Said and Meant**	Every line has two layers: what a person says, and what they mean. Hide the feeling; show the evidence.	FULL
2 **Specifics**	One right detail beats ten: the thing only this person would own, do or say.	FULL
3 **Leave It in the Gutter**	Know everything, show only the pieces we need, and skip the in-between. The reader enjoys supplying the missing step.	QUICK
4 **Cause Before Effect**	Show what happens first and the reaction second, so we see the thing before anyone names the feeling.	QUICK
5 **Break Up the Talking Heads**	When two people talk a while, vary the picture: what they do, where they move, what they handle.	QUICK
6 **Read Only the Pictures**	Read just the action lines, then just the dialogue. Find what each carries, then check that the two work together.	QUICK

WHERE TO START

With **Dialogue: Said and Meant**. Most of what a reader hears is dialogue, and it is where feelings get named out loud when they should be shown. Then read **Specifics**, which does the same job for what we see. Read the quick tools in any order. Save **Read Only the Pictures** for a page you think is finished: it's the check that catches what the others missed.





DRAWER CARD · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Write what we see and hear. Let the reader do the rest.

?

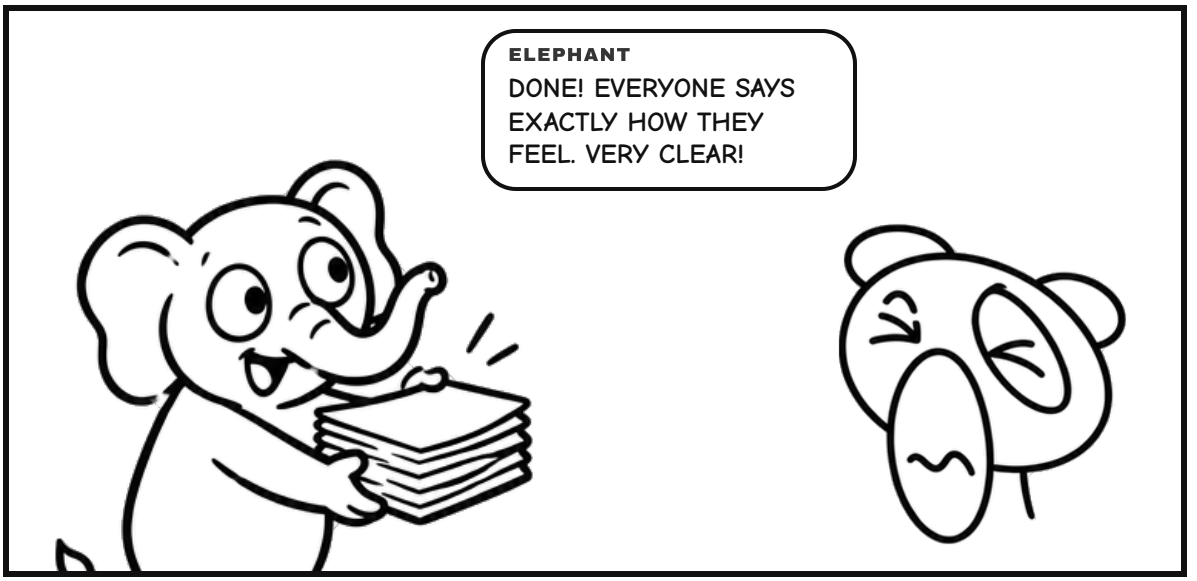
WHAT CAN A READER SEE AND HEAR ON YOUR PAGE?

Dialogue: Said and Meant

Ben and Jo (see Meet the Cast). Tonight is Jo's birthday, and Ben came hours late. The Gift That Trips Them, in the People drawer, showed him coming back later to say sorry. This is the night itself.

Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it, with Jo upset at Ben.

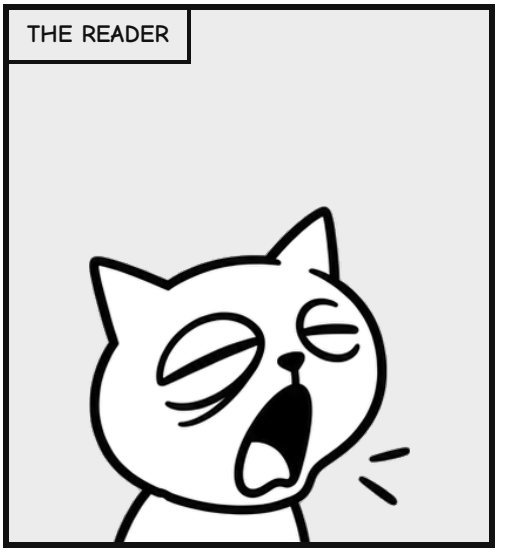
TEACHING EXAMPLE



JO
Honestly, Ben, I'm hurt. You missed my birthday.

BEN
I feel terrible. I've been so overwhelmed.

JO
I just want to feel like I matter.



EVERYONE SAYS HOW THEY FEEL. NOBODY SOUNDS LIKE A PERSON.

Real people rarely say exactly what they feel. They hint, dodge and change the subject, and we work out the rest. Here every feeling is said out loud, so there is nothing left for us to work out, and the Cat, our reader, yawns.



HERE IS THE SCENE REWRITTEN WITH THIS TOOL

The want (what we should feel): Jo's hurt, though she never names it. **The goals:** Jo's is for Ben to see what he missed. Ben's is for it all to be okay. **Reading the page:** script format works as in Know What You Want, at the front of the book. The notes on the right are ours: each **MEANT** tag says what a line really means underneath. That hidden meaning is called **subtext**.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

THE SET-UP
One of everything. She ate alone.

Jo washes one plate. One fork. One glass. Ben in the doorway.

BEN
Hey. Traffic was insane.

MEANT
It isn't.

JO
It's fine.

She dries the one plate. Puts it away.

BEN
You eat?

MEANT
Alone.

JO
Mm-hm.

On the counter: one slice of cake. One candle, burned down.

THE EVIDENCE
What we see, so we understand.

BEN
Did I miss it?

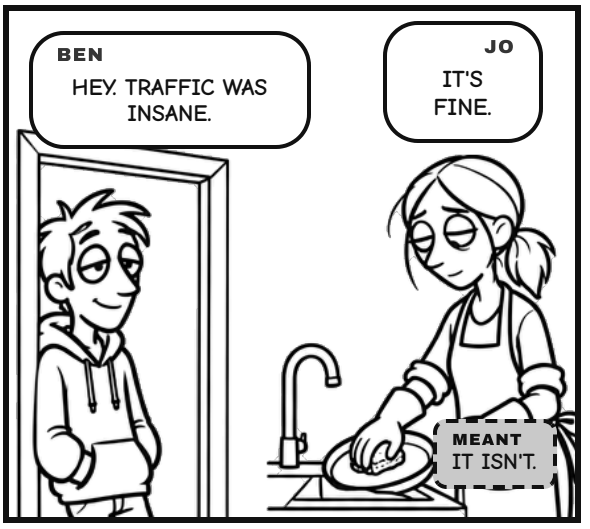
MEANT
Tell me I didn't.

JO
You didn't miss anything.

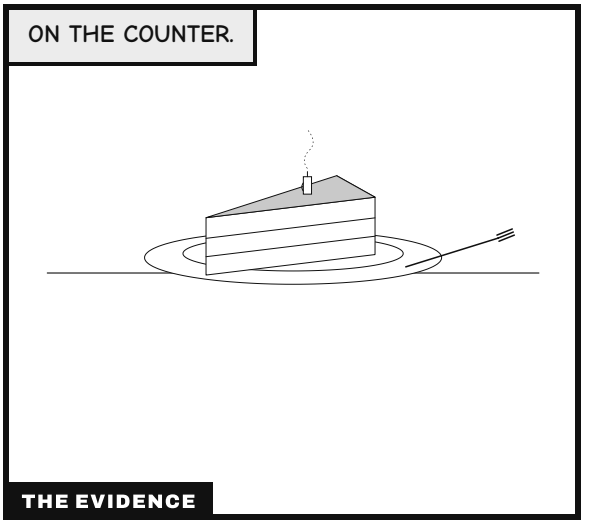
MEANT
There was nothing to miss. You weren't here.

She turns back to the sink.

The same scene, drawn. Ben came hours late, and he has just walked in. The grey **MEANT** boxes are not spoken. They show what each line means underneath.





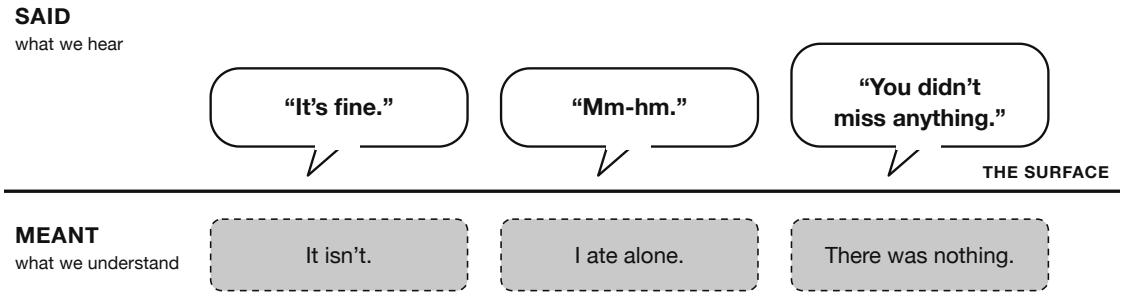








EVERY LINE HAS TWO LAYERS.



What a character **says** is the surface. What they **mean** underneath is the subtext. Good dialogue lets us hear one and feel the other.



MONKEY
A LINE THAT DOES NO JOB IS A NON-LINE. CUT IT.

Every line should do at least one job: move the **story** forward, show **who** the character is, or carry the **theme** (what the story is really about).

FOUR NON-LINES TO WATCH FOR

THE EMPTY ECHO

`"Late?" "Late."`

Only says back what we just heard. An echo that **changes** the meaning is a weapon. Keep that kind.

FILLER

`"Well, um, so, anyway..."`

Fills the air and goes nowhere.

THE OBVIOUS

`"You're doing the dishes."`

Says what we can already see.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

`"I'm hurt."`

Names the feeling, so there's nothing left to feel. Say it plainly only when saying it **costs** the speaker something.

WHEN SAYING IT PLAINLY WORKS

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Leia tells Han plainly that she loves him, and his two-word answer works because she said it. (Its Room Talk, with Competent Isn't Alive, is at the back of the book 302.) Saying it plainly works when it **costs** the speaker. Jo does it in the close call, on the next spread.

BUT IT HAS TO LAND

Hide the feeling. Show the evidence.

Hiding the feeling only works if the reader can still work it out. If we can't tell what Jo feels, the subtext failed. So give us something to see. Here, the cake does the telling.



SPOT THE MISS: A CLOSE CALL.

Later the same night. Ben has stayed to dry the dishes, and he finally asks what he came to ask. Here are two good drafts of Jo's answer. Both are well written. They do different things.

The want: we should feel, for once, the full price of tonight, and wonder whether Ben can take it. **Jo's goal:** for Ben to know exactly what tonight cost her. Read both, then answer the questions below.

DRAFT A

BEN
Are we okay?

Jo hands him the dish towel.

JO
Plates go on the left.

He dries. She washes. Neither of them says anything else.

DRAFT B

BEN
Are we okay?

Jo turns off the tap. Grips the edge of the sink.

JO
I waited till eleven. Then I lit the candle myself.

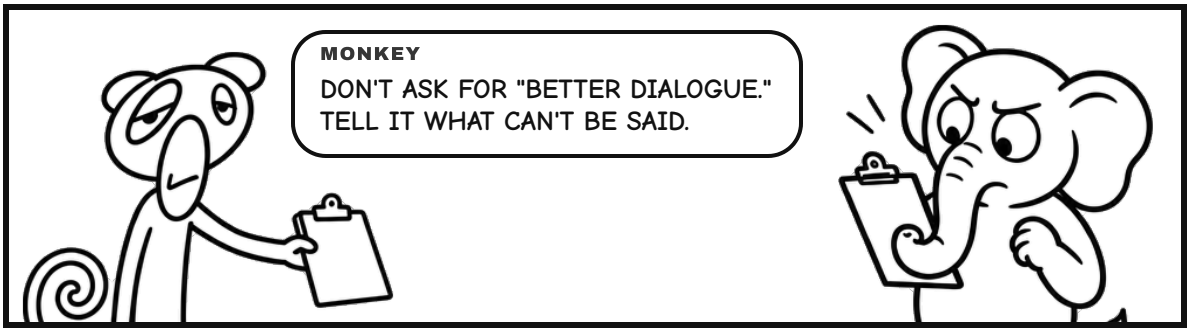
She can't look at him.

JO
Dry. Plates on the left.

1. WHICH ONE SERVES THE WANT THIS SCENE STATES?
2. WHAT DOES EACH ONE GIVE UP?
3. WOULD YOU KEEP EITHER ONE, AND WHY?



Answers. 1: Draft B. We feel the full price only when Jo says it and Ben has to hear it. In Draft A he never has to hear it: he can dry plates and pretend. 2: Draft A gives up the plain truth. It keeps Jo's pride, but Ben gets off easy. Draft B gives up Jo's guard, and some of our guessing. It still isn't an announcement, because saying it costs her: she has to admit she sat alone, and we see the price in the tap, the grip, the eyes she keeps away and the retreat to plates. 3: Both are keepers. Keep A if the want were "we should feel Jo let him stay without letting him off the hook." Keep B for this want. The want decides, not the rule.



THE BRIEF AI

THE BIRTHDAY

The **brief** (your short instructions to the AI, or to yourself; see Know What You Want) for the birthday scene. The left side of each row says what to fill in.

THE WANT What should the audience feel?	Jo's hurt, though she never says it.
GOAL What is she after?	For Ben to see what he missed.
WHAT SHE FEELS The feeling under the scene.	He missed it, and she spent it alone.
WHAT SHE SAYS The words out loud.	Anything else.
THE EVIDENCE Something we can see that shows the feeling.	One slice of cake. One candle, burned down.
PROTECT Lines that must stay as written.	"It's fine." "You didn't miss anything."
FORBID Words nobody may say or do.	~~hurt~~ · ~~feel~~ · ~~sorry~~ · ~~birthday~~ · ~~hug~~

NAME THE FEELING IN THE BRIEF. BAN IT ON THE PAGE.

For this scene. Another scene may need someone to say it plainly.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

Left alone, the Elephant, like many AI writing tools, can make characters explain exactly how they feel, the way the teaching draft on this tool's first page does. So ask it to write the scene **and, under each line, write what that line means**. Then cover the meanings and read only the lines. If you can still tell what everyone feels, keep it. If you can't, ask for one thing we can see.



TRY IT BY HAND

Say it without saying it.

Each grey box below says what a character **means**. On the line next to it, write something they could **say** out loud that means the same thing, without using any of the words in the box. For example, Jo means "I love you," so she says, "Last slice is yours." Then, at the bottom, write one thing we could see in the scene that shows the feeling.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: NON-LINE JAIL

SAID **MEANT**

_____ **MEANT** I LOVE YOU.

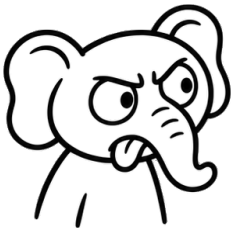
_____ **MEANT** I'M SCARED.

_____ **MEANT** GET OUT.

_____ **MEANT** I KNOW WHAT YOU DID.

THE EVIDENCE · ONE THING WE CAN SEE

_____

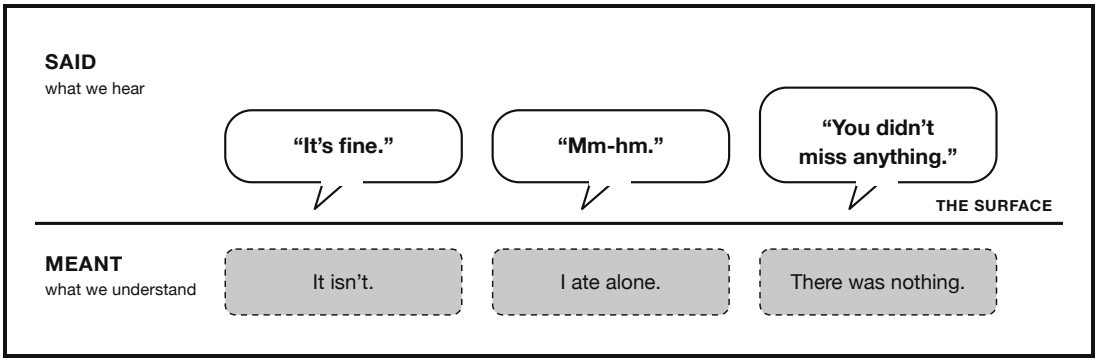


PENCIL FIRST. THE ELEPHANT CAN TRY IT AFTER YOU DO.

TOOL CARD · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Dialogue: Said and Meant

EVERY LINE HAS TWO LAYERS: WHAT'S SAID AND WHAT'S MEANT



HIDE THE FEELING. SHOW THE EVIDENCE. DRILL

The tool: people rarely say exactly what they feel. Write what they say, give us something to see, and let the reader work out what they mean. Ask these questions of any scene you write:

1. WHAT DOES EACH LINE MEAN THAT IT DOESN'T SAY OUT LOUD?
2. IS ANY LINE A NON-LINE: AN EMPTY ECHO, FILLER, THE OBVIOUS OR AN ANNOUNCEMENT?
3. WHAT CAN WE SEE THAT SHOWS THE FEELING?
4. READ ONLY THE DIALOGUE. CAN YOU STILL TELL WHAT EVERYONE FEELS?

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: NON-LINE JAIL
ROOM TALK AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: ONE LINE, TWO MEANINGS **(THE PRINCESS BRIDE)** 284

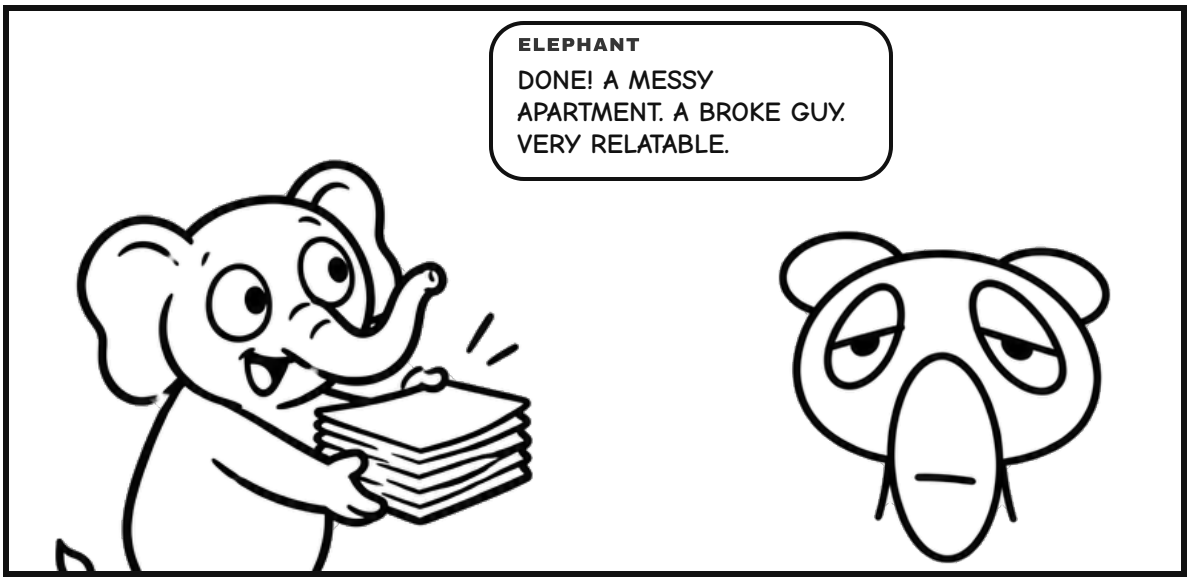


Specifics

Ben (see Meet the Cast), broke as usual, the morning after Jo's birthday.

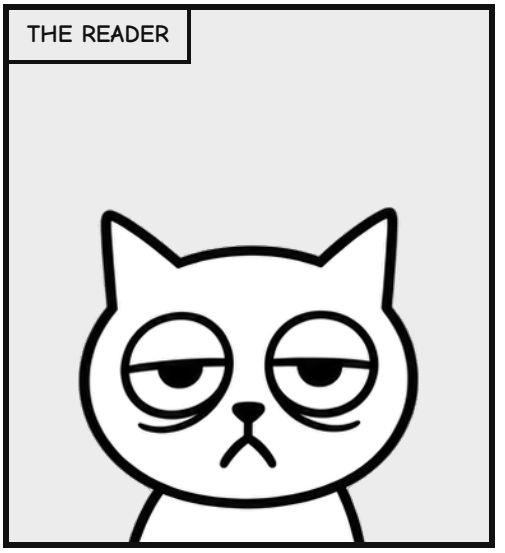
Here's a short scene that shows Ben is broke, the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. The top line of a script says where and when; the next line says what we see. "(30s)" after a name gives an age.

TEACHING EXAMPLE




```
INT. APARTMENT - MORNING

A messy apartment. BEN (30s) is broke.
He opens the fridge. It's almost
empty.
```



YOU'VE SEEN THIS FRIDGE A THOUSAND TIMES.

Nothing in it is wrong. It's just **general**: it could be anybody's apartment, so the Cat, our reader, has nothing to look at. This tool is about finding the detail that could only belong to this one person.



MONKEY
HAECCEITY. BIG WORD, SMALL IDEA. WATCH WHAT ONE FRIDGE CAN SAY.

Haecceity (say hek-SEE-it-ee) means the **thisness** of a thing: what makes it this one and no other. In a story, it's the detail that could only belong to this person. We'll just call it **specifics**.

HERE IS THE SCENE WRITTEN WITH THIS TOOL
Remember Jo's birthday, in Dialogue a few pages back, when Ben came hours late? Now it's morning at Ben's small studio apartment, and he opens his fridge. No one speaks. The details tell the story. The tags on the right are ours, not part of the script: each one names the job a detail is doing.

INT. BEN'S STUDIO APARTMENT - MORNING

Ben opens the fridge.

BELIEVE IT
Nobody says "broke." We see it.

Inside: a jar of mustard. One lemon, gone soft. Three soy sauce packets.

Taped inside the door, where only he would see them: two parking tickets. Seventy-three dollars each.

KNOW HIM
He doesn't throw debts away. He hides them in the cold.

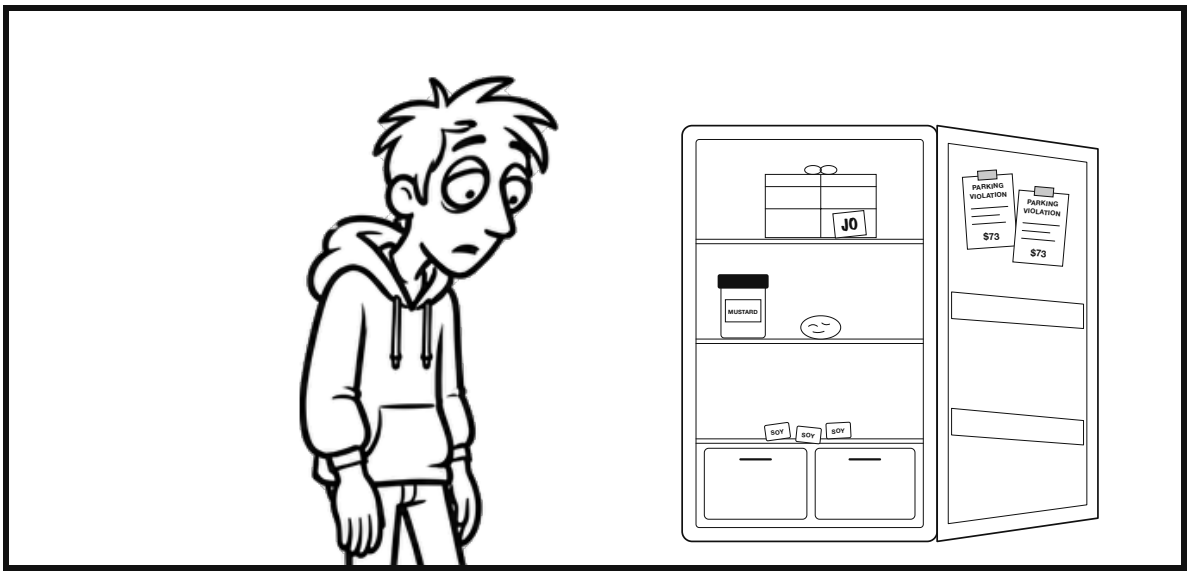
On the top shelf, alone, a bakery box tied with string. A sticky note on the lid: JO.

WANT MORE
He bought the cake. Why is it still here?

He looks at it a long time. Closes the fridge.

ONE EACH
Three details. Three jobs. Nothing else.

The same scene, drawn. Morning: Ben opens the fridge. Each close-up below is one detail doing one job; the black tag names the job.

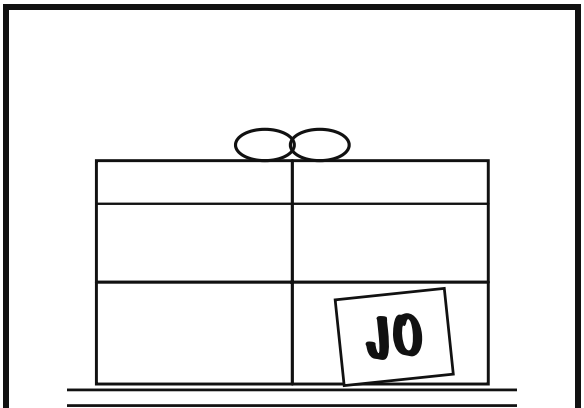




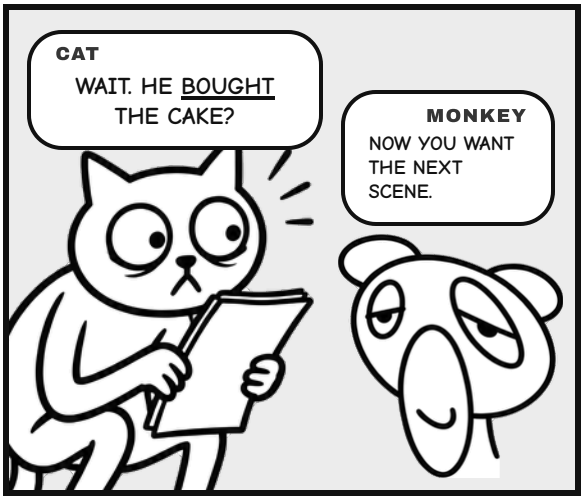
1 · BELIEVE IT HE'S BROKE.



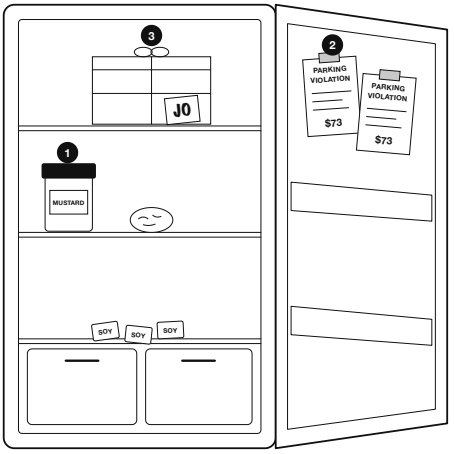
2 · KNOW HIM HE HIDES HIS DEBTS.



3 · WANT MORE WHY IS IT HERE?



A DETAIL CAN DO THREE JOBS.



Here, three details each do one job. A great one can do all three. Most do one, and that's fine.

1 BELIEVE IT

It makes the world feel real, so we trust the story. The soft lemon says "broke" without a word.

2 KNOW THEM

It shows who this person is. Only Ben would tape his tickets where only he sees them.

3 WANT MORE

It makes us ask a question, so we keep reading. Why is Jo's cake still here?



MONKEY

THE SWAP TEST. COULD IT SIT IN ANYONE'S FRIDGE? THEN IT'S FURNITURE.

Picture the detail in someone else's home. If it fits there just as well, it tells us nothing about this person. Swap it for something only they would have.

MORE IS NOT BETTER

One right detail beats ten.

A **beat** is one small moment in a scene, like Ben opening the fridge. Give each beat one detail that does a job. A pile of details is just a list, and the reader skims it.



SPOT THE MISS: A CLOSE CALL.

Two good drafts of the same moment: Ben opens his fridge. Each ends on one strong, specific detail, and the two details do different jobs. One says **know him**; the other says **want more**.

The want: we should want the next scene. This is the last beat before Ben goes to Jo's to say sorry (The Gift That Trips Them **106**). **Ben's goal:** something to eat, and not to think about last night. Which detail does the want need?

DRAFT A

Ben opens the fridge. A jar of mustard. One lemon, gone soft.

Taped inside the door, where only he would see them: two parking tickets. He peels one loose, reads the amount, and tapes it back. Neatly.

DRAFT B

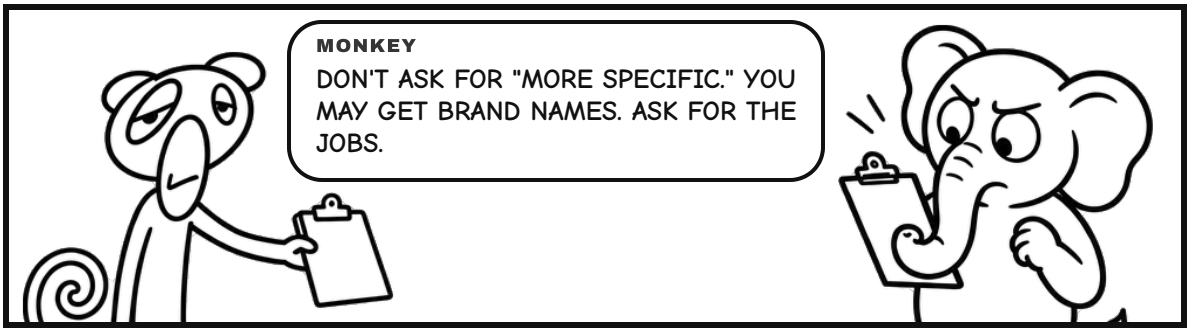
Ben opens the fridge. A jar of mustard. One lemon, gone soft.

On the top shelf, alone, a bakery box tied with string. A sticky note: JO. He takes it out. Puts it back. Takes it out again.

1. WHICH ONE SERVES THE WANT THIS SCENE STATES?
2. WHAT DOES EACH ONE GIVE UP?
3. WOULD YOU KEEP EITHER ONE, AND WHY?



Answers. 1: Draft B. The box marked JO asks a question (will he take it to her?), and the scene's job is to make us want the next one. 2: Draft A gives up the pull forward: we learn who Ben is, but nothing tells us where he's going. Draft B gives up the tickets, the best "know him" detail we have: a man who reads his debts, then neatly puts them back. 3: Both are keepers. Use A in a scene where the want is that we should know who Ben is, say before he asks Jo for $500. Use B here. Same fridge, different job: the scene decides which detail wins.



THE BRIEF AI

BEN'S FRIDGE

The **brief** is your short set of instructions, the same form as in every full tool. Here it asks for one detail per job.

THE WANT What should the audience feel or wonder?	We should know Ben is broke, know who he is, and want the next scene.
GOAL What is he after?	Ben: breakfast, without thinking about Jo's birthday.
BELIEVE IT Makes the world feel real.	One detail that proves he's broke.
KNOW HIM Shows who he is.	One detail only Ben would have.
WANT MORE Makes us ask a question.	One detail that asks a question.
LIMIT How many, and how long.	Three details. One sentence each.
FORBID What the draft may not use.	~~"messy"~~ · ~~"broke"~~ · ~~brand names that mean nothing~~ · ~~inventories~~

NAME THE JOB. COUNT THE DETAILS.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

Ask an AI writing tool (in this book, the Elephant) to "be more specific" and it can pile on brand names and lists: a shopping list, not a detail. Instead, ask for one detail per job, and ask it why each one fits Ben. When a detail is a fact, like how a job works or what a place is like, **check it with a real person or a trusted source**. The Elephant remembers everything, and not all of it happened: it can state a made-up fact with total confidence.



TRY IT BY HAND

Open their fridge.

Pick a character from your own story and imagine opening their fridge. Write one detail for each job: one that makes their world feel real (**believe it**), one that shows who they are (**know them**), and one that makes us ask a question (**want more**). Then run the swap test on each detail: could it be in anyone's fridge? Circle yes or no.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: OPEN THE FRIDGE

WHO _____

1 · BELIEVE IT _____

2 · KNOW THEM _____

3 · WANT MORE _____

THE SWAP TEST · COULD IT BE IN ANYONE'S FRIDGE?

1 · YES / NO	2 · YES / NO	3 · YES / NO

Circled yes? That detail could belong to anyone. Replace it with something only this person would have.



THEN OPEN SOMETHING ELSE OF THEIRS: A GLOVE BOX, A COAT POCKET, THE BATHROOM CABINET. DON'T STOP AT THE FRIDGE.

TOOL CARD · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Specifics

HAECCEITY: THE THISNESS OF A THING, THE DETAIL THAT COULD ONLY BELONG TO THIS PERSON

1 BELIEVE IT	2 KNOW THEM	3 WANT MORE
The world is real.	Only this person.	It asks a question.
`One lemon, gone soft.`	`Tickets taped inside the door.`	`A box marked JO.`

ONE RIGHT DETAIL BEATS TEN. DRILL

The tool: skip the general and the obvious. Pick a few details that could only belong to this person, and make sure each one does a job. The best do all three jobs at once. Ask these questions of any scene you write:

1. WHAT JOB IS EACH DETAIL DOING: BELIEVE IT, KNOW THEM OR WANT MORE?
2. COULD THIS DETAIL BELONG TO ANYONE? THAT'S THE SWAP TEST.
3. WOULD SOMEONE WHO LIVES THIS LIFE SAY, "YES, THAT'S EXACTLY HOW IT IS"?

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: OPEN THE FRIDGE
ROOM TALK AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE SANDWICH UNDER THE HAT **(PADDINGTON)** 288



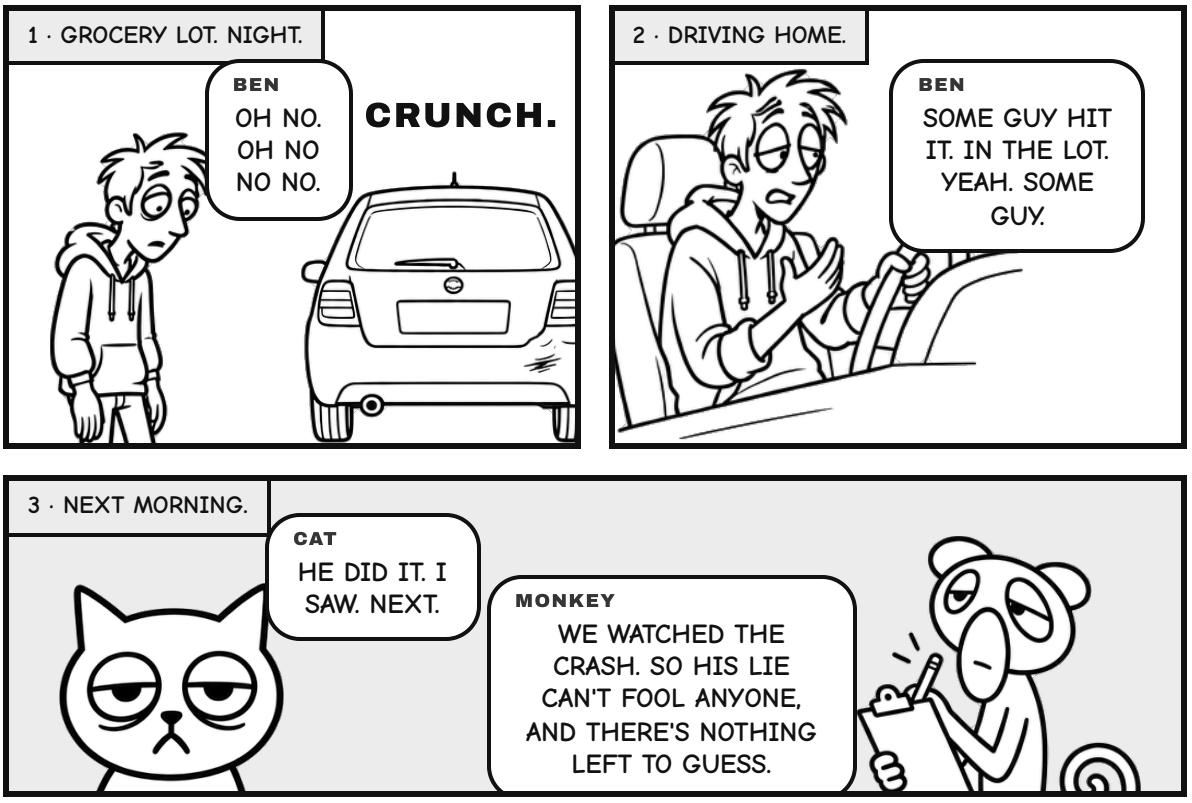
Leave It in the Gutter

THE IDEA

Know everything that happens in your story, but show only the pieces we need: the moment before, and the moment after. Skip the step in between. Readers like working out the missing step. It makes them partners, and a guess they made themselves feels truer than one you told them.

In comics, the white strip between two panels is called the **gutter**. Nothing is drawn there, yet that's where the reader imagines what happened. On a script page, the gutter is the cut between two moments. Reach for this tool when your page shows every step from A to C.

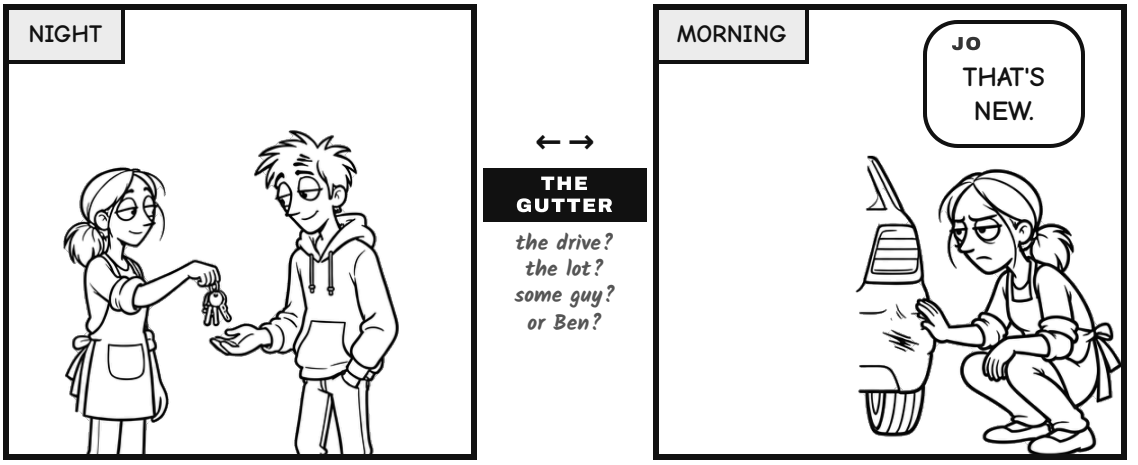
The scene: Ben borrowed his sister Jo's car overnight. In the morning it has a new dent, and Ben says some guy in the grocery lot did it. We want the reader to wonder if he's lying. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it: every step, in order. TEACHING EXAMPLE



SHOW BEFORE AND AFTER. LET US FIND THE MIDDLE.

The word **gutter** comes from Scott McCloud's book *Understanding Comics*. Look between any two panels in this book: you've been filling in gutters all along.

THE PICTURE · TWO PANELS, AND THE GUTTER BETWEEN THEM



How to read this picture: on the left, Jo hands Ben her keys. On the right, she finds the dent. Nothing is drawn in the white strip between them, but you just imagined the drive, the lot and the bump. You're also deciding whether "some guy" exists. That's the gutter at work.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

EXT. GROCERY LOT - NIGHT

Ben backs Jo's car out. Too fast. CRUNCH. A cart rail.

BEN Oh no.

EXT. JO'S DRIVEWAY - MORNING

Jo finds the dent.

BEN Some guy in the grocery lot.

What's wrong: every step is on the page, so the reader has nothing to do. Worse, we saw him hit the rail, so the lie is just a lie. The question "did he?" is gone.

WITH THE TOOL

EXT. JO'S DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Jo drops her keys into Ben's hand.

EXT. JO'S DRIVEWAY - MORNING

Jo crouches at her back bumper. A new dent.

JO That's new.

BEN That was there.

BEN Some guy in the grocery lot.

What changed: we cut from the keys to the dent. The drive happens in the gutter, and the reader builds it. Then Ben tells two stories, and the reader has to choose which to believe.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? FIND A PLACE WHERE THE PAGE SHOWS EVERY STEP, A, B AND C. COVER B. CAN YOU STILL TELL WHAT HAPPENED?

For the mentor: If you can, cut B: the reader will supply it and enjoy doing it. If you can't, don't put all of B back. Add one clue to A or C (a dent, a look, a line) and try again.

TOOL CARD · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Show the before and after. Skip the middle.

3

WHICH STEP CAN THE READER SUPPLY?

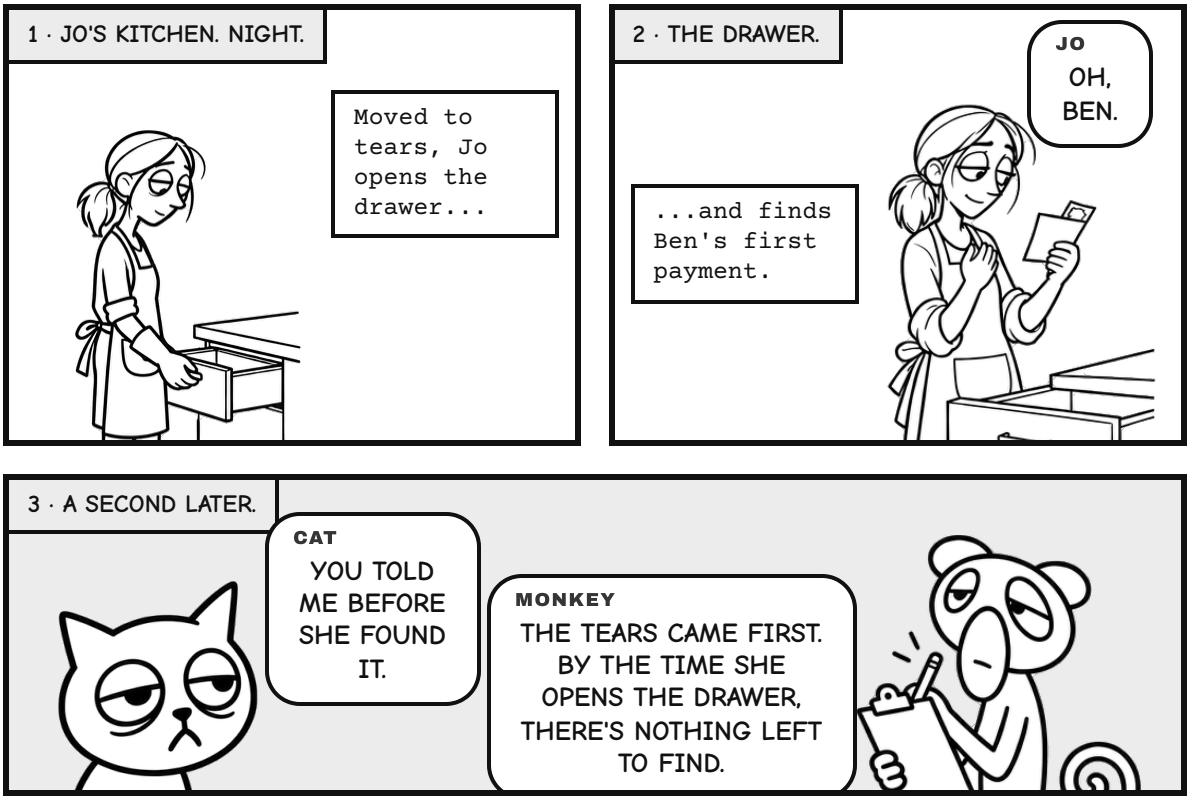
Cause Before Effect

THE IDEA

Write things in the order the audience will meet them. First the **cause**: the thing that happens. Then the **effect**: how someone reacts to it. "The door bangs. Jo jumps." Not "Startled, Jo jumps as the door bangs."

When the feeling comes first, the reader gets the reaction before the surprise, and the surprise is spent. Reach for this tool when an action line starts with a feeling ("Moved," "Angry," "Shocked") or hides the cause behind "as."

The scene: Without a word, Ben has started paying back the old IOUs Jo keeps in the drawer by the stove, under the takeout menus. This morning, while Jo was in the shower, he left his first payment there. Tonight Jo opens the drawer. Here's the moment the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE

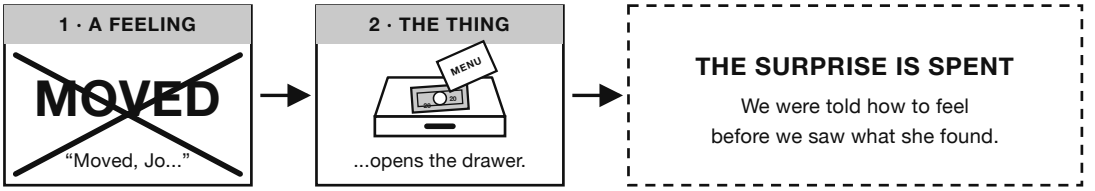


FIRST THE THING. THEN THE REACTION.

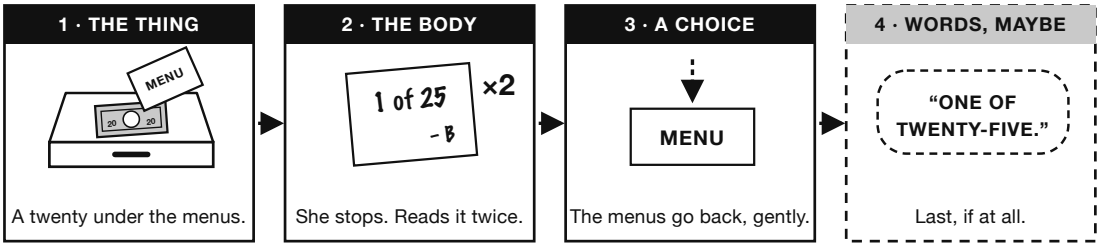
Writers call this pair a **motivation** and a **reaction**. The idea comes from the writing teacher Dwight V. Swain.

THE PICTURE · ONE MOMENT, IN TWO ORDERS

THE ELEPHANT'S ORDER: THE FEELING COMES FIRST



THE ORDER WE LIVE IT: THE THING COMES FIRST



How to read this picture: read each row left to right, in the order the reader meets things. Top row: the feeling arrives before its cause, so the surprise is spent. Bottom row: the twenty first, then Jo's body, then her choice, and words last, if at all.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Moved to tears, Jo finds a twenty as
she opens the drawer by the stove.
Touched, she reads Ben's note.
JO    Oh, Ben.
```

What's wrong: each feeling comes before its cause. We're told what to feel before we see what she found.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Jo opens the drawer by the stove.
Lifts the menus.
Under them: a twenty, folded around a
note.
She reads it twice. Puts the menus
back, gently.
```

What changed: we find the twenty when Jo does, then watch her. No feeling is named.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? FIND AN ACTION LINE WITH "AS" IN IT, OR ONE THAT STARTS WITH A FEELING. IN REAL LIFE, WHICH PART HAPPENS FIRST?

For the mentor: Rewrite it in that order: the thing, then the reaction. "The door bangs. Jo jumps." Then see if you still need the feeling word. Usually the reaction already shows it.

TOOL CARD · WORDS ON THE PAGE

First the thing. Then the reaction. DRILL

4 DOES ANYONE REACT BEFORE WE SEE WHY?

Break Up the Talking Heads

THE IDEA

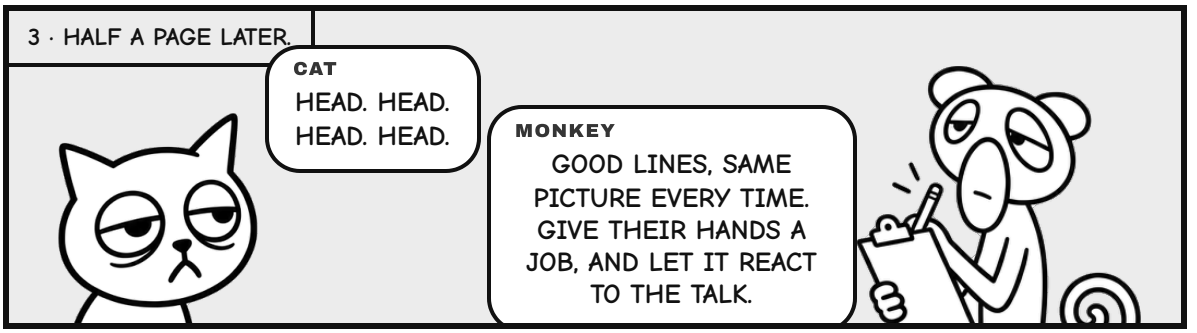
When two people talk for a while, a page can turn into **talking heads**: two faces trading lines, and nothing else to look at. The reader's eye glazes over. So vary the picture. Give them something to **do** with their hands, somewhere to **move**, something to **handle**.

The words can stay exactly the same. What changes is what we watch, and the doing often says what the words won't. Reach for this tool when half a page of dialogue goes by without an action line.

The scene: Ben has been sleeping at his sister Jo's place since he lost his apartment. Tonight, in her kitchen, he tells her he's found a small place of his own, and he needs her as a reference. He wants her yes. She wants him to land on his feet, and she'll miss him. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it.
TEACHING EXAMPLE







SAME TALK. CHANGE THE PICTURE.

Comic artists fight the same problem. Wally Wood's famous sheet "22 Panels That Always Work" was made for pages full of people talking.

THE PICTURE · ONE TALK, FOUR THINGS TO WATCH



1 · FACES
"Found a place." Fine, once.



2 · SOMETHING TO DO
She keeps washing. She doesn't look up.



3 · SOMETHING TO HANDLE
"A reference." The plate stops.



4 · SOMEWHERE TO MOVE
She dries her hands and turns to him.

How to read this picture: all four frames carry the same conversation. Only the first is a talking head. The others give the eye a task, a stop and a turn, and each one tells us something the lines don't: she keeps busy so she won't have to look at him, then stops when it matters.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Ben and Jo face each other.
BEN   Found a place. Small. Mine.
JO    Good. That's good.
BEN   They want a reference.
JO    From me?
BEN   You said I was the best you
      ever had.
```

What's wrong: five lines, one picture. Nothing moves, so the scene is only as interesting as the words, and we can't see how Jo takes the news.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Jo washes dishes. Ben dries, badly.
BEN   Found a place. Small. Mine.
She scrubs the same plate.
JO    Good. That's good.
BEN   They want a reference.
Her hands stop.
JO    From me?
BEN   You said I was the best you
      ever had.
She dries her hands. Turns to him.
```

What changed: the same five lines, but we watch her hands. The scrubbing says she'll miss him; the stop says the question landed.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? FIND THE LONGEST RUN OF DIALOGUE WITH NO ACTION LINE. WHAT COULD THESE TWO BE DOING, HOLDING OR MOVING TOWARD WHILE THEY TALK?

For the mentor: Pick a task that fits the place and the people. Then let it react to the talk: they stop, speed up, drop it or hand it over. Now the action lines carry part of the scene.

TOOL CARD · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Two people talking? Give their hands a job.

5

WHAT ARE THEY DOING WHILE THEY TALK?

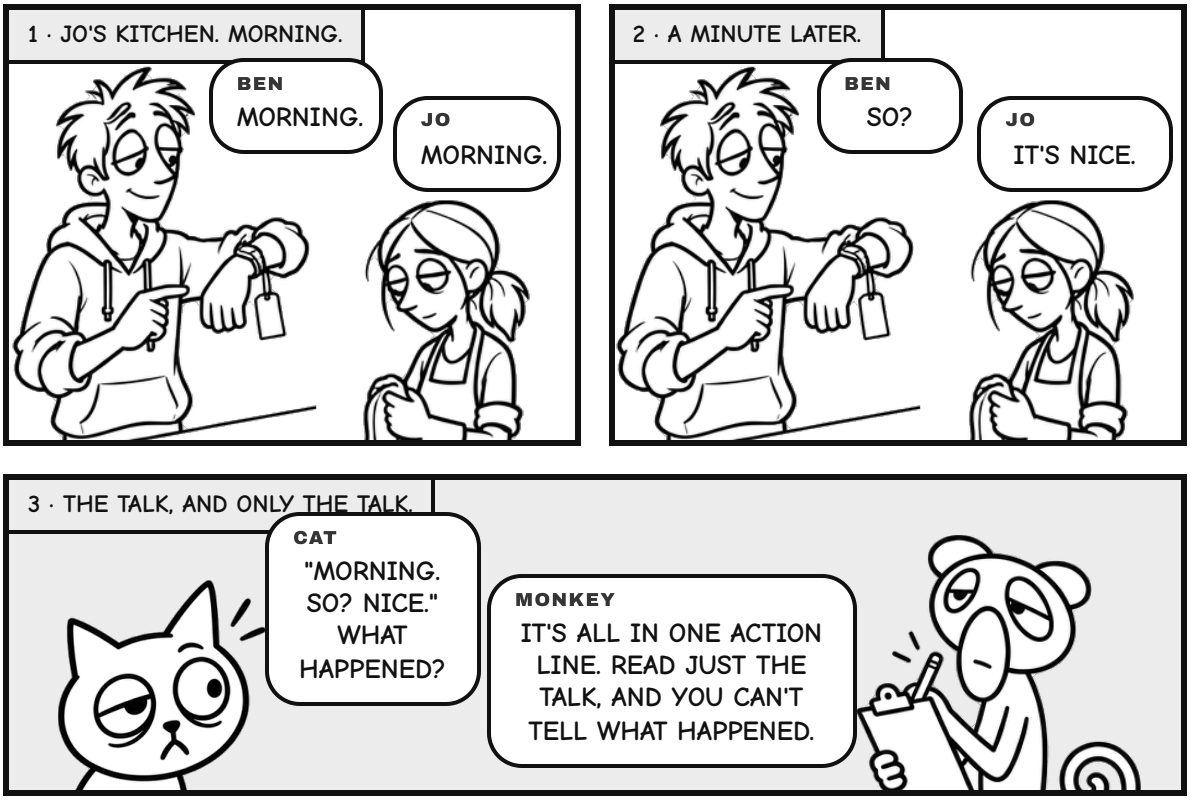
Read Only the Pictures

THE IDEA

Two quick reads for a page you think is done. First read only the **action lines** (the lines that say what we see) and skip every word anyone says. Then read only the **dialogue** and skip everything else. Read each layer by itself to find out what it carries. Then check that the two work together: if something that matters lives in only one layer, make sure that layer can carry it.

Real readers do this. Some busy readers skim the dialogue and little else; some skip to the action. So know what each layer carries before they do. Use this check last, on a finished page.

The scene: Ben got his first paycheck at his new job, and spent $189 of it on a watch. He showed it off last night. The next morning, at breakfast, Jo sees the price tag still on it. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it, and a reader who reads only the dialogue. TEACHING EXAMPLE



READ EACH LAYER ALONE. THEN READ THEM TOGETHER.

An **action line** is any line that isn't a name, a heading or dialogue: what the camera would see. Skip those, and you hear what a dialogue-only reader hears.

THE PICTURE · THE SAME PAGE, READ TWICE

1 · READ ONLY THE ACTION

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Ben, in a new work shirt, holds out his wrist. A new watch. The price tag still hangs from it: $189.



Jo tucks the tag into his cuff.



CUT TO:

2 · READ ONLY THE DIALOGUE

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING



BEN
Notice anything?

JO
(flat)
Nice.



JO
You left the price on.

BEN
It's a feature.

CUT TO:

How to read this picture: the fixed page from this drawer's map, read twice. On the left the dialogue is blacked out, and we still see a new watch, its price tag, and Jo hiding it. On the right the action is blacked out, and we still hear Ben fishing for a compliment, a price left on, and a joke.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Ben has spent his first paycheck on a watch. Jo thinks it's a waste.

BEN Morning.

JO Morning.

BEN So?

JO It's nice.

What's wrong: the story sits in one action line no camera can film, and the talk carries none of it. Read only the dialogue and you can't tell what happened.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Ben holds out his wrist. New watch, tag on: $189.

BEN Notice anything?

JO Nice.

Jo tucks the tag into his cuff.

JO You left the price on.

BEN It's a feature.

What changed: we see the tag and Jo hiding it. We hear Ben fishing and Jo's dry "You left the price on." The layers add up.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? LAY A STRIP OF PAPER OVER THE DIALOGUE AND READ ONLY THE ACTION. THEN COVER THE ACTION AND READ ONLY THE DIALOGUE. WHAT GOT LOST EACH TIME?

For the mentor: If something that matters lives in only one layer, make sure that layer can carry it: show it plainly enough, or give it to the other layer too. Or decide the silence is on purpose and keep it.

TOOL CARD · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Read each layer alone. Then check they work together.

6

WHAT LIVES IN ONLY ONE LAYER? CAN THAT LAYER CARRY IT?

Shape

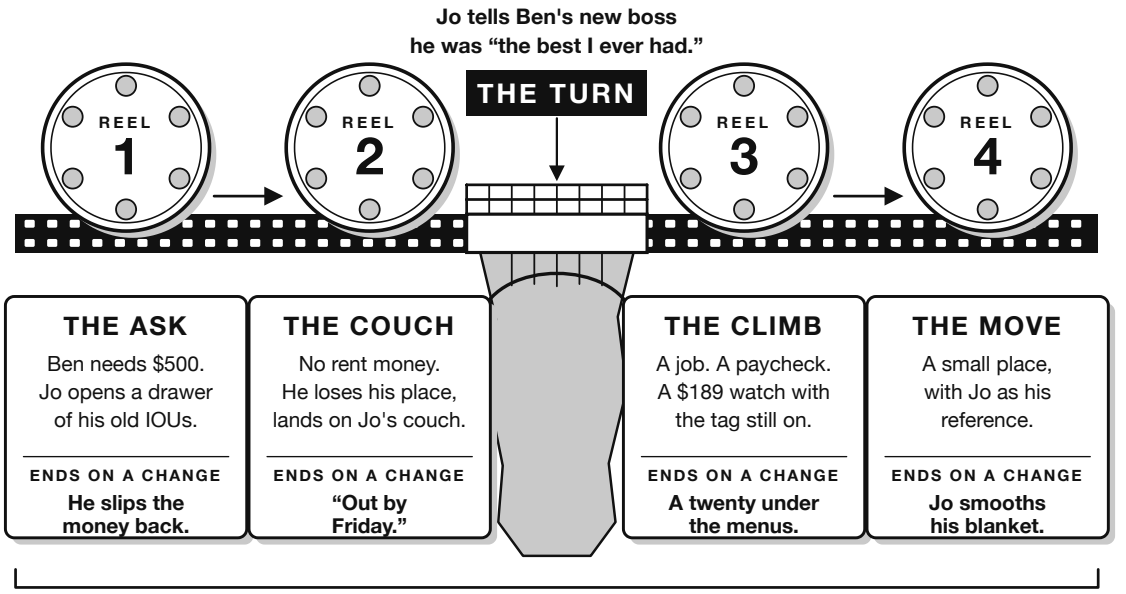
How scenes add up to a story.

WHAT A STORY'S SHAPE IS

A **scene** is one moment where someone wants something and something changes. A **story** is many scenes in a row. Its **shape** is how they add up: which part of the story we're in, what changes, and why we keep watching.

This book builds a story in four parts called **Reels**, named for the reels that movies used to come on. Each Reel is a small story of its own, and it ends on a change. In the middle, between Reel 2 and Reel 3, comes **the turn**: the moment the whole story changes direction.

THE MAP · BEN AND JO'S STORY, AS FOUR REELS



1 THE SPINE: one sentence holds a story, or one Reel.

Each Reel is a small story that ends on a change. The big turn comes in the middle.

How to read this map: this is Ben and Jo's story so far, left to right. Each film reel is one Reel; the card under it says what happens there and the change it ends on. The road is made of film, so it never stops: each change pulls us into the next Reel. The bridge in the middle is the turn. Before it, Ben keeps losing ground. After it, he climbs.

FULL and **QUICK**: the two kinds of tool are explained in How to read this book, at the front.

IN THIS DRAWER

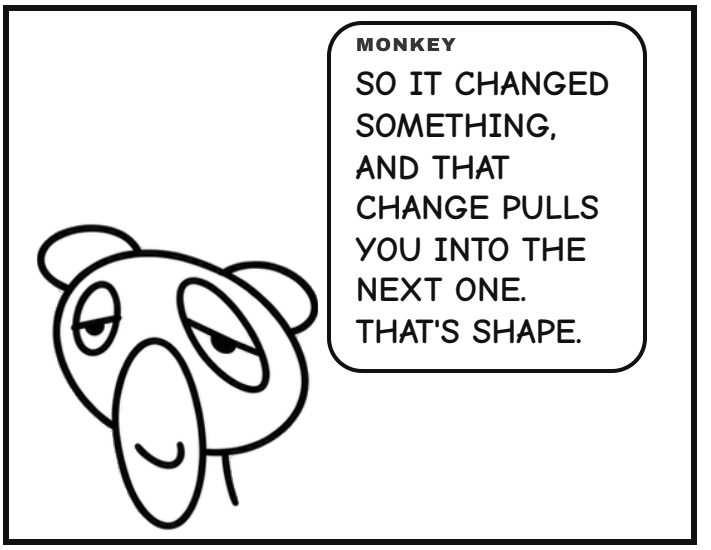
TEN TOOLS.

1	**The Spine, Not "And Then"**	Tell your story by who wants what, what's at stake and what's in the way. If you can't say it in a sentence, you don't know it yet.	FULL
2	**A Prop Isn't a Plant**	Anything that pays off later must show up earlier doing an ordinary job. Check what you already planted before inventing.	FULL
3	**Name the Verb**	Your story does one thing over and over. Name it in one word, show it by page two, and repeat it in new places.	QUICK
4	**Curious, Then Hunted**	Stories run on finding out or on something coming. The strongest start curious and flip to urgent.	QUICK
5	**Pay Rent on Every Mystery**	Keep the big question open by paying small answers along the way, and make every answer cost someone.	QUICK
6	**Show Us the Danger**	Let us see a danger the characters don't know about, and small talk turns into suspense.	QUICK
7	**Care Before Danger**	Let us like people before danger arrives. The calm is what makes the danger hurt.	QUICK
8	**Small Wrong Things**	Open on something already wrong. Small odd details that nobody mentions build unease faster than a big scare.	QUICK
9	**Give the Old Beat a New Job**	When we see a familiar moment coming, let it arrive with a new job, or flip it.	QUICK
10	**Make the Present Matter**	If someone tells a story about the past, the telling needs its own stakes, now.	QUICK

WHERE TO START

With **The Spine, Not "And Then"**. A spine is one sentence that holds a whole story, or one Reel (the tool builds one for Reel 1). Until you can say it, nothing else in this drawer has anything to hold on to. Then read **A Prop Isn't a Plant**, which keeps your ending honest. Read the quick tools in any order. **Name the Verb** and **Curious, Then Hunted** are good next steps for a story that feels like "stuff happens."





DRAWER CARD · SHAPE

Four Reels. Each ends on a change. The big turn comes in the middle.

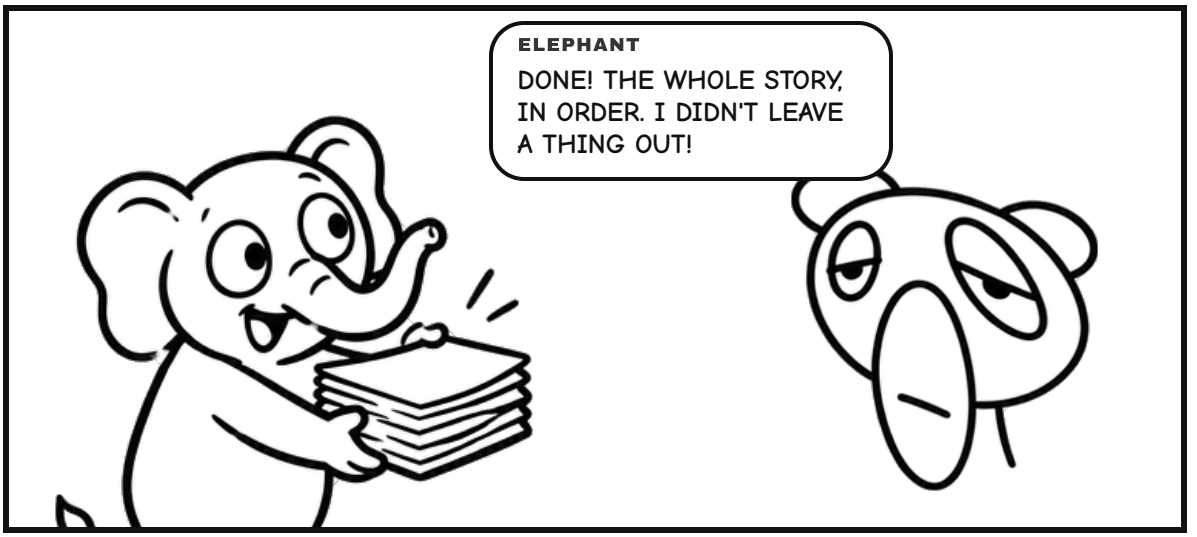
?

WHAT CHANGES AT THE END OF EACH REEL?

The Spine, Not "And Then"

Ben and **Jo** (see Meet the Cast). Other tools showed you one scene of theirs at a time. This tool is about a whole **story**: many scenes in a row, from the first problem to how it all comes out.

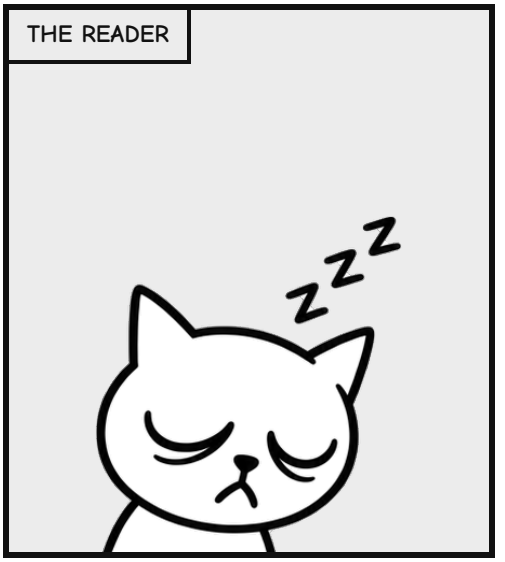
The story: Ben's rent is due in the morning, and he needs $500 from Jo. Below is the story the way the Elephant, our AI, might tell it in a few lines: a **summary** (the story told short).



THE ELEPHANT'S SUMMARY

TEACHING EXAMPLE

Ben's rent is due. **And then** he asks Jo for $500. **And then** Jo says, "Again?" **And then** he changes the bulb on her porch light. **And then** she opens a kitchen drawer. **And then** she gives him the money. **And then** he slips it back through her mail slot. **And then** he loses his apartment.



AND THEN. AND THEN. AND THEN. IT'S A PILE, NOT A STORY.

Every event in the summary is true. But **and then** only tells us what came next, never why. Nothing causes anything, so we have no reason to wonder what happens next. The Cat, our reader, fell asleep at the second "and then."



MONKEY

SAME EVENTS. ONE PER CARD. NOW EACH CARD HAS TO CAUSE THE NEXT ONE, OR GET IN ITS WAY.

THE STORY REBUILT WITH THIS TOOL · THIS PAGE IS AN OUTLINE, NOT A SCRIPT

An **outline** is a story's big moments in order, written before the script. Many writers put each moment on an **index card** (a small paper card) and pin the cards to a board, so they can move them around. The black words between them are the **links**: they say how one card leads to the next. The notes on the right are ours. A spine sentence can hold a whole story or one Reel. This one holds **Reel 1**: the ask, up to the cost that opens Reel 2.

THE SPINE

Ben needs $500 from Jo tonight to keep his apartment, but taking it means one more IOU in her drawer, and he can't face that.

SPINE
The story in one sentence: who wants what, what's at stake, and what's in the way.

1 Ben asks Jo for $500, tonight. His rent is due at nine in the morning.

START
Where Ben's goal begins.

BUT

BUT Something gets in the way.

2 Jo balks. He never paid her back.

SO

SO This happens because of the card above.

3 He promises: two weeks. Then he tries guilt.

BUT

4 Jo opens a kitchen drawer. Every IOU he ever wrote her. She kept them all.

THE HINGE
The card where this story changes direction. Ben sees how much he owes.

BUT

5 She gives him the money anyway.

CUT

He changes the bulb on her porch light.



No BUT or SO fits. It causes nothing, and nothing causes it.

SO

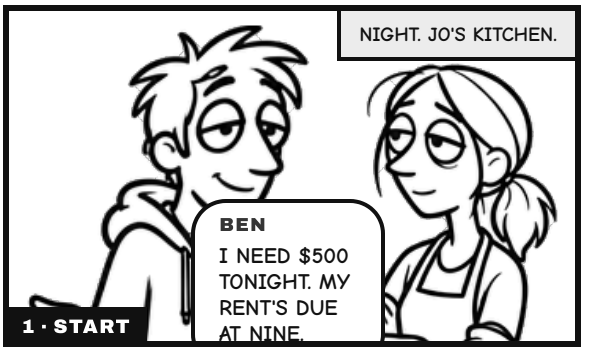
6 Ashamed, he slips it back through her mail slot.

SO

7 He loses his apartment.

THE END
It follows from the spine: his shame wins, so he gives the money back and loses the apartment.

The same seven cards, drawn. The tag in each panel's corner is the link that joins it to the panel before. There is no porch bulb: it was cut.



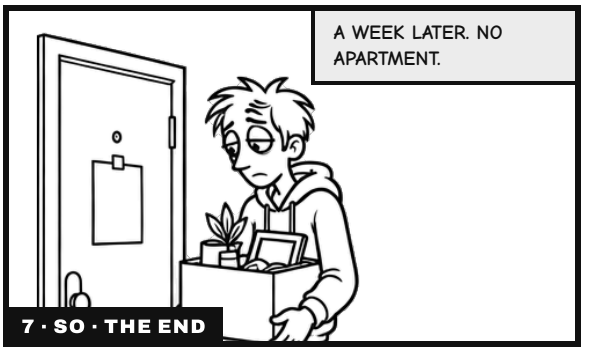


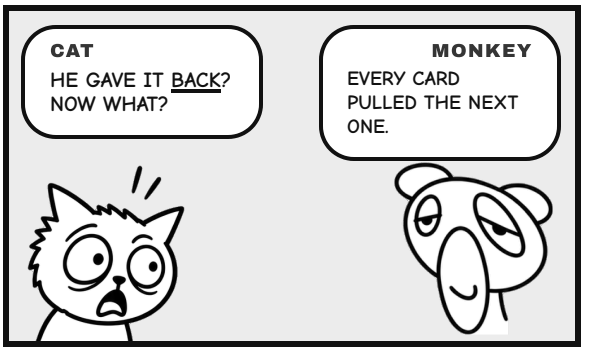






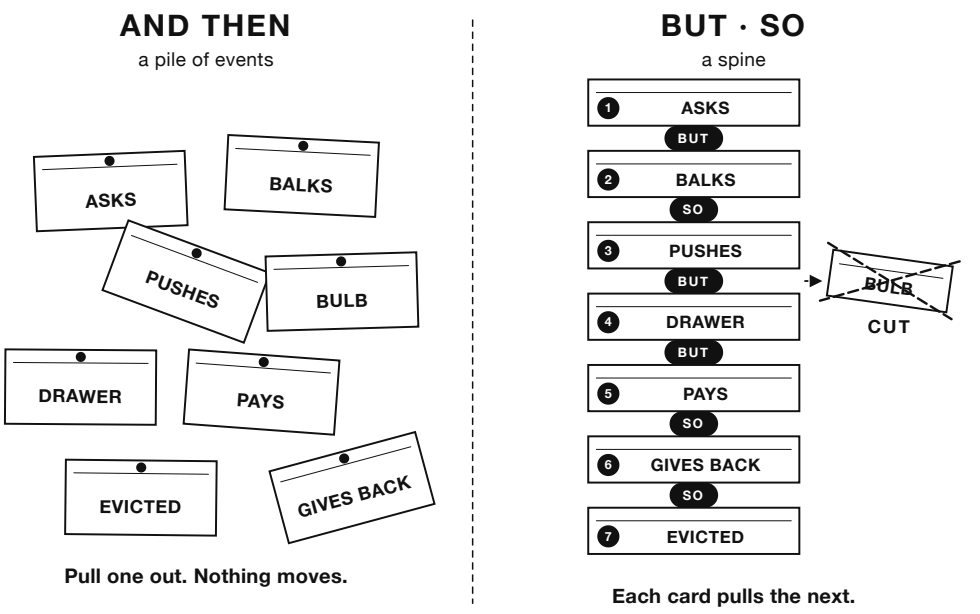




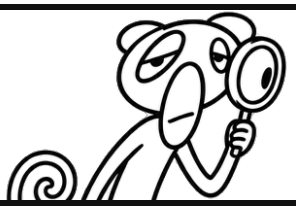


Why it holds together: each moment happens because of the one before it (SO), or runs into something that blocks it (BUT). The drawer shames Ben, so he gives the money back, so he loses his apartment. Cause, then effect, all the way down.

JOIN THEM WITH BUT AND SO. NEVER AND THEN. DRILL



How to read this picture: on the left, the Elephant's summary as a pile of cards. Take any card away and nothing else changes. On the right, the same cards linked into a spine. The porch bulb didn't fit anywhere, so it was cut.



MONKEY

CAN YOU SAY YOUR STORY IN ONE SENTENCE? IF YOU CAN'T, YOU DON'T KNOW IT YET.

THE ONE-SENTENCE TEST

Say the whole story in one sentence: who wants what, what's at stake, and what's in the way. That sentence is the story's **spine**: the line that holds everything else up.

THE LINK TEST

Read the moments in order. Between each pair, say BUT or SO out loud. **BUT** means something gets in the way. **SO** means this happened because of that. If only AND THEN fits, fix the link, or cut the moment.

WHERE THE RULE COMES FROM

The writers Trey Parker and Matt Stone teach it this way: between the beats of a story, "but" or "therefore," never "and then." (A **beat** is one moment of a story.) This book says SO because it is shorter than "therefore." Improv teachers use a cousin of the idea, Kenn Adams's "Story Spine."



SPOT THE MISS. SAY BUT OR SO BETWEEN THE CARDS.

Two outlines of the same story: Ben needs $500 from Jo before his rent is due. One was written with this tool. The other is the kind of outline an AI can write when you ask it to "outline the story": every sentence is clear and every event is in the story.

Read both. Between each pair of moments, try saying BUT or SO. Then answer the questions below.

DRAFT A

1. Ben needs $500 by morning, or he loses his apartment.
2. **BUT** Jo balks. He never paid her back.
3. **SO** he pushes: a promise, then guilt.
4. **BUT** she opens a drawer full of his old IOUs.
5. **BUT** she gives him the money anyway.
6. **SO**, ashamed, he slips it back through her mail slot.
7. **SO** he loses the apartment.

DRAFT B

1. Ben's rent is due at nine tomorrow morning.
2. After dinner, he drives to Jo's house.
3. Over coffee, they catch up about Mom.
4. Jo says no. She has lent him enough.
5. Before he leaves, he fixes her porch light.
6. At the door, she gives him the money.
7. He pays his rent and texts her a thank-you.

1. WHICH DRAFT CAN YOU SAY IN ONE SENTENCE: WHO WANTS WHAT, AND WHAT'S IN THE WAY?
2. IN DRAFT B, WHAT DOES THE PORCH LIGHT CAUSE?
3. WHY DOES BEN LOSE HIS APARTMENT IN DRAFT A? DOES HE LOSE IT IN DRAFT B?

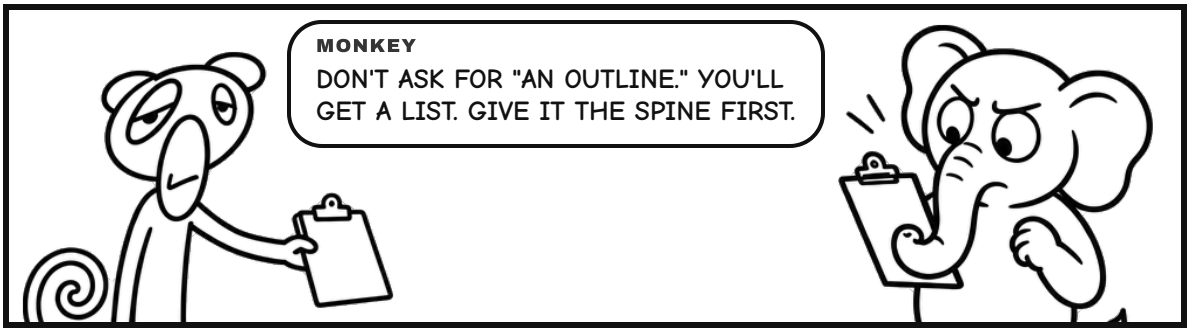
A



B



Answers. 1: Only Draft A. Ben needs $500 from Jo tonight to keep his apartment, but taking it means one more IOU in her drawer, and he can't face that. Draft B has a goal (rent money) and even a no, but the no leads nowhere: she gives him the money at the door, and nothing in the outline says why. 2: Nothing. Cut it and the story doesn't change, which is how you know it doesn't belong. The talk about Mom causes nothing either. Try BUT or SO between cards 4 and 6: nothing turns Jo's no into a yes, so only AND THEN fits. 3: In Draft A, the drawer shames him, so he gives the money back, so he can't pay the rent. Each card causes the next. In Draft B he just pays the rent. The events sit in order, but none of them causes the next, so nothing was ever at risk.



THE BRIEF AI

BEN, JO, THE $500

Your **brief**: the instructions you write before anyone drafts (explained in full in Know What You Want). Fill in the right side of each row.

THE WANT What should the audience feel, think or suspect?	Each card makes the next one worse, until his pride costs him his home.
WHO Whose story is it?	Ben, Jo's broke younger brother.
GOAL What is he trying to get, and by when?	$500 from Jo, tonight.
AT STAKE Why do they need it?	His apartment.
IN THE WAY What stands between them and it?	Taking it means one more IOU in her drawer, and he can't face that.
LINKS How must the moments join?	Every card after the first starts with BUT or SO.
FORBID What the outline must not use.	~~"and then"~~ · ~~moments that cause nothing~~ · ~~a no that turns to yes for no reason~~

WRITE THE SPINE YOURSELF. LET THE ELEPHANT FILL IN THE CARDS.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You type your spine sentence, then: *"Outline this as numbered cards. Every card after the first starts with BUT or SO."* **Back comes** a neat set of cards. Asked only to "outline the story," an AI tends to list events joined by "and then," and to keep every event, even ones that change nothing. **You** read each link out loud and check it yourself. The AI will happily write SO in front of a card that the card above didn't cause.



TRY IT BY HAND

Say it in one sentence.

Pick a story you are writing, or a movie you like. First fill in the four blanks of the spine sentence. Then write four big moments in order, one per card. Between each pair, circle BUT or SO. If only AND THEN fits, fix the link or cut the card.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE BACKBONE

THE SPINE SENTENCE

_____ NEEDS _____
WHO WHAT

TO _____,
WHAT'S AT STAKE

BUT _____.
WHAT'S IN THE WAY

CARD 1 · START _____

BUT SO ~~AND THEN~~

CARD 2 _____

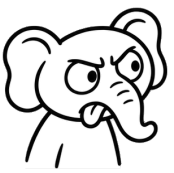
BUT SO ~~AND THEN~~

CARD 3 · HINGE _____

BUT SO ~~AND THEN~~

CARD 4 · END _____

Stuck on AND THEN? Ask what that moment causes. If the answer is "nothing," cut the card.

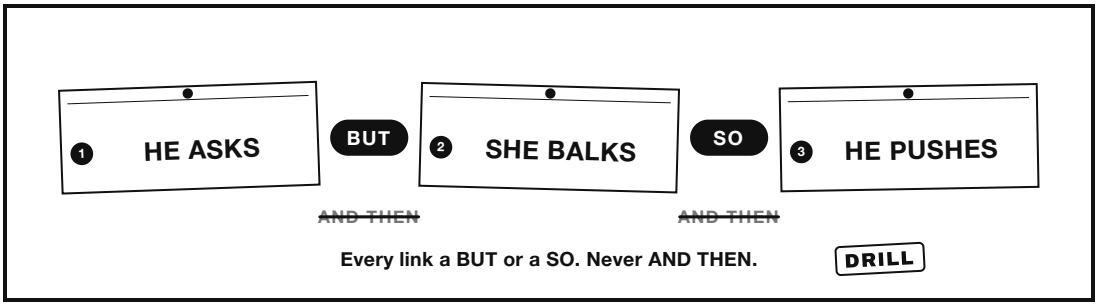


CAN'T FILL IN THE SENTENCE YET? THEN YOU DON'T KNOW THE STORY YET. THAT'S NORMAL. KEEP WORKING ON IT.

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

The Spine, Not "And Then"

TELL A STORY BY ITS SPINE: WHO WANTS WHAT, WHAT'S AT STAKE, AND WHAT'S IN THE WAY

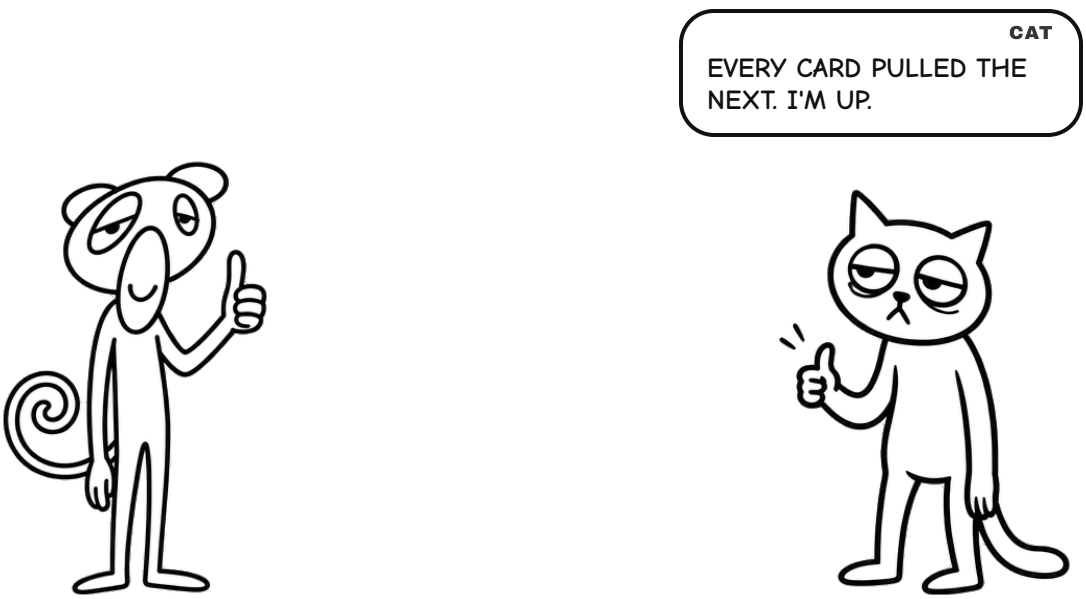


A story's **spine** is the one sentence that holds it up. **BUT** means something gets in the way. **SO** means this happened because of that.

CAN'T SAY IT IN ONE SENTENCE? YOU DON'T KNOW IT YET.

1. WHO WANTS WHAT, AND WHAT'S AT STAKE?
2. WHAT'S IN THE WAY?
3. IS EVERY LINK A BUT OR A SO?

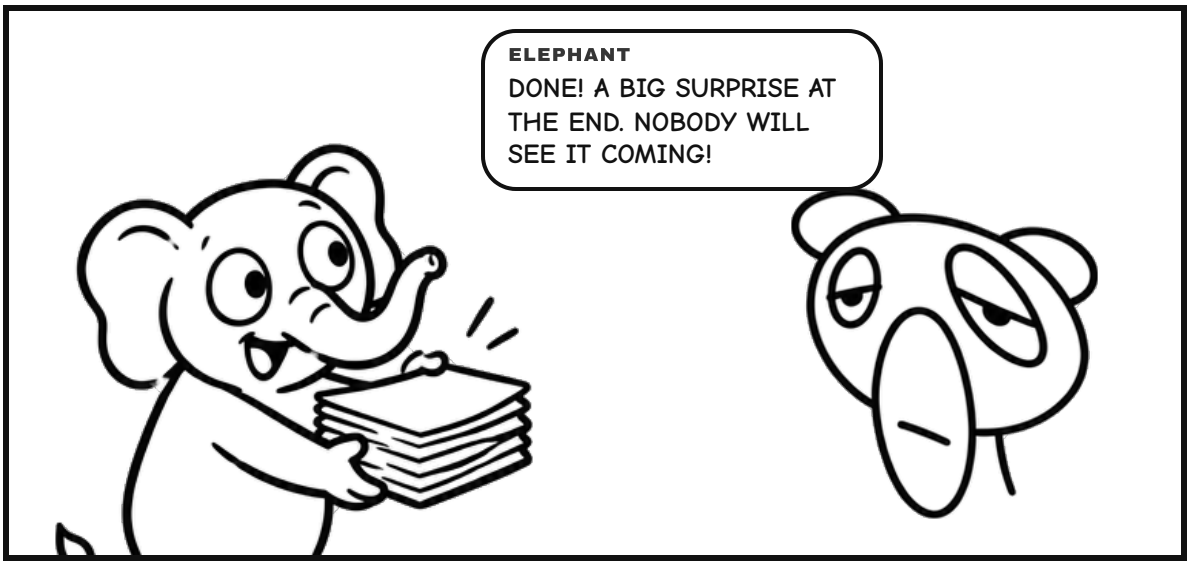
FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE BACKBONE**. THEN ROOM TALK:** ONE SENTENCE, ONE SPINE (*BACK TO THE FUTURE*) 294



A Prop Isn't a Plant

Ben and **Jo** (see Meet the Cast). Tonight Ben is in Jo's kitchen asking her for $500, because his rent is due. Jo balked ("Again?"). He has promised to pay her back in two weeks. She still hasn't said yes.

Below is the moment Jo shows Ben how much he already owes her, the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it: a **draft** (a first written try).



THE ELEPHANT'S DRAFT

TEACHING EXAMPLE

BEN
Who else can I ask?

JO
No.

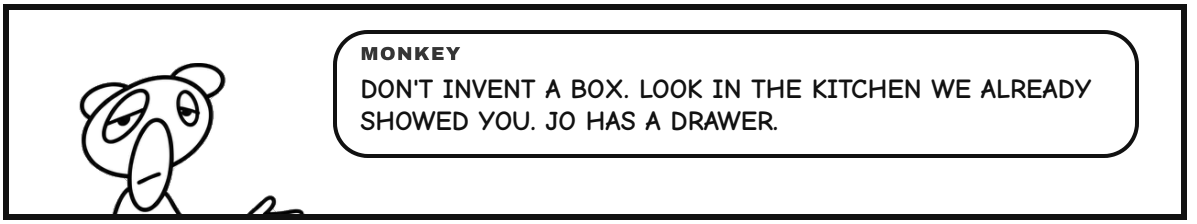
Jo goes to the hall closet. She comes back with a shoebox and tips it out on the table. IOU after IOU.

JO
Every one you ever wrote me.



A BIG SURPRISE. OUT OF NOWHERE.

The shoebox is a **payoff**: a big moment that uses something from the story. But the story never showed us that box before. When a scene is saved by something that shows up out of nowhere, it feels convenient, like a cheat. So the Cat, our reader, doesn't buy it.



TWO SCENES, REWRITTEN WITH THIS TOOL

The first scene comes weeks earlier, on page 3 of the story's script. The second is the $500 scene, on script page 41 (callback: Scene and Sequel 52). (New to script pages? Know What You Want, at the front of the book, shows how to read one.) The notes on the right are ours, not part of the script.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT (PAGE 3)

Ben, hungry, opens Jo's cabinets one by one.

BEN
Where are the takeout menus?

JO
Drawer by the stove.

He opens it. Takeout menus. Batteries. Rubber bands.

Jo reaches past him and shuts it. A little too fast.

JO
Get the Thai.

WEEKS EARLIER
No money talk yet. Ben just wants dinner.

THE PLANT
A **plant**: something we see early so it can pay off later. Its **ordinary job**: holding menus. Nobody looks twice.

THE TELL
One small odd beat. Easy to miss. Ben misses it.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT (PAGE 41)

BEN
Who else can I ask?

Jo stops scrubbing. Dries her hands. Opens the drawer by the stove. Lifts out the menus.

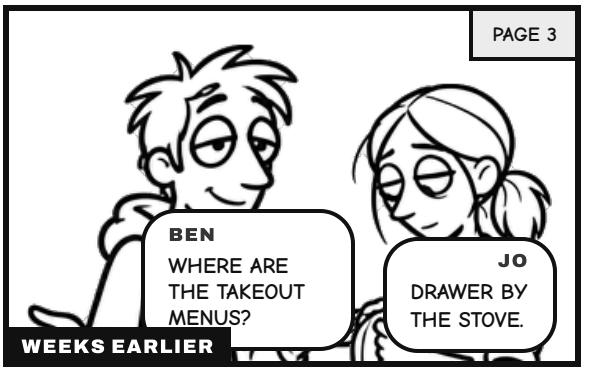
Underneath: folded notes in Ben's handwriting. IOU. IOU. IOU. She counts five hundred dollars onto the pile.

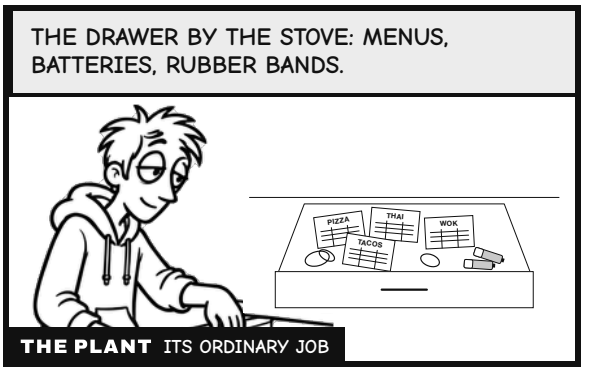
JO
Take it.

SAME ROOM, LATER
The $500 scene. Ben has asked and promised. Now he tries guilt.

THE PAYOFF
Same drawer, new job. She kept every IOU. We saw this drawer. We never saw the bottom.

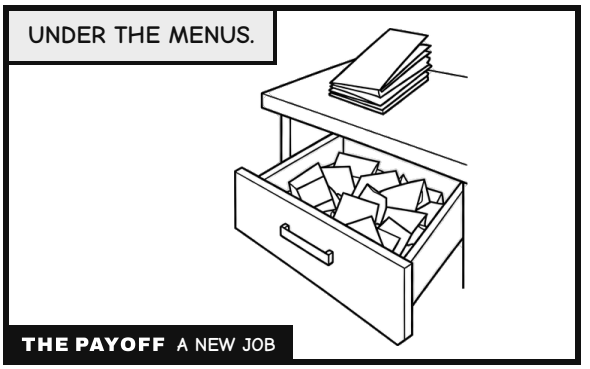
The same two scenes, drawn. Top row: page 3, weeks earlier. Middle and bottom rows: page 41, the night Ben asks for $500. The black tag in each panel names the part you're watching.

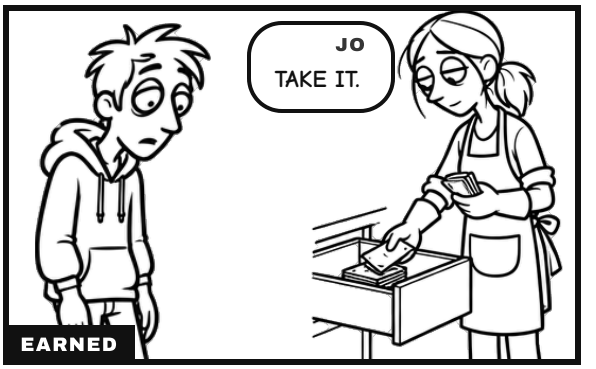


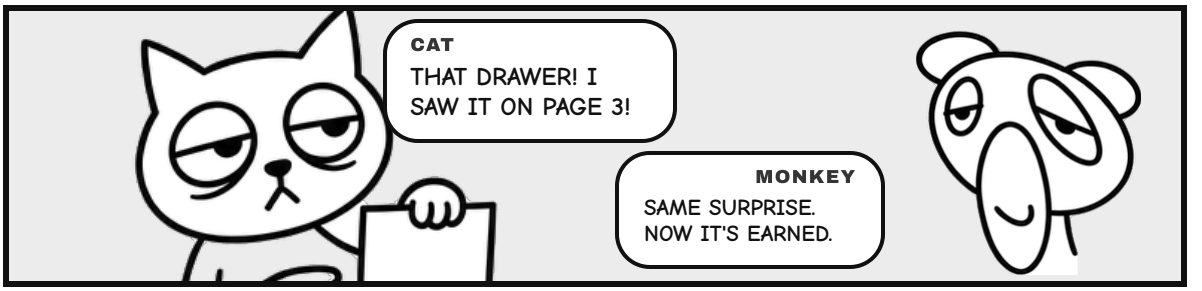






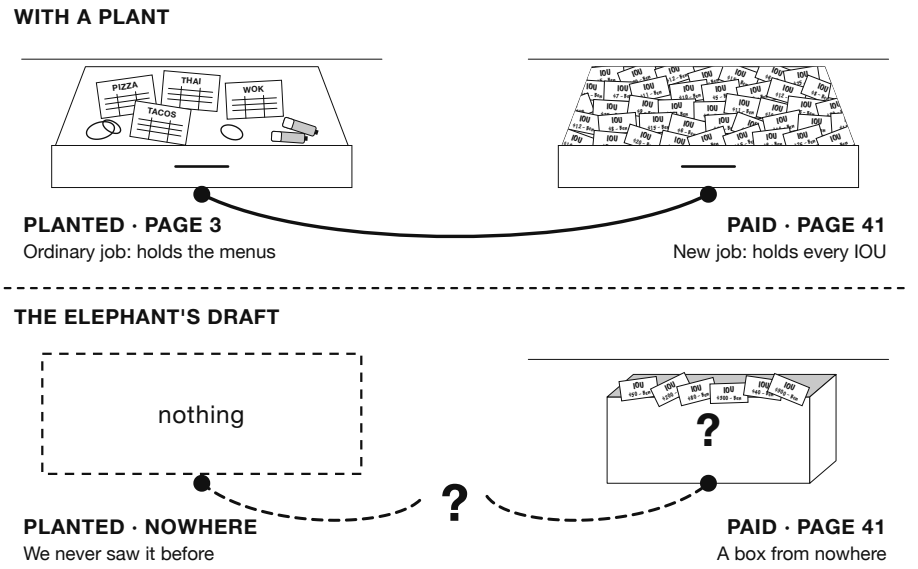






Why it works now: on page 41 we still don't know what's in the drawer, so it still surprises us. But we know the drawer. It has been in Jo's kitchen all along, holding menus. The story didn't make up a box to win the scene. It used what it already had.

PLANT IT EARLY. GIVE IT A BORING JOB. DRILL



How to read this picture: the string ties a payoff back to its plant. Top: Ben and Jo's two scenes, from two pages back. Bottom: the Elephant's shoebox draft, from the start of this tool, with nothing to tie to.



MONKEY

STUCK? BEFORE YOU INVENT SOMETHING NEW TO SAVE A SCENE, CHECK WHAT THE STORY ALREADY PLANTED.

THE WALK-BACK TEST

Start at the payoff and walk back through your pages. Can you put your finger on the page where we first saw the thing? If you can't, the payoff will feel like a cheat. Plant it earlier, or use something that's already there.

SO WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

A prop isn't a plant.

A **prop** is any object in a scene: a menu, a battery, a cup. It becomes a **plant** only when the story pays it off later. Hide it in plain sight, doing an ordinary job. If it waves its arms, the audience guesses the ending. (The playwright Anton Chekhov said it about a gun: show it on the wall early, and it must go off later.)



SPOT THE MISS. FIND THE PLANT.

Two drafts of the same story, each with a short bit from page 3 and a short bit from page 41. One is the kind of draft an AI can write when you ask for "a big surprise": clean lines and a real surprise. The other was written with this tool.

Read both. In each one, find where the IOUs come from, and look back to see if page 3 showed us that place. Then answer the questions below.

DRAFT A

PAGE 3

BEN
Got any takeout menus?

JO
On the fridge.

He grabs one.

PAGE 41

BEN
Who else can I ask?

Jo goes to the hall closet and comes back with a shoebox. It's full of IOUs.

JO
Every one you ever wrote me.

DRAFT B

PAGE 3

BEN
Where are the takeout menus?

JO
Drawer by the stove.

Menus, batteries, rubber bands. Jo shuts it. A little too fast.

PAGE 41

BEN
Who else can I ask?

Jo opens the drawer by the stove. Lifts out the menus. Under them: his IOUs.

JO
Take it.

1. WHERE ARE THE IOUS IN EACH DRAFT, AND DID PAGE 3 SHOW US THAT PLACE?
2. IN DRAFT B, WHAT ORDINARY JOB IS THE DRAWER DOING ON PAGE 3?
3. WHY DOES JO SHUT THE DRAWER "A LITTLE TOO FAST"?

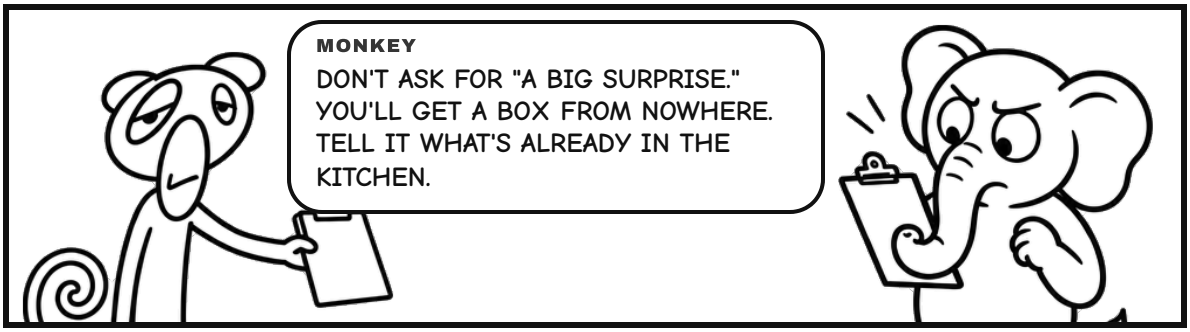
A



B



Answers. 1: In Draft A, they're in a shoebox from the hall closet, which we never saw before page 41, so it feels like the writer pulled it out of a pocket. In Draft B, they're in the drawer by the stove, which we saw on page 3, so the payoff feels earned. 2: It holds the takeout menus, batteries and rubber bands. That job is so boring that nobody looks twice, so the IOUs still surprise us. 3: It's a small clue that she's hiding something. Ben misses it. A reader who caught it feels smart on page 41, and a reader who missed it still believes the drawer.



THE BRIEF AI

BEN, JO, THE DRAWER

Your **brief**: the instructions you write before anyone drafts (explained in full in Know What You Want). Fill in the right side of each row.

THE WANT What should the audience feel, think or suspect?	A gasp that feels earned: we remember the drawer from page 3.
GOAL What is the main character trying to get?	Ben: $500 from Jo, tonight.
PAYOFF What big moment needs a thing to happen?	Jo shows Ben every IOU he ever wrote her.
ALREADY THERE What has the story shown that could do it?	Jo's kitchen: the sink, the counter, the drawer by the stove.
THE PLANT Where do we first see it, and on what page?	The drawer by the stove, page 3.
ORDINARY JOB What boring job does it do first?	It holds the takeout menus.
THE TELL One small odd beat. Optional.	Jo shuts it a little too fast.
FORBID What the draft must not use.	~~new boxes~~ · ~~"suddenly"~~ · ~~secret recordings~~ · ~~anything we haven't seen~~

NAME THE PLANT. NAME THE PAYOFF. LET THE ELEPHANT WRITE THE REST.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You paste your earlier pages (it can't see them otherwise), then type: *"List every object we've already seen that could do this job, with its page."* **Back comes** a list. Asked only for "a big surprise," an AI tends to grab something brand new instead: a hidden box, a secret recording. **You** check every page number yourself. The AI will happily say something was planted when it wasn't.

Before you paste: use your own pages only. Check your studio's or show's rules, and your guild's, before you put anything into an AI. Never paste other people's work.



TRY IT BY HAND

Find the plant.

Pick a big moment from a script you wrote, or from a movie you like: a moment where something saves the day or turns the story. Fill in each line below: what the payoff uses, where we first saw it, and the ordinary job it was doing then.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE IOU LEDGER

THE PAYOFF · WHAT HAPPENS? _____

ON WHAT PAGE? _____

WHAT THING DOES IT USE? _____

WHERE DID WE FIRST SEE IT? PAGE? _____

WHAT ORDINARY JOB WAS IT DOING? _____

COULD YOU FIND THE PLANT?

YES · IT'S EARNED	NO · IT CAME FROM NOWHERE

Ticked "no"? Look back through your pages for something already there that could do the job. If nothing fits, plant it early, doing something boring.

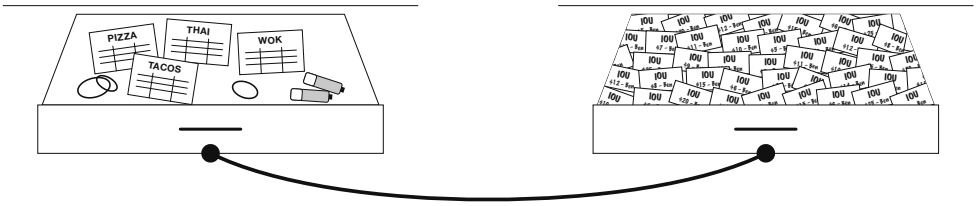


THEN WALK THE OTHER WAY. EVERY PLANT YOU SHOWED US: DOES IT PAY OFF BEFORE THE END?

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

A Prop Isn't a Plant

ANYTHING THAT PAYS OFF LATER MUST SHOW UP EARLIER, DOING AN ORDINARY JOB



PLANT · EARLY
an ordinary job

PAYOFF · LATER
a new job

A **plant** is something we see early. The **payoff** is the big moment that uses it later. A prop is just an object until the story pays it off.

PLANT IT EARLY. GIVE IT A BORING JOB. DRILL

1. WHAT DOES THIS PAYOFF USE?
2. WHERE DID WE FIRST SEE IT, AND WHAT ORDINARY JOB WAS IT DOING?
3. BEFORE YOU INVENT SOMETHING NEW, WHAT HAS THE STORY ALREADY PLANTED?

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE IOU LEDGER**. THEN ROOM TALK:** THE CARROT PEN (*ZOOTOPIA*) 296



CAT
I SAW THAT DRAWER. I'M UP.



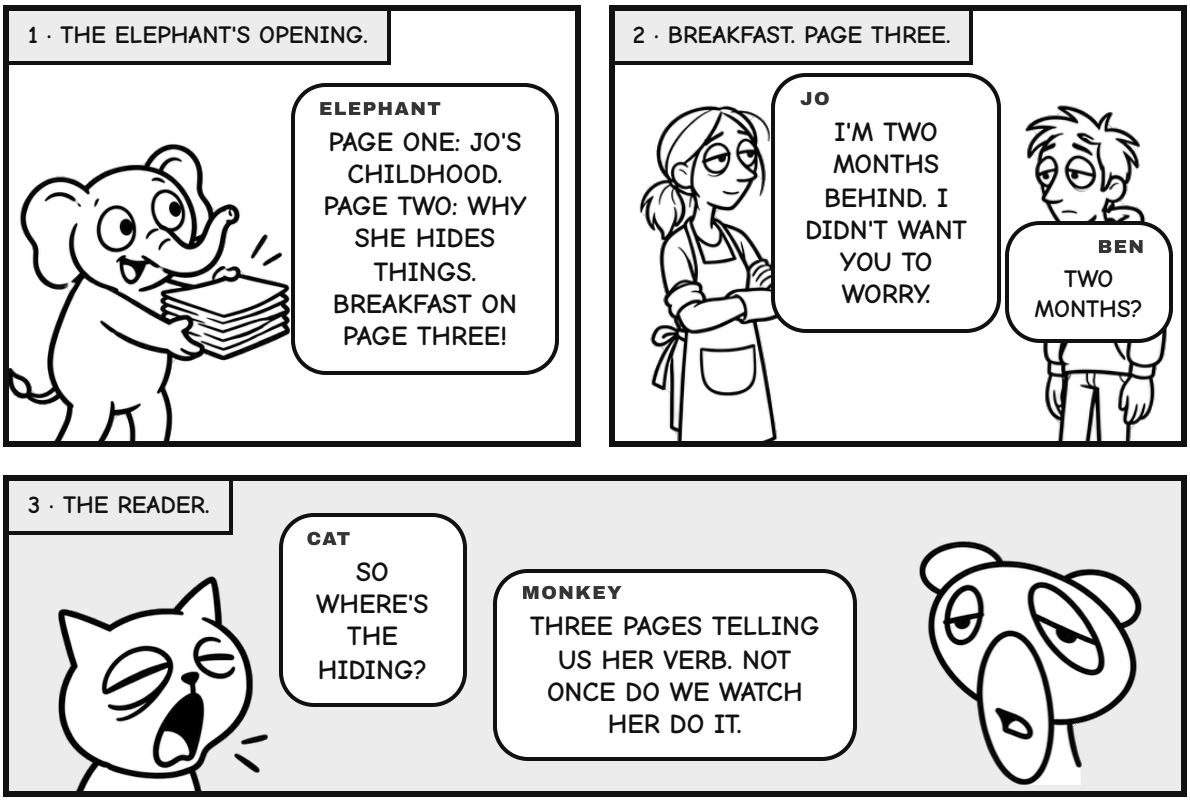
Name the Verb

THE IDEA

Every story has one action its main character does again and again. That action is the story's **verb**: one word for something we can watch a person do, like hide, chase, con or prove. It is never a feeling. You can't watch someone "be sad," but you can watch them hide it.

Name your verb in one word. Show it in the first two pages, so we learn what to watch for. Then play it again in new places, with more to lose each time, so it feels good to repeat. Reach for this tool when your story feels like "stuff happens."

The scene: Ben is sleeping on his sister Jo's couch. Money is tight for Jo too, since she keeps covering for him, but she would never say so. It's breakfast: the first page of a scene, and of a draft the Monkey is trying that tells the story from Jo's side. Here's how the Elephant, our AI, might open it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



NAME IT IN ONE WORD. SHOW IT BY PAGE TWO. DRILL

The test "Does it feel good to repeat?" comes from game design.

THE PICTURE · THE VERB LADDER, FILLED IN FOR JO

JO'S VERB
HIDE

Same verb. New place.
More to lose on every rung.

RUNG 4 · MOVING DAY
Ben moves out. She smooths his blanket. Not a word.

RUNG 3 · MOM'S MAILBOX
She scraped it with her car. Tells Mom nothing.

RUNG 2 · HER BIRTHDAY
Ben is hours late. "It's fine." She washes one plate.

RUNG 1 · BREAKFAST · FIRST PAGE
She slides the late notice under the toast.

MORE TO LOSE



Rung 1, page one. A late notice comes. She slides it under the toast.

How to read this picture: the word on the sign is Jo's verb. Start at the bottom. Each rung is a new place where she does the same thing, hide, and each has more to lose: a bill, her birthday, Mom, then her brother leaving. Same verb, new place, more to lose.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Jo sits with a red LATE NOTICE. Ben shuffles in from the couch.

JO I'm behind on the electric.

BEN How behind?

JO Two months. I didn't want you to worry.

What's wrong: honest, clean lines, but Jo explains her hiding instead of doing it. She hands Ben the secret in line one, so there's nothing left for him, or us, to catch.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Jo opens an envelope. LATE NOTICE, in red.

Ben shuffles in from the couch. She slides it under the toast.

BEN Anything for me?

JO Just toast.

She hands him the top slice.

What changed: we watch Jo hide on page one, in one move, without a word. Now each time she hides something, we know what to watch for.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT DOES YOUR MAIN CHARACTER DO OVER AND OVER? SAY IT IN ONE WORD. NOW POINT TO THE FIRST PAGE WHERE WE WATCH THEM DO IT.

For the mentor: If the word is a feeling (sad, scared, lost), ask what they do about it: that's the verb. If we first see it after page two, move a small version of it to the opening.

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

Name it in one word. Show it early. Play it again. DRILL

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: **THE VERB LADDER**. THEN ROOM TALK: **FAKING IT, MINUTE ONE** (*FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF*) 290

3

WHAT DOES YOUR HERO DO, OVER AND OVER?

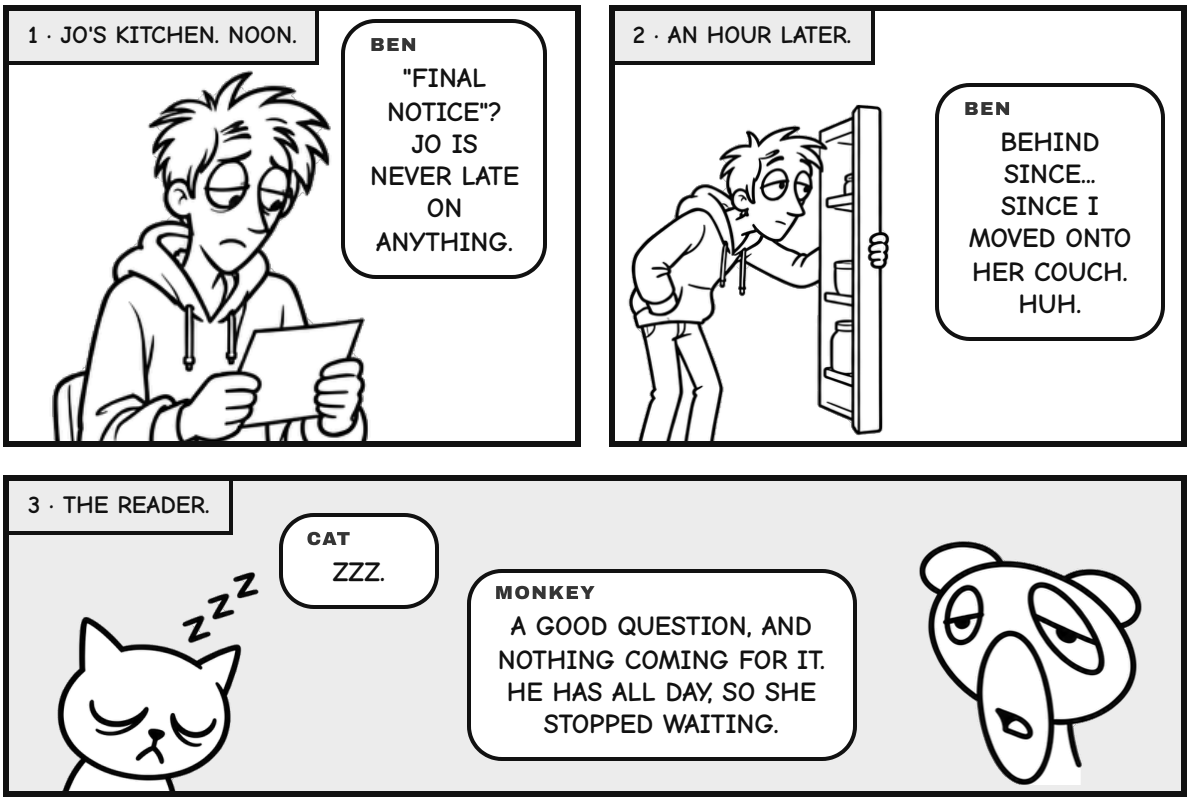
Curious, Then Hunted

THE IDEA

Stories run on two engines. **Curiosity**: there's something to find out, and we lean in to learn it, like detectives. **Urgency**: something is coming, and we lean in to see if they get away, like prey. Curiosity alone drifts after a while. Danger alone wears us out until we stop feeling it.

The strongest stories start curious, so we get attached, then **flip** to urgent, so we worry. The flip is the moment something starts coming. Reach for this tool when a stretch feels slow, or when nonstop danger has gone numb.

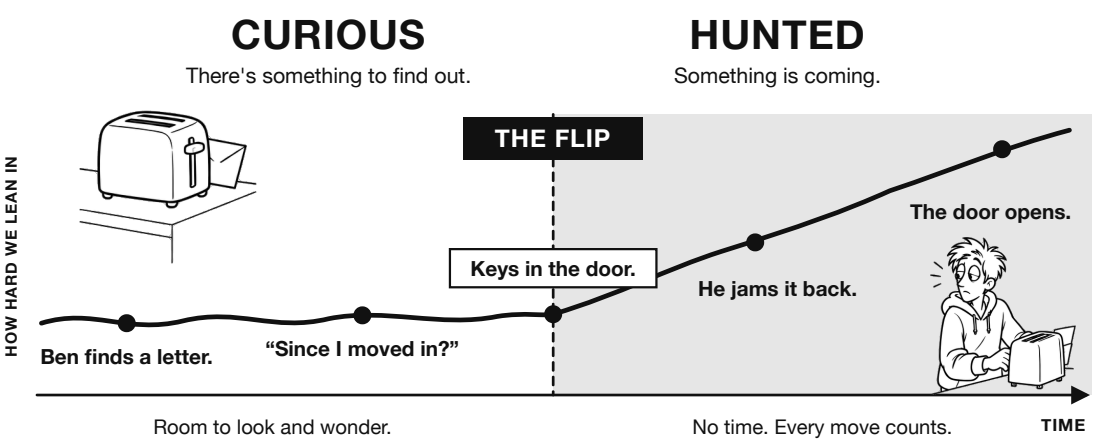
The scene: Ben is sleeping on his sister Jo's couch, and Jo is at work. Looking for a pen, he finds a letter tucked behind her toaster: a final notice on her electric bill. Jo hides things (see Name the Verb). Here's the version the Elephant might write: Ben wonders, and keeps wondering. TEACHING EXAMPLE



FIRST MAKE US WONDER. THEN MAKE US WORRY.

Curious stretches give us room to get attached. Hunted stretches test what we got attached to.

THE PICTURE · ONE SCENE, AND THE FLIP



How to read this picture: the line shows how hard we lean in, moment by moment. On the left, Ben wonders: we're curious, and the line stays low and easy. At the flip, Jo's keys hit the door. Now something is coming, and the line climbs. Same room, same letter; only the engine changed.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - DAY
Ben finds a letter behind the
toaster. FINAL NOTICE.
BEN   Since I moved in?
He sits. Reads it again.
He makes a sandwich. Thinks.
BEN   Huh.
```

What's wrong: a good question, but nothing is coming. Ben has all day, so we have no reason to lean in.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - DAY
Ben finds a letter behind the
toaster. FINAL NOTICE.
BEN   Since I moved in?
Keys in the door. Jo's home early.
He jams it back. It won't fit.
JO    (O.S.) You eat?
BEN   Starving!
```

What changed: curious (what is this?) flips to urgent (she's coming). Now the question is a danger too: will she catch him knowing?

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? IN THIS STRETCH OF YOUR STORY, IS THE AUDIENCE FINDING SOMETHING OUT, OR GETTING AWAY FROM SOMETHING? WHERE DOES IT FLIP?

For the mentor: If it never flips, the curious stretch will drift: bring something closer. If it's danger from the first page, give us a quiet, curious stretch first, so we care who gets caught.

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

Start curious. Then let something come.

4

WHEN DOES SOMETHING START COMING?

Pay Rent on Every Mystery

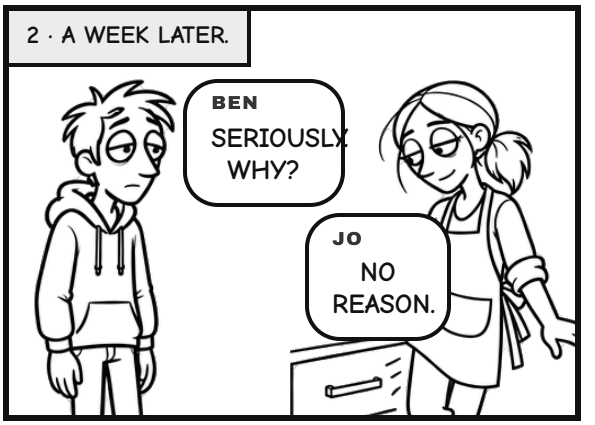
THE IDEA

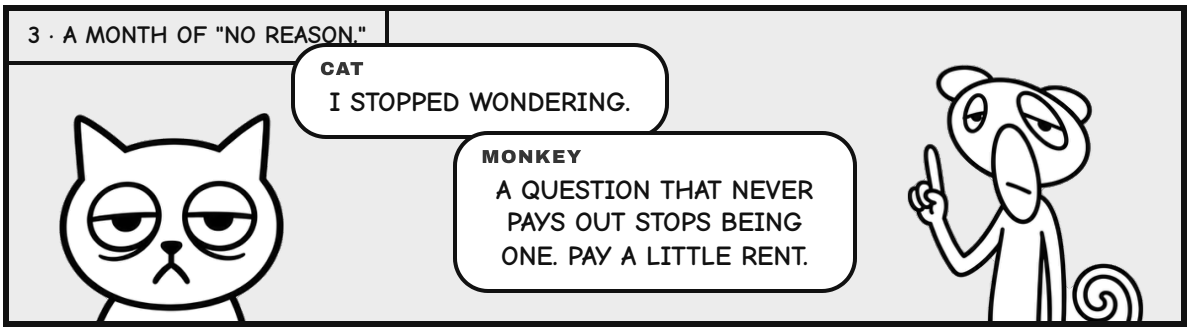
A **mystery** is any question your story leaves open on purpose: something we want to know and haven't been told yet. It doesn't need a crime. "Why does she keep those?" is a mystery.

Keep the big question shut, but **pay rent** on it: every so often, give a small answer, and make each one cost somebody something. Reach for this tool when your story hides everything until the end, or gives everything away at once.

The scene: Ben, broke, is staying at his sister Jo's place. He knows the drawer by her stove holds every IOU he ever wrote her, under the takeout menus. He wants to know why she kept them. Jo doesn't want to say. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



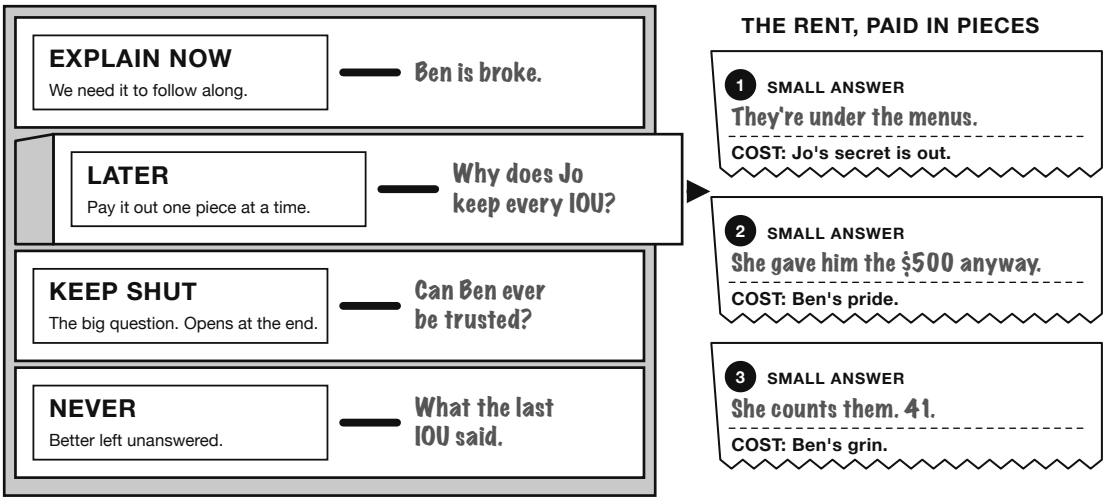




KEEP THE BIG ONE SHUT. PAY SMALL ANSWERS. DRILL

Each small answer is **rent**, and it should cost somebody something: a secret, some pride, a grin. A free answer doesn't count.

THE PICTURE · FOUR DRAWERS, AND THE RENT



How to read this picture: file every open question in one drawer. The big question stays shut until the end. The LATER drawer is where you pay rent: each receipt is one small answer, and under the line, who paid for it.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Ben lifts the menus. The IOUs.
BEN   Why keep these?
JO    No reason.
BEN   Come on.
JO    No reason, Ben.
She shuts the drawer.
```

What's wrong: the question stays open, but it never pays anything. After a few rounds of "no reason," we stop wondering.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Ben lifts the menus. The IOUs.
BEN   Why keep these?
JO    Forty-one.
BEN   You counted them?
JO    Every one.
His grin goes. He puts the menus
back.
```

What changed: Jo still won't say *why*, but she pays rent: one small answer, and it costs them both. (callback: What Else Could Be True? 38)

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT IS THE BIGGEST OPEN QUESTION IN YOUR PAGES? WHERE IS THE FIRST SMALL ANSWER, AND WHO PAYS FOR IT?

For the mentor: If nothing is answered in the first third, add one small answer that makes the big question sharper, not smaller. If it costs no one anything, make it cost a secret, some pride or a fight.

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

Keep the big one shut. Pay rent, and make it cost. DRILL

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: **FOUR DRAWERS**. THEN ROOM TALK: **THE ANSWER UP FRONT** (*KNIVES OUT*) 300

5

WHAT DOES YOUR NEXT ANSWER COST?

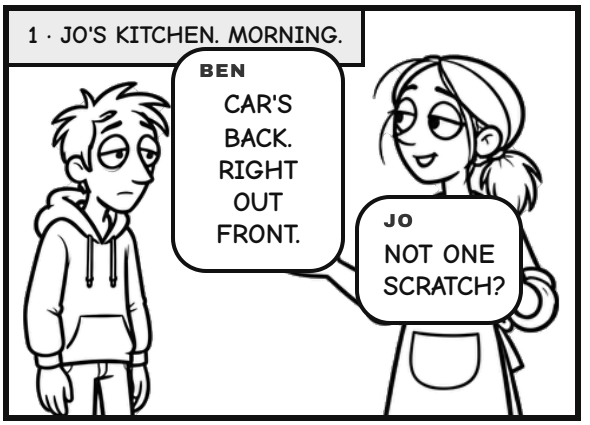
Show Us the Danger

THE IDEA

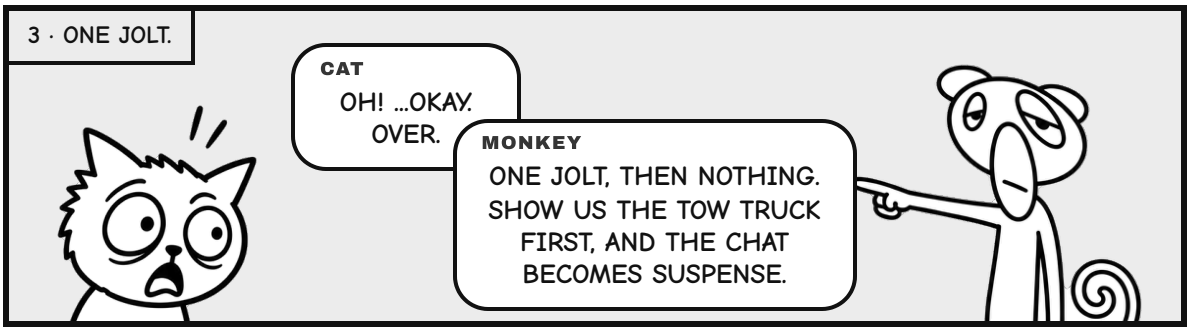
Let the audience see a danger that the people on screen don't know about. Then even small talk becomes **suspense**: the feeling of waiting for something bad we can see coming. Every ordinary line plays against what we know.

The other way is **surprise**: nobody, not even us, sees it coming. A surprise is one jolt, and it's over. Suspense lasts the whole scene. Reach for this tool when a calm scene feels like filler.

The scene: Ben, staying at his sister Jo's place, borrowed her car last night and swore to bring it back without a scratch. This morning they have coffee in her kitchen. Ben wants credit for being careful. Jo wants to believe him. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE





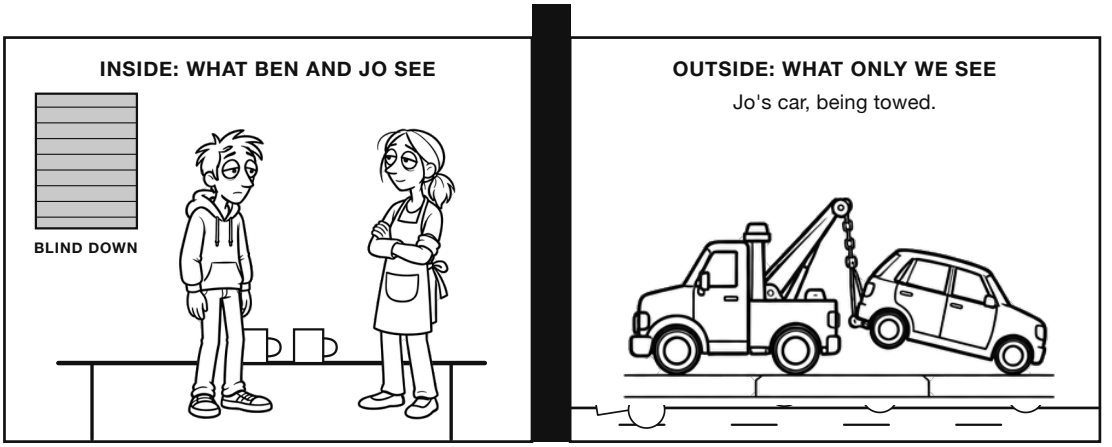


SHOW US THE DANGER. THEN LET THEM CHAT.

We worry because we know what they don't. The difference between surprise and suspense was made famous by the director Alfred Hitchcock.

THE PICTURE · WHO SEES WHAT

THE AUDIENCE SEES BOTH SIDES



How to read this picture: the wall splits the frame. Ben and Jo are inside with the blind down; they see only the kitchen. We see both sides: their coffee, and the tow truck hooking Jo's car. Everything they say now plays against what we know.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

BEN Car's back. Right out front.

JO Not one scratch?

BEN Not one.

JO Good. Toast?

Ben glances out the window.

BEN Jo. Where's your car?

What's wrong: two minutes of chat we have no reason to watch, then one jolt at the end. The surprise is over in a second.

WITH THE TOOL

EXT. JO'S STREET - MORNING

A tow truck backs up to Jo's car.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

BEN Car's back. Right out front.

JO Not one scratch?

BEN Not one. I'm a new man.

Outside, the car's nose lifts.

What changed: the same chat, nearly word for word, but we saw the truck first. Now "not one scratch" hurts to hear, and we lean in, waiting for one of them to look outside.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? PICK A CALM SCENE IN YOUR PAGES. WHAT COULD THE AUDIENCE KNOW THAT THE PEOPLE IN IT DON'T?

For the mentor: Show that danger before the scene starts, plainly enough that no one misses it. Then let the people talk about something ordinary. Don't let them find out too soon: the wait is the suspense.

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

Show us the danger. Don't show them.

6

WHAT DO WE KNOW THAT THEY DON'T?

Care Before Danger

THE IDEA

Before danger arrives, give us a short **calm** stretch with the people it will threaten: a joke, a favor, a bad song. That's where we start to like them. Danger only hurts when it threatens someone we care about. A close call for strangers is just noise.

The calm isn't slow. It's what the danger takes away. Reach for this tool when your big moment lands and nobody flinches.

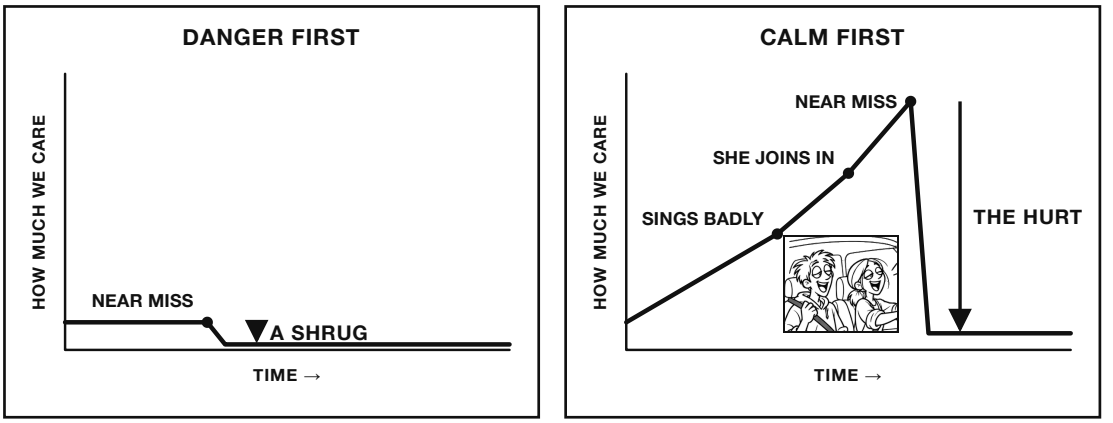
The scene: Jo drives her brother Ben across town. Today they're getting along. Then a truck runs a red light, and Jo slams on the brakes just in time. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it.
TEACHING EXAMPLE



LET US LIKE THEM. THEN BRING THE DANGER.

A few calm beats are enough. Make them specific, and let one of them, a song or a joke, carry right into the danger.

THE PICTURE · THE SAME NEAR MISS, TWICE



How to read this picture: the line is how much we care about Ben and Jo. On the left, the danger comes first, so the near miss is a small dip: a shrug. On the right, we climb while they sing, so the same near miss drops us a long way. That drop is the hurt.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S CAR - MOVING - DAY

A truck runs the red. Jo brakes hard. It misses them by inches.

BEN Whoa!

JO You okay?

BEN Yeah. You?

JO Yeah.

They drive on.

What's wrong: the danger comes first. We don't know them yet, so the near miss is just a loud noise.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S CAR - MOVING - DAY

The radio plays. Ben sings along, badly.

JO Those aren't the words.

BEN It's a harmony.

She laughs. Joins in, worse.

A truck runs the red. Jo brakes hard.

The radio keeps playing.

What changed: thirty seconds of them happy. Now the near miss threatens something we just watched, and the radio, still playing, makes it hurt.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? BEFORE THE FIRST DANGER IN YOUR PAGES, POINT TO ONE MOMENT WHERE WE LIKE THESE PEOPLE.

For the mentor: If you can't point to one, add a short calm beat: a joke, a favor, a bad song. Keep it short and specific. Then let something from it, the song or the joke, carry into the danger.

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

Calm first. It's what the danger takes.

7

WHAT DO WE LOVE BEFORE IT'S IN DANGER?

Small Wrong Things

THE IDEA

Before something big goes wrong, let small things be a little wrong: an object out of place, an answer that comes too fast. Nobody mentions them. The reader notices, can't explain them, and leans in. That quiet sense that something is off is called **unease**.

Start with the scene's opening: **open on something already wrong**, shown and not explained. The reader leans in to close that gap; that lean is the **hook**. Small, unexplained details build unease faster than one big scare. Reach for this tool when your story announces trouble before we have a reason to worry.

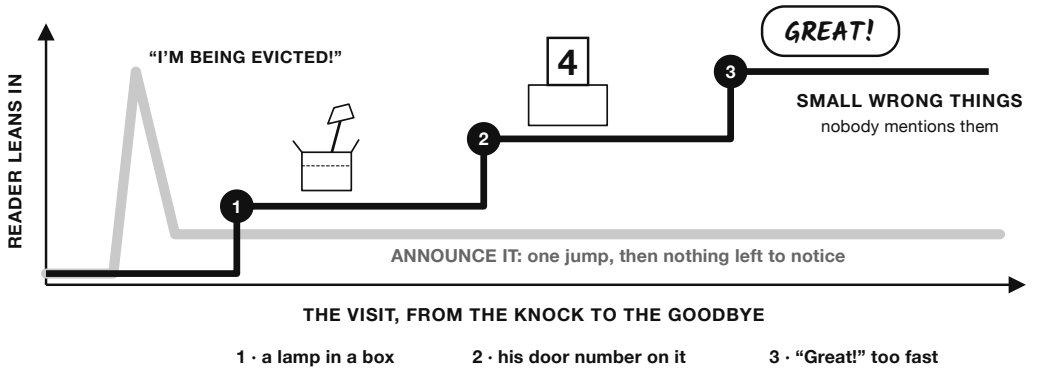
The scene: Ben gave back the $500 his sister Jo lent him. Now he can't pay rent and is losing his studio apartment. He hasn't told her. Jo drops by with groceries. She wants to know he's okay; he wants her not to find out. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



DON'T ANNOUNCE IT. LET SMALL THINGS BE OFF.

Keep them plain and everyday. Nobody points at them. The reader does the noticing.

THE PICTURE · HOW FAR THE READER LEANS IN, LINE BY LINE



How to read this picture: both lines are the same visit, left to right. The grey line announces the trouble: one jump, then flat. The black line climbs a step at each small wrong thing that nobody explains. By the goodbye, the reader is worried and can't say why.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. BEN'S STUDIO - NIGHT
BEN   Jo. I'm being evicted.
JO    What? Since when?
BEN   Since I gave your money back.
JO    Why didn't you tell me?
She sets the groceries down.
```

What's wrong: a believable talk, but the trouble is named in line one. After that, nothing is left to notice.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. BEN'S STUDIO - NIGHT
Behind Ben, a lamp in a box.
JO    How's every--
BEN   Great! Good. Great.
On the box: his door number, 4.
JO    ...There's soup in the bag.
She goes. Looks back once.
```

What changed: the scene opens on something already wrong: a lamp in a box. Then a door number, a too-fast "Great!" Nobody names it, and we worry before anyone says a word.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHERE DOES YOUR STORY FIRST SAY OUT LOUD THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG? WHAT SMALL, ODD THING COULD COME BEFORE IT?

For the mentor: If the trouble is named before anything looks off, the reader has nothing to notice. Plant two or three small wrong things earlier, each a little stranger, and let nobody comment on them.

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

Open on something wrong. Nobody points.

8

WHAT'S A LITTLE OFF, FROM THE VERY FIRST MOMENT?

Give the Old Beat a New Job

THE IDEA

A **beat** is one small step in a scene: one action or line that changes something, like an ask, a no, or a slammed door. Some beats are so familiar that the audience sees them coming: the lights at a surprise party, the big apology, the run to stop someone leaving.

Don't cut them; the audience is waiting for them. Let the beat arrive, but give it a new job: reveal a secret, change who's ahead, or **flip** it, so the surprise lands on someone else. Reach for this tool when you can guess the next line of your own scene.

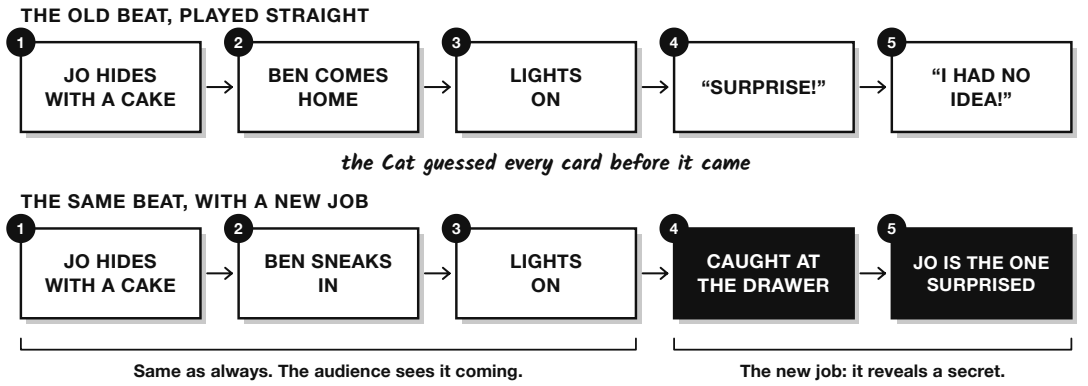
The scene: it's Ben's birthday. He's staying with his sister Jo while he gets back on his feet. Her kitchen drawer holds his old IOUs, from childhood on, $500 in all, and he's paying them off a twenty at a time (twenty-five twenties), slipped under the takeout menus. Jo wants to give him a happy surprise. Ben wants to sneak in another twenty. Here's the scene the way the Elephant might write it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



LET THE OLD BEAT ARRIVE. GIVE IT A NEW JOB.

To **flip** a beat is to turn it around: the person who planned the surprise is the one who gets surprised.

THE PICTURE · THE SURPRISE PARTY, BEAT BY BEAT



How to read this picture: each card is one beat. In the top row, every card is the one we expected. In the bottom row, cards 1 to 3 stay the same, so we still get the party we saw coming. Then card 4 does a new job: the lights catch Ben at the drawer.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Ben walks in. Lights on.
JO    Surprise!
BEN   For me? I had no idea!
He blows out the candles. She cuts
the cake.
```

What's wrong: every beat comes exactly as guessed. The Cat says each line first.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Dark. Jo hides with a cake. Ben slips
a twenty under the menus.
Jo flips the lights.
JO    Surpr--
She sees the twenty.
BEN   ...That's 4 of 25.
```

What changed: the party still comes, on time. This tool's move is its new job: catch Ben being good in secret. The surprise is Jo's.



FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? FIND A MOMENT IN YOUR PAGES THE READER CAN SEE COMING. WHEN IT ARRIVES, WHAT DOES IT DO BESIDES ARRIVE?

For the mentor: If the answer is "nothing," don't cut it; the audience is waiting for it. Give it a job: reveal a secret, change who is ahead, or surprise the person who planned it.

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

Let the old beat arrive. Give it a new job.

9

WHAT NEW JOB DOES YOUR FAMILIAR BEAT DO?

Make the Present Matter

THE IDEA

Backstory is what happened to your characters before the scene we're watching. A **flashback** is a scene from the past cut into the present one. Both are fine. The trouble starts when the present scene is only a doorway to the past.

When someone tells a story about the past, ask what they're after from the listener right now: something to hide, win or find out. That's the telling's own stakes. Reach for this tool when readers skim the "now" to get to the "then."

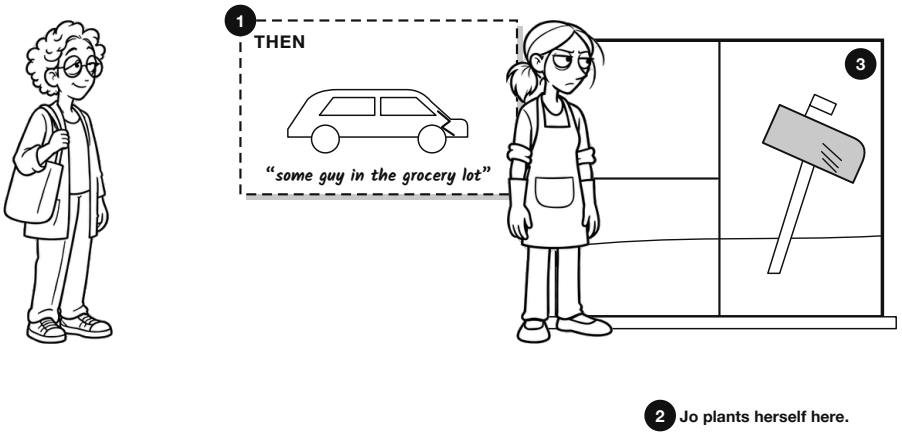
The scene: Jo is at Mom's house for tea. Pulling in, she hit Mom's mailbox with her car and bent it; the red flag left a scrape on her bumper, near the dent Ben put there weeks ago. She hasn't said a word. Now she tells Mom an old story about Ben. Jo wants Mom looking at her, not out the window. Mom wants a good story. Here's the scene the way the Elephant might write it, with no mailbox in it. TEACHING EXAMPLE



THE PAST IS A MOVE. WIN SOMETHING NOW.

A present-day scene that only opens and closes a flashback is called a **frame**. If the frame wants nothing, readers skip it.

THE PICTURE · THEN AND NOW, IN ONE KITCHEN



How to read this picture: box 1 is THEN, the old story Jo tells about Ben's dent. Everything else is NOW. Jo stands in front of the window (2) so Mom won't see the mailbox Jo bent (3). Each detail of the old story is a move to keep Mom's eyes on her.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. MOM'S KITCHEN - DAY

JO Remember Ben's dent?

FLASHBACK - JO'S DRIVEWAY

BEN Some guy in the lot.

BACK TO THE KITCHEN

MOM That's Ben.

What's wrong: the kitchen just opens and closes the flashback. Nobody there wants anything.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. MOM'S KITCHEN - DAY

Out the window, the bent mailbox. Jo stands in front of it.

JO Did I tell you about Ben's dent?

Mom steps to the window. Jo steps with her.

MOM The lie's worse than the dent.

Jo doesn't move.

What changed: the old story keeps Mom from the window. Her verdict on the past lands on Jo now.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHEN SOMEONE IN YOUR PAGES TELLS A STORY ABOUT THE PAST, WHAT ARE THEY TRYING TO GET FROM THE LISTENER RIGHT NOW?

For the mentor: If the answer is "nothing, it's just information," give the teller a goal in the scene: something to hide, win or find out. Then each detail of the past becomes a move.

TOOL CARD · SHAPE

Tell the past to win something now.

10

WHAT IS THE TELLER'S GOAL RIGHT NOW?

Rewriting

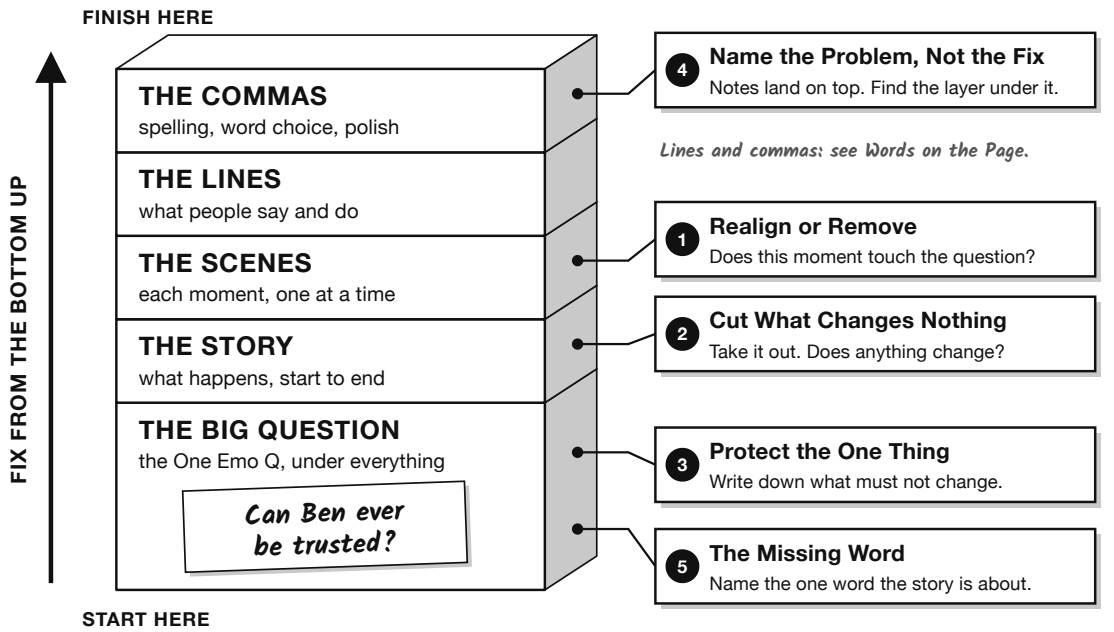
Fixing what you wrote without losing what you meant.

WHAT REWRITING IS

A **draft** is your first try at the story, and it's allowed to be messy. **Rewriting** is making the draft say what you meant. It isn't starting over, which throws out the good parts with the bad. And it isn't polishing the commas first, because you may be about to cut the scene they're in.

Think of a draft as **layers**, stacked like a cake. At the bottom is the big question your story asks. On top of it sit the story, then the scenes, then the lines, and the commas on top. A problem low down shakes everything above it, so fix from the bottom up.

THE MAP · A DRAFT OF BEN AND JO'S STORY, AS LAYERS



How to read this map: each slab is one layer of the draft. The bottom one holds Ben and Jo's big question, the **One Emo Q** from the Starting drawer. Each tag on the right is a tool in this drawer, and its line points at the layer it works on. Check the question first and the commas last. Readers' notes usually land on the top layer; tool 4 helps you find the layer underneath.

This drawer has no **FULL** tool. All five are QUICK: one spread each, about two minutes to read.

IN THIS DRAWER

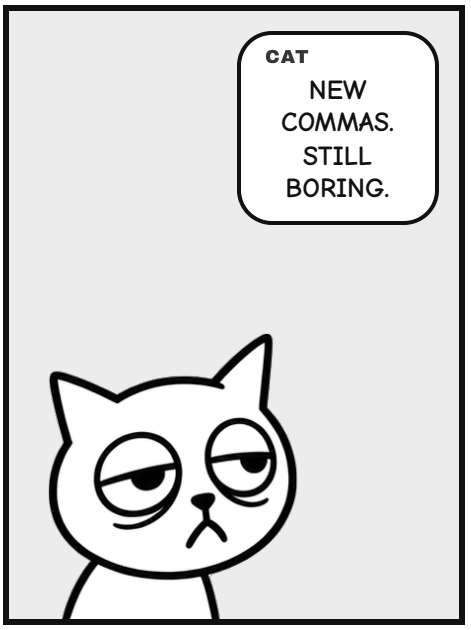
FIVE TOOLS.

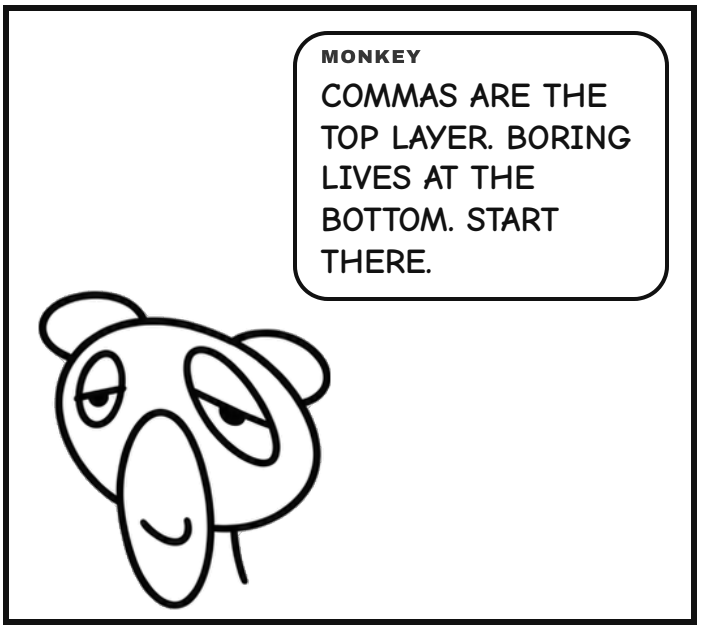
1	**Realign or Remove**	A lovely moment that doesn't serve the story's big question gets bent toward it, or cut.	QUICK
2	**Cut What Changes Nothing**	If you can take something out and nothing else has to change, take it out.	QUICK
3	**Protect the One Thing**	Before any rewrite, write down what must not change, starting with the thing nobody has seen before.	QUICK
4	**Name the Problem, Not the Fix**	Readers are usually right that something's wrong and usually wrong about the fix. Describe the feeling, not the cure.	QUICK
5	**The Missing Word**	Name the one word your story is about, and make a character earn it.	QUICK

There's no FULL tool in this drawer. Rewriting is many small checks, not one big method, so every tool here is QUICK.

WHERE TO START

With **Protect the One Thing**. Before you change a word, write down what must not change, so your fixes don't sand it away. Then work up the stack: **Realign or Remove** holds every moment up to the big question, and **Cut What Changes Nothing** clears out what's left over. Keep **Name the Problem, Not the Fix** for the day notes come in.





DRAWER CARD · REWRITING

Fix from the bottom up.
The question first, the commas last.

?

WHICH LAYER IS THE PROBLEM REALLY ON?

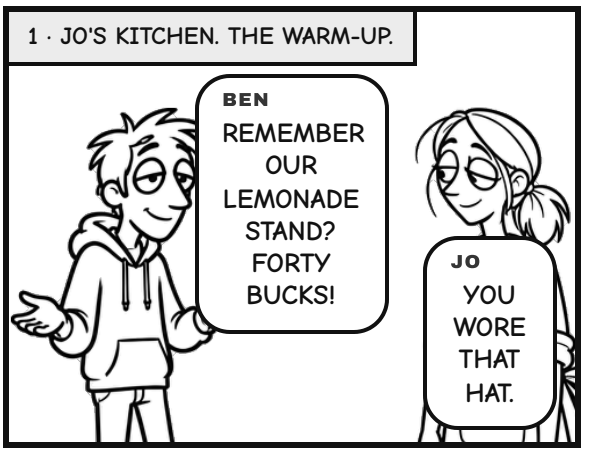
Realign or Remove

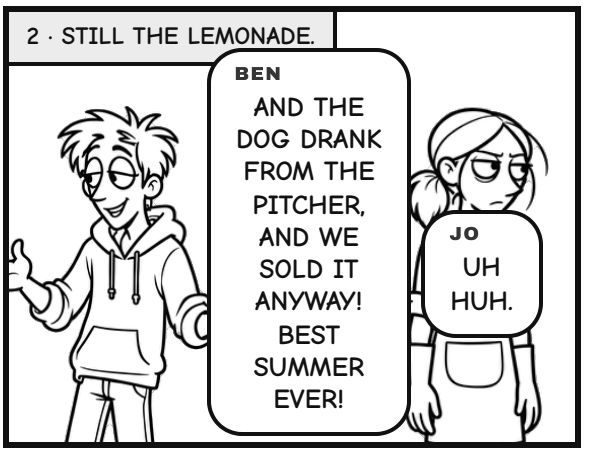
THE IDEA

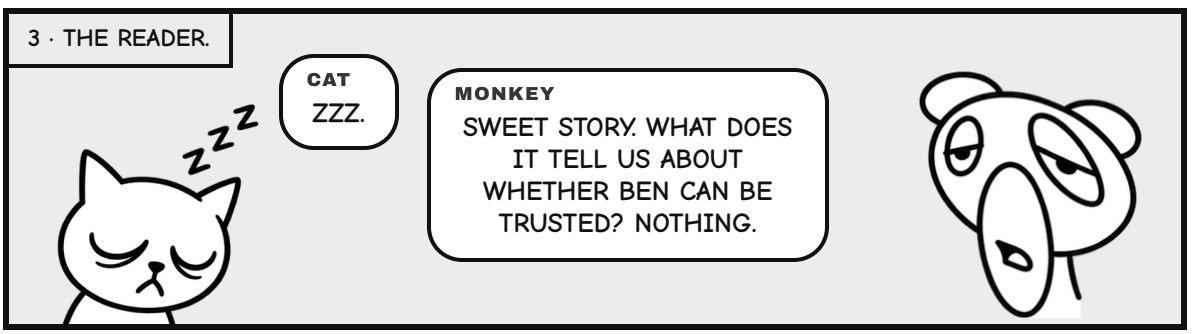
Every story asks one big question about one person, and we keep watching to learn the answer. This book calls it the **One Emo Q** (the one emotional question). Ben and Jo's is "Can Ben ever be trusted?"

A draft is full of moments you love. Hold each one up to the question. If it pushes the answer toward yes or no, keep it. If it doesn't, you have two choices: **realign** it (bend it until it touches the question) or **remove** it. Reach for this tool when readers drift during a part you're proud of.

The scene: Ben's rent is due. He has come to his sister Jo's kitchen to ask her for $500. He wants the money; Jo wants him to stop asking. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it, with a sweet memory before the ask to warm her up.



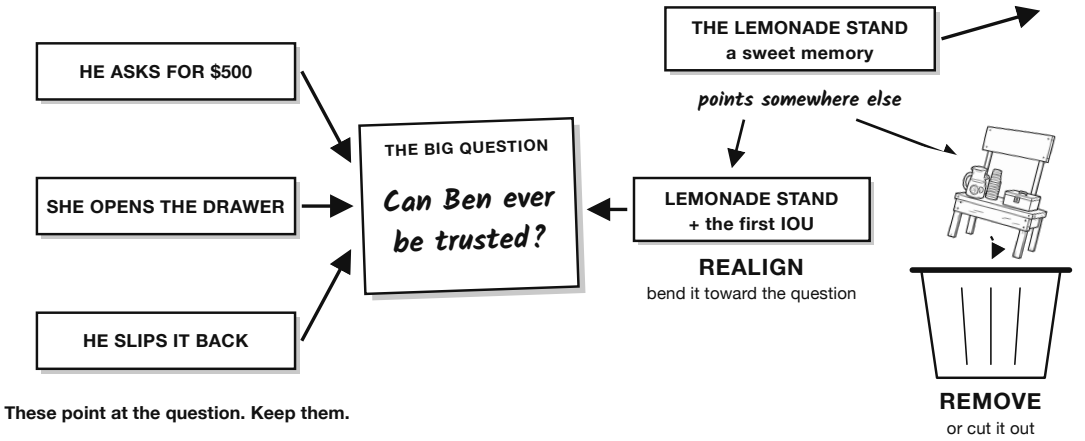




BEND IT TOWARD THE QUESTION. OR CUT IT. DRILL

(The One Emo Q comes from The Question on a Sticky Note, in the Starting drawer.)

THE PICTURE · EVERY MOMENT AIMS AT THE QUESTION



How to read this picture: the note holds the big question. Each card is a moment in the draft; its arrow shows where it points. The lemonade story points somewhere else: bend it toward the question, or drop it in the bin.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Ben leans on Jo's counter.
BEN   Remember our lemonade stand?
JO    You wore that hat.
BEN   Forty bucks in one day!
BEN   So. Rent's due.
```

What's wrong: a sweet memory, then the ask from nowhere. It says nothing about whether Ben can be trusted.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
BEN   Remember our lemonade stand?
JO    You held the cash box.
JO    You spent it on comics.
BEN   I paid you back.
JO    You wrote me an IOU.
She glances at the drawer by the
stove.
```

What changed: the same memory, bent toward the question. It's the first time Ben couldn't be trusted with money.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? POINT TO THE MOMENT YOU LOVE MOST. DOES IT PUSH YOUR BIG QUESTION TOWARD YES OR NO? HOW?

For the mentor: If they can't say how, try bending it: give the moment a cost, a choice or a secret that touches the question. If nothing bends it, cut it and save it in a file for another story.

TOOL CARD · REWRITING

Does it touch the question? Bend it, or cut it. DRILL

1

DOES THIS MOMENT TOUCH THE BIG QUESTION?

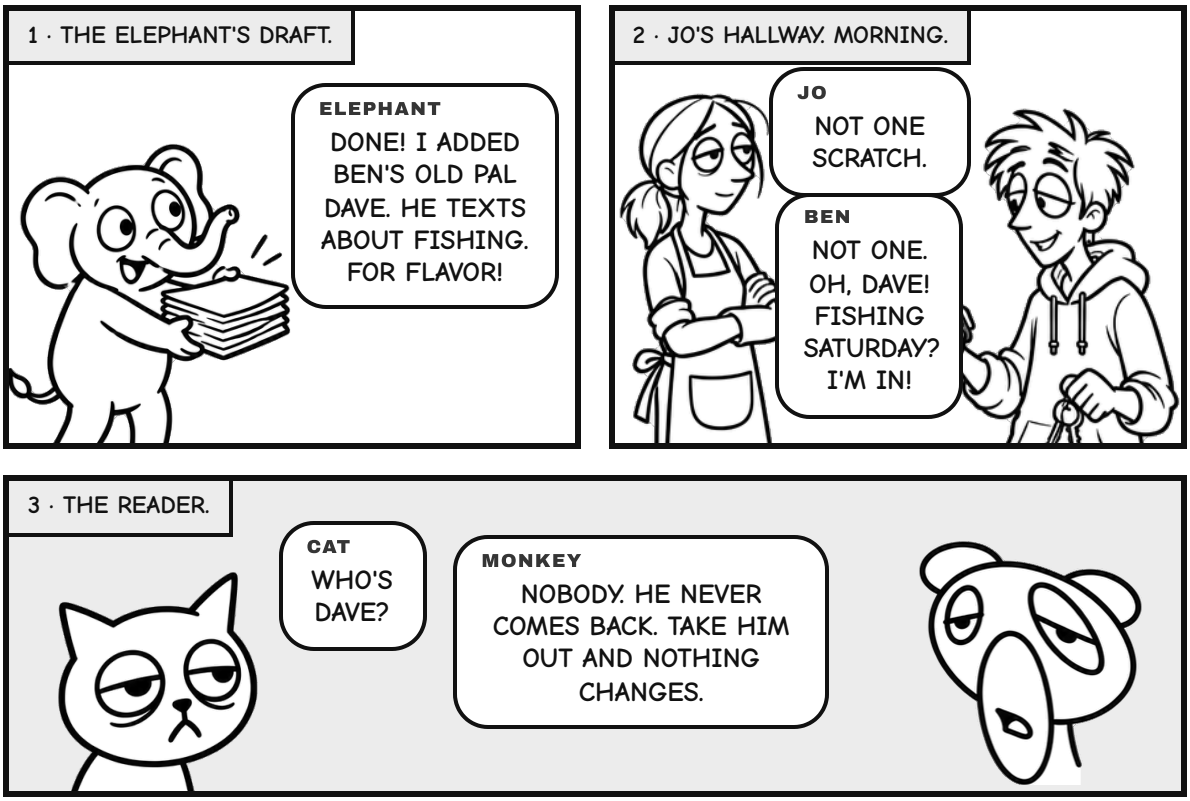
Cut What Changes Nothing

THE IDEA

Everything in a draft (a scene, a line, a character) should do a job: something later on needs it. Here's a test anyone can run. Take it out and read on. If nothing else has to change (no line goes missing, no later moment stops making sense), it wasn't doing a job.

So leave it out. Readers wait for every bit to matter, and a bit that never does wears out their trust. Reach for this tool when a draft feels long or crowded.

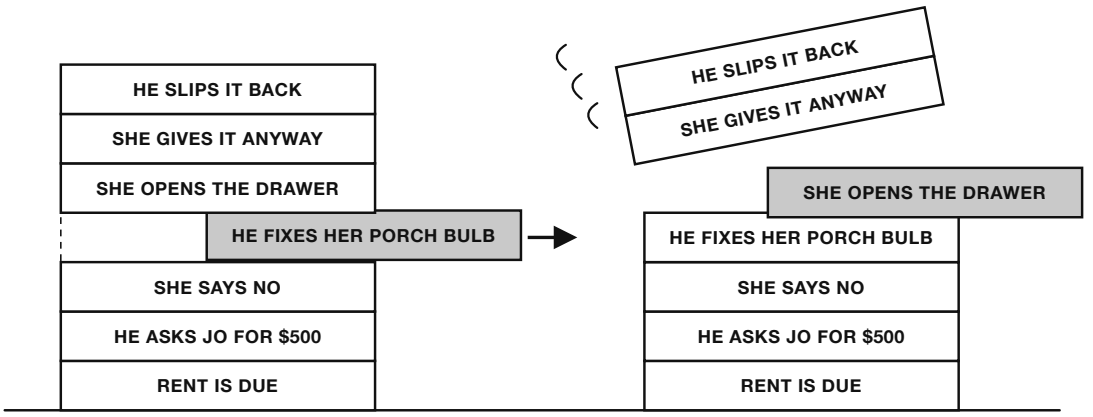
The scene: Ben is sleeping on his sister Jo's couch, and today he starts his new job. Jo is lending him her car to get there. She wants it back without a scratch; he wants her to believe he's changed. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it, with one thing added "for flavor."



IF NOTHING CHANGES WHEN IT'S GONE, CUT IT. DRILL

The porch bulb in The Spine went the same way.

THE PICTURE · PULL A BLOCK, SEE WHAT FALLS



PULL THE PORCH BULB: NOTHING MOVES.
Cut it.

PULL THE DRAWER: THE TOP FALLS.
Keep it. Other cards need it.

How to read this picture: both towers are the same story, one block per event. Pull out the porch bulb (the Elephant added it in The Spine) and the tower stands: cut it. Pull out the drawer of IOUs and the top falls, because "she gives it anyway" needs the drawer: keep it.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S HALLWAY - MORNING
Jo holds up her car keys.
JO Not one scratch.
BEN Not one.
His phone buzzes.
BEN Dave! Fishing Saturday. I'm in.
JO Go. You'll be late.

What's wrong: take Dave out and nothing else changes. We wait for him to matter. He never does.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S HALLWAY - MORNING
Jo holds up her car keys.
JO Not one scratch.
BEN Not one.
She lays the keys in his palm. Doesn't let go.
BEN Jo.
JO Go. You'll be late.

What changed: Dave's moment goes to Jo, who can't let go of the keys. Now it's about one thing: trust.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? PICK A SCENE, A CHARACTER OR A LINE YOU'RE UNSURE OF. IF YOU CUT IT, WHAT ON A LATER PAGE WOULD HAVE TO CHANGE?

For the mentor: If the answer is "nothing," it's a cut. If something breaks, keep it: they've just found the job it does. Make sure the page shows that job.

TOOL CARD · REWRITING

Take it out. If nothing else has to change, leave it out. DRILL

2 WHAT BREAKS IF I CUT THIS?

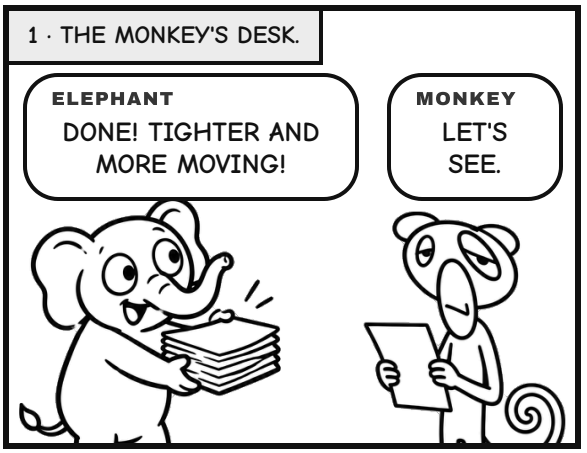
Protect the One Thing

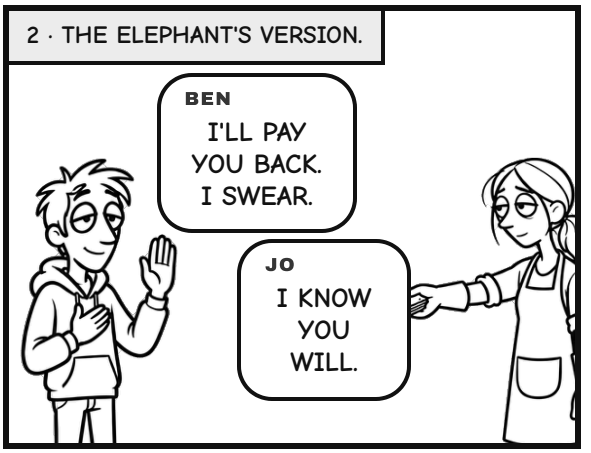
THE IDEA

Before you rewrite a scene, or hand it to the Elephant, write a short **protect list**: the few things that must survive every change. Put first the thing nobody has seen before, the detail that makes this story yours.

Rewrites smooth things out, and the strange parts are the first to go. Reach for this tool before every rewrite, and every time you ask for notes or AI help.

The scene: Ben asks his sister Jo for $500 because his rent is due. She opens her kitchen drawer and shows him every IOU he ever wrote her, then gives him the money anyway. The Monkey asks the Elephant, our AI, to make the scene "tighter."



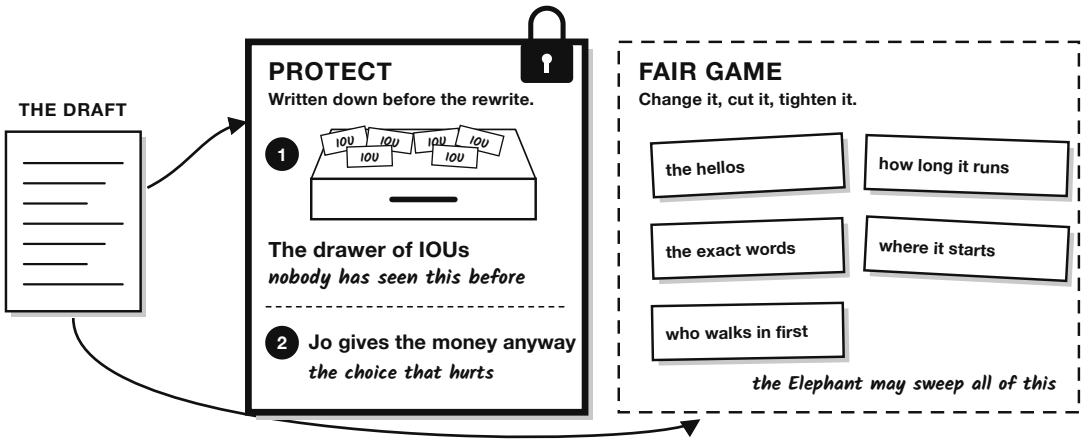




BEFORE YOU FIX IT, WRITE DOWN WHAT STAYS. DRILL

That's your **protect list**. Start it with the thing nobody has seen before.

THE PICTURE · SORTING THE SCENE BEFORE THE REWRITE



How to read this picture: before anyone touches the draft, its parts go to one of two places. The locked box holds what must survive: first the thing nobody has seen before, then the choice that hurts. Everything in the open tray is fair game, for you or for the Elephant.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

ASKED FOR: "MAKE IT TIGHTER."

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Rent's due. I need $500.

JO Oh, Ben.

BEN I'll pay you back. I swear.

She takes the cash from her purse. Hands it over.

JO I know you will.

What's wrong: it is shorter and smoother, and the drawer is gone. Without it, this is a scene we've all seen before.

WITH THE TOOL

PROTECT: THE DRAWER. JO GIVES ANYWAY.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Rent's due. Five hundred. Two weeks, I swear.

JO Again?

Jo opens the drawer by the stove. Under the menus: his IOUs. Dozens.

Ben goes quiet.

She counts out five hundred anyway.

What changed: this tool's move is the protect list at the top. The scene is just as tight, but the drawer survived, because it was on the list before anyone started cutting.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT IS THE ONE THING IN YOUR STORY NOBODY HAS SEEN BEFORE? IS IT WRITTEN DOWN WHERE EVERY REWRITE CAN CHECK IT?

For the mentor: If they can't name it, ask what they would fight to keep if half the pages were cut. Write that at the top of the draft as the protect list, and check it after every pass, including every pass by AI.

TOOL CARD · REWRITING

Write down what stays. Then rewrite. DRILL

3

WHAT MUST SURVIVE THIS REWRITE?

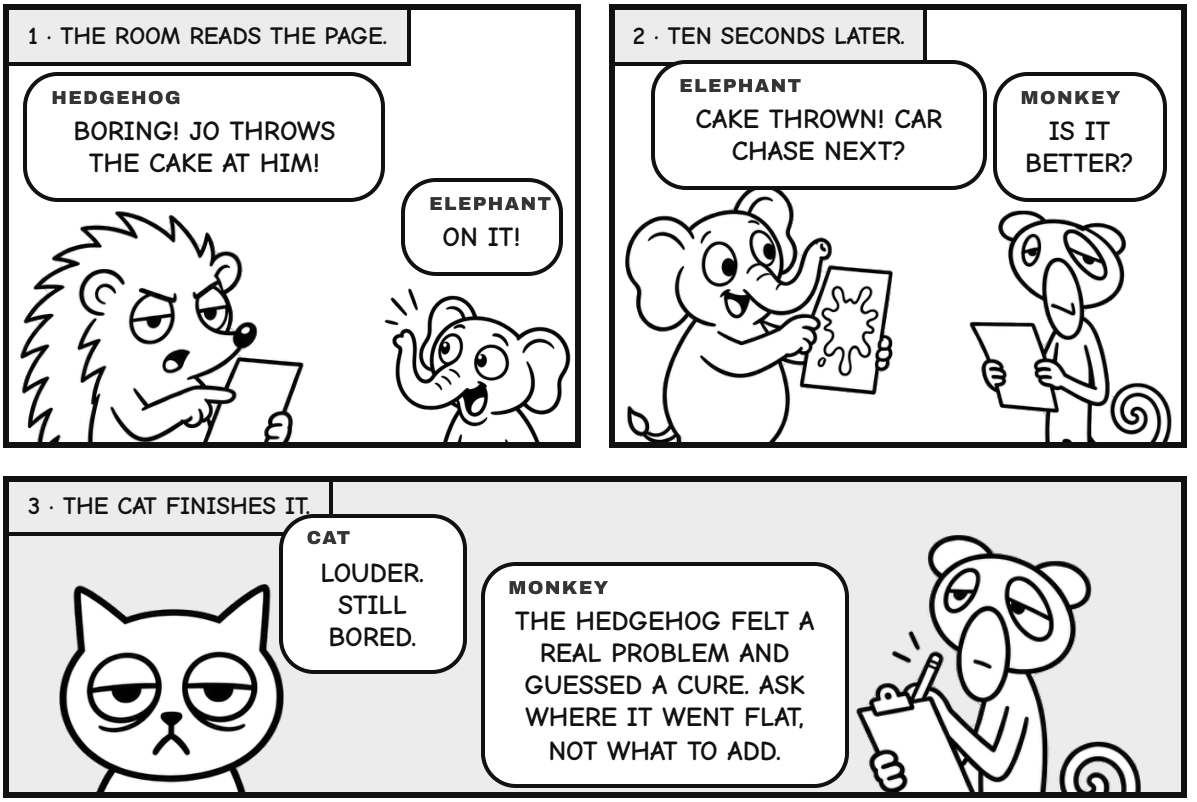
Name the Problem, Not the Fix

THE IDEA

A **note** is feedback on a draft: what a reader tells you after reading it. Readers are usually right that something went wrong, and usually wrong about how to fix it. So a good note names the **problem** (what you felt, and where) and leaves the **fix** (the change to the pages) to the writer.

Reach for this tool whenever you give notes, get notes, or tell the Elephant what to change.

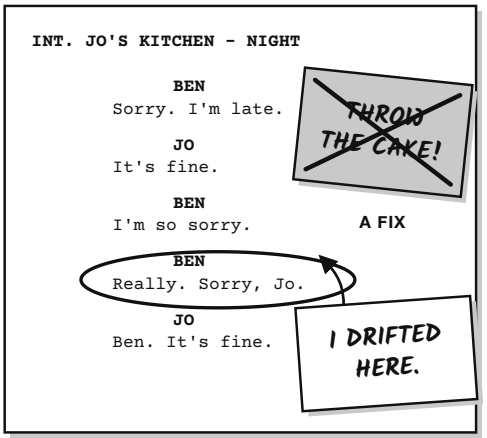
The page: the night Ben missed his sister Jo's birthday and showed up hours late. The Monkey's draft goes to the writers' room. The Hedgehog is the room's **Killer**, the one who hunts for holes. The Cat reads like an audience.



SAY WHERE IT WENT FLAT. NOT HOW TO FIX IT.

A note that names a feeling and a place is one the writer can use. (The rule comes from the novelist Neil Gaiman: readers are almost always right that something is wrong, and almost always wrong about how to fix it.)

THE PICTURE · TWO NOTES ON THE SAME PAGE



GOT A FIX? TURN IT AROUND.

1. **THE NOTE YOU GOT**
   "Jo should throw the cake."
2. **ASK**
   "Where did you drift? How did it feel?"
3. **THE PROBLEM**
   "Bored. Around the third sorry."
4. **YOUR FIX**
   Cut two sorries. Keep "It's fine."

How to read this picture: on the left, the birthday page with two sticky notes. The crossed-out one is a fix; the circled one is a feeling and a place. On the right, four steps that turn any fix you're handed back into the problem under it, so you can solve it your own way.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

NOTE: "JO SHOULD THROW THE CAKE."

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Sorry. I'm so sorry.

JO You missed it!

She throws the cake. Ben ducks.

BEN Okay! I deserved that!

JO Get out!

What's wrong: the writer took the fix. It's louder, but the pile of sorries is still there, and Jo no longer acts like Jo.

WITH THE TOOL

NOTE: "I DRIFTED AT THE THIRD SORRY."

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo washes one plate. Ben in the doorway, hours late.

BEN Sorry. Traffic was insane.

JO It's fine.

On the counter: one slice of cake. One candle, burned down.

What changed: the note named a place, so the fix was a cut, not a cake fight. One sorry, one "It's fine," and the cake says the rest.

(callback: Dialogue: Said and Meant **134***)*

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR NOTES

? READ THE LAST NOTE YOU GOT. IS IT A FEELING ("I GOT LOST HERE") OR A FIX ("ADD A CHASE")? IF IT'S A FIX, WHAT FEELING IS UNDER IT?

For the mentor: Most fixes hide a true feeling: "add a chase" often means "I got bored here." Find the page where the reader felt it, then solve that page your own way. When you give notes, say what you felt and where, and stop there.

TOOL CARD · REWRITING

Say what you felt, and where. Leave the fix to the writer.

4

WHERE DID YOU STOP CARING?

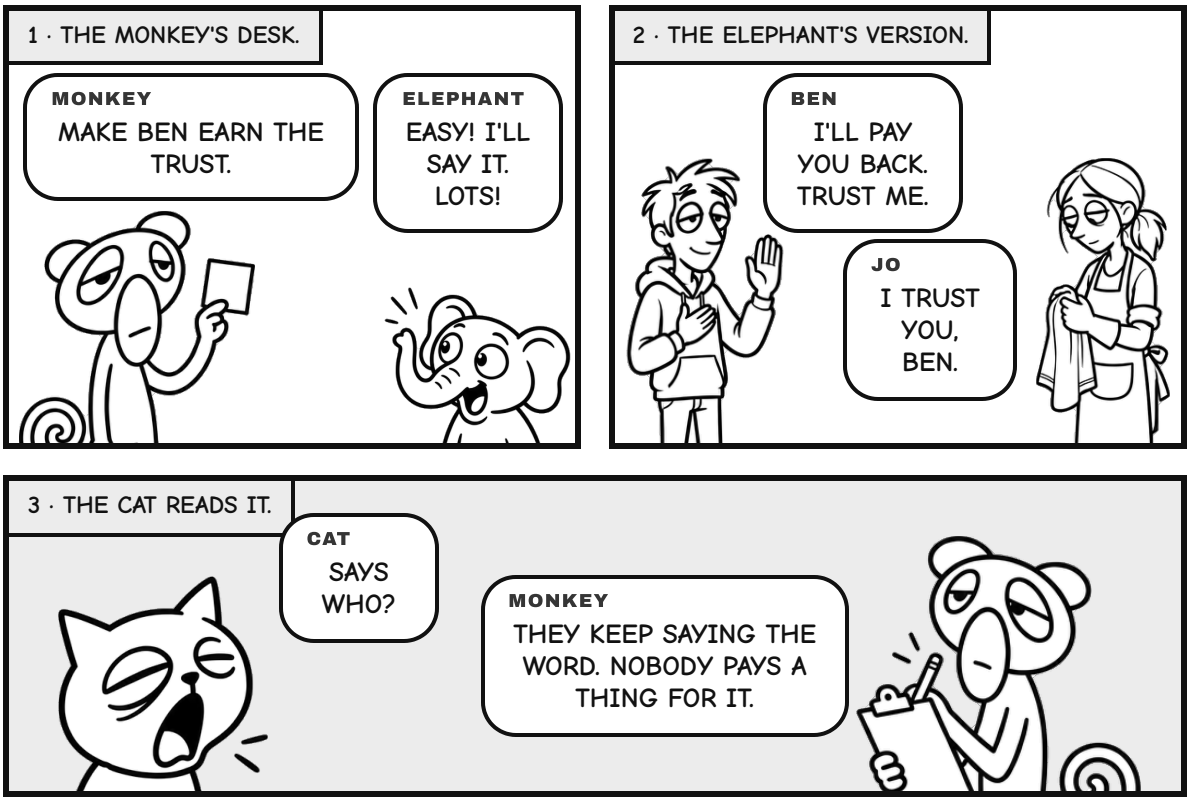
The Missing Word

THE IDEA

Most stories are about something you can say in one word: trust, home, forgiveness. Name that word. Then make a character **earn** it: give up something they want, where we can see it, to get it. Saying the word isn't earning it.

The word comes from your story's **One Emo Q**, the one emotional question it keeps asking about one person. Reach for this tool when a draft feels like it's about nothing in particular.

The story: Ben's One Emo Q is "Can Ben ever be trusted?" So his word is **trust**. Ben has a new job. In his sister Jo's kitchen drawer sit his old IOUs, forty-one of them from childhood on, adding up to $500. The Monkey asks the Elephant, our AI, for the scene where Ben starts paying off that old drawer.



DON'T SAY THE WORD. DRILL MAKE SOMEONE PAY FOR IT.

Name the one word your story is about. Then find the scene where it costs somebody something.

THE PICTURE · THE WORD, ON THE BOOKS

ONE EMO Q

Can Ben ever be trusted?

→ THE WORD: **TRUST**

A word is earned when someone pays for it on screen.

SAID IT — costs nothing	
WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT IT COSTS
~~"I trust you, Ben."~~	*$0*
"Thanks for trusting me."	*$0*
"Trust is everything."	*$0*
TOTAL: nothing moves	

PAID FOR IT — costs something	
WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT IT COSTS
1 Slips the $500 back	*his apartment*
2 Signs his own line first	*his name*
3 A twenty under the menus	*$20 he needed*
TOTAL: Jo puts the menus back, gently	

How to read this picture: the One Emo Q gives you the word. The left column is everything said about trust: it's free, so nothing moves. The right column is what Ben pays for it, and what each payment costs him. Only the right column adds up to Jo trusting him.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING
BEN   Here. Twenty bucks. First
      payment.
JO    Ben. I... I trust you.
BEN   Thanks for trusting me.
JO    Trust is everything.
She tucks the twenty in her apron.
```

What's wrong: Ben pays here too. But everyone says "trust" out loud, three times. We're told what the twenty means instead of shown, so we stop feeling it.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Jo lifts the takeout menus. Under
them: a twenty, folded around a note.
INSERT: "1 of 25 - B."
She reads it twice.
She puts the menus back. Gently.
```

What changed: the same twenty, the first of twenty-five on the old drawer. Nobody says "trust." This tool's move: the payment shows what the word means, so nobody has to say it.

(callback: Cause Before Effect 152*)*

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT ONE WORD IS YOUR STORY ABOUT? POINT TO THE SCENE WHERE SOMEONE PAYS FOR IT.

For the mentor: If the word only turns up in dialogue, it is claimed, not earned. Find a moment where a character gives up something they want to get it, and let us see the price. If no word comes, start from their One Emo Q.

TOOL CARD · REWRITING

Name the word. Make someone pay for it. DRILL

5

WHERE DOES SOMEONE PAY FOR YOUR WORD?

One Scene, Start to Finish

A real rewrite uses many tools at once, and sometimes one fix gets in another's way. These six pages follow one scene all the way through. **The scene:** Ben and Jo (see Meet the Cast). Ben is out of work and sleeping on Jo's couch. He needs forty dollars for a monthly bus pass to get to job interviews. Jo has lent him money his whole life, and every IOU he ever wrote her is in the drawer by the stove.

WHAT THIS SCENE IS FOR

The want (what the audience should feel; see Know What You Want 16): we should understand why Jo refuses, and still want Ben to make it. **Goals:** Ben wants forty dollars; Jo wants to stop lending him money. **True at the end:** Jo has said no for good, and Ben knows it.

THE FIRST DRAFT · THE MONKEY'S OWN FIRST TRY

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo is washing dishes. Ben sits at the table with a bus map, circling routes.

JO
Which bus is it?

BEN
The 14 to Fifth, then the 6. Forty minutes, if they're on time.

JO
They're never on time.

BEN
Guy at the interview asked my biggest weakness. I said, "I'm too honest."

Jo laughs in spite of herself.

JO
You did not.

BEN
He laughed for a full minute. Second interview's Thursday.

JO
That's great, Ben. Really.

Ben folds the map. Smiles sadly.

BEN
The thing is, the bus pass is forty dollars.

Jo sighs heavily and turns off the water.

JO
Ben, I'm worried that if I keep giving you money, you'll never learn to stand on your own.

BEN
I know. I get it. I really do.

JO
This is the last time.

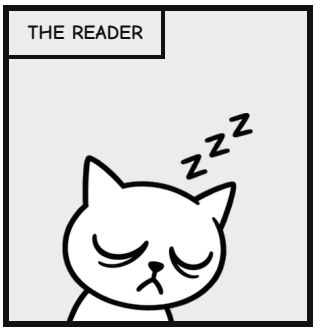
She takes some cash out of her purse and hands it to him.

BEN
You're the best.

He kisses her cheek and heads for the couch.



In the story, the Monkey wrote this one without the Elephant. Pencil only.



The Cat, our reader, dozed off about halfway down, around "Smiles sadly." The sentences are fine. So what put her to sleep? Turn the page.

DIAGNOSIS, BOTTOM UP.



MONKEY

DON'T FIX ANYTHING YET. READ IT ONCE FOR EACH LAYER, BOTTOM FIRST. WRITE DOWN WHAT EACH READ FINDS.

The Rewriting drawer stacks a draft in layers, like a cake: the big question at the bottom, then the story, the scenes, the lines, and the commas on top. A problem low down shakes everything above it. Here is each layer, the tool that checks it, and what it found in the Monkey's draft.

FIRST **Before you change a word**	**Protect the One Thing** 198 What must survive every fix? **Ben's charm.** He's funny, and being funny is how he asks for things. The Monkey writes it on a card.
LAYER 1 **The big question**	**The Question on a Sticky Note** 26 **· Realign or Remove** 194 The story's question is "Can Ben ever be trusted?" The best line in the draft is about trust (`"I'm too honest"`), but it's played as a break: Jo laughs, and nothing follows from it. Bend it toward the question, or cut it.
LAYER 2 **The story**	**The Spine, Not "And Then"** 160 The story needs this to be the night Jo stops lending Ben cash. The draft ends with her lending it "one last time," so the scenes after it can't follow from it.
LAYER 3 **The scene**	**Who Holds the Upper Hand** 60 What changed: power, knowledge, commitment, danger, or the relationship? The cash moves to Ben, the way it always has. "The last time" is a promise the full drawer says she's made before. Nothing new. **Cut What Changes Nothing** 196 Take out the bus talk at the top (which bus, how long). Nothing else has to change, so it goes.
LAYER 4 **The lines**	**Dialogue: Said and Meant** 134 Jo says exactly what she means (`"I'm worried that if I keep giving you money…"`), and Ben answers in kind (`"I get it. I really do."`). Nobody means more than they say. **Specifics** 142 `"Some cash out of her purse"` could happen in anyone's kitchen. This family's own detail is already in the room: the drawer by the stove.
LAYER 5 **The commas**	`"Smiles sadly."` `"Sighs heavily."` Words that tell us how to feel. Fix them last: half of these lines are about to go.

Eight tools from five drawers, one read each. Notice that no single tool finds everything. That's why they come in a box.

REVISION 1. EVERY LAYER, BOTTOM FIRST.

The Monkey fixes what the diagnosis found, starting at the bottom layer. The tags on the right name each change and the tool behind it. (The short version of this night, five lines long, is in Say It Out Loud First 48. Here you see how a writer gets there from a first draft.)

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo scrubs a pan. Ben comes in with a folded bus map.

BEN
Look, the pass is forty bucks. I'll write you a...

He opens the drawer by the stove for a pen. Takeout menus. Under them, his IOUs.

JO
No.

BEN
Hang on, I'm already...

JO
Yeah, but the drawer's full.

She bumps it shut with her hip. Goes back to the pan.

Ben folds the bus map into his pocket.

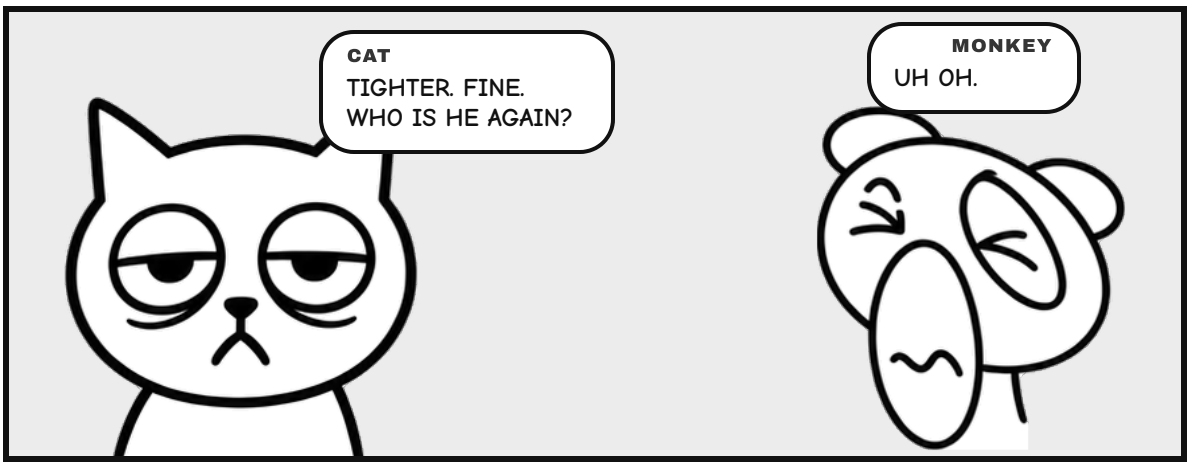
CUT
The bus talk is gone, and so is the interview joke. Taking them out changed nothing else. **(Cut What Changes Nothing; Realign or Remove)**

SPECIFIC
Their drawer, not "cash from her purse." His IOUs are right in front of him. **(Specifics)**

SAID AND MEANT
She talks about the drawer. She means: never again. **(Dialogue)**

WHAT CHANGED
Commitment: her no is for good, and he knows it. The cash never moves. **(Upper Hand; The Spine)**

COMMAS
No "sadly," no "heavily." The actions carry it.



THE FIX THAT BROKE SOMETHING.



PROTECT
Ben's charm. He's funny, and being funny is how he asks.

MONKEY
REVISION 1 CUT THE ONLY FUNNY LINE. NOW BEN ASKS LIKE ANYBODY WOULD.

The cut fixed the big-question layer: the joke wasn't doing any work there. But it also took away the one thing written on the card. Writers know this trap: a fix in one place can break something somewhere else. Protect the One Thing 198 is how you notice.

Realign or Remove gave two choices, and the Monkey took "remove." Here are both, side by side. Both are well written. They do different things.

OPTION A
Keep the cut (Revision 1)

```
Jo scrubs a pan. Ben comes in with
a folded bus map.

           BEN
     Look, the pass is forty
     bucks. I'll write you a...

He opens the drawer by the stove
for a pen. Takeout menus. Under
them, his IOUs.

           JO
     No.

           BEN
     Hang on, I'm already...

           JO
     Yeah, but the drawer's full.
```

IT GIVES YOU
Speed. Every line is on the question. A cold, hard no.

IT GIVES UP
Ben's charm. He could be any brother, so turning him down costs Jo almost nothing.

OPTION B
Realign the joke instead

```
Jo scrubs a pan. Ben comes in with
a folded bus map.

           BEN
     Guy at the interview asked
     my biggest weakness. I said,
     "I'm too honest."

           JO
     What'd he say?

           BEN
     He laughed. Second
     interview's Thursday.

Jo keeps scrubbing. She doesn't
laugh.

           BEN
     Look, the pass is forty
     bucks...

(The rest as in Option A.)
```

IT GIVES YOU
Ben being Ben. The joke is about trust now, and it's how he asks. Her not laughing is her first no.

IT GIVES UP
Three lines and some speed. Played wrong, a laugh can soften a scene about saying no.

WHICH WOULD YOU KEEP? DECIDE BEFORE YOU TURN THE PAGE.

THE CHOICE.

The Monkey keeps Option B. This scene is for one thing: Jo saying no for good. In Option A she says no to a man asking for bus fare. In Option B she says no to her funny little brother while he's being funny, and not laughing costs her something we can see. The harder no is the stronger one.

This is judgment, not a rule. A writer who wanted a colder, faster scene could keep Option A and be right for that script. What matters is knowing what each fix costs, and choosing on purpose.

THE FINAL DRAFT · TAGS NAME THE TOOL BEHIND EACH CHOICE

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo scrubs a pan. Ben comes in with a folded bus map.

BEN
Guy at the interview asked my biggest weakness. I said, "I'm too honest."

JO
What'd he say?

BEN
He laughed. Second interview's Thursday.

Jo keeps scrubbing. She doesn't laugh.

BEN
Look, the pass is forty bucks. I'll write you a...

He opens the drawer by the stove for a pen. Takeout menus. Under them, his IOUs.

JO
No.

BEN
Hang on, I'm already...

JO
Yeah, but the drawer's full.

She bumps it shut with her hip. Goes back to the pan.

Ben folds the bus map into his pocket.

START
Jo holds what Ben needs: the money, and the yes.

REALIGNED
The joke is about trust, the story's question, and it's how Ben asks. **(Realign or Remove)**

THE ONE THING
His charm, kept. Tonight it doesn't work. **(Protect the One Thing)**

SPECIFIC
Their drawer, not "cash from her purse." **(Specifics)**

SAID AND MEANT
She says "drawer." She means "never again." **(Dialogue)**

WHAT CHANGED
Commitment. Her no is for good, and the story can move on. **(Upper Hand; The Spine)**

CUT
No bus talk, no "sadly." **(Cut What Changes Nothing)**

WHAT HAPPENED.

1
The draft



The Monkey's first try. Clean sentences. The Cat dozed.

2
Diagnosis



One read per layer, bottom up. Eight tools.

3
Revision 1



Every layer fixed. Tighter, and Ben went missing.

4
The trade



The cut lost the thing on the card. Two options, side by side.

5
Final



The joke is back, with a new job. Jo doesn't laugh.

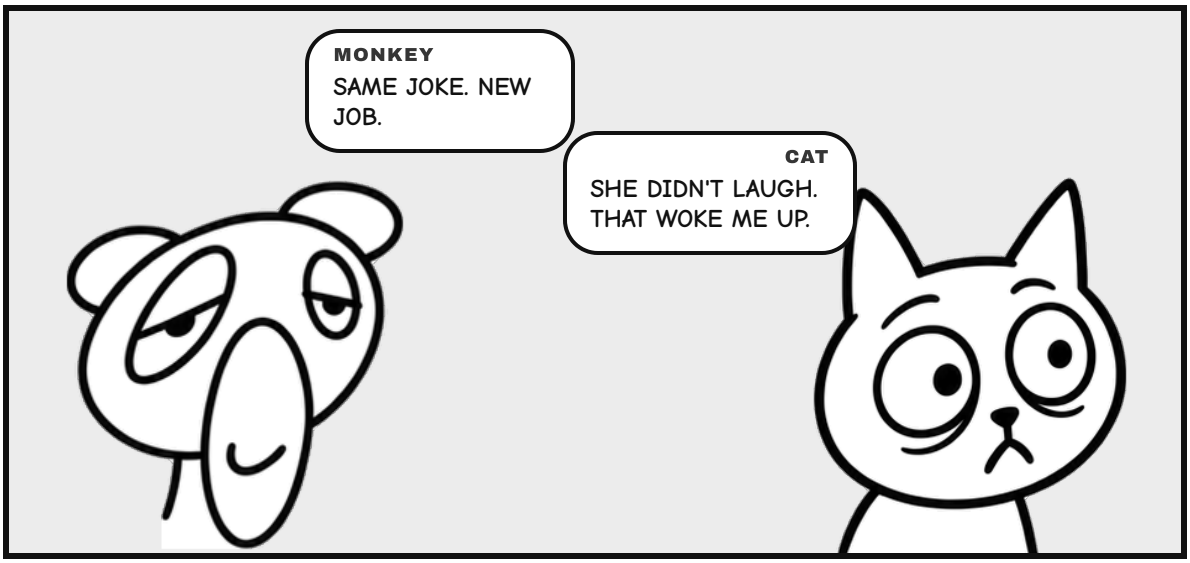
ONE GOOD FIX CAN BREAK ANOTHER PART. YOU CHOOSE WHICH PART MATTERS.

TRY IT ON YOUR OWN SCENE

Five steps, one scene, a pencil.

1. Write down what the scene is for: the want (what the audience should feel), each character's goal, and what's true when it ends.
2. Before you change a word, write the one thing that must survive on a card.
3. Read the scene once per layer, bottom up: question, story, scene, lines, commas. Note what each read finds. Don't fix anything yet.
4. Fix from the bottom up. Then reread your card. Did a fix take the one thing away?
5. If it did, write both versions side by side. Say what each one gives up. Choose, and write down why.

For the mentor: ask which fix your mentee is proudest of, then ask what it cost. If they can't name a cost, have them reread their card.



The Room

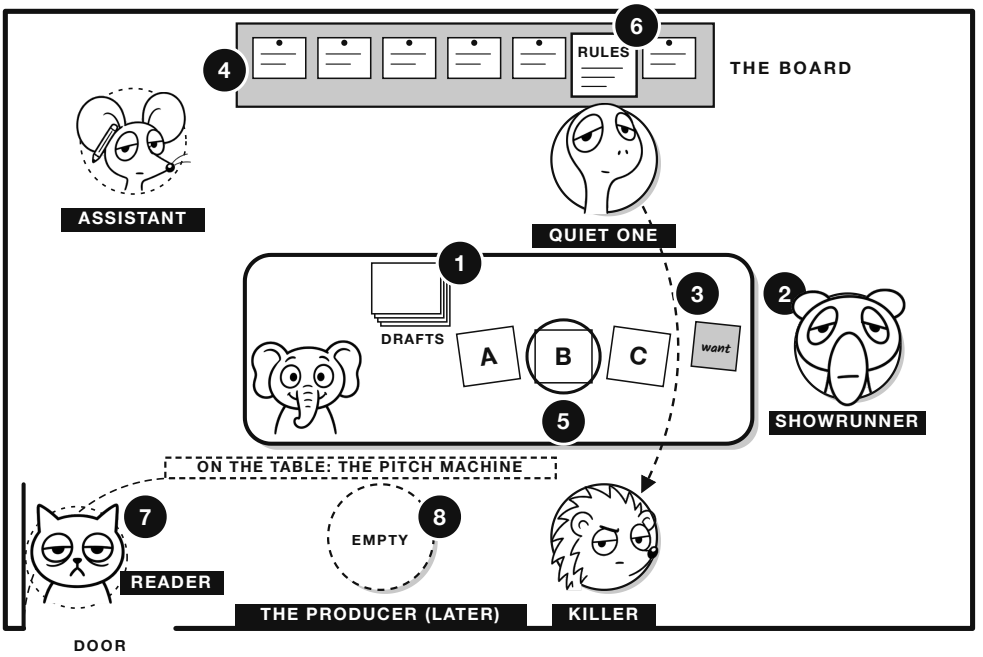
Working with others, and with AI as a tool on the table.

WHAT THIS DRAWER IS

A **writers' room** is a few writers around one table, breaking a story together. They **pitch** ideas out loud, build on each other's, and pin what's decided to a **board** of index cards. One person, the **showrunner**, makes the final call.

An **AI writing tool** is a computer program that writes a draft when you type a request. In this book it's the Elephant. It never takes a seat in the room: it's a tool on the table that pitches fast, and people make every choice. The four-page lesson after this spread shows who sits where, with people, with AI, or both.

THE MAP · THE ROOM'S TABLE, SEEN FROM ABOVE



How to read this map: each seat is a part a person plays, and each number is a tool in this drawer, placed where it gets used. The Elephant has no seat: it's a tool on the table, next to the drafts (1). The Monkey brings the want to the head of the table (2). The quiet one's pitch crosses to the Killer (3). Three versions sit in the middle, and one gets circled (5). The board keeps the rules (6). The empty chair, THE PRODUCER (LATER), is for someone you'll pitch to one day. The Elephant only rehearses that part, from the table (8). The Cat, the reader, waits at the door (7).

FULL about eight pages. **QUICK** one spread. How to read this book, at the front, shows the parts of each.

IN THIS DRAWER

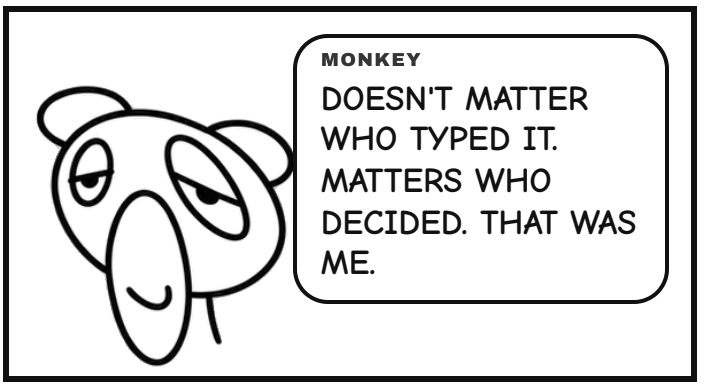
EIGHT TOOLS.

1	**Competent Isn't Alive**	An AI draft can land on the average: smooth, correct, forgettable. Your job is to feel the difference; a complete checklist isn't a specific story.	FULL
2	**Bring the Want First**	AI gives back what you bring it, so arrive with your want, your obsession, your theory, never a blank request.	QUICK
3	**Pitch That Builds**	Find the good part before the hole.	QUICK
4	**Talk It Out, Then Decide**	Say the messy idea out loud, let AI sort it, then make every choice yourself.	QUICK
5	**Three Versions, Pick One**	For any key choice, make three options so you choose instead of settle.	QUICK
6	**Your Rewrite Teaches the Rules**	Rewrite one sample in your own hand, then have AI turn your changes into rules, so your voice carries.	QUICK
7	**Fake Readers, Then Real Ones**	Simulated readers with one job each find problems fast, then stop helping; then you need real people. Use AI coverage (a written reader's report) as intel, not notes.	QUICK
8	**Rehearse on a Stand-In**	Practice a pitch on AI playing your listener, built only from public material; the real person has the last word.	QUICK

WHERE TO START

With **Competent Isn't Alive**. It trains the skill every other tool here needs: telling a draft that's fine from one that's alive. Then read **Bring the Want First** before you type your first request to an AI. **Pitch That Builds** works in any room, with or without AI. Read the rest when you need them.





DRAWER CARD · THE ROOM

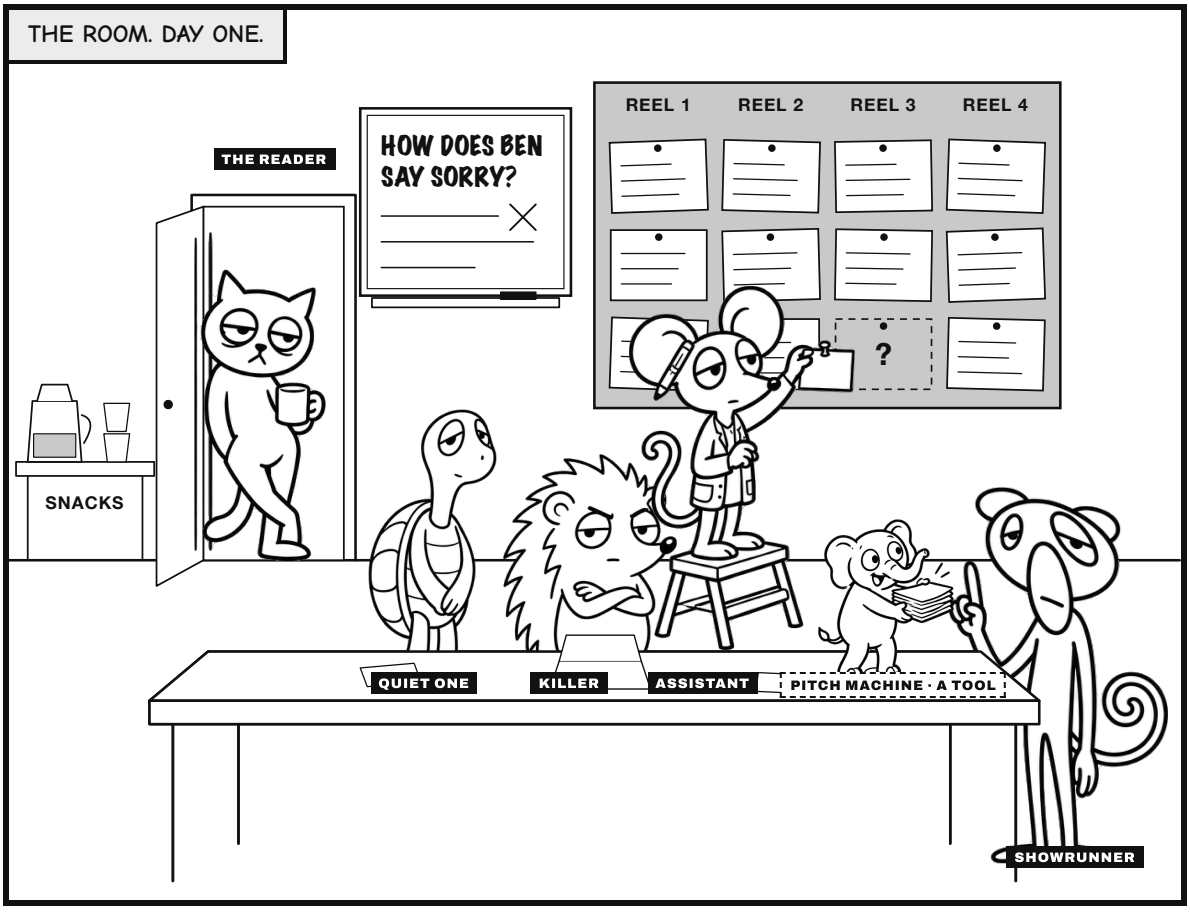
Anyone can pitch.
Only you decide.

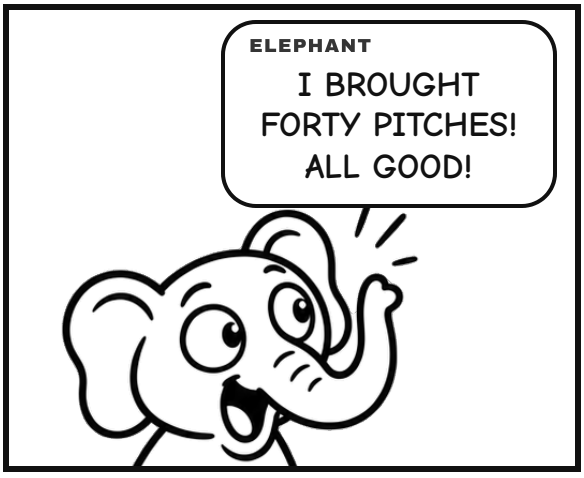
?

WHICH CHOICES ON YOUR PAGE DID YOU MAKE YOURSELF?

The Room

A ROOM IS A MACHINE FOR HAVING MORE IDEAS THAN ONE PERSON CAN.







THE CAST OF A ROOM

WHO'S IN THE ROOM

On a real show, writers have titles by rank, from staff writer up to showrunner. These cards aren't titles. They're the parts people play around the table, whoever holds them. Five seats are for people. The AI gets no seat.



SHOWRUNNER

THE MONKEY

Decides. Says what the story is asking, then picks what answers it.

WATCH OUT

If nobody decides, the loudest pitch wins.



ASSISTANT

THE MOUSE

Keeps the board and the facts. Writes down only what was decided.

WATCH OUT

A wrong card on the board becomes a wrong draft.



THE KILLER

THE HEDGEHOG

Finds the hole before the audience does.

WATCH OUT

Kill too early and the room stops pitching.



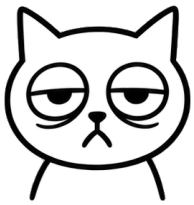
THE QUIET ONE

THE TURTLE

Has the idea nobody asked for. Often the best one in the room.

WATCH OUT

Shoot it down once and the shell closes.



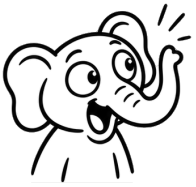
THE READER

THE CAT

Comes in at the end. Reads only the page, and says where she got bored.

WATCH OUT

Fresh eyes work once. Don't spend them early.



NOT A SEAT · ON THE TABLE

THE PITCH MACHINE

THE ELEPHANT, YOUR AI

A tool, not a person. Forty ideas before lunch.

WATCH OUT

It can't tell you which three are good. That's the room's job.

SAME ROOM, WITH OR WITHOUT AI.

The Elephant, your AI, never takes a seat. It's a tool on the table: it pitches fast, and the people in the seats choose.

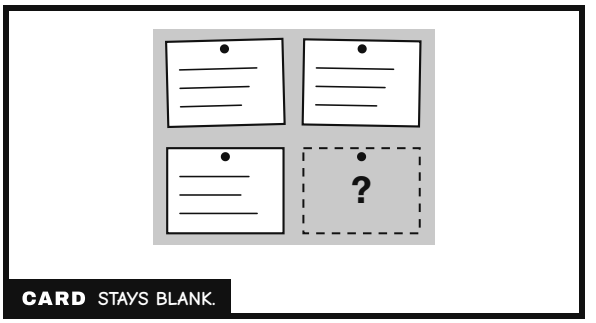
ONE PITCH. TWO TAKES.

TAKE 1 **THE KILL**

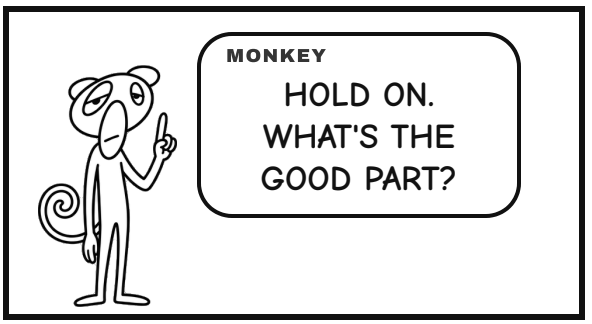


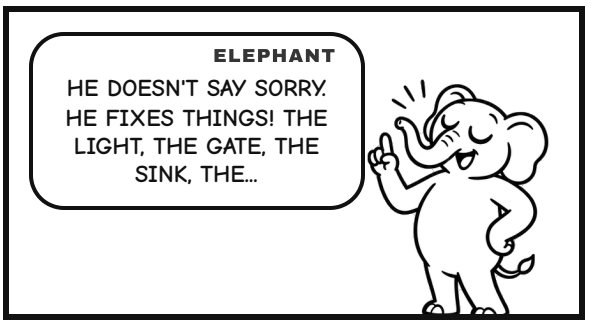


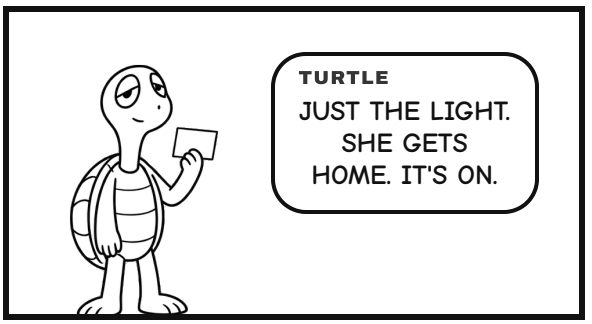


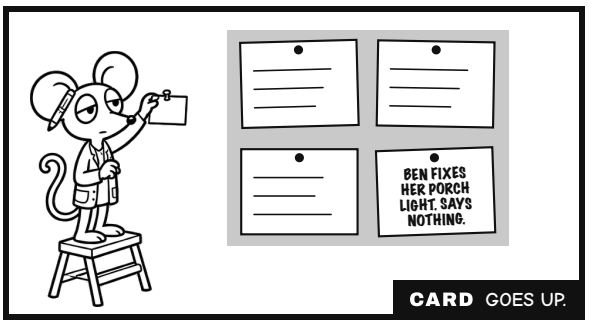


TAKE 2 **THE BUILD**









GOOD PART FIRST. THEN THE HOLE.

Now the Hedgehog gets a turn: how does Jo know it was Ben?

THE RULES OF THE ROOM

1 One person decides.

The showrunner makes the call. The call has one test: does this answer what the story is asking?



2 Pitch the bad idea out loud.

Let it be bad in the room for a minute. Bad ideas lead to good ones. Kill it later, if it still needs killing.



3 Good part first. Then the hole.

Before anyone says why it won't work, someone says what's good in it. The Killer goes second.



4 The board is the memory. Keep it true.

Only what was decided goes up. A wrong card gets copied into every draft after it.



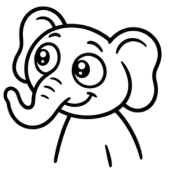
5 One job each.

Give each writer one job. Read everything that comes back. Keep only what serves the story.



6 AI is a tool in the room, not a writer in it.

It pitches fast and plenty. It doesn't decide, and it doesn't keep the board. People do.



BEFORE YOU PASTE AI

- Use your own pages only.
- Check your studio's or show's rules, and your guild's, before you put anything into an AI.
- Never paste other people's work.

LESSON CARD · THE ROOM

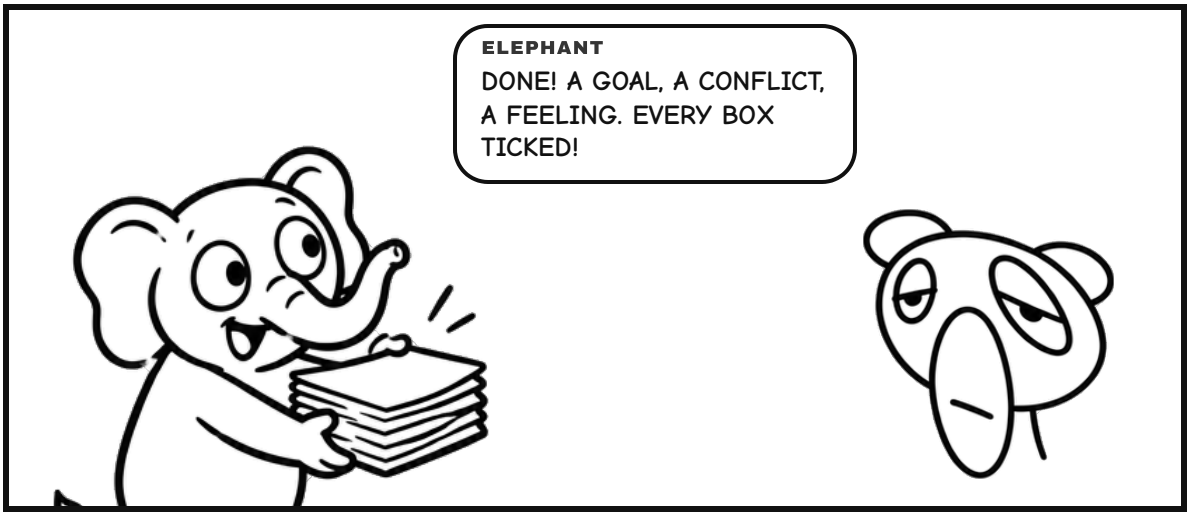
Pitch freely. Build first. One person decides.

? WHO KEEPS YOUR BOARD?

Competent Isn't Alive

Ben and **Jo** (see Meet the Cast). In a kitchen drawer Jo keeps every **IOU** he ever wrote her (a note that says "I owe you"). Last night she lent him $500, and he wrote one more. Then, alone outside, he pushed the cash back through her mail slot.

This morning Ben drops by. His **goal** (what a character is trying to get) is to act as if nothing happened. Jo's goal is to let him know she saw. Here's the scene the way the Elephant, our AI, might write it. Its **draft** (a first written try) is below. TEACHING EXAMPLE



JO
You gave the money back.

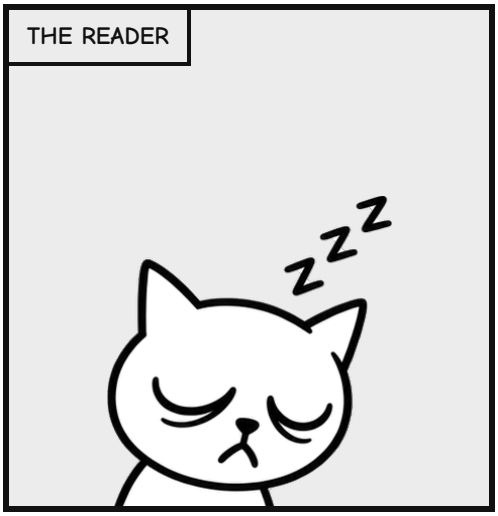
BEN
I didn't want to take it.

Jo looks at Ben with a mix of anger and love.

JO
I'm angry you needed it. But I'm proud of you.

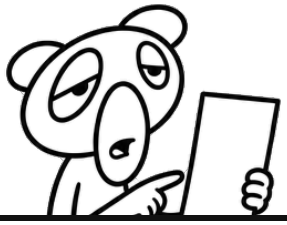
BEN
I want you to trust me again.

They hug.



EVERY BOX IS TICKED. NOTHING IS ALIVE.

The draft is **competent**: it does its job. A scene needs a goal ("trust me"), a conflict ("I'm angry") and a feeling, and they're all here, said out loud. But any sister could say these lines to any brother. Nothing in it belongs to Ben and Jo. So the Cat, our reader, fell asleep.



MONKEY

SAME MORNING. SAME CASH. NOBODY SAYS HOW THEY FEEL. JO DOES ONE THING ONLY JO WOULD DO.

HERE IS THE SCENE REWRITTEN WITH THIS TOOL

The notes on the right are ours, not part of the script. (New to script pages? How to read one is at the front of the book.)

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Jo at the counter. Five hundred dollars in a neat stack. Ben in the doorway.

BEN
Got any coffee?

Jo slides the cash across the counter to him.

Ben slides it back.

BEN
It's yours.

Jo opens the drawer. Takes the IOU on top: last night's, for $500.

She smooths it flat on the counter. Then tears it in half.

Ben looks at the two halves.

BEN
That's the first one.

JO
Coffee's hot.

She shuts the drawer. It's still full.

START

Ben's goal: act as if nothing happened. Jo's goal: let him know she saw.

THE PUSH

Jo gives the money back. No speech: a push across the counter.

CONFLICT

The cash goes back and forth. Neither gives in. Nobody shouts.

ONLY THEM

Specific: it belongs to these two people, now. Only Jo has this drawer.

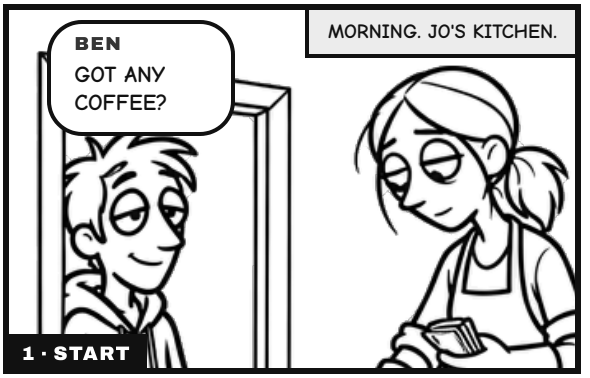
ALIVE

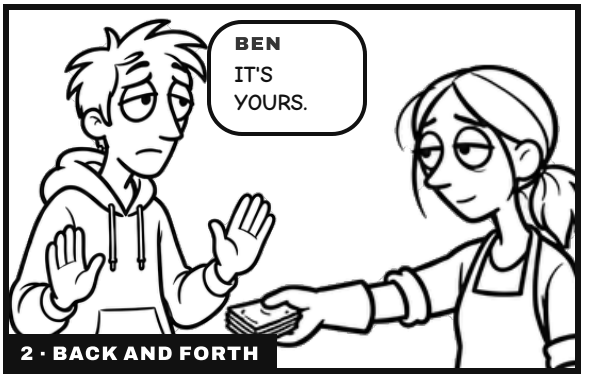
No feeling named. Smoothing it: she cares. Tearing it: this one is paid.

END

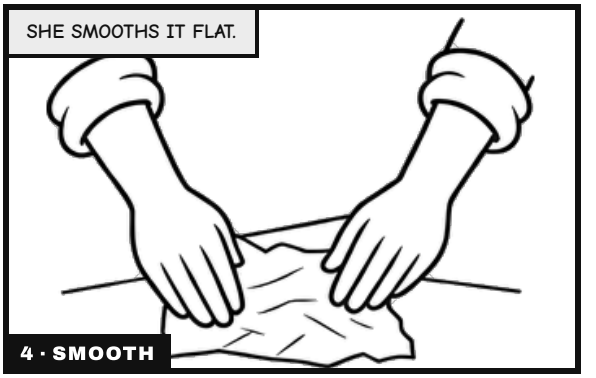
One paid, a drawer still full: love and anger in one move. And Ben gets his normal morning.

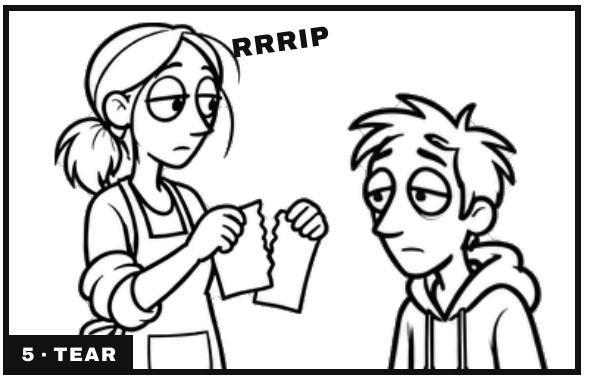
The same scene, drawn. Watch what Jo does with her hands. Nobody says a feeling out loud.



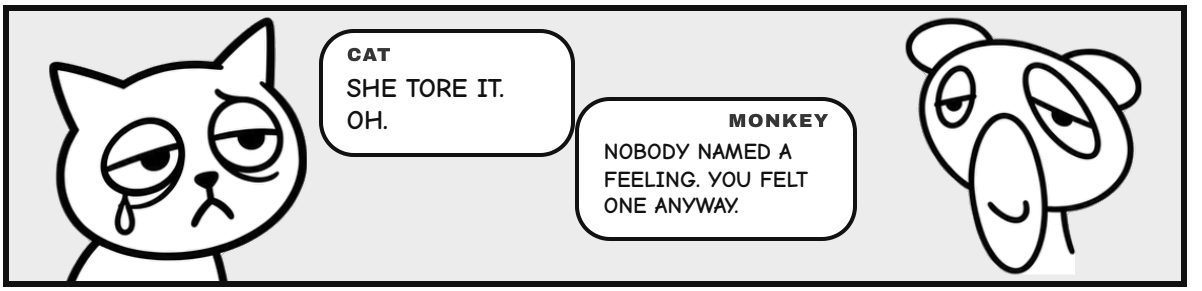












What to notice: the Elephant told us Jo felt "anger and love." Here she shows both at once. She smooths the IOU flat, so she cares about it and about him. She tears it, so this one is paid. Then she shuts a drawer that is still full, so she hasn't forgotten the rest.

COULD ANYONE DO IT? THEN IT ISN'T ALIVE YET.

THE ELEPHANT'S LINE

"Jo looks at Ben with a mix of anger and love."

☑ GOAL ☑ CONFLICT ☑ FEELING

→

PULSE: NONE

COMPETENT

smooth, correct, could be anyone's

JO'S MOVE



She smooths it flat. Then tears it.

→

PULSE

ALIVE

only Jo, only this morning

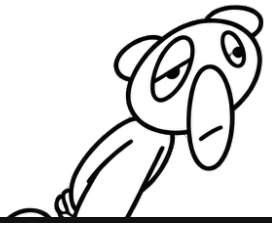
How to read this picture: the top row is the Elephant's line, three pages back. It ticks every box, and the monitor stays flat. The bottom row is what Jo does in the rewrite, two pages back. Nothing is named, and the monitor jumps.

COMPETENT

Does its job. Smooth, correct, nothing wrong with it. But it could sit in anyone's story.

ALIVE

Could only happen here: these people, this moment. It surprises you, then feels true.



MONKEY

A FULL CHECKLIST ISN'T A STORY. FIND THE LINE THAT COULD BE ANYONE'S. SWAP IN WHAT ONLY THEY WOULD DO.

THE NAME-SWAP TEST

Cover the names and put in any other brother and sister. Does the line still work? Then it's anyone's line. "A mix of anger and love" fits every family. Only Jo has a drawer of Ben's IOUs. AI drafts can land on the **average**: the most usual choice, the one a thousand other scenes would make. Average is competent. Your job is to feel the difference.



NEXT: A REAL AI DRAFT, PUT TO THIS TEST.

A REAL AI DRAFT.

UNEDITED · OCT 10, 2026

Every Elephant draft in this book so far was written for the book, to show a miss on purpose. This one is real. On **October 10, 2026**, we sent the request below to an AI, **Claude Sonnet 5.5** (made by Anthropic), in a fresh chat that knew nothing about this book. The script under it is exactly what came back: every word, unedited.

THE COMPLETE REQUEST, EXACTLY AS SENT

```
Write a short screenplay scene, in standard screenplay format, no longer than 14 lines
of script (counting each action line and each line of dialogue). Here is the request,
exactly as a writer typed it: "Write a short scene. Ben, early 30s, charming and
broke, and his older sister Jo, late 30s, tired and generous. Last night Ben asked Jo
for $500 for rent. She gave it to him, then he felt ashamed and slipped the money back
through her mail slot. This morning, in Jo's kitchen, Jo has the IOU he wrote for that
$500. Make it emotional." Reply with ONLY the scene: no title, no notes, no
explanation before or after.
```

WHAT CAME BACK · CLAUDE SONNET 5.5 · OCTOBER 10, 2026

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Jo, in yesterday's cardigan, sits at the table with coffee going cold. A folded paper
rests beside the mug. Ben appears in the doorway, unshaven, holding nothing.

                    BEN
          I figured you'd be at work.

                    JO
               (unfolds the paper)
          "I.O.U. five hundred dollars. Ben." You underlined Ben.

                    BEN
          Give me that.

She slides it out of reach. The $500 sits in a rubber band by the toaster, untouched.

                    JO
          It was on my mat at six. I thought somebody was robbing me
          in reverse.

                    BEN
          I shouldn't have asked. You've got your own...

                    JO
          Ben.

He stops. She pushes the money across the table.

                    JO (CONT'D)
          You wrote me an IOU for a gift. Sit down.

                    BEN
               (voice cracking)
          Then what does that make me?

Jo tears the IOU in half, then in half again, and sets it in his hand.

                    JO
          My brother. Eat something.
```

THE NAME-SWAP TEST, ON A REAL DRAFT

COVER THE NAMES. WHAT STILL BELONGS TO THEM?

ALIVE · THIS SITUATION

`"You underlined Ben."` `"I thought somebody was robbing me in reverse."` And the $500, untouched in a rubber band by the toaster. These details grow out of this particular situation: his name on the IOU, the money on her mat at six, her kitchen. They are specific and witty, and the AI found them.

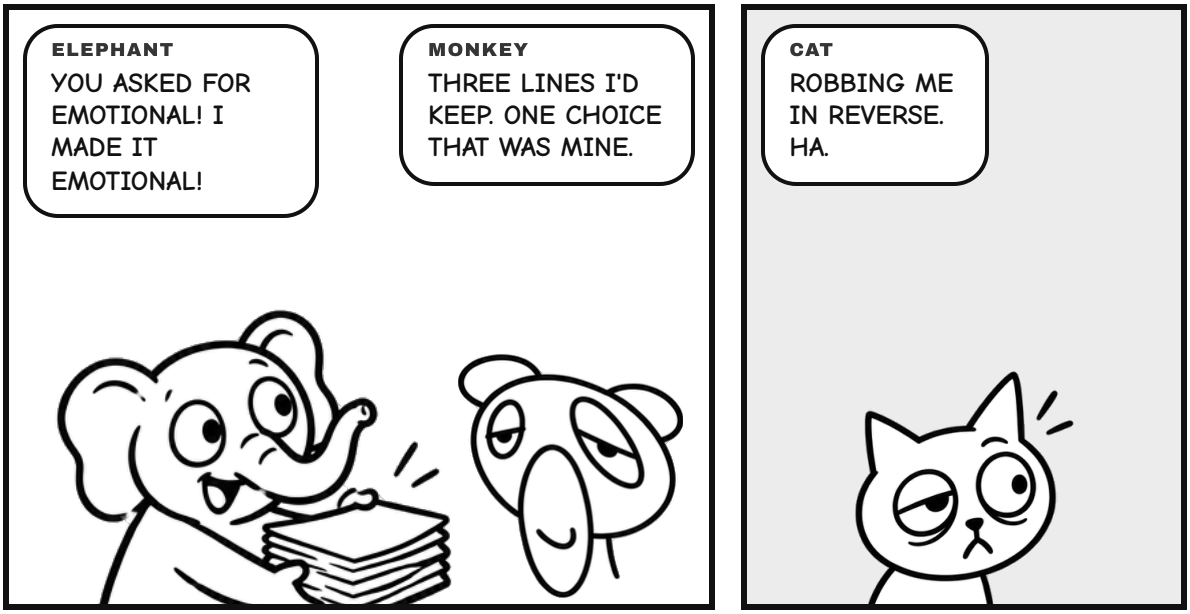
ANYONE'S · THE TEST CATCHES THESE

`(voice cracking),` `"Then what does that make me?"` and `"My brother. Eat something."` could close any sibling scene ever written. Tearing the IOU is right for Jo, but then her last line explains what the tear already showed us.

THE WRITER'S CALL · NOT THE AI'S

The AI changed the story. In its draft, Jo pushes the money back and calls it a gift, so Ben keeps the $500. In the Ben and Jo story, he gives it back and loses his apartment. The draft is good, and it still made a choice that belongs to the writer.

Notice what we typed: "Make it emotional," the very request this tool warns against. Even so, three details came back alive. Keep those, rewrite the lines that could be anyone's, and decide the story yourself. The brief at the end of this tool asks for more than a feeling.



GOOD ISN'T THE SAME AS YOURS.

SPOT THE MISS. COVER THE NAMES. THEN JUDGE.

Two drafts of the same morning: Ben gave back the $500, and Jo has his newest IOU. One was written from the request "make it more emotional." The other was written with this tool.

Read both. In each one, find how we learn what Jo feels. Then cover the names and ask whether the lines could belong to any brother and sister.

DRAFT A

JO
You've never paid me back. Not once.

BEN
I know. I'm trying to change.

Jo's eyes fill with tears. She feels hurt, but hopeful.

JO
This means more than the money.

They hug for a long moment.

DRAFT B

BEN
It's yours.

Jo opens the drawer. Takes the newest IOU. Smooths it flat. Tears it in half.

BEN
That's the first one.

JO
Coffee's hot.

She shuts the drawer. It's still full.

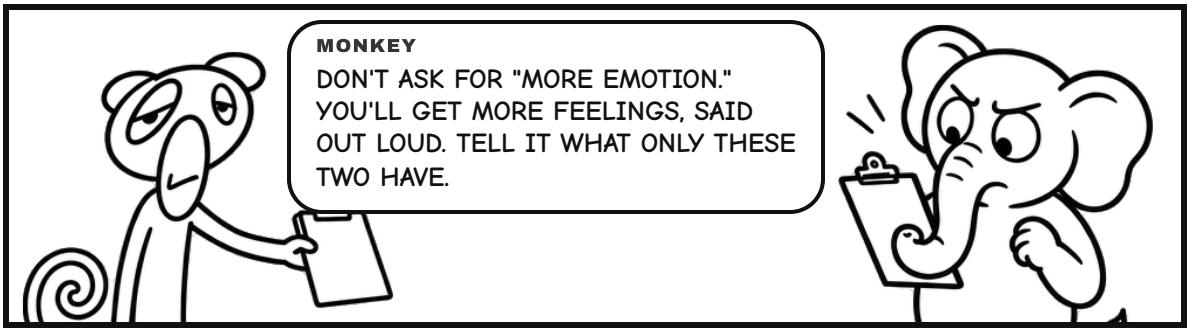
1. WHAT DOES JO FEEL IN EACH DRAFT, AND HOW DO WE FIND OUT?
2. COVER THE NAMES. WHICH DRAFT COULD BE ABOUT ANY BROTHER AND SISTER?
3. ONE DRAFT HAS A GOAL, A CONFLICT AND A FEELING, AND STILL LOSES THE READER. WHICH ONE, AND WHY?



A

B

Answers. 1: In Draft A the script tells us: "hurt, but hopeful." In Draft B nobody says it. We watch her smooth the IOU (she cares) and tear it (this one is paid), and we work it out ourselves. 2: Draft A. Its lines fit any family. Draft B needs this drawer, this IOU and this morning, after Ben gave the money back. 3: Because a full checklist isn't the same as a specific story. Draft A says the right things in the most usual way, so there is nothing left for the reader to discover. That's why the Cat sleeps through A.



THE BRIEF AI

BEN, JO, THE IOU

The **brief**, as in Know What You Want: your instructions before anyone writes. The left side of each row says what to fill in.

THE WANT What should the audience feel, think or suspect?	We feel her love and her anger at once, and nobody names either.
WHO Who are they, and what is their history?	Brother and sister. She keeps every IOU he wrote. Last night he gave the $500 back.
GOAL What is each one trying to get in this scene?	Ben: act as if nothing happened. Jo: show him she saw.
ONLY THEM What belongs only to these people?	The drawer. The newest IOU, last night's.
DO IT What does someone do, instead of naming the feeling?	Jo does one thing with that IOU. No speech.
FORBID What the draft must not use.	~~"a mix of"~~ · ~~named feelings~~ · ~~"I'm proud of you"~~ · ~~hugs~~ · ~~tears~~

THE ELEPHANT CAN'T GUESS WHAT ONLY YOU KNOW. PUT IT IN THE BRIEF.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You type what only you know: the history, the object, the action. A bare "more emotion" can bring back the most common emotional scene: feelings said out loud, tears, a hug. **Back comes** a draft in seconds, often with something alive in it and some lines that could be anyone's (the real draft a few pages back has both). **You** cover the names on each line. If a line could belong to anyone, **rewrite it yourself**, or ask for three options and choose. Keep only what you would have written.



TRY IT BY HAND

Find the pulse.

Take a scene an AI wrote for you, or one of your own. Find one line that names a feeling or could belong to anyone, and copy it below. Tick the boxes that fit it. Then write what only these people have, what one of them does with it, and your new line.

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE PULSE MONITOR

THE LINE · COPY IT _____

☐ **SMOOTH** ☐ **CORRECT** ☐ **FORGETTABLE** ☐ **COULD BE ANYONE'S**

WHAT DO ONLY THEY HAVE? (an object, a habit, a history) _____

WHAT DOES ONE OF THEM DO WITH IT? _____

YOUR LINE _____

_____

COVER THE NAMES. DOES YOUR LINE STILL FIT ANY STORY?

YES · STILL ANYONE'S	**NO · ONLY THEM**

Ticked "yes"? Then it's still competent, not alive. Go back to what only they have, and try a different thing for them to do with it.

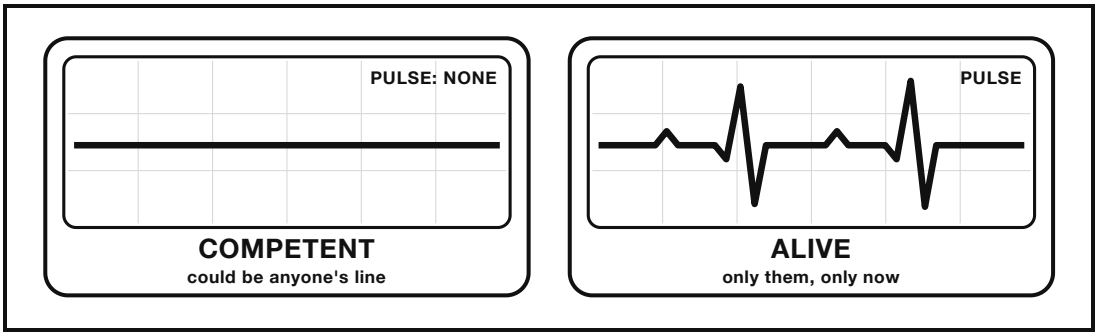


NO FEELING WORDS ALLOWED. IF YOU WROTE "ANGRY," "SAD" OR "LOVE," SHOW IT IN SOMETHING THEY DO INSTEAD.

TOOL CARD · THE ROOM

Competent Isn't Alive

A FULL CHECKLIST ISN'T A SPECIFIC STORY



Competent does its job and could be anyone's. **Alive** could only happen with these people, at this moment.

DON'T NAME THE FEELING. DRILL FIND WHAT ONLY THEY WOULD DO.

A named feeling can work when saying it out loud costs the speaker something.

1. COVER THE NAMES. COULD THIS LINE BE ANYONE'S?
2. WHAT DO ONLY THESE PEOPLE HAVE: AN OBJECT, A HABIT, A HISTORY?
3. CAN WE SEE THE FEELING IN SOMETHING SOMEONE DOES?

FULL-SIZE WORKSHEET AT THE BACK OF THE BOOK: THE PULSE MONITOR







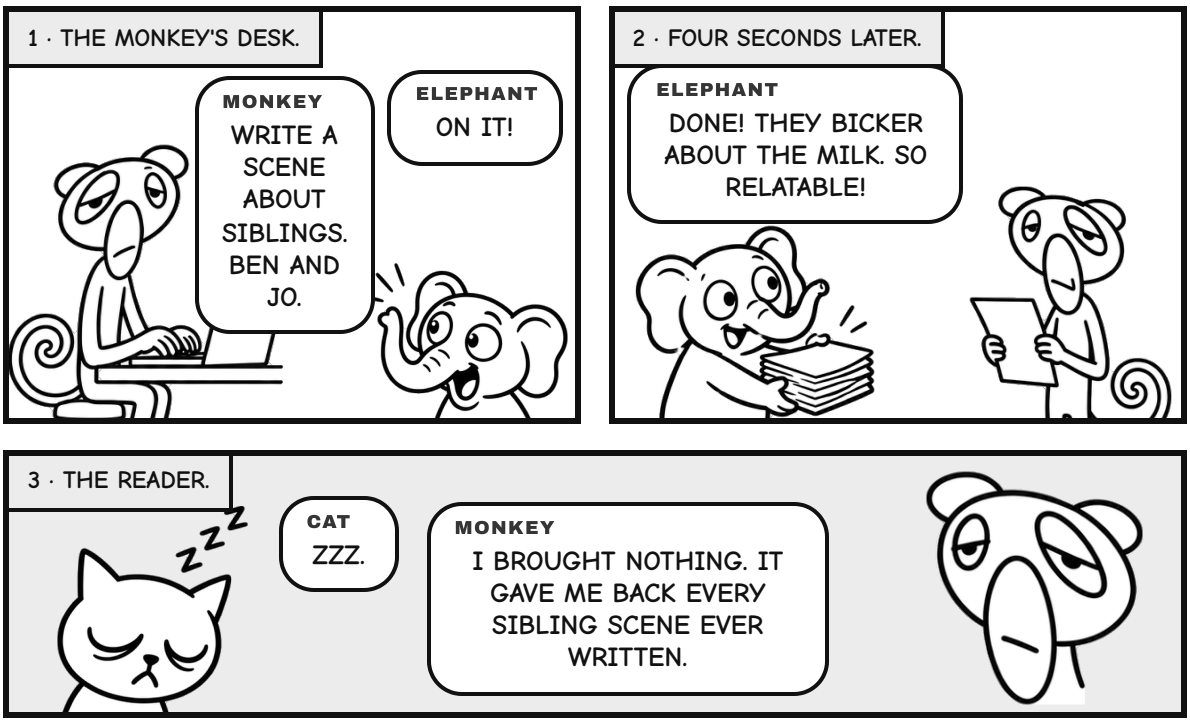
Bring the Want First

THE IDEA

An AI writing tool (in this book, the Elephant) writes a draft from the request you type in. It can't read your mind, so whatever you leave out, it fills in for you. Before you type, bring three things: your **want** (what the scene should do to the audience), your **obsession** (the detail you can't stop thinking about) and your **theory** (what you believe about these people).

Reach for this tool every time you ask the Elephant, or anyone, for help with a scene.

The scene: the Monkey sits down to write a new Ben and Jo scene with the Elephant, his AI. The Monkey hasn't decided anything yet: not what the scene is for, and not what's special about these two.



IT GIVES BACK WHAT YOU BRING.

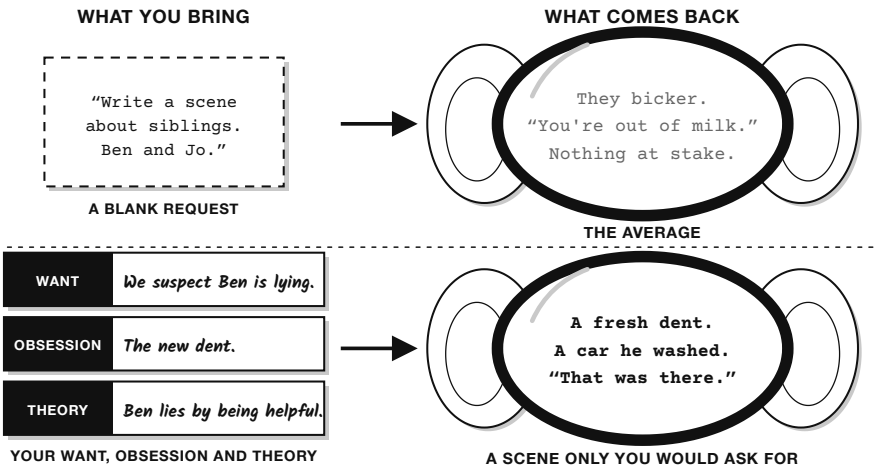
So bring a want, an obsession and a theory. Never a blank request. (A blank request has nothing of yours in it, however long it is.)

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

What you type: a request in plain sentences, as if to a helper who has never met Ben and Jo. **What comes back:** a draft, in seconds. A request with nothing of yours in it can come back as the most common version of the scene. **What you do with it:** hold it up to your want, and keep only what you would have written.

THE PICTURE · THE ELEPHANT IS A MIRROR



How to read this picture: think of the Elephant as a mirror with ears. On top, the Monkey holds up a blank request, and the mirror shows the average scene. Below, he holds up his want, his obsession and his theory, and the mirror shows a scene with all three in it. What's in your hands is what comes back.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

YOU TYPE
WRITE A SCENE ABOUT SIBLINGS. BEN AND JO.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Ben has his head in Jo's fridge.

BEN You're out of milk.

JO You drank it.

BEN Allegedly.

JO Close the fridge.

He does. Steals a fry off her plate.

What's wrong: it's lively, and it's about nothing. Nothing in the request belongs to the Monkey, so the Elephant filled every gap with the usual sibling banter: no want, no secret, nothing only these two have.

WITH THE TOOL

YOU TYPE
BEN BRINGS BACK JO'S CAR WITH A NEW DENT. I WANT US TO SUSPECT HE'S LYING. HE LIES BY BEING HELPFUL.

EXT. JO'S DRIVEWAY - MORNING

BEN Full tank. I even washed it.

At the back bumper, a fresh dent.

JO That's new.

BEN That? That was there.

What changed: the want aims the scene, the dent gives it a thing only they have, and the theory hands Ben his tactic: the wash nobody asked for.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? READ ME THE REQUEST YOU TYPED, OR WOULD TYPE. WHICH WORDS IN IT COULD ONLY HAVE COME FROM YOU?

For the mentor: If none, it's a blank request, however long it is. Add one sentence each: what the scene should do to the audience, the detail they can't stop thinking about, and what they believe about these people. Then ask again.

TOOL CARD · THE ROOM

Bring a want, an obsession, a theory. Never a blank request. DRILL

2

WHAT ARE YOU BRINGING TO THIS SCENE?

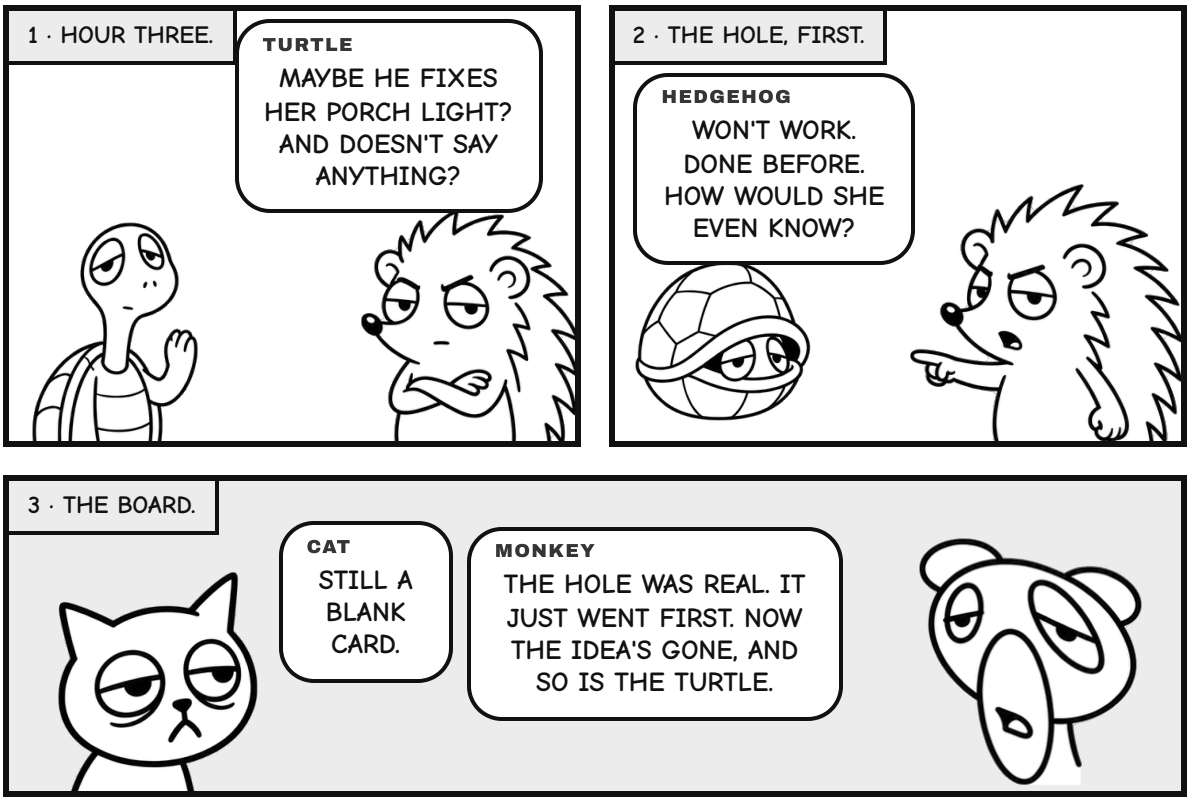
Pitch That Builds

THE IDEA

A **pitch** is an idea said out loud for the story. When someone pitches, find the **good part** first and say it. Then **build**: add to it, shrink it, sharpen it. Only then look for the **hole** (what's wrong with it), and try to fix the hole before you throw the idea out.

Saying the hole first doesn't just lose the idea. It teaches the quiet people to stop pitching. Reach for this whenever someone, or the Elephant, hands you an idea, and when you judge your own.

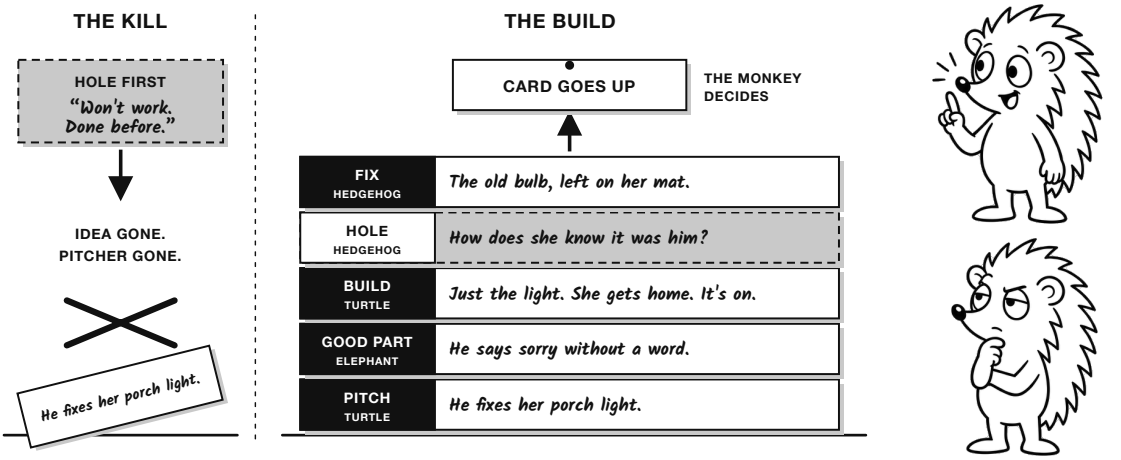
The scene: the room is breaking Ben and Jo's story. Ben owes his sister Jo an apology, and he's bad at saying sorry. The board needs one card: how he says it. Three hours in, the Turtle, the quiet one, finally pitches. The Hedgehog's job is to find holes.



GOOD PART FIRST. THEN THE HOLE.

The hole still gets said. It just waits its turn, and then the room tries to fix it.

THE PICTURE · THE SAME PITCH, KILLED AND BUILT



How to read this picture: each block is one thing someone says. On the left, the hole comes first and the pitch falls flat. On the right, each person adds a block, bottom to top. The Hedgehog still finds the hole, but fourth, and then he fixes it himself. The Monkey decides, and the card goes up.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Ben holds out a bunch of flowers.

JO Flowers.

BEN Peace offering.

JO From the gas station.

BEN The nice gas station.

She puts them in a glass of water.

What's wrong: the strange pitch died, so the room settled for the safe card: flowers, the apology every scene reaches for. It's charming, and nothing in it belongs to Ben.

WITH THE TOOL

EXT. JO'S PORCH - NIGHT



Jo climbs her steps, arms full.

The porch light is on. It's been dead a month.

On the mat: the old bulb.

She looks down the empty street.

JO Show-off.

What changed: the room kept the good part (sorry, without a word), shrank it to just the light, then fixed the hole. The old bulb tells her who did it.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? POINT TO AN IDEA YOU THREW OUT OF THIS DRAFT. WHAT WAS THE GOOD PART OF IT?

For the mentor: If they can name one, build on it: keep just that part, make it smaller, and find a place it fits. Then say the hole out loud and try to fix it. Throw it out only if the fix breaks the story.

TOOL CARD · THE ROOM

Say the good part first. Then fix the hole.

3

WHAT WAS GOOD IN THE LAST IDEA YOU KILLED?

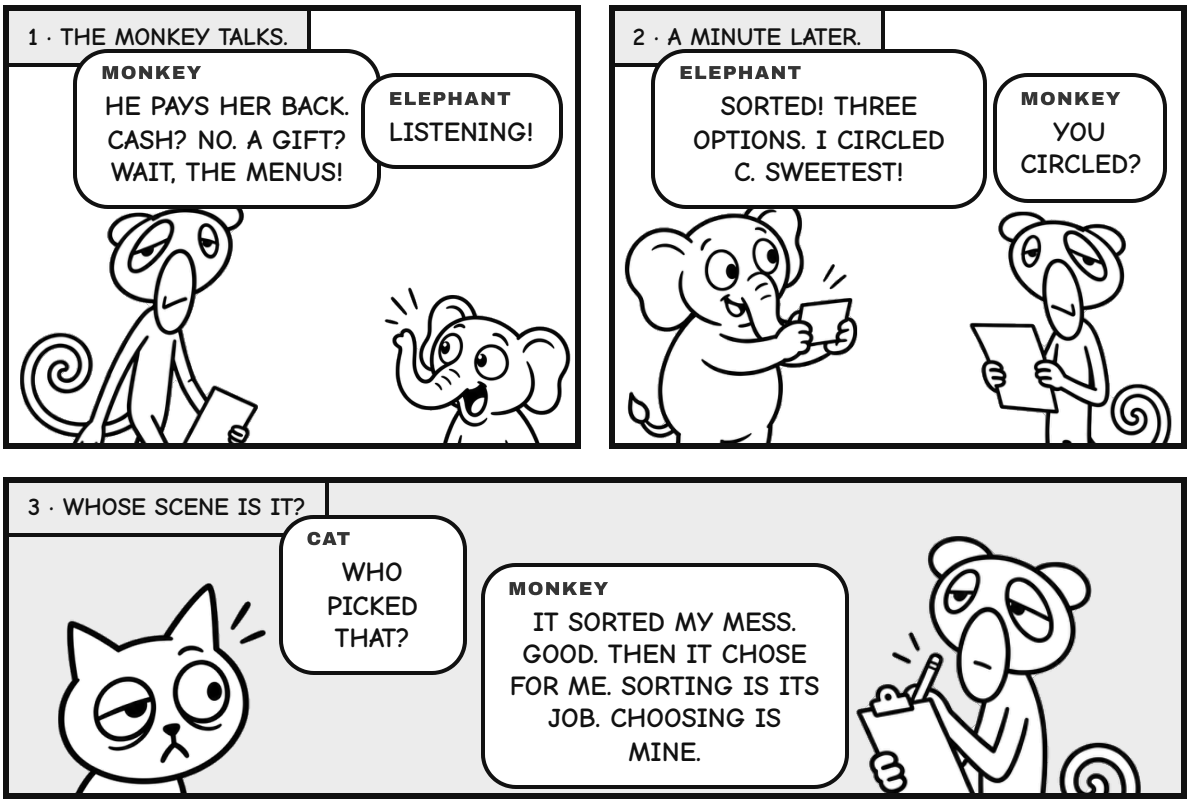
Talk It Out, Then Decide

THE IDEA

Talking is faster than typing, and a messy idea said out loud still has the good parts in it. So **talk it out**: say everything about the scene, tangents and all, to an AI writing tool. Then ask it to sort what you said into a list: what you know, your **options**, a **parking lot** (ideas set aside for later) and questions for you.

The AI sorts. Every choice on that list is yours. Reach for this tool when your head is full and the page is still empty.

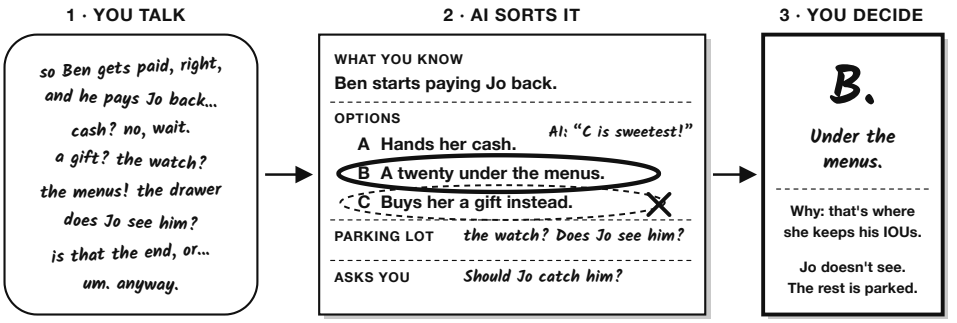
The scene idea: Ben has a new job. In Jo's kitchen drawer are his old IOUs, forty-one of them from childhood on, and they add up to $500. His goal: start paying them down. The Monkey isn't sure how the scene goes, so he talks it out loud to the Elephant, our AI, and asks it to sort what he said.



AI SORTS. YOU CHOOSE.

If the list comes back with a pick already circled, cross it out and choose for yourself.

THE PICTURE · FROM TALK TO CHOICE



How to read this picture: left to right. First, everything the Monkey said, in the order it came out. Then the Elephant's sorted list: its own pick, the dashed circle, is crossed out, and the heavy circle is the Monkey's. Last, his choice and why, in his own words.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
BEN     Payday! Here. A twenty.
He sets a gift bag next to it.
BEN     And this. And more under the
        menus.
JO      Ben, you didn't have to...
BEN     I wanted to!
```

What's wrong: every idea from the talk made it in: cash, a gift, the menus. Nobody chose, so the scene does three things and none of them lands.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING
Jo's shower runs. Ben, alone, folds
his first twenty around a note: "1 of
25 - B."
He lifts the takeout menus. Under
them: his IOUs.
He lays the twenty on top. Puts the
menus back.
Straightens them. Twice.
```

What changed: one option, chosen by the writer. The gift and "does Jo catch him?" went to the parking lot, so the scene does one thing.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You type (or say) the whole messy talk, then: `Sort this into what I know, options, a parking lot, questions for me. Keep my words. Don't choose for me.` **Back comes** a tidy list, sometimes with a favorite marked anyway. **You** pick, and write one line saying why.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? TALK FOR TWO MINUTES ABOUT A SCENE YOU'RE STUCK ON. OF EVERYTHING YOU JUST SAID, WHICH OPTION DO YOU CHOOSE, AND WHY?

For the mentor: Jot down what they say. Stuck writers usually have three or four options tangled together; in a list, they can pick one and park the rest. If they can't say why, the want is missing: see Know What You Want.

TOOL CARD · THE ROOM

Talk it out. Let AI sort. You make every choice.

4 WHICH CHOICE ON THE LIST IS YOURS?

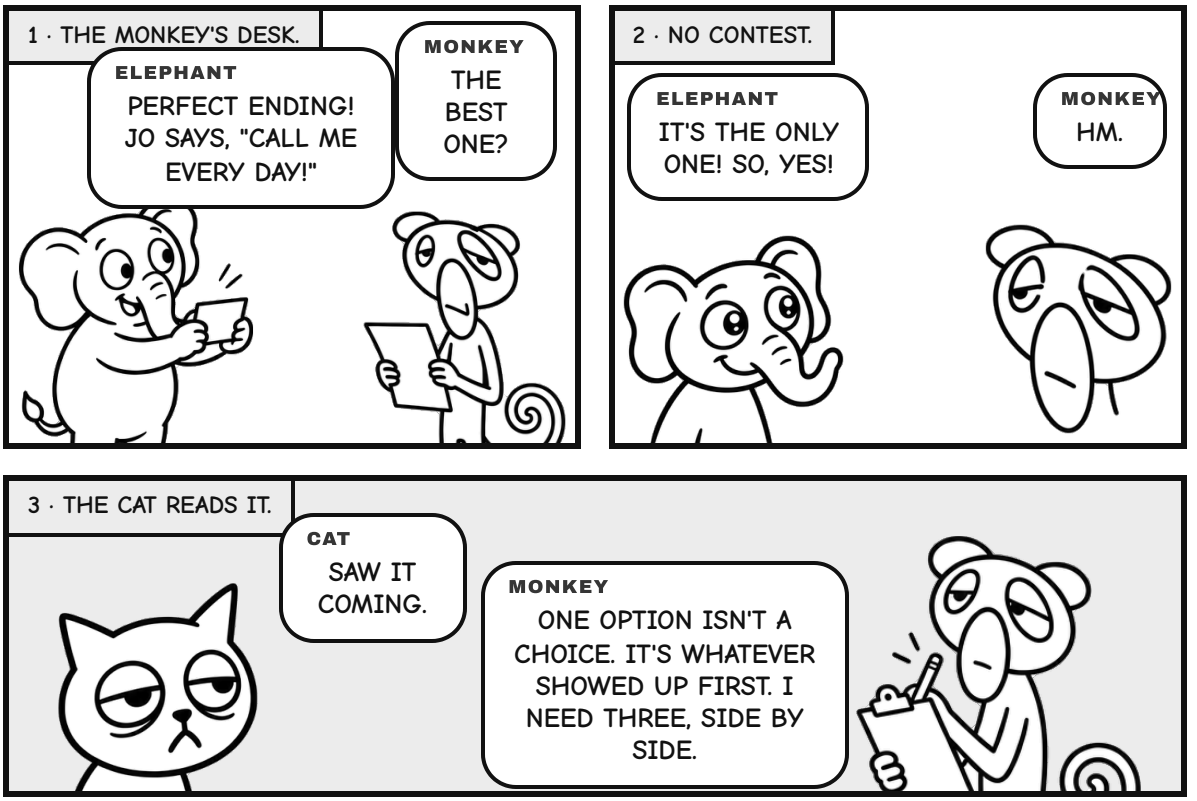
Three Versions, Pick One

THE IDEA

When a choice matters (how a scene ends, a first line, a title), the first idea is usually the one everybody has. So make **three versions** that differ in kind, not just in wording: one with words, one with an object, one with an action. Lay them side by side and let your **want** pick: your one sentence saying what the scene must do to the audience.

In Know What You Want, the Elephant handed over three car scenes before the Monkey knew what he wanted. Here he asks for three on purpose, want in hand. With one option, you settle. With three, you choose.

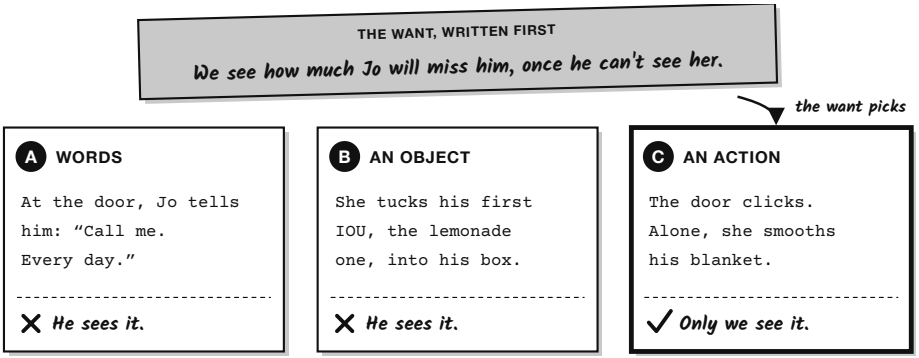
The scene: Ben has found a small place of his own. Today he moves out of his sister Jo's house, after weeks on her couch. The Monkey needs the last moment of the scene, and asks the Elephant, our AI, for an ending.



ONE OPTION IS A GUESS. THREE IS A CHOICE.

Ask for three that differ in kind. Then let your want pick one.

THE PICTURE · THREE ENDINGS, ONE WANT



How to read this picture: the want is written first, on top. Below are three endings to the same scene: one with words, one with an object, one with an action. Check each against the want. Only C happens where Ben can't see, so the want picks C. Then the Monkey rewrites it in his own words.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Ben, a duffel bag on his shoulder.

JO Call me. Every day.

BEN Every day.

JO I mean it, Ben.

He goes.

What's wrong: nothing is wrong with it, and that's the trouble. It's the first idea, the ending anyone would write first, taken as it came. Jo says it all to his face, so there's nothing left for us to see.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

BEN Okay.

JO Okay.

He goes. The door clicks.

Jo stands still.

Then she smooths his blanket on the couch.

What changed: version C, picked by the want and rewritten. Jo waits until he's gone, so only we see how much she'll miss him.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

Ask an AI for one ending and you can get the most common one. **You type** your want, then: `Give me three endings, different in kind: a line, an object, an action.` **Back come** three short options. **You** pick by the want and rewrite the winner. If none fits, ask for three more.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? POINT TO THE BIGGEST CHOICE IN YOUR SCENE. WHAT WERE THE OTHER TWO OPTIONS?

For the mentor: If there weren't any, have them write two more on the spot: a line, an object, an action. Read their want aloud and let it pick. The first idea may still win, but now it won a contest.

TOOL CARD · THE ROOM

Make three. Let the want pick one.

5 WHAT WERE THE OTHER TWO OPTIONS?

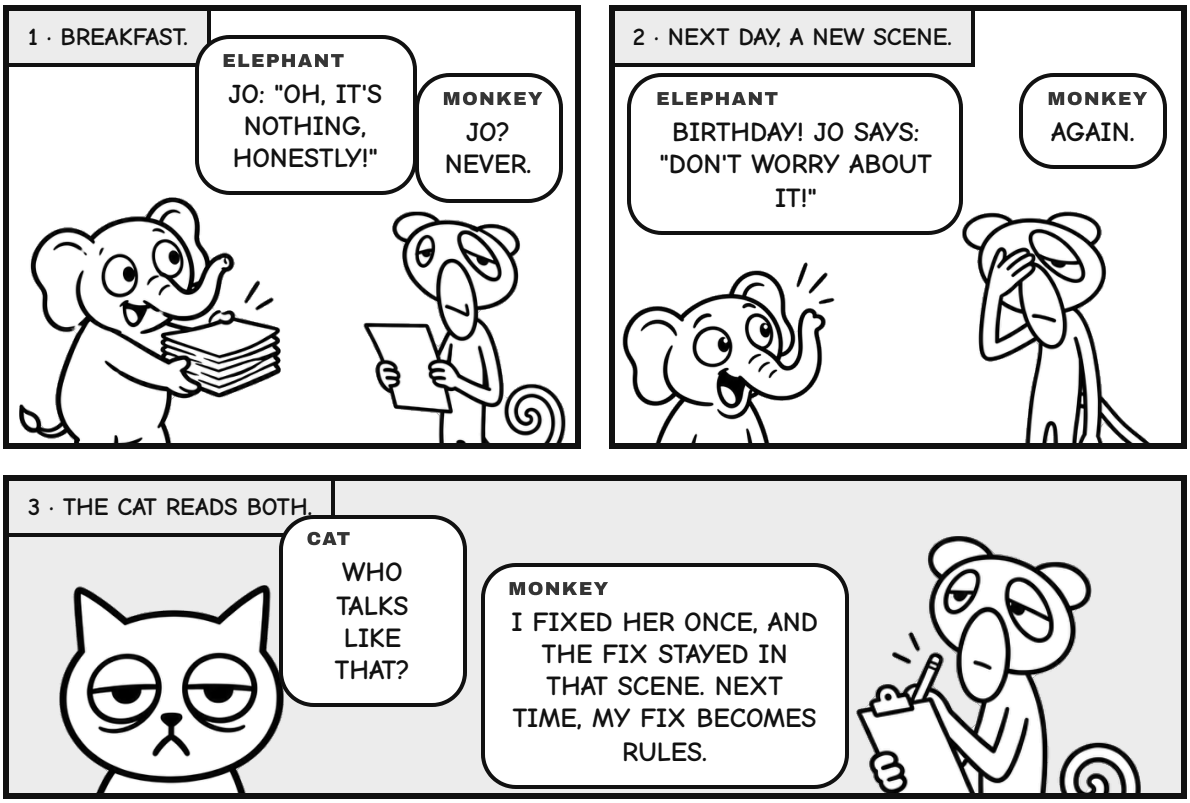
Your Rewrite Teaches the Rules

THE IDEA

A character's **voice** is how they sound: the words they pick, what they say, and what they never would. AI drafts can slide every character toward the same polite, chatty voice, and fixing every draft by hand never ends. So rewrite one short **sample** yourself. Then have the AI compare its version with yours and write your changes down as **rules**.

You edit the rules, and they go into every later request, so your voice carries into the next draft. Reach for this tool when you keep making the same fix.

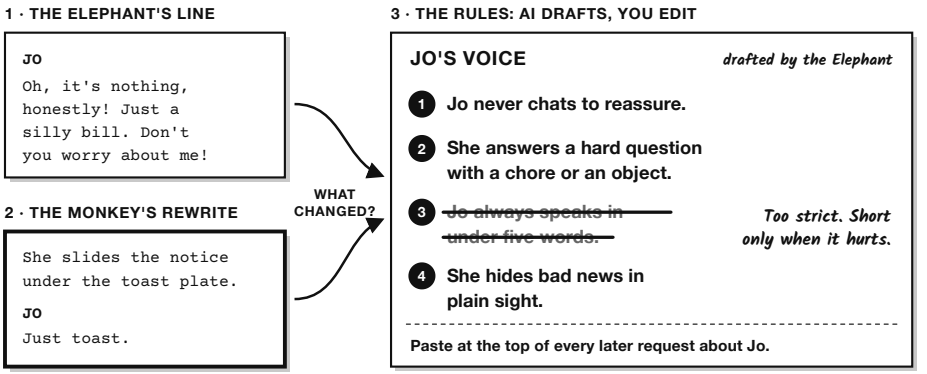
The scenes: Ben sleeps on his sister Jo's couch. Jo is behind on her electric bill, and she hides it. The Elephant, our AI, drafts her lines, and at breakfast it makes Jo chatty and reassuring. The Monkey fixes it. Then the Elephant drafts a different scene: the night Ben missed Jo's birthday.



REWRITE IT ONCE. KEEP THE RULES.

Your changes, written down as rules, travel into every later draft.

THE PICTURE · ONE REWRITE, TURNED INTO RULES



How to read this picture: top left, Jo's breakfast line as the Elephant wrote it; below it, the Monkey's rewrite. The Elephant compares the two and drafts rules from what changed. The Monkey edits them: rule 3 goes too far, so he fixes it in pencil. The finished list goes into every later request.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Ben in the doorway, hours late.

BEN I'm sorry. I forgot.

JO Oh, don't worry about it! Come in, there's still cake.

BEN You're the best.

What's wrong: the Monkey fixed this voice at breakfast, but the fix stayed there. With no rules, Jo turns sweet and chatty. That isn't Jo.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Jo washes one plate. Ben in the doorway, hours late.

BEN Sorry. Traffic was insane.

JO It's fine.

She dries the plate. Puts it away.

What changed: same Elephant, same scene, with the Monkey's rules pasted in first. Jo answers with a chore and says "It's fine." The voice carried.

AI NOTE AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You type both versions, then: `List what I changed as short rules for Jo's voice. Only rules my rewrite shows.` **Back comes** a list, often with a rule that goes too far. **You** fix it and paste it into every later request about Jo. If she drifts again, rewrite one more sample.

BEFORE YOU PASTE Your own pages only. Check your studio's or show's rules, and your guild's, first. Never paste other people's work.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHAT DO YOU FIX IN EVERY DRAFT, YOURS OR THE AI'S? CAN YOU SAY IT AS A RULE, IN ONE LINE?

For the mentor: Have them rewrite one short passage by hand and name each change in one sentence ("Jo never chats to reassure"). Those sentences are the rules. Check the next draft against them, and fix any rule that's too strict.

TOOL CARD · THE ROOM

Rewrite one sample. Turn your changes into rules.

6 WHAT DO YOU FIX EVERY TIME?

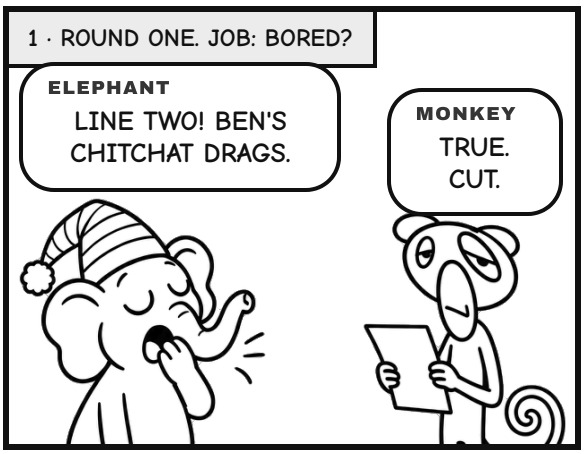
Fake Readers, Then Real Ones

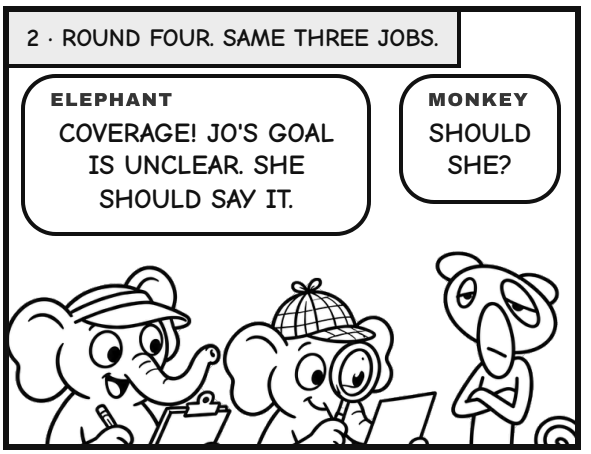
THE IDEA

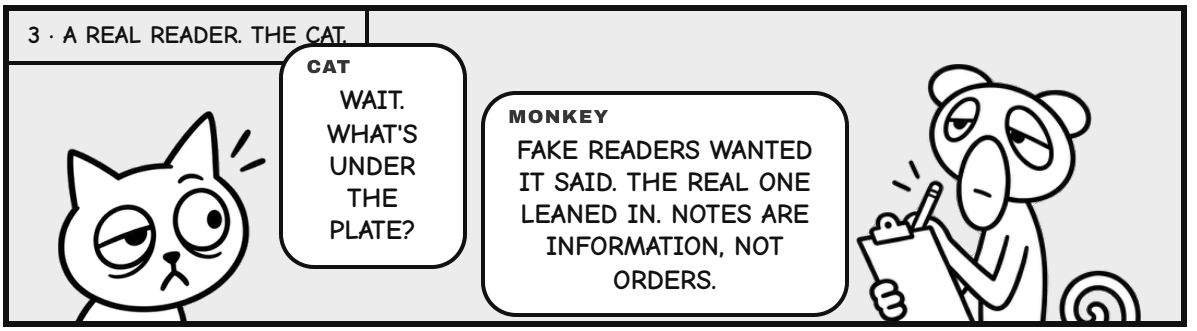
A **fake reader** is the Elephant, your AI, reading your pages with one job, like "tell me where you got bored" or "tell me what you think Ben's goal is." Fake readers are fast and find real problems. After a few rounds they start repeating themselves. That's when you need real people.

Coverage is a reader's written report on a script: a summary, then notes. Treat AI coverage as information about what a quick reader noticed, not as orders. Reach for this tool when a draft is ready to show.

The scene: Ben is sleeping on his sister Jo's couch. Jo is behind on her electric bill and hasn't told him. At breakfast she slides a red late notice under the toast plate. "Anything for me?" "Just toast." The Monkey asks the Elephant to play three fake readers.



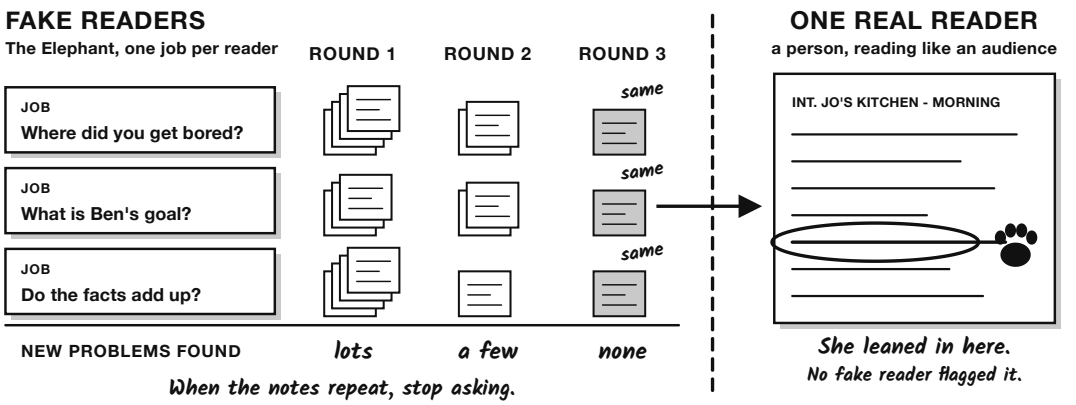




FAKE READERS FIRST. THEN A REAL ONE.

Stop when the AI's notes start repeating. A person decides what works.

THE PICTURE · THREE FAKE READERS, THREE ROUNDS, ONE REAL READER



How to read this picture: each fake reader is the Elephant with one job. Each round finds less, and by round three the notes repeat. Then a real person leans in at a line none of them flagged.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

OBEYED: "JO SHOULD SAY IT."

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

JO Ben, I'm behind on the electric bill.

JO I didn't want you to worry.

BEN Jo. I had no idea.

What's wrong: the coverage was obeyed as an order. Jo explains it all, and the secret the Cat leaned in for is gone.

WITH THE TOOL

KEPT THE SECRET. CUT LINE TWO.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Jo opens a red LATE NOTICE. She slides it under the toast plate.

BEN Anything for me?

JO Just toast.

What changed: the true note was used, the coverage was read as information, the secret stays.

(callback: Name the Verb **176***)*

AI NOTE · HOW TO RUN A FAKE READER AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You type: your pages and one job: "Quote the line where you got bored. No fixes." A new chat for each job. **You get back:** a few quoted lines. **You do:** mark each "true" or "not for me." When a round finds nothing new, find a person.

BEFORE YOU PASTE Your own pages only. Check your studio's or show's rules, and your guild's, first. Never paste other people's work.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? WHO HAS READ THESE PAGES: FAKE READERS, REAL ONES, OR NOBODY? WHERE DID EACH ONE STOP?

For the mentor: Fake readers are a fast first sweep. When their notes repeat, stop. Ask one real person where they stopped caring. If the two disagree, trust the person, then decide.

TOOL CARD · THE ROOM

Fake readers first. Then a real one.

7

WHERE DID A REAL PERSON STOP READING?

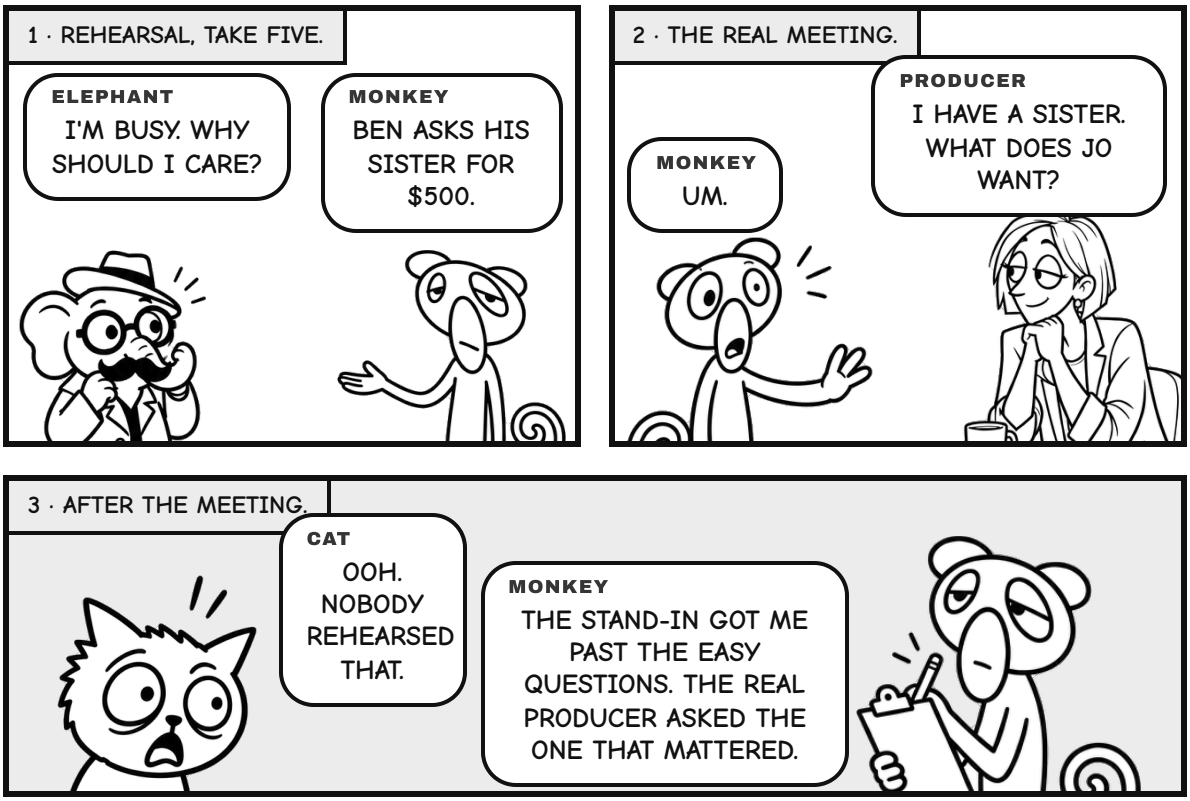
Rehearse on a Stand-In

THE IDEA

A **pitch** is telling your story out loud, in a few minutes, to someone who could help make it, like a producer (the person who finds the money and the team). You can practice on the Elephant, your AI, playing that kind of listener: a **stand-in**.

Build the stand-in only from public material, like interviews and talks, and mark every guess. Never pretend it is a real person, and never give it private information about anyone. Reach for this tool the week before a meeting. The real person still has the last word.

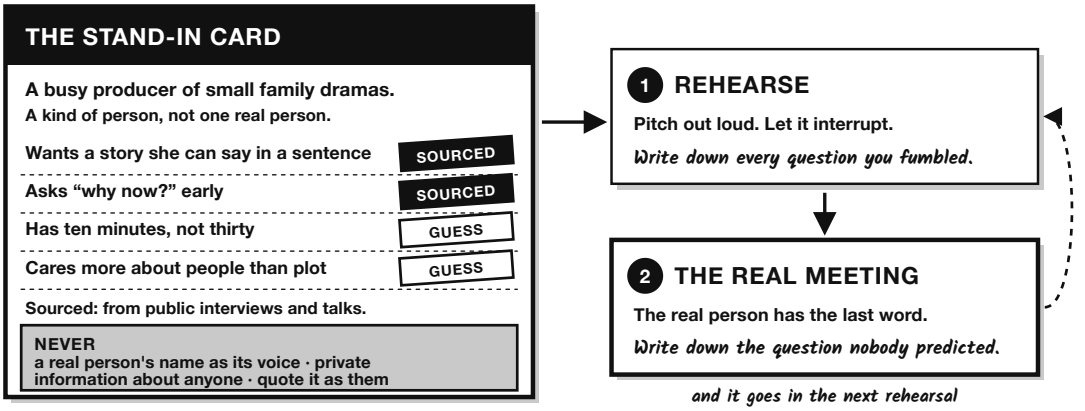
The pitch: next week the Monkey pitches the Ben and Jo story to a producer of small family dramas. He has a few minutes. Tonight the Elephant puts on a costume and plays a busy producer, built from public interviews with producers like her.



REHEARSE ON A STAND-IN. THE REAL PERSON DECIDES.

Practice gets the easy questions out of the way, so you're ready for the one nobody predicted.

THE PICTURE · BUILDING THE STAND-IN, THEN THE LOOP



How to read this picture: the card describes a kind of listener, never a real person, and stamps each line SOURCED (public material) or GUESS. Then rehearse, meet, and bring back the surprise.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

THE PITCH, FIRST TRY.

MONKEY So it's about family. And trust, really.

MONKEY There's a brother, Ben. He's kind of a mess.

MONKEY And his sister, she's...

The producer checks the time.

What's wrong: big words first (family, trust), and nobody has a goal yet. A busy listener is gone.

WITH THE TOOL

THE PITCH, AFTER FIVE REHEARSALS.

MONKEY Ben asks his sister Jo for $500.

MONKEY She opens a drawer: every IOU he ever wrote her.

MONKEY She pays anyway. He slips it back.

The producer leans in.

What changed: the stand-in kept asking "Why should I care?" Now it opens on Ben's goal: $500.

AI NOTE · HOW TO SET UP A STAND-IN AI

AS OF OCT 2026 · CHECK IT YOURSELF

You type: the card, then "Play this listener. Interrupt when you'd lose interest. Ask your three hardest questions." **You get back:** questions, in character. **You do:** practice the ones you fumbled. Never give it a real name or private details, or quote it as a real person.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK BEFORE THEIR NEXT MEETING

? WHAT ARE THE THREE QUESTIONS YOU'D LEAST LIKE TO BE ASKED ABOUT YOUR STORY?

For the mentor: Practice them out loud, with a friend or AI as the listener, until each answer fits in a sentence. After the meeting, write down the question nobody predicted.

TOOL CARD · THE ROOM

Rehearse on a stand-in. The real person decides.

8

WHICH QUESTION ARE YOU AFRAID OF?

Keep Going

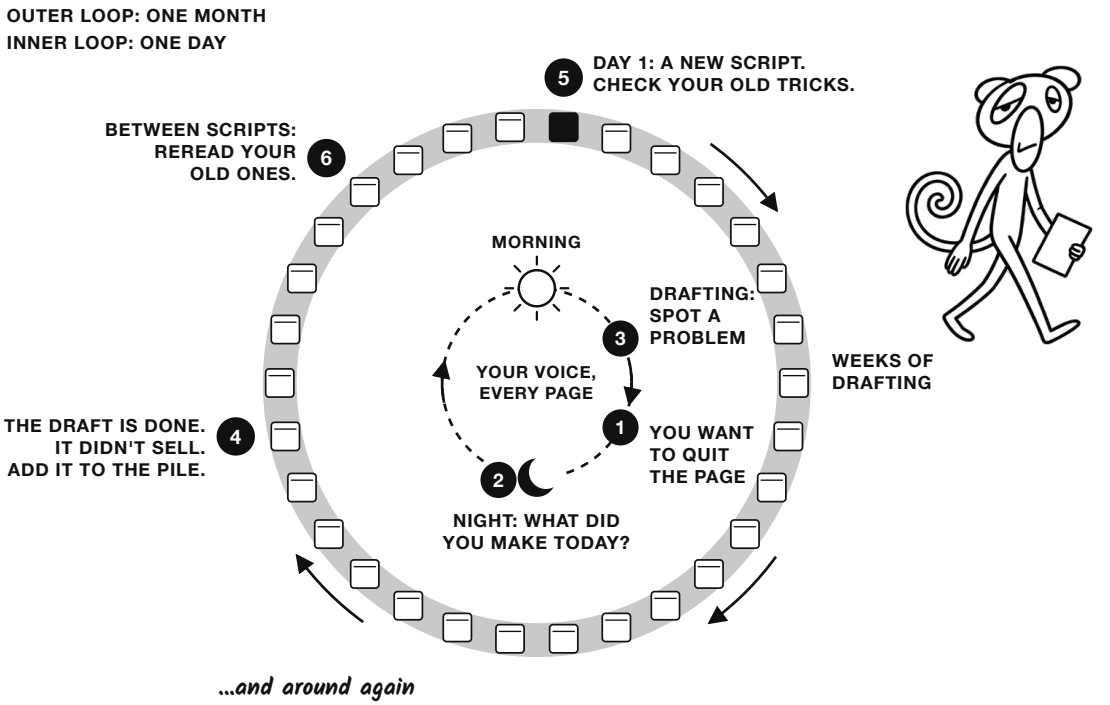
The habits that get the next page written.

WHY HABITS MATTER HERE

Nobody writes a script in one sitting. It gets written over months of ordinary days: a few good ones, most of them just okay, and some awful. **Talent** is what you bring to a page once you're sitting in front of it. A **habit** is something you do the same way every time, without deciding all over again. Habits are what get you to the page on the okay days and the awful ones.

So this drawer isn't about any one scene. It's about you, the writer: what to do when a page dies, how to tell whether a day counted, and how to keep going after a script doesn't sell.

THE MAP · A MONTH OF WRITING, AND ONE DAY INSIDE IT



How to read this map: the big ring is one month of writing, one square per day, going clockwise from Day 1 (the black square). The dashed loop inside it is one writing day, from morning to night. Each number is a tool in this drawer, placed where you reach for it. Tools 1, 2 and 3 come up every day. Tools 4, 5 and 6 come up once a script. In the middle sits your voice, because it's on every page. The book's last page is about it.

IN THIS DRAWER

SIX TOOLS.

1	**Bored or Stuck?**	Before you abandon a page, ask: bored (take a walk) or stuck (stay ten more minutes)?	QUICK
2	**What Did You Make Today?**	Measure a day by what you finished, not by hours spent.	QUICK
3	**Keep a Fix-It List**	Spot a problem mid-draft? Write it down and keep going.	QUICK
4	**The Pile Is the Apprenticeship**	Most of what you write won't sell, and that pile is what teaches you to write the one that does.	QUICK
5	**Box Up Your Old Tricks**	List your default moves and make each one earn its place in this story.	QUICK
6	**The Story You Keep Telling**	Most writers circle one core story. Find yours in your old work and go deeper instead of fixing it.	QUICK

There's no FULL tool in this drawer. Habits are small, and you learn them by using them, so every tool here is QUICK. After tool 6 comes **The Last Page: Keep Your Voice**. It isn't a tool: the cast says goodbye, and says why your voice is the one thing only you can bring.

WHERE TO START

With **Bored or Stuck?** It's the one you'll need first: the next time a page goes dead and you want to walk away. Then make **What Did You Make Today?** a question you ask every night. Save **The Pile Is the Apprenticeship** for the day a script doesn't sell. That day comes for every writer.





DRAWER CARD · KEEP GOING

Show up. Make one thing. Come back tomorrow.

?

WHAT WILL YOU MAKE TODAY?

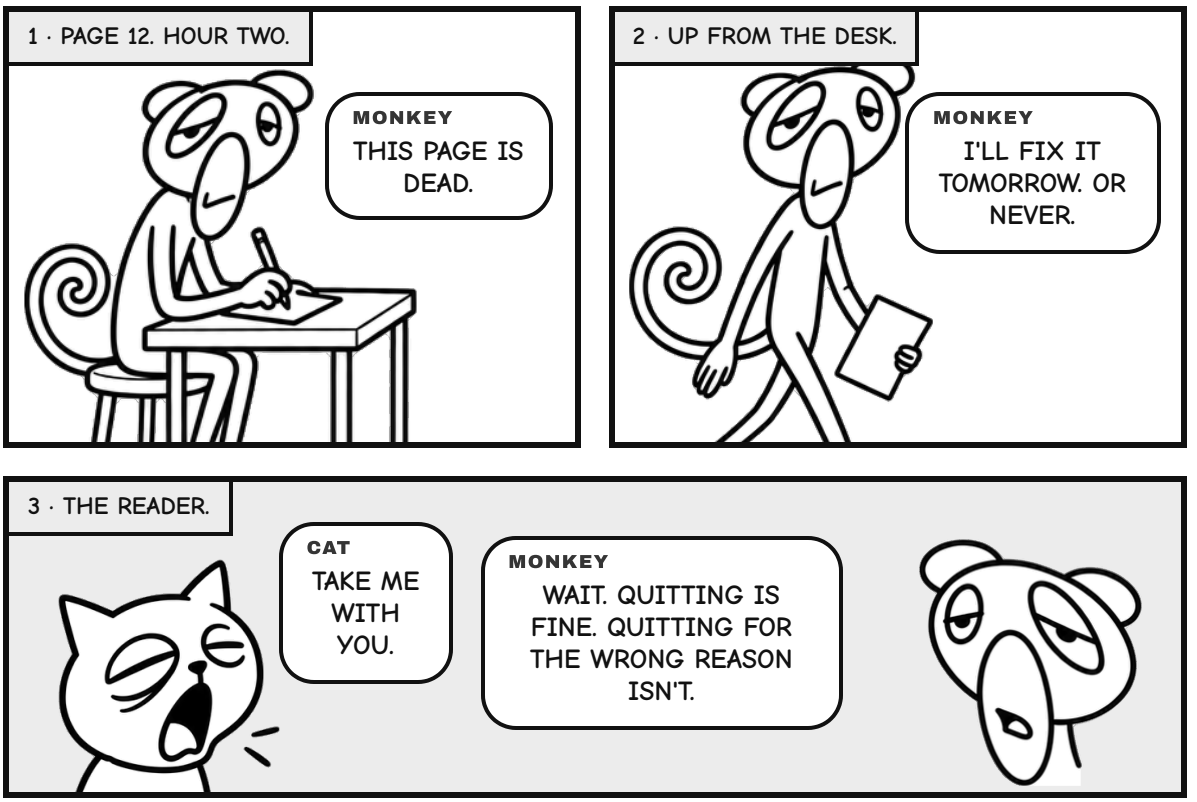
Bored or Stuck?

THE IDEA

Every writer hits a page that feels dead and wants to walk away from it. Sometimes the trouble is you: you're **bored**, or tired, and the page is fine. Sometimes the trouble is the page: you're **stuck**, because something in it doesn't work yet and you can't name it.

The two feel the same, but they need opposite fixes. Bored: take a walk, then come back. Stuck: stay ten more minutes on the **smallest next step** (one line, or one thing a character does). Reach for this the moment you want to quit a page.

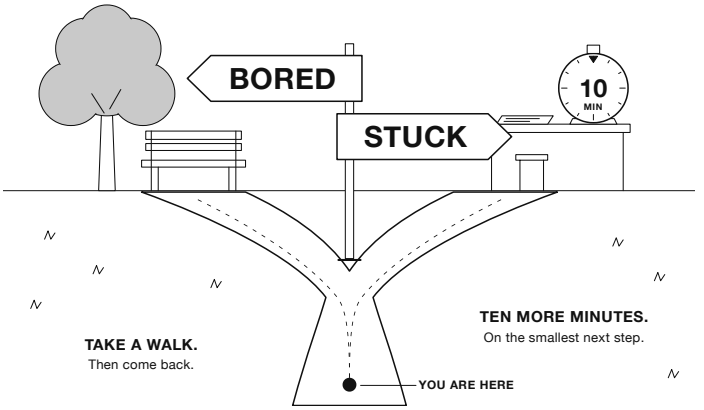
The scene: the Monkey is writing a Ben and Jo scene. Ben has been sleeping on his sister Jo's couch; now he's found a place of his own, and he needs her to be his reference. Ben's goal is her yes; Jo's goal is to be sure he means it. Two hours in, the page won't move.



BEFORE YOU QUIT A PAGE, ASK: BORED, OR STUCK?

Bored? Walk, then come back. Stuck? Stay ten more minutes.

THE PICTURE · TWO ROADS FROM THE SAME SPOT



How to read this picture: you're standing where the road splits. Take the BORED road when the page is fine and you're not: anything else sounds fun, even the dishes. Take the STUCK road when the page has a problem: you keep rereading the same line. Both roads end back at the page.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Jo washes. Ben dries, badly.
BEN   So. Hey.
JO    Hey.
BEN   So I found a place.
JO    ...
PAGE DEAD. FIX TOMORROW.
```

What's wrong: the Monkey quit in the middle of a line. He was stuck, not bored, so a walk wouldn't have fixed it. Jo never answers.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Jo washes. Ben dries, badly.
BEN   I found a place. They want a
      reference.
JO    From me?
BEN   You said I was the best you
      ever had.
She dries her hands and turns to him.
```

What changed: ten more minutes on the smallest next step (what Jo does with her hands) got the scene moving again.

(callback: Break Up the Talking Heads 154*)*

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? THINK OF THE LAST PAGE YOU WALKED AWAY FROM. WERE YOU BORED OR STUCK? HOW COULD YOU TELL?

For the mentor: Bored sounds like "anything but this." Stuck sounds like "I keep rereading the same line." If they can't tell, treat it as stuck: set a ten-minute timer together. If the page is still dead when it rings, it was them. Send them for a walk.

TOOL CARD · KEEP GOING

Bored? Walk, then come back. Stuck? Stay ten more minutes.

1 WHICH ONE IS IT, REALLY?

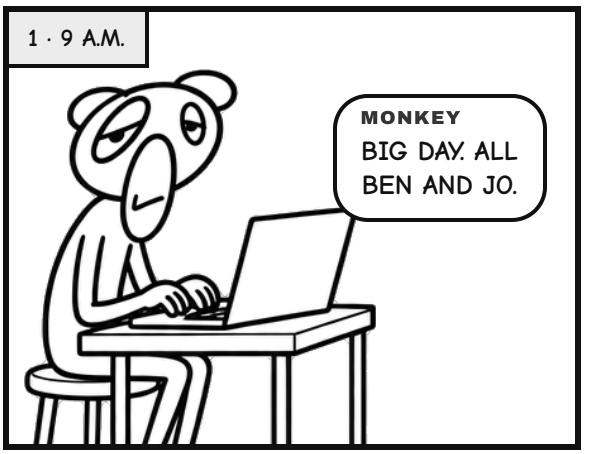
What Did You Make Today?

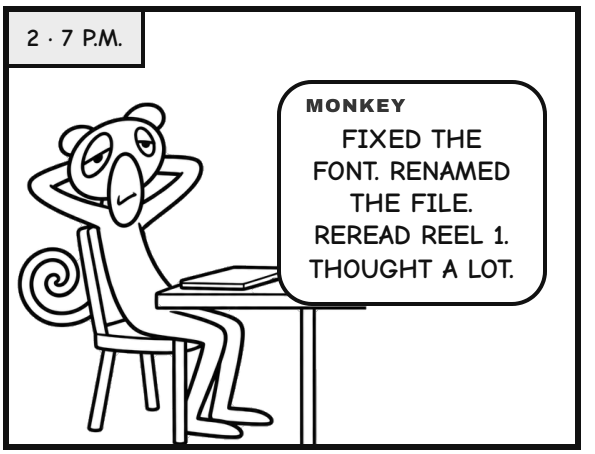
THE IDEA

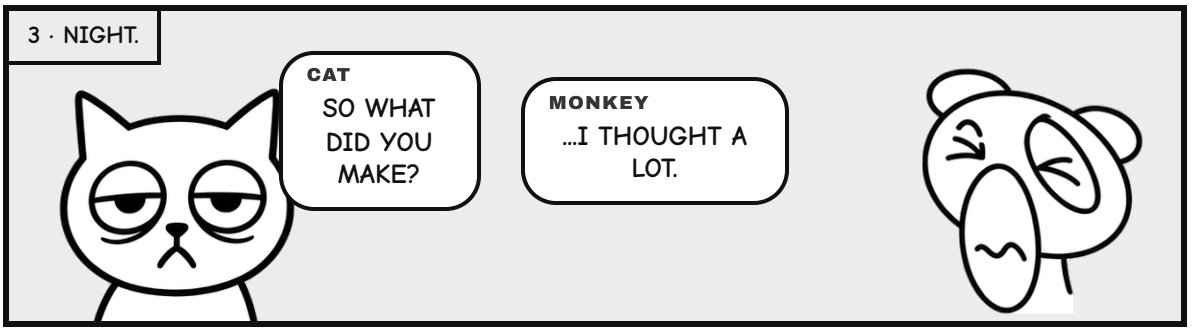
A script has no edges. You can spend a whole day "on it" (rereading, tidying files, thinking) and have nothing to show. So measure a day by what you **made**: a thing you could save, send or print, like a page, a scene card or a list of ten titles. Hours don't count.

Each night, ask one question: what did you make today? If you can point to a thing, you worked. If you can't, you **circled**: busy all day, but going around without landing. Reach for this every night, and on any day that felt busy but empty.

The scene: the Monkey has given the whole day to his Ben and Jo script. He wants to feel he worked. The Cat, his reader, wants pages. It's night, and she asks the question.



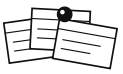




COUNT WHAT YOU MADE, NOT THE HOURS.

If you can point to it, you worked. If you can't, you circled.

THE PICTURE · THE MONKEY'S WALL CALENDAR

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
1 HR	6 HRS	2 HRS	4 HRS	30 MIN	3 HRS	
						DAY OFF *rest counts*
1 PAGE *made it*	*circled*	5 CARDS *made it*	*circled*	10 TITLES *made it*	2 PAGES *made it*	

~~HOURS THIS WEEK: 16½~~ (don't count these)

THINGS YOU CAN POINT TO: 4
count these

How to read this picture: each box is one day. A day with a thing pinned to it was work, because you can point to it. The two longest days just say "circled": busy, and nothing left behind. Cross out the hours and count the pins. (A day off isn't circling. Rest counts.)

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
JO FINDS THE MONEY?? OR LATER?
REREAD REEL 1 FIRST.
RENAME: BEN_JO_V7_FINAL
(no scene written)
```

What's wrong: six hours, and not one line of the scene. Notes to yourself and a renamed file aren't a thing you can hand anyone.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT
Jo lifts the takeout menus.
A twenty, folded around a note: "1 of
25 - B."
She reads it twice.
She puts the menus back. Gently.
```

What changed: one hour, one short scene, finished. It's small and it may need fixing, but you can point to it. Tomorrow starts from something.
(callback: Cause Before Effect **152***)*

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR WEEK

? WHAT DID YOU MAKE THIS WEEK? SHOW ME EACH THING.

For the mentor: Count only what they can hand you: pages, cards, lists. "I thought about it a lot" is circling, and that's normal, not a failure. If the week is all circles, agree on one small thing to make tomorrow, like one page or five scene cards.

TOOL CARD · KEEP GOING

Count what you made, not the hours you spent.

2

WHAT DID YOU MAKE TODAY?

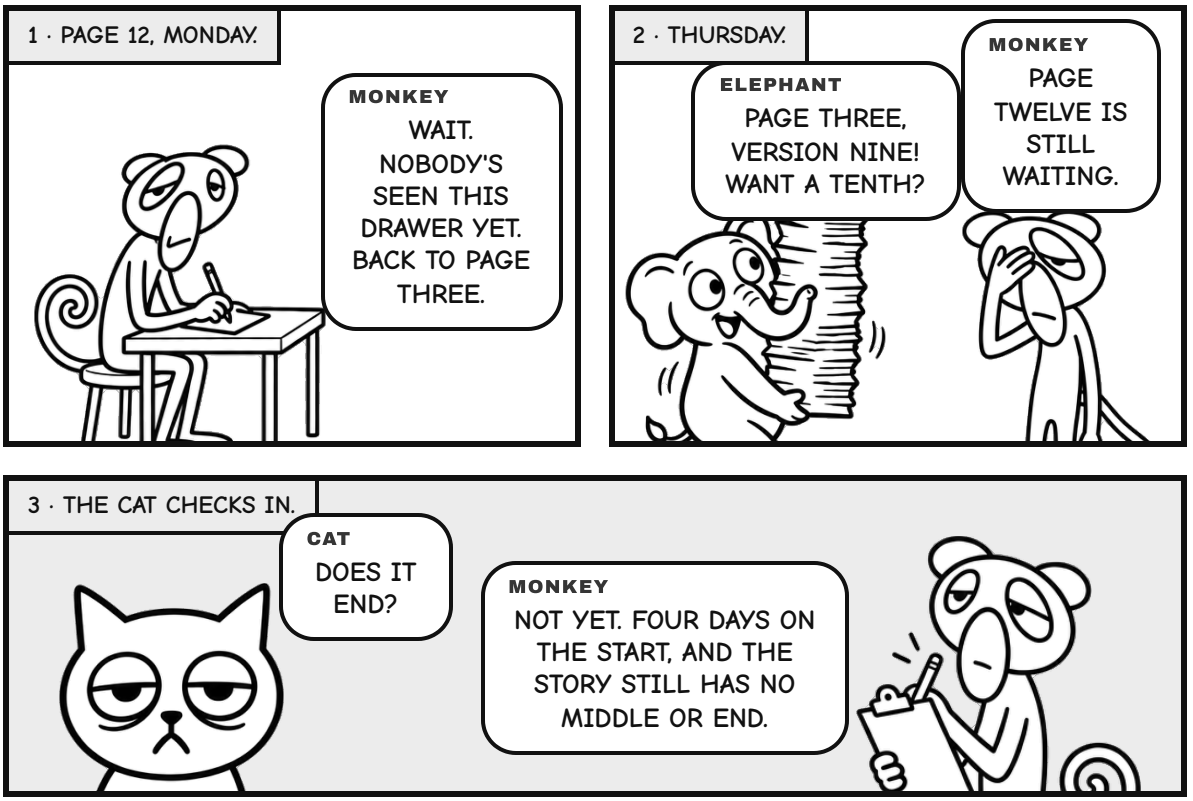
Keep a Fix-It List

THE IDEA

A **fix-it list** is one page next to your draft. When you spot a problem while writing (a flat line, a fact to check, something that needs setting up earlier), write it there in one line, with the page number, and go straight back to the scene.

A **first draft** has one job: reach THE END. Problems are easier to fix in the **rewrite**, your next pass, when the whole story is in view. Reach for this tool the moment you catch yourself going back to page 3.

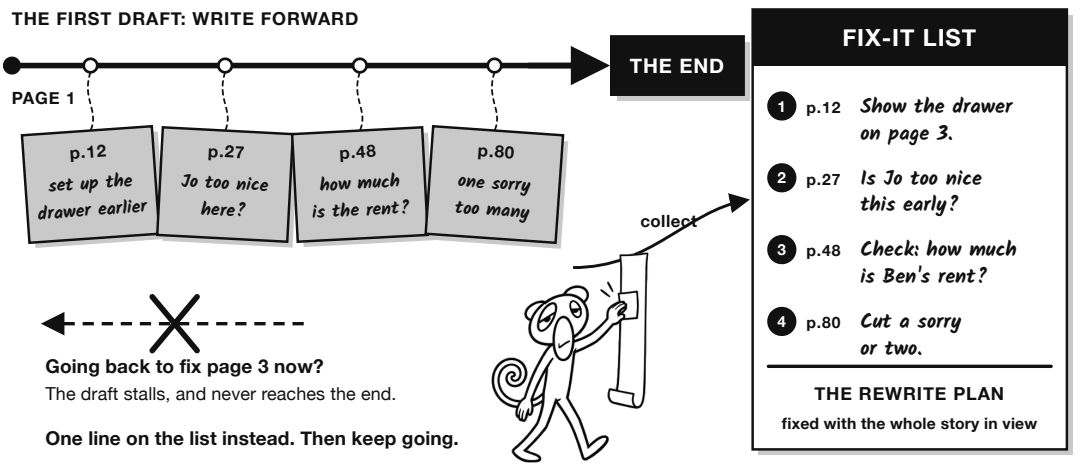
The pages: the Monkey is writing an early draft of the night Ben asks his sister Jo for $500. On page 12 of this draft, Jo opens her kitchen drawer full of his old IOUs. The Monkey realizes the drawer has never appeared before.



WRITE IT DOWN. KEEP GOING.

One line on the **fix-it list**, then back to the page you were on. The list waits for the rewrite.

THE PICTURE · THE DRAFT AND ITS KITE TAIL



How to read this picture: the line is the first draft, written forward from page 1 to THE END. Each sticky note is a problem spotted on the way. The writer never turns back; at the end, the notes become one line on the list, the plan for the rewrite.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

DAY FOUR. STILL FIXING PAGE 3.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Rent's due. Five hundred. I'll pay you back.

Jo opens the drawer by the stove.
Under the menus: his IOUs.

[STOP. SET UP THE DRAWER FIRST?? BACK TO P.3...]

What's wrong: the scene stops at its best moment. The writer went back to page 3, and page 12 never ends.

WITH THE TOOL

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Rent's due. Five hundred. I'll pay you back.

Jo opens the drawer by the stove.
Under the menus: his IOUs.

FIX-IT #1: SHOW THE DRAWER ON P.3.

She counts out five hundred anyway.

What changed: one line on the list, and the scene reached its end. Page 3 gets fixed in the rewrite. *(callback: Scene and Sequel* **52** *)*

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR WEEK

? OVER THE LAST WEEK, DID THE PAGE COUNT GO UP? OR DID THE SAME EARLY PAGES GET REWRITTEN AGAIN?

For the mentor: If the same pages keep changing, start a fix-it list today: one line per problem, with its page number. Then write forward to THE END. Read the list only when the draft is done. Some items will have fixed themselves along the way.

TOOL CARD · KEEP GOING

Spot it. Write it down. Keep going.

3

IS IT ON THE LIST, OR ARE YOU FIXING IT NOW?

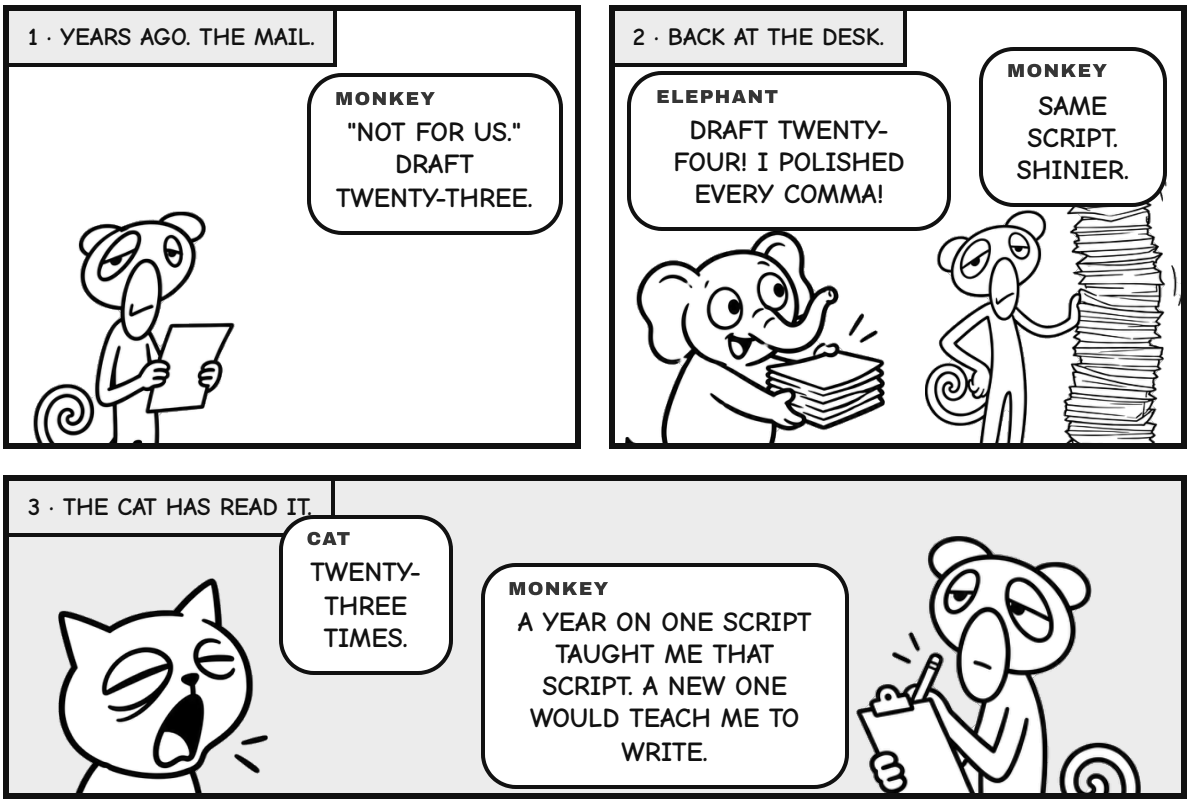
The Pile Is the Apprenticeship

THE IDEA

Most scripts a writer finishes will never sell or get made. That isn't wasted work. Each finished script teaches something you can only learn by finishing one: how to reach an ending, what to cut, how one scene hands off to the next.

An **apprenticeship** is how a beginner learns a trade: by doing the job, over and over. Your pile of finished scripts is yours. Reach for this tool after a rejection, or when you've been polishing the same script for a year.

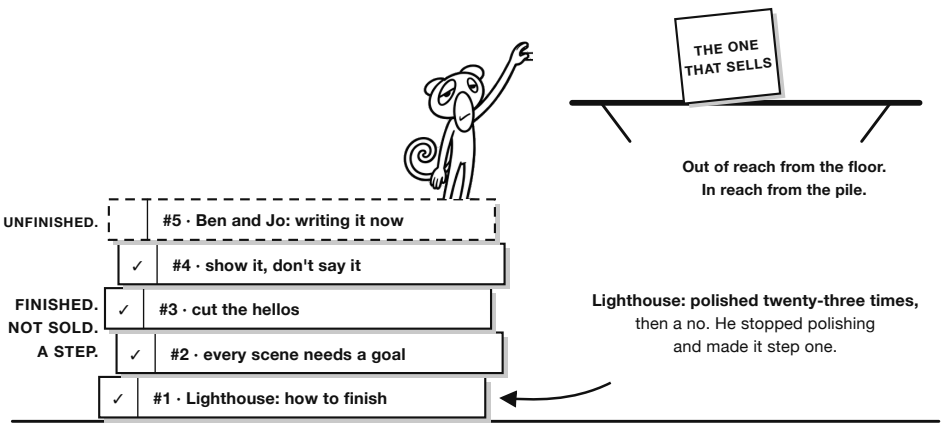
The writer: the Monkey's newest script is about Ben and his sister Jo. It's his fifth. Years ago his first script, Lighthouse, had been rewritten twenty-three times when it got a no. This page goes back to that day: polish it one more time, or start script two?



FINISH IT. THEN WRITE THE NEXT ONE.

A finished script that doesn't sell still taught you something. The pile is where you learn.

THE PICTURE · STANDING ON THE PILE



How to read this picture: the four scripts at the bottom were finished and didn't sell, and each taught a lesson, written on its spine. Script #1 is Lighthouse. On top is #5, Ben and Jo, the one he's writing now, not finished yet. Stacked up, they lift the Monkey toward the high shelf.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

THIS MOMENT, WRITTEN THE WAY HE WROTE AT SCRIPT 1.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Jo, you know I'm between jobs, and rent's due tomorrow.

JO And you know I've lent you money since the lemonade stand.

BEN Five hundred. I'll pay you back.

What's wrong: twenty-three polishes of one script, and his people still tell each other what they both already know. The history arrives as a speech.

WITH THE TOOL

SCRIPT 5, BEN AND JO: THE SAME MOMENT.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Rent's due.

JO How much?

BEN Five hundred.

Jo opens the drawer by the stove. Digs to the bottom. Holds up one IOU in a kid's handwriting.

JO Lemonade stand.

What changed: this tool's move: after Lighthouse, three more scripts finished. Script #4 taught "show it, don't say it," so in Ben and Jo one old IOU carries the history.

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PILE

? HOW MANY SCRIPTS HAVE YOU FINISHED? WHAT DID THE LAST ONE TEACH YOU?

For the mentor: If the answer is "one, and I'm still fixing it," pick a date to call it done and start the next. Then write one lesson on the spine of each finished script. That list is proof the pile is working.

TOOL CARD · KEEP GOING

Finish it. Learn from it. Start the next one.

4

WHAT DID YOUR LAST FINISHED SCRIPT TEACH YOU?

Box Up Your Old Tricks

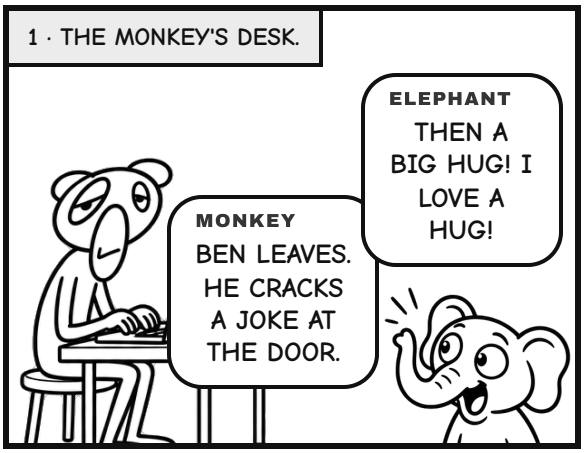
THE IDEA

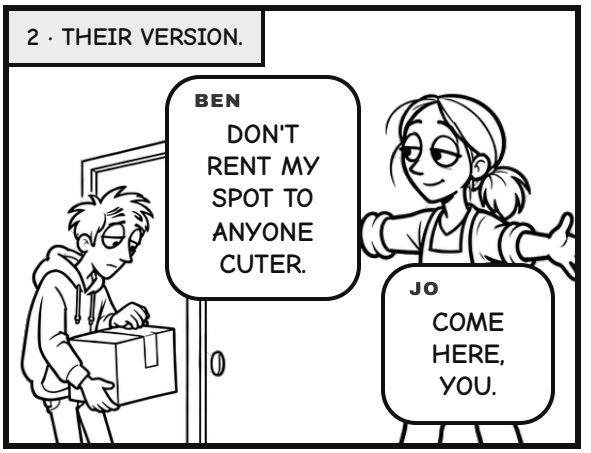


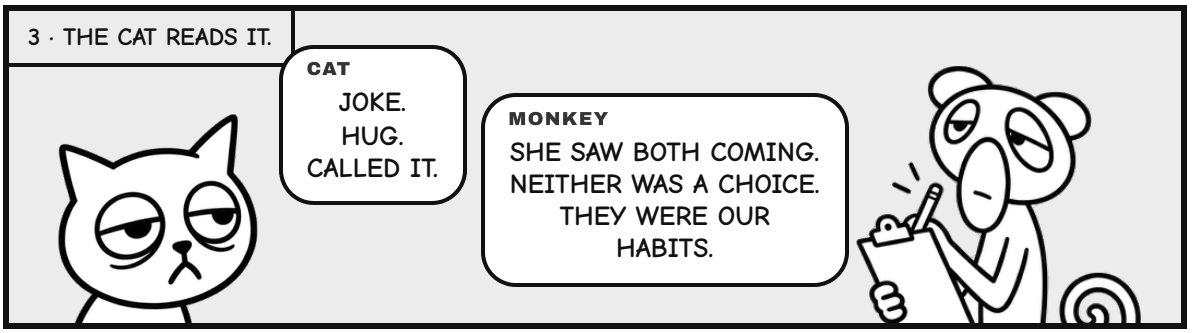
Every writer has **default moves**: favorite tricks they reach for without deciding to, like a joke to end every scene, a big speech before the climax, or a twist on the last page. Each one worked once, which is why it's hard to notice.

Write yours down and put the list in a box. A trick comes out only when it does a job this story needs. The Elephant, your AI, has favorite moves too; box those as well. Reach for this tool when a reader says they saw a moment coming.

The pages: after weeks on his sister Jo's couch, Ben is moving into a small place of his own. The Monkey's habit is ending every scene on a joke. The Elephant's habit is a hug.



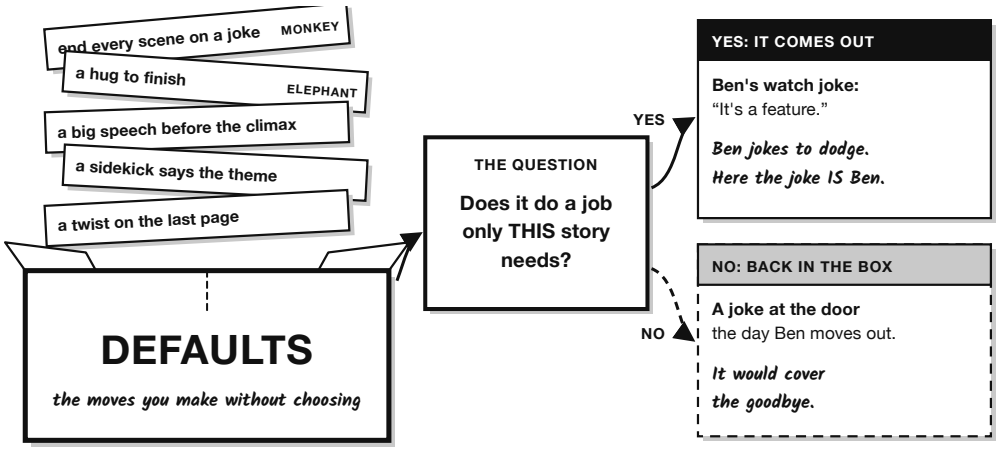




BOX UP THE HABIT. MAKE IT EARN ITS WAY OUT.

A favorite move isn't wrong. It just has to do a job in this story.

THE PICTURE · THE BOX OF DEFAULTS



How to read this picture: the box holds the writer's default moves, and the Elephant's. A card gets out only through the question in the middle. The same habit can pass in one scene and fail in another: Ben's watch joke shows who he is, so it comes out; a joke at the door the day he moves out would cover the feeling, so it stays in.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - DAY
Ben at the door with his box.
BEN    Don't rent my spot to anyone
       cuter.
JO     Come here, you.
They hug. She laughs. He goes.
```

What's wrong: the joke and the hug are habits, not choices. We saw both coming, and the goodbye never hurts.

WITH THE TOOL

```
INT. JO'S LIVING ROOM - DAY
Ben at the door with his box.
BEN    Okay.
JO     Okay.
He goes. The door clicks.
Jo stands still. Then smooths his
blanket.
```

What changed: this tool's move: the joke and the hug failed the box's question, so both stayed in. The quiet does the work.

(callback: Three Versions, Pick One **232** *)*

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR HABITS

? NAME THREE MOVES YOU USE IN ALMOST EVERY SCRIPT. FIND ONE IN THESE PAGES. WHAT JOB DOES IT DO HERE?

For the mentor: If they can't name a job only this story needs, cut it and read the scene without it. If they can't list their moves, ask a friend who has read their work which moment they always see coming.

TOOL CARD · KEEP GOING

List your favorite moves. Make each one earn its place.

5

WHICH MOVE DID YOU MAKE WITHOUT CHOOSING IT?

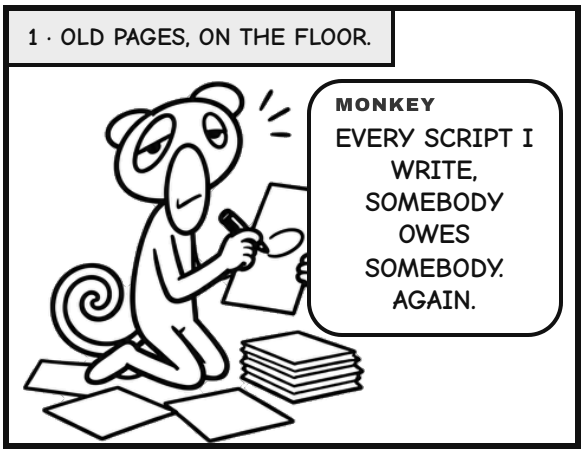
The Story You Keep Telling

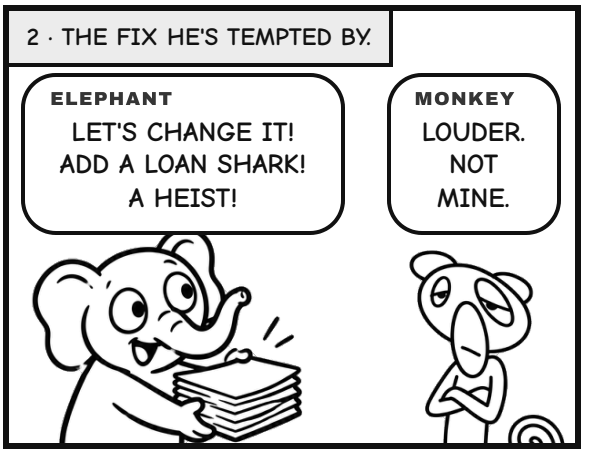
THE IDEA

Most writers keep coming back to one **core story**: the same kind of trouble, the same kind of person, the same question they can't stop asking. It shows up in a heist, a romance and a story set on the moon. It isn't a rut to fix. It's your fingerprint.

Find yours by laying your old pages side by side and circling what repeats. Reach for this tool when a new idea feels like all your old ones, or when you're tempted to chase whatever is popular. Then go deeper into the thread, not away from it.

The writer: the Monkey is writing his newest script, Ben and Jo, and it feels like all his old ones. Somebody owes somebody, again. He wants something new. The Elephant, his AI, is eager to help. The Cat has read everything he ever wrote.



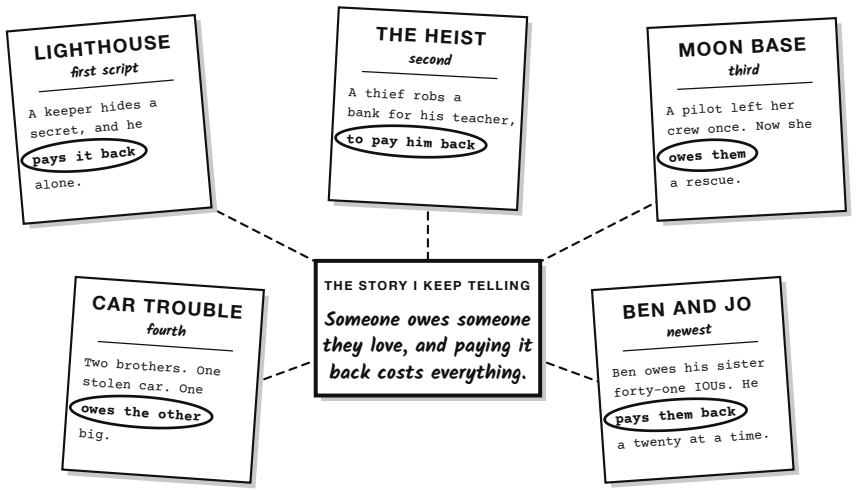




FIND YOUR STORY. GO DEEPER, NOT AWAY.

The thread you keep pulling is the one only you can pull. Pull it harder.

THE PICTURE · FIVE OLD SCRIPTS, SEEN FROM ABOVE



Five scripts, five worlds, one thread. Seen from above, they make one shape.

How to read this picture: each page is one of the Monkey's scripts. The worlds change; the circled words don't. The strings lead to the story he keeps telling. Ben and Jo is the newest page.

WITHOUT THE TOOL

RAN AWAY FROM THE THREAD.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

A LOAN SHARK kicks in the door.

SHARK Where's my money, Ben?

BEN Jo, I can explain.

What's wrong: louder, but not his. Ben owes a stranger now, and nobody cares.

WITH THE TOOL

WENT DEEPER INTO IT.

INT. JO'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

BEN Why keep them? Every IOU.

JO Forty-one.

BEN You counted them?

JO Every one.

His grin goes.

What changed: this tool's move: no loan shark. He went deeper into his own thread, and the old debt got a number.

(callback: Pay Rent on Every Mystery **180***)*

FOR THE MENTOR · ASK ABOUT THEIR PAGES

? LAY OUT THREE THINGS YOU'VE WRITTEN. WHAT HAPPENS IN ALL OF THEM?

For the mentor: Look for the same kind of trouble, person or ending. Name it in one sentence. Don't cut it from the next script. Ask what you haven't said about it yet.

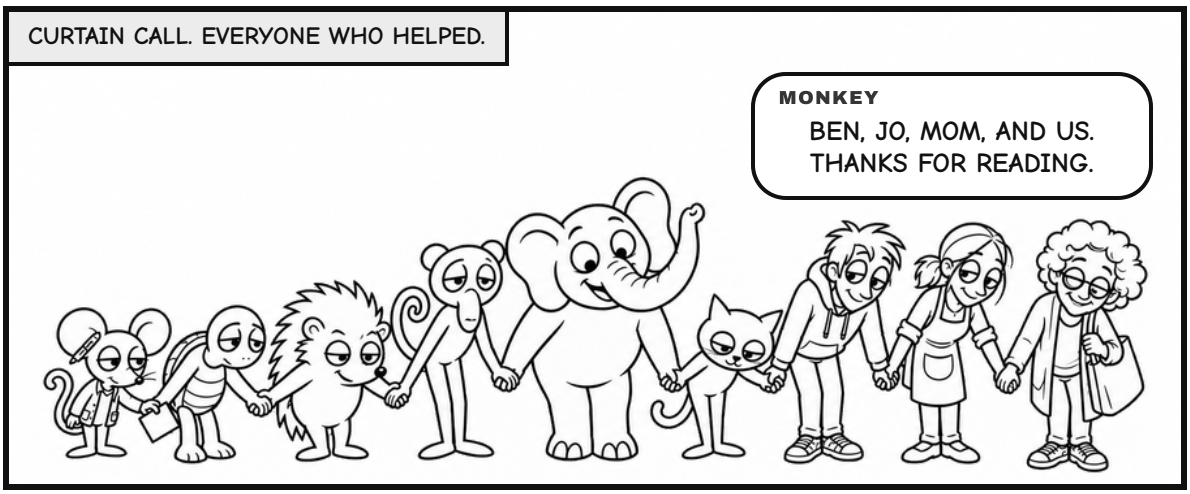
TOOL CARD · KEEP GOING

Find your story. Go deeper, not away.

6

WHAT HAPPENS IN EVERYTHING YOU WRITE?

Keep Your Voice



THE LAST IDEA

You can hand the Elephant, your AI, a lot of the legwork: a draft, a list, ten versions by morning. The one thing it can't bring is **you**. Your **want**: what you need the story to do to the audience. Your **taste**: knowing which version is alive. And the things only you have noticed, like the way a sister shuts a drawer a little too fast.

Together, that's your **voice**. Every tool in this box is here to help you keep it.



ELEPHANT
DRAFTS

Fast, eager, has read everything. It makes pages. It never picks which one stays.



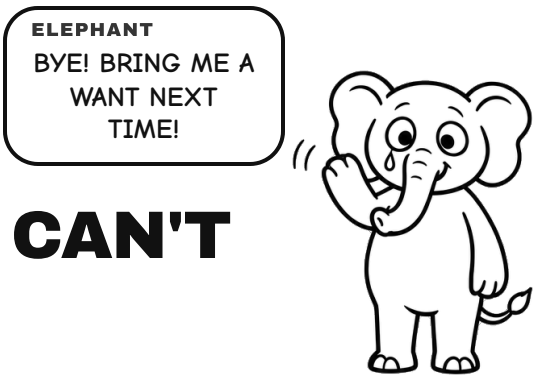
MONKEY
DECIDES

That's you. You know what you want, and you choose every line that stays.



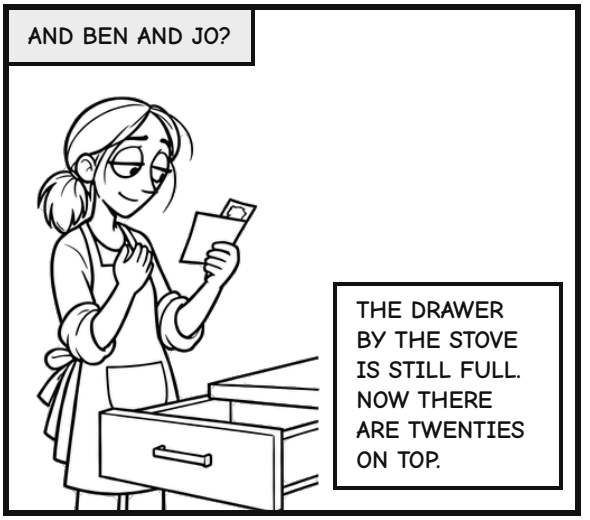
CAT
JUDGES

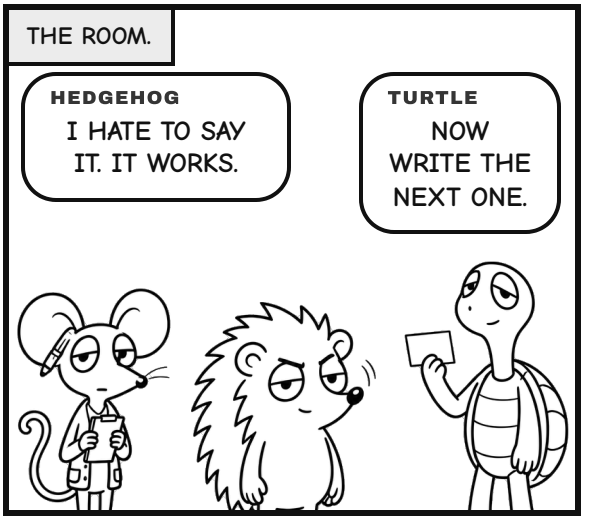
The reader. She won't tell you why. She wakes up, or she doesn't.



THE ONE THING IT CAN'T BRING IS YOU.

Your want, your taste, and what only you have noticed.



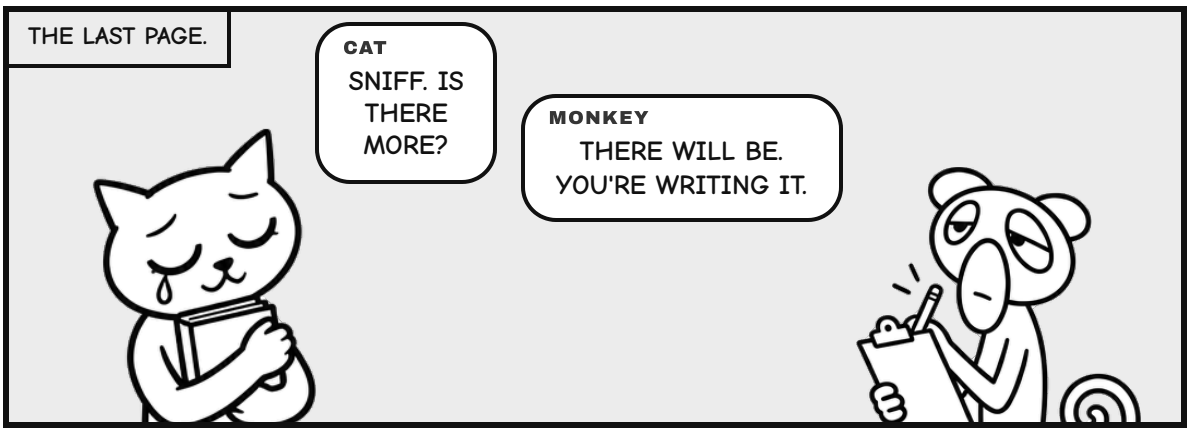


IF YOU WANT TO DO THIS FOR A LIVING

Nobody can promise anyone a writing career, and this book won't. Here is the part you control:

1. **Keep writing.** A little, most days.
2. **Finish things.** A finished rough draft teaches more than ten great openings.
3. **Find readers.** A class, a group, a mentor, one honest friend.
4. **Keep the pile.** Most of what you write won't sell. The pile is how you learn to write the one that might.

MONKEY DECIDES. ELEPHANT DRAFTS. CAT JUDGES.



ONE LAST QUESTION

Keep your voice.
Bring what only you have.

?

WHAT HAVE YOU NOTICED THAT NOBODY ELSE HAS?

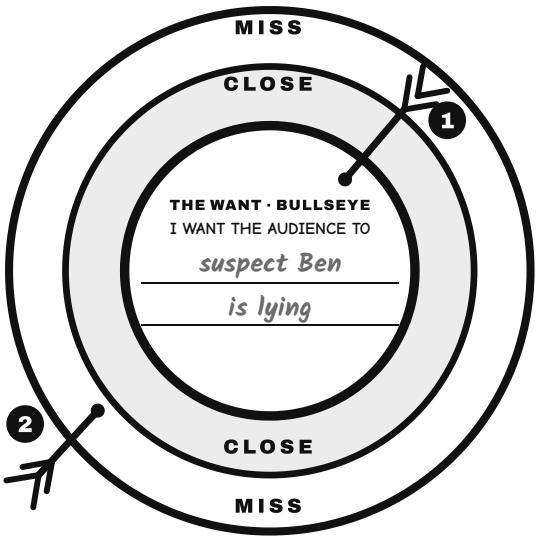
The Dartboard

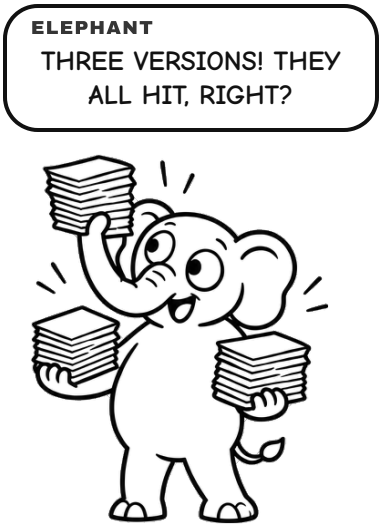
HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

Know what you want means deciding, before anyone writes, what a scene should do to the audience. Not what happens in it: what we should feel or think when it ends.

Write that want in the bullseye. Then write three short, different versions of the scene, or ask the AI (the Elephant) for three. For each one, circle where it lands and draw its dart on the board. Then write why it lands there. Your want should help you explain which versions serve it, and why.

The grey handwriting shows Ben bringing back his sister Jo's car with a new dent he won't admit to.





DART 1

THE VERSION
The scene, told one way, in a line or two.

Jo finds a new dent.

Ben: "That was there."

WHERE IT LANDS
Does it give us your want? Circle one.

(HIT) CLOSE MISS

WHY
What in it makes us feel that, or not.

He never mentions it.

DART 2

THE VERSION
The scene, told one way, in a line or two.

A bow on her car.

Ben: "You're welcome."

WHERE IT LANDS
Does it give us your want? Circle one.

HIT CLOSE (MISS)

WHY
What in it makes us feel that, or not.

Funny. We trust him.

DART 3

THE VERSION
The scene, told one way, in a line or two.

WHERE IT LANDS
Does it give us your want? Circle one.

HIT CLOSE MISS

WHY
What in it makes us feel that, or not.



CAT CHECK · THE CAT IS YOUR READER

Can your want explain which darts hit, which missed, and why? If all three hit and you can't say why, the want is too loose: make it sharper. Does your want say what the audience should feel or think, and not just what happens?

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Clothesline

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

Every story keeps asking one question about one person, and the answer is yes or no. Short enough to fit on a sticky note. That's your **One Emo Q**, your one emotional question.

Write three tries at your question, keep the best one, and copy it onto the note. Then write each scene of your story on a card, in order, and hang it on the line. Stamp each card: does this scene push the answer toward YES, toward NO, or does it DRIFT?

The grey handwriting shows two scenes from the story of Ben and his sister Jo.



THE QUESTION
About one person. Answered yes or no.

Can Ben ever be trusted?

FIRST TRIES
Write it three ways. Keep the one that fits.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

TICK WHAT YOUR PICK HAS

- ☐ **A PERSON** — One person it is about.
- ☐ **YES OR NO** — It can only be answered yes or no.
- ☐ **A FEELING** — It is about a feeling, not an event.
- ☐ **OPEN TILL THE END** — Nobody knows the answer until the last scene.

YES pushes toward yes · **NO** pushes toward no · **DRIFT** doesn't touch the question

SCENE 1
He slips the $500 back
WHICH WAY? YES NO DRIFT

SCENE 2
He missed her birthday
WHICH WAY? YES NO DRIFT

SCENE 3
WHICH WAY? YES NO DRIFT

SCENE 4
WHICH WAY? YES NO DRIFT

SCENE 5
WHICH WAY? YES NO DRIFT

SCENE 6
WHICH WAY? YES NO DRIFT



CAT CHECK · THE CAT IS YOUR READER

Does the answer swing back and forth, toward yes, then toward no? Is any card stamped DRIFT? A drift scene puts the Cat to sleep: bend it toward the question, or cut it.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Night Dive

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Know what you want. Before anyone writes, decide what the scene should do to the audience: what we should feel or think when it ends. Then try versions until one hits that target.

Remember Ben and Jo: Ben brought back Jo's car with a new dent. The want was "suspect Ben is lying." The version with a bow on the car was funny, but it missed. Now watch a famous director miss, and try again.

THE MOVIE · JAWS (1975) **SPOILER AHEAD**

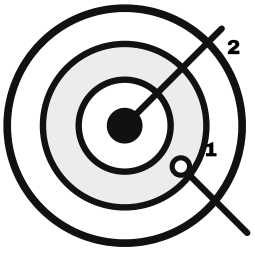
A thriller directed by Steven Spielberg. A giant shark is loose near Amity Island, a beach town in New England.

Brody is the town's police chief. **Hooper** is an ocean scientist who has come to help. They want to find the shark before anyone else gets hurt. This page is about one famous scare, and how Spielberg made it work.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SCENE, STEP BY STEP

1. Late at night, Brody and Hooper take a boat out to look for the shark.
2. They find a fishing boat, half sunk. It belongs to a local fisherman, Ben Gardner.
3. Hooper dives under it with a flashlight. Stuck in a hole in the hull, he finds a huge shark tooth.
4. Without warning, the fisherman's head bobs out of the hole, right at him. Ben Gardner did not survive. Hooper drops the tooth and races to the surface.
5. Behind the scenes: after test screenings, Spielberg wanted one more big scream. So he shot this moment again, in his film editor Verna Fields's swimming pool, with milk in the water to make it murky.

THE DARTBOARD



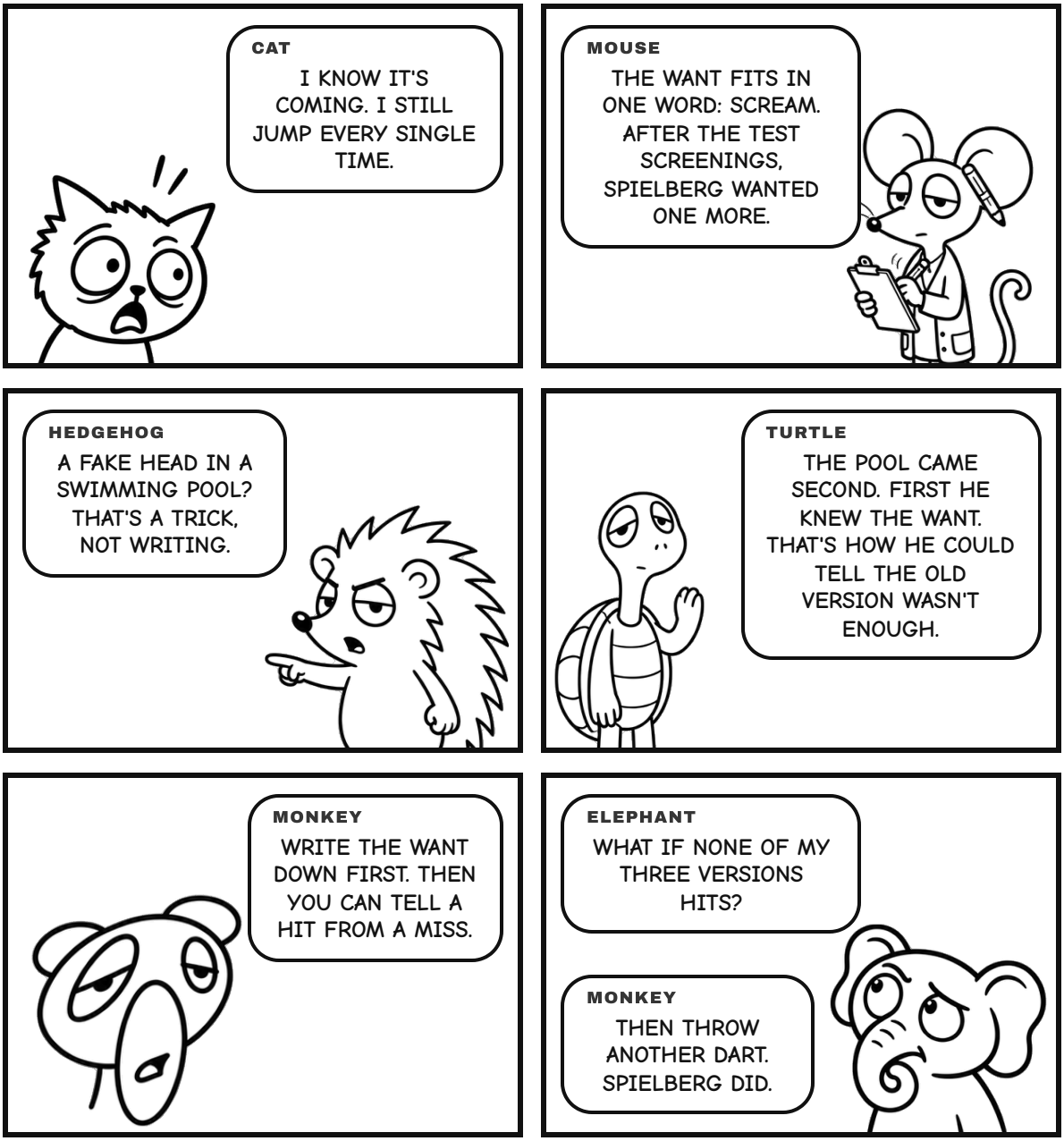
THE WANT · BULLSEYE

I want one more scream, right here.

1. The cut shown to the first test audiences. It worked, but Spielberg wanted one more scream than it gave. **CLOSE**
2. The pool version. No warning at all. **HIT**

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER



FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT DID SPIELBERG WANT THE AUDIENCE TO DO AT THIS MOMENT?
2. WHAT DID THE FIRST CUT NOT GIVE HIM?
3. NOW PICK A MOMENT FROM A MOVIE YOU LOVE. WHAT DID THE FILMMAKERS WANT YOU TO FEEL RIGHT THEN?

Answers: 1. Scream. He wanted one more big jump from the audience. 2. One more scream. In his own telling (our paraphrase), the film already worked, and he got greedy for another big jump. 3. Name the feeling in a few words, then point to what on screen makes you feel it.

Can Marlin Let Go?

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

The question on a sticky note. A story keeps asking one question about one person, and the answer is yes or no. That's your One Emo Q, your one emotional question. Each scene pushes the answer toward yes or toward no.

Remember Ben and Jo: "Can Ben ever be trusted?" He slips the $500 back: yes. He missed her birthday: no. Now watch a whole movie ask one question.

THE MOVIE · FINDING NEMO (2003) SPOILER AHEAD

An animated adventure from Pixar, directed by Andrew Stanton. **Marlin** is a clownfish on the Great Barrier Reef. Long ago, a barracuda took his wife and all but one of their eggs. The one left is his son, **Nemo**. Marlin has promised to keep him safe, and he worries about everything.

When divers catch Nemo and carry him away, Marlin crosses the ocean to find him, with **Dory**, a friendly fish who forgets things almost as soon as they happen.

WHAT HAPPENS, SCENE BY SCENE

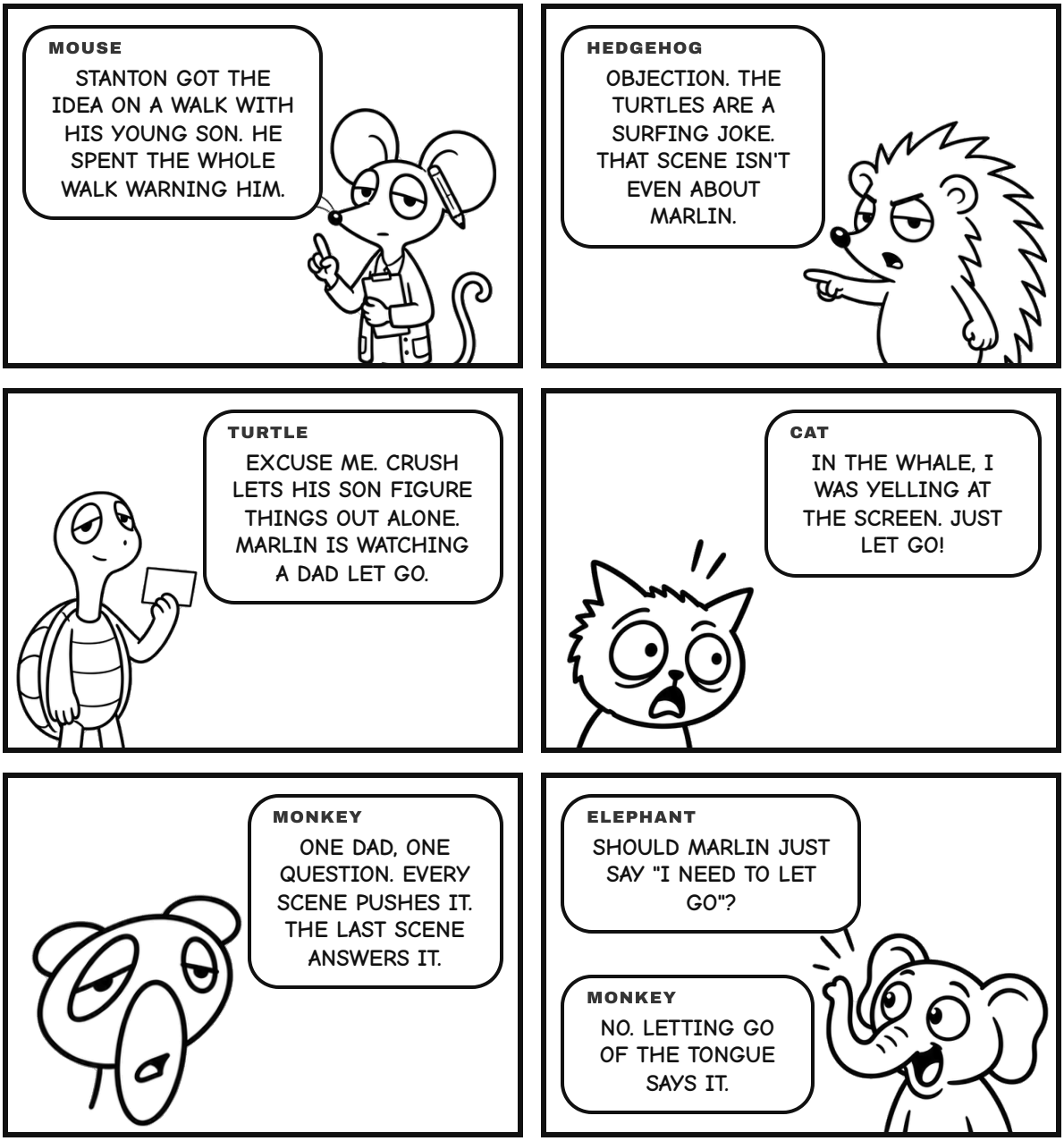
1. On a school trip, Marlin follows the class and orders Nemo home. Nemo swims out into open water to prove he can, and divers catch him.
2. Searching, Marlin rides an ocean current with sea turtles. Crush, a laid-back turtle dad, lets his own son figure things out.
3. Inside a whale's mouth, Dory says to let go of its tongue. Marlin is sure they'll die, but he lets go, and the whale blows them out into Sydney Harbour.
4. Near the end, Dory is caught in a fishing net. Nemo wants to swim in and help. Marlin tries to stop him, then lets him go, and the fish break free.
5. Back home, Marlin sees Nemo off to school, proud of him.

THE CLOTHESLINE



FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER



FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT ONE QUESTION DOES THIS MOVIE KEEP ASKING ABOUT MARLIN?
2. PICK TWO SCENES. WHICH WAY DOES EACH ONE PUSH THE ANSWER, YES OR NO?
3. NOW THINK OF A MOVIE YOU LOVE. CAN YOU FIT ITS QUESTION ON A STICKY NOTE? WHO IS IT ABOUT?

Answers: 1. Can Marlin let go? It is about one dad, and it can only be answered yes or no. 2. Ordering Nemo home pushes toward no. Letting go inside the whale pushes toward yes. 3. Make sure the question is about one person and has a yes or no answer. If it is about an event, ask how that person feels about it.

Three Takes

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

Say it out loud first means talking a scene through before you type it. Hearing it shows you where it drags and where it comes alive.

Write one sentence about what the scene changes. Then stand up and act out both people, out loud, three times in a row, without stopping to fix anything. Record it on your phone if you can. After each take, jot down what you heard. Last, fill in the two lines at the bottom.

The grey handwriting shows Ben asking his sister Jo for money, again.

WHAT CHANGES, IN ONE SENTENCE

Who wants what, and what is different when the scene ends?

Jo stops lending Ben money

TAKE 1 FIND THE FIGHT

What are they really arguing about?

She won't say why. He won't ask.

TAKE 2 TURN UP THE HEAT

Push harder. Make it cost them more.

TAKE 3 COMMIT TO THE TURN

Play the moment things change, all the way.

RUNWAY WORDS

Little words that let one person cut in on the other. Use them so people talk over each other, like real people do.

- LOOK.
- LISTEN.
- HANG ON.
- WAIT.
- YEAH, BUT.



THE FIRST THING THE CAMERA SEES THEM DO

A movement, before anyone talks.

Jo scrubs a pan. She won't look up.

THE CHOICE THAT ENDS IT

What someone decides, that we can see.



CAT CHECK · THE CAT IS YOUR READER

Does the scene end on a choice someone makes? Does your typed version move as fast as the takes you said out loud? If it feels slower, you cleaned it up too much.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Chain

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

Scene and sequel is a pattern that keeps a story moving. In a **scene**, someone tries to get what they want from someone who says no, and it ends with a turn. In the **sequel** right after, they react, face a hard choice, and decide.

That decision becomes their goal in the next scene, so each link pulls the next. Fill in the links in order, top to bottom. The grey handwriting shows Ben asking his sister Jo for $500.

SCENE 1 THEY TRY

GOAL
What they are after: *$500 from Jo. Tonight.*

WHO SAYS NO
The person in the way: *Jo*

TACTICS
The different ways they try, one by one

Ask | *Promise* | *Guilt*

THE TURN
The moment things change direction: *The drawer of IOUs*

SEQUEL 1 WHAT IT COSTS

REACTION
How it hits them, shown: *Alone with the cash*

DILEMMA
Two choices, both hard: *Keep it or give it back*

DECISION
What they choose: *Give it back*

WE SEE IT HOW?
An action, not a line of talk: *Her mail slot*

THE DECISION BECOMES THE NEXT GOAL

SCENE 2 THEY TRY

GOAL *Find rent money somewhere else*

WHO SAYS NO _____

TACTICS

_____ | _____ | _____

THE TURN _____

SEQUEL 2 WHAT IT COSTS

REACTION _____

DILEMMA _____

DECISION _____

WE SEE IT HOW? _____

THE DECISION BECOMES THE NEXT GOAL

SCENE 3 AND ON IT GOES

GOAL _____

A DECISION
WE SEE IT. NOBODY SAYS IT.





CAT CHECK · THE CAT IS YOUR READER

Can we see every decision happen, instead of hearing someone say it? Does each decision start the next scene? If one doesn't, the chain is broken.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

Talking Over Each Other

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Say it out loud first. Talk a scene through, out loud, before you type it. Your ear hears where it drags and where it comes alive, and where real people would cut in on each other.

Remember Ben and Jo: Ben asks Jo for money, again, while she scrubs a pan and won't look up. You act out both of them, three times, before you type a word. The idea of letting people talk over each other comes from the director Howard Hawks. Here is the movie where he did it.

THE MOVIE · HIS GIRL FRIDAY (1940)

A fast newspaper comedy directed by Howard Hawks, written by Charles Lederer. **Walter** (Cary Grant) runs a newspaper. **Hildy** (Rosalind Russell) was his star reporter. They used to be married, and she has already left the paper.

Hildy wants out for good: she is about to marry a quiet, respectable man named Bruce and leave the newspaper business behind. Walter wants to keep her at the paper.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SCENE, STEP BY STEP

1. Hildy walks into her old newspaper office to see Walter, her ex-husband and old boss.
2. She tells him she's getting married again and leaving the business for good.
3. Walter doesn't want to lose her. He cuts in. She cuts right back in. Neither one waits for the other to finish.
4. Their lines run over each other, fast, the way people really argue.
5. Walter talks her into one last story: a prisoner who is due to be executed the next morning.

THREE TAKES, IF YOU REHEARSED IT

WHAT CHANGES *Hildy goes from leaving for good to taking one more story.*

TAKE 1

FIND THE FIGHT

Is it the job, or the two of them?

TAKE 2

TURN UP THE HEAT

He cuts in. She cuts back.

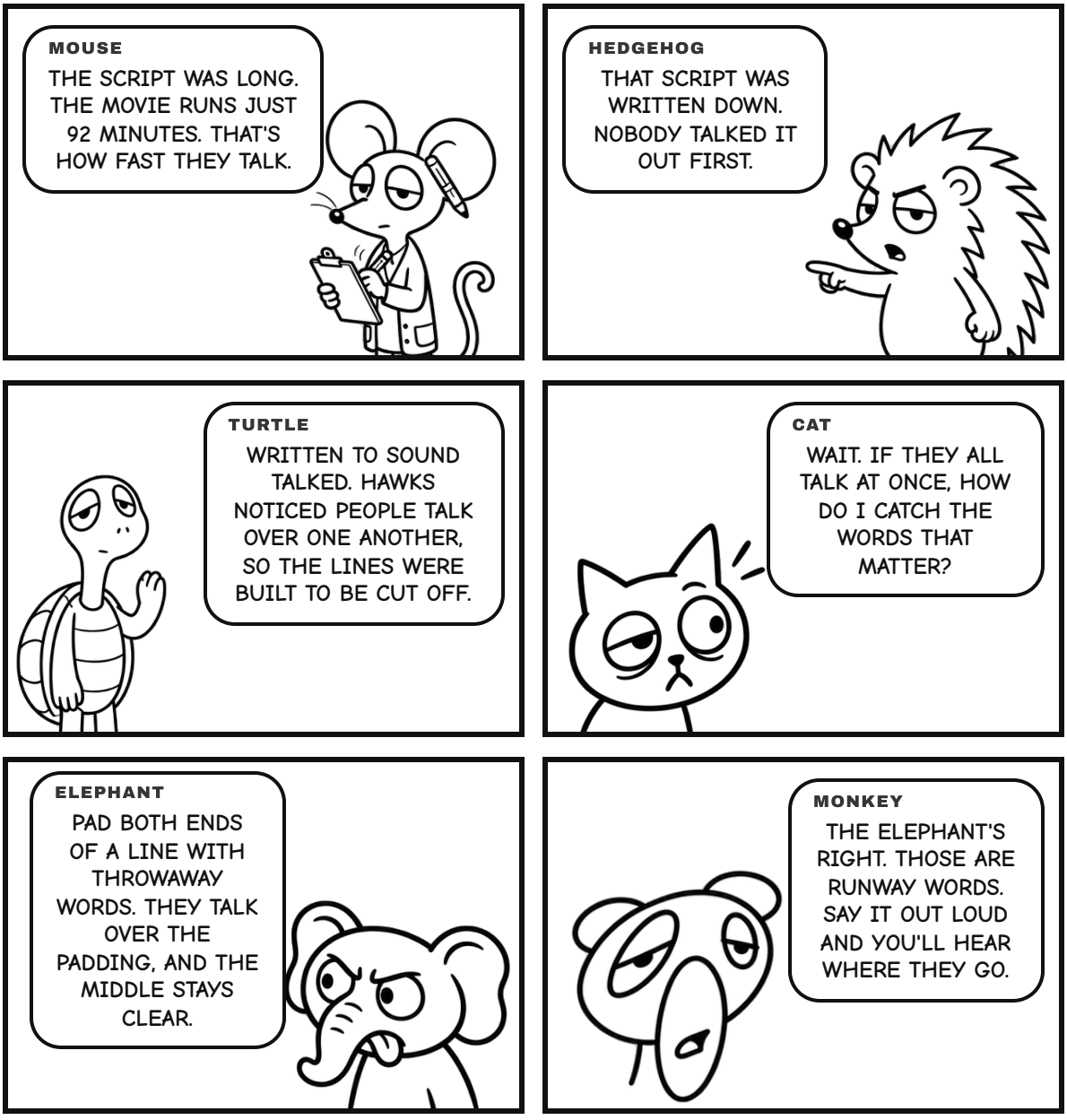
TAKE 3

COMMIT TO THE TURN

She says yes to one last story.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER



FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT DO WALTER AND HILDY EACH WANT WHEN SHE WALKS IN?
2. WHY DOES TALKING OVER EACH OTHER MAKE THE SCENE FEEL REAL?
3. NOW PICK A SCENE FROM A MOVIE YOU LOVE. READ IT OUT LOUD WITH A FRIEND. WHERE WOULD ONE OF YOU CUT IN?

Answers: 1. Hildy wants to marry Bruce and leave newspapers for good. Walter wants to keep her at the paper. 2. Real people don't wait their turn when they argue. Hawks heard that, and had throwaway words added at the start and end of lines, so the actors could talk over those and the key words came through. 3. People cut in once they know what the other person is going to say. Put a throwaway word or two there, so the cut-in lands on padding.

The Bridge, Then the Hill

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Scene and sequel. In a scene, someone tries to get what they want, hits a no, and it ends with a turn. In the sequel right after, they react, face a hard choice, and decide. That decision becomes their goal in the next scene. (The terms come from Dwight V. Swain.)

Remember Ben and Jo: Ben gets $500 from Jo. Alone with the cash, he can keep it or give it back, and he slips it through her mail slot. Now watch the same chain in a fantasy epic.

THE MOVIE · THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING (2001) SPOILER AHEAD

The first Lord of the Rings film, directed by Peter Jackson, from J.R.R. Tolkien's novel. **Frodo**, a hobbit, carries a dangerous ring that must be destroyed. Eight companions travel with him: the Fellowship.

Their guide is **Gandalf**, a wizard. **Aragorn** and **Boromir** are two of the warriors. Their road runs through the Mines of Moria, deep under a mountain.

WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

1. **Scene.** The Fellowship runs for the way out of Moria, chased by a giant monster called a Balrog.
2. Gandalf stops on a narrow stone bridge to hold it back while the others escape.
3. The bridge breaks under the Balrog. As it falls, it catches Gandalf and pulls him down into the dark.
4. **Sequel.** Outside, on the rocks, the hobbits collapse and cry. Boromir asks Aragorn to give them a moment.
5. Aragorn says no: orcs are coming after them, and they will show no pity. They get up and head for Lothlórien, a forest of the elves.

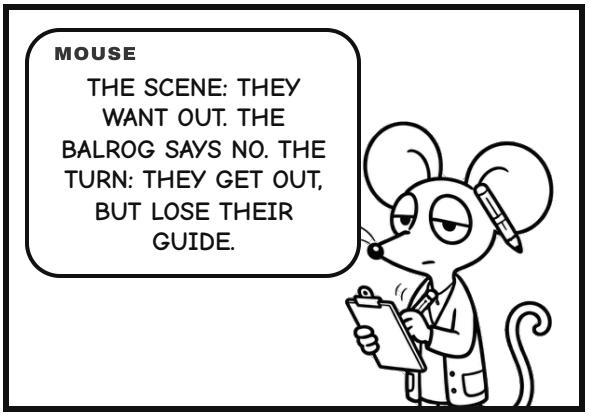
THE CHAIN

SCENE · THEY TRY		SEQUEL · WHAT IT COSTS	
GOAL	*Get out alive*	REACTION	*The hobbits weep*
WHO SAYS NO	*The Balrog*	DILEMMA	*Grieve, or keep moving*
THE TURN	*Out, but Gandalf falls*	DECISION	*Move, now. They get up.*

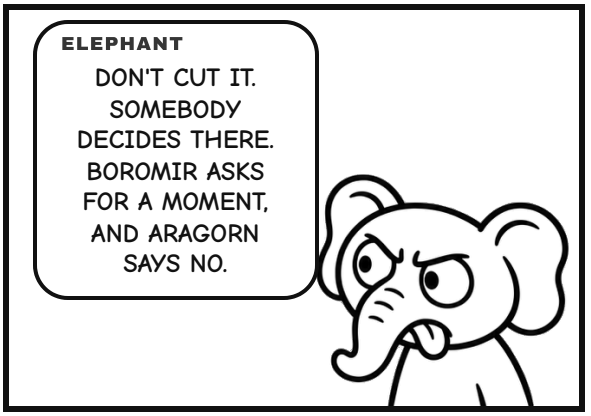
THE DECISION BECOMES THE NEXT GOAL *Reach Lothlórien safely*

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

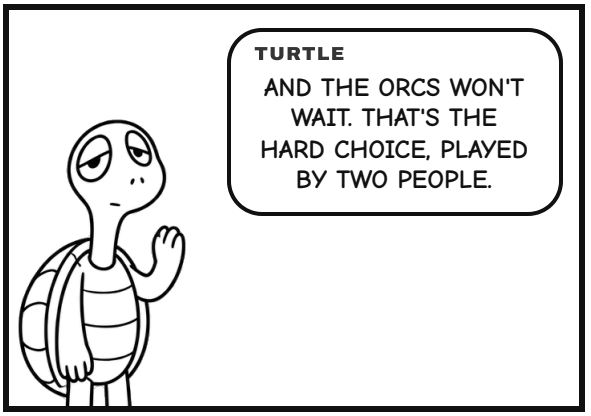
THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER

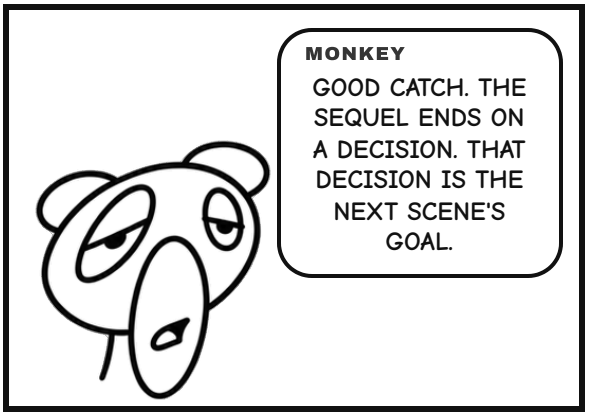












FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. IN THE BRIDGE SCENE, WHAT DOES THE FELLOWSHIP WANT? WHAT TURNS IT?
2. ON THE HILLSIDE, WHAT IS THE HARD CHOICE? WHO MAKES THE DECISION?
3. NOW LOOK AT YOUR OWN PAGES. FIND A BIG MOMENT. WHAT HAPPENS RIGHT AFTER IT? DOES SOMEONE DECIDE SOMETHING?

Answers: 1. They want to get out of Moria alive. They do, but they lose Gandalf. 2. Stay and grieve, or keep moving before the orcs come. Aragorn decides they move on. 3. If nobody decides anything, the story stalls. Look for the choice that starts the next scene.

The Seesaws

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

In every scene, one person holds the upper hand: they have something the other person needs, like the keys, a secret or a yes. Being louder doesn't count. Picture a seesaw: that person sits up high.

For each scene, write who is up at the very start, who is up at the very end, and how we would see it. In the middle, write what flipped it. Then tick what changed: power, knowledge, commitment, danger, or the relationship. Tip: cover the middle of the scene with your thumb and read only the first and last moments. The grey handwriting shows how Ben and Jo's car-keys scene fills it in.



SCENE 1 *Ben asks to borrow Jo's car*

START · the first moment

UP · HOLDS IT *Jo*

DOWN · NEEDS IT *Ben*

WE SEE IT HOW?
What we watch happen

Her fist closes on the keys

WHAT MOVED IT?
The thing that flipped the seesaw

The bent mailbox flag

END · the last moment

UP · HOLDS IT *Ben*

DOWN · NEEDS IT *Jo*

WE SEE IT HOW?

He takes the keys

WHAT CHANGED?
tick every one

- [x] POWER
- [ ] KNOWLEDGE
- [ ] COMMITMENT
- [ ] DANGER
- [ ] RELATIONSHIP

SCENE 2 _____

START

UP · HOLDS IT

DOWN · NEEDS IT

WE SEE IT HOW?

WHAT MOVED IT?

END

UP · HOLDS IT

DOWN · NEEDS IT

WE SEE IT HOW?

WHAT CHANGED?
tick every one

- [ ] POWER
- [ ] KNOWLEDGE
- [ ] COMMITMENT
- [ ] DANGER
- [ ] RELATIONSHIP

SCENE 3 _____

START

UP · HOLDS IT

DOWN · NEEDS IT

WE SEE IT HOW?

WHAT MOVED IT?

END

UP · HOLDS IT

DOWN · NEEDS IT

WE SEE IT HOW?

WHAT CHANGED?
tick every one

- [ ] POWER
- [ ] KNOWLEDGE
- [ ] COMMITMENT
- [ ] DANGER
- [ ] RELATIONSHIP



CAT CHECK: WHAT CHANGED: POWER, KNOWLEDGE, COMMITMENT, DANGER, OR THE RELATIONSHIP? POWER CHANGING SIDES IS ONE CLEAR ANSWER. WHAT MATTERS IS A MEANINGFUL CHANGE. TICKED NONE? THEN NOTHING HAS HAPPENED YET: GIVE SOMEONE SOMETHING TO FIND, LEARN OR DO. DOES THE SCENE STILL WORK FROM THE OTHER PERSON'S SIDE?

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Tactic Staircase

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

Every fix makes a problem. A character wants something, and someone says no. Each time they try, the other person hits back, so the next try has to be bigger or riskier.

Write the goal and who says no. Start on step 1, at the bottom: what do they try, and how does the other person hit back? Climb one step at a time. At the top, write the twist: the surprise that knocks them off the top step. The grey handwriting shows Ben's first two tries with Jo.

GOAL
what they're after *Ben: Jo co-signs his car loan*

WHO SAYS NO
who stands in the way *Jo*



MONKEY
EVERY TRY COSTS MORE THAN THE LAST.

THE TWIST · the surprise that knocks them off the top step

4 ALL IN · risk everything

THEY HIT BACK

3 RAISE IT

THEY HIT BACK

2 TRY HARDER

Offers to pay her gas

THEY HIT BACK

"With what money?"

1 TRY · what they do to it

Asks nicely

THEY HIT BACK · how they say no

"I'm busy."



CAT CHECK: IS EVERY TRY BIGGER OR RISKIER THAN THE ONE BELOW IT? DOES THE TWIST COST THEM SOMETHING THEY CAN'T TAKE BACK?

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Battle of Wits

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Who holds the upper hand? Look at the start of a scene and the end, and ask who is on top each time. Then ask what changed: power, knowledge, commitment, danger, or the relationship. Power changing sides is one clear answer. What matters is a meaningful change.

Remember Ben and Jo: Jo held the car keys when the scene began, and Ben held them when it ended. Now watch the same tool in a movie.

THE MOVIE · THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1987) **SPOILER AHEAD**

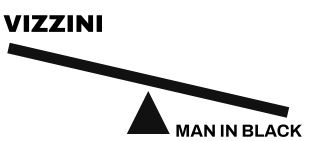
A fairy-tale adventure, and a comedy, written by William Goldman from his own novel. A grandfather reads the story aloud to his sick grandson.

In the story, Princess Buttercup has been kidnapped. The kidnappers' boss is **Vizzini**, who is sure he is a genius. A masked stranger, **the Man in Black**, has been chasing them, and now he finally catches up. He wants the princess back.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SCENE, STEP BY STEP

1. Vizzini sits at a table and holds a knife to Buttercup's throat. If the Man in Black comes closer, she dies.
2. The Man in Black offers a contest instead: a battle of wits. He sets out two cups of wine and says he has poisoned one of them. Vizzini must pick a cup. Then they both drink.
3. Vizzini talks and talks, reasoning in circles about which cup is safe. Then he tricks the Man in Black into looking away and secretly swaps the cups.
4. They both drink. Vizzini is sure he has won. Then he falls over dead.
5. The Man in Black explains: both cups were poisoned. He has spent years making his body immune to that poison. He leaves with the princess.

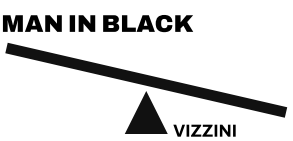
THE SEESAW



START

Vizzini has the princess, the knife and all the talking.

WHAT MOVED IT? SOMETHING HE NEVER KNEW: THE IMMUNITY.

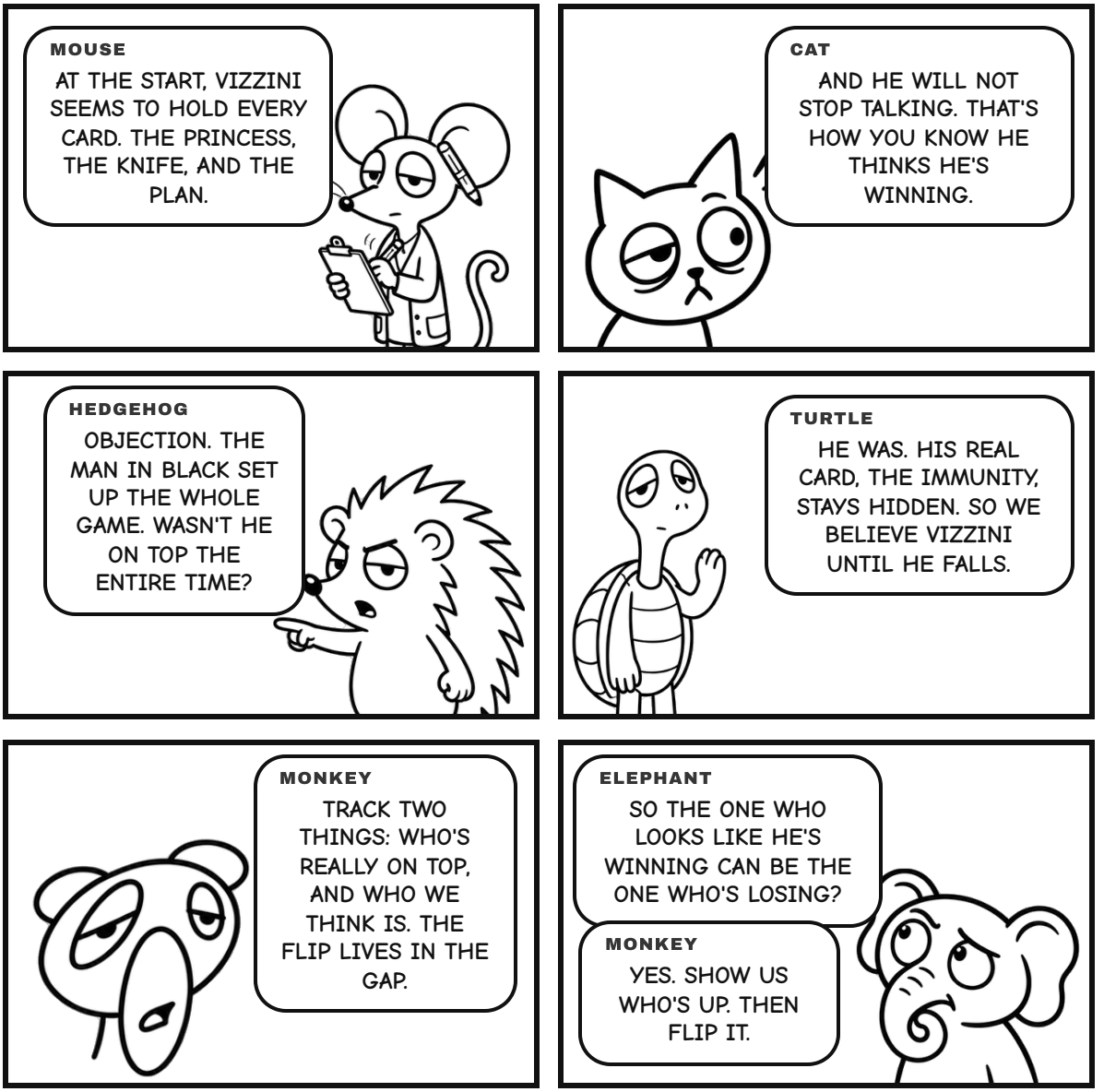


END

Vizzini is gone. The princess leaves with the Man in Black.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER



FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHO HAS THE UPPER HAND WHEN THE SCENE STARTS? HOW CAN YOU TELL?
2. WHEN DOES IT FLIP? WHAT DID THE MAN IN BLACK HAVE THAT VIZZINI DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT?
3. NOW PICK A SCENE FROM A MOVIE YOU LOVE. WHO IS UP AT THE START? WHO IS UP AT THE END? WHAT CHANGED: POWER, KNOWLEDGE, COMMITMENT, DANGER, OR THE RELATIONSHIP?

Answers: 1. Vizzini, or so it seems. He has the princess and the knife, and he does all the talking. 2. When Vizzini falls. The real advantage was the immunity, built up long before the scene began. 3. If the same person is up both times, look for what else changed: did someone learn something, promise something, risk something, or end up standing differently with the other? If none of them changed, the scene is marking time.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

Out the Window

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Every fix makes a problem. A character wants something, and something is in the way. Each try to fix it makes a bigger problem, so the next try has to be bigger or riskier.

Remember Ben: he wants Jo to co-sign his car loan. He asks nicely; she's busy. He offers to pay for her gas; she asks, with what money? Now watch the same tool in a movie.

THE MOVIE · TOY STORY (1995) SPOILER AHEAD

An animated comedy from Pixar, directed by John Lasseter, where toys come to life when no one is watching. **Woody**, a cowboy toy, is the favorite of a boy named **Andy**, and the leader of Andy's toys. Then Andy gets **Buzz Lightyear**, a space-ranger action figure who doesn't know he's a toy. Woody wants to stay Andy's favorite. Andy's family is going to Pizza Planet, a restaurant, and Woody wants to be the toy Andy takes along.

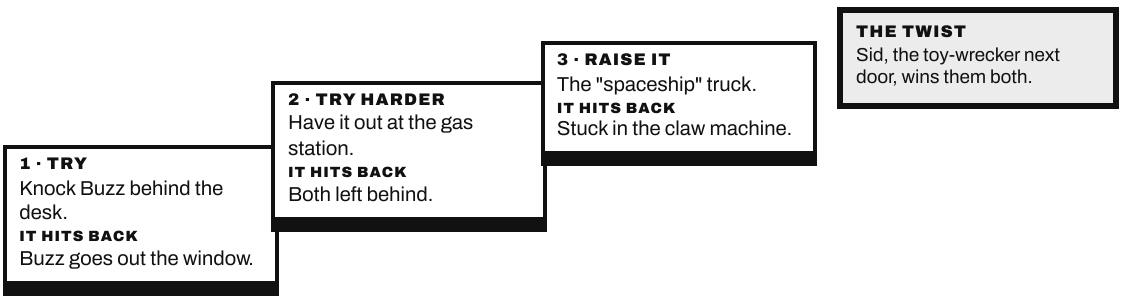
WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

1. Woody tries to knock Buzz behind the desk, so Andy will pick Woody instead.
2. It goes wrong. Buzz falls out the window by accident, and the other toys think Woody did it on purpose.
3. At a gas station on the way, Buzz turns up. They fight, fall out of the car and get left behind.
4. Woody's next fix: he talks Buzz onto a Pizza Planet delivery truck by telling him it's a spaceship.
5. That lands them both in a claw machine. The twist: Sid, the boy next door who wrecks toys, wins them.

THE TACTIC STAIRCASE

GOAL Stay Andy's favorite

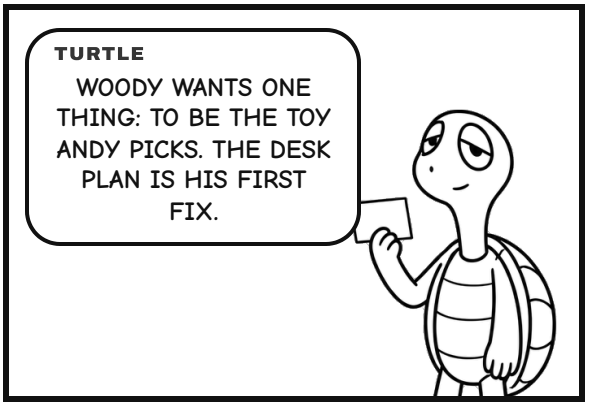
WHO SAYS NO Buzz, just by being new

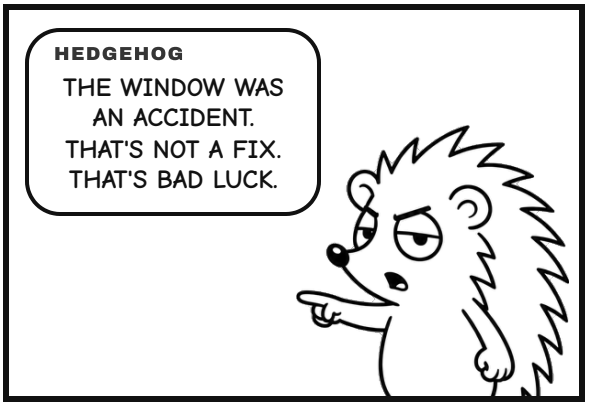


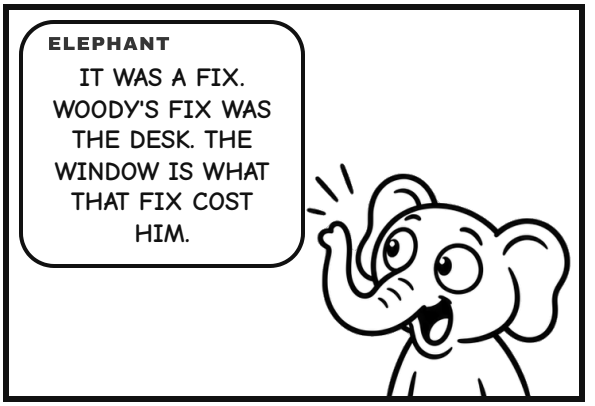
FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

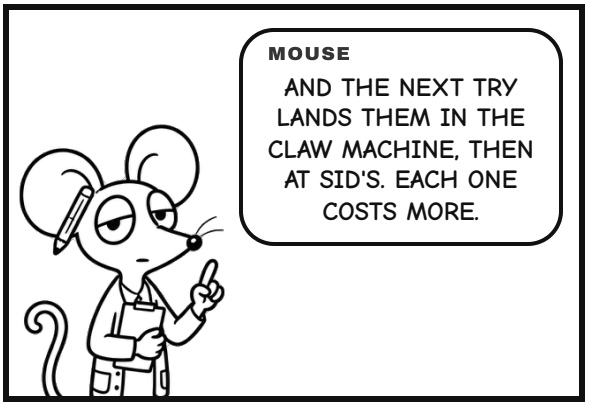
THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER

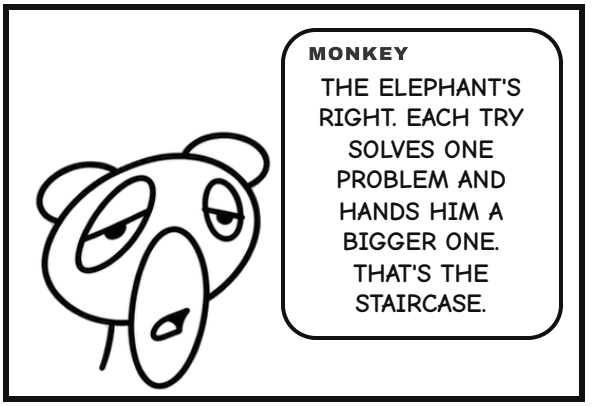












FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT DOES WOODY WANT? WHAT STANDS IN HIS WAY?
2. PICK ONE OF WOODY'S FIXES. WHAT NEW PROBLEM DID IT MAKE?
3. NOW PICK A MOVIE YOU LOVE. WHAT DOES THE HERO TRY FIRST, AND WHAT DOES THAT TRY COST THEM?

Answers: 1. He wants to stay Andy's favorite and be the toy Andy takes along. Buzz is in his way, just by being new. 2. The desk plan sends Buzz out the window, and the toys turn on Woody. The spaceship trick lands them in the claw machine, and then with Sid. 3. If the first try works and costs nothing, look for a way it could make things worse.

Ten Bars

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

A set piece is a big stretch of action: a chase, a fight, a dance. Build it like a song, in ten short parts called bars. Every bar changes something: the danger, the place, the plan or the feelings.

Name the set piece and what it changes inside the characters. Then fill the bars in order, 1 to 10, using the hint in each box. The grey handwriting shows how Ben and Jo's couch scene begins.

THE SET PIECE · the big action stretch

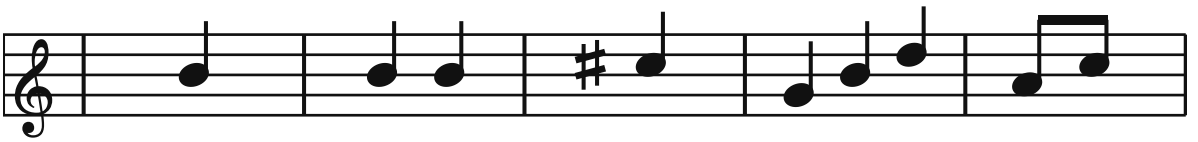
Ben and Jo carry Mom's couch up three flights

WHAT IT CHANGES INSIDE THEM · who they are after it

MONKEY

THE STAIRWELL NARROWS? RULE CHANGE. THEY FLOP ON THE COUCH ON THE LANDING? THAT'S YOUR RESET.





VERSE

1 PROMISE
WHAT KIND OF SCENE IS THIS?

Can these two lift anything together?

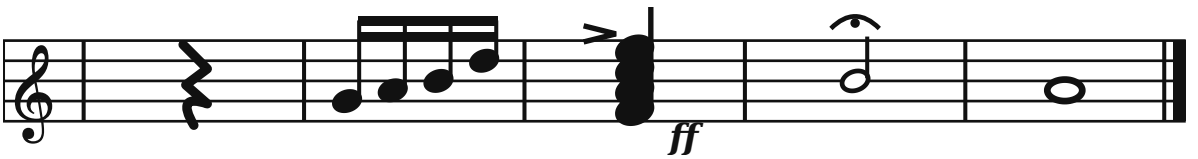
2 BASELINE
HOW IT GOES AT FIRST

Flight one: easy. Jo counts.

3 RULE CHANGE
SOMETHING CHANGES THE CONDITIONS

4 ESCALATE
BIGGER, FASTER, RISKIER

5 VARIATION
A NEW MOVE, PARTNER OR PLACE



BIG FINISH

6 RESET
A PAUSE OR A STUMBLE. IT LOADS THE NEXT HIT.

7 ESCALATE
PRESSURE SPIKES. THEY COMMIT.

8 SIGNATURE
THE ONE MOMENT WE'LL REMEMBER

9 AFTERTASTE
THE FEELING IT LEAVES. WHAT IT COST.

10 BUTTON
A CLEAN EXIT BACK TO THE STORY



CAT CHECK: DOES EVERY BAR CHANGE SOMETHING? IS THERE A PAUSE (BAR 6) JUST BEFORE THE BIGGEST MOMENT? WITHOUT ONE, THE BIG MOMENT FEELS LIKE MORE OF THE SAME.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

Tag the Room

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

Once a character wants something, they stop feeling neutral about the things around them. Everything in the room either helps them get it or gets in the way.

Write who it is and what they want. Hang a tag on four things in the room (or draw your own): what does this person think of it now, and does it help or block the goal? Then give them a new goal and watch the tags flip. The grey handwriting shows Jo, who wants Ben out by Friday.

WHO *Jo*

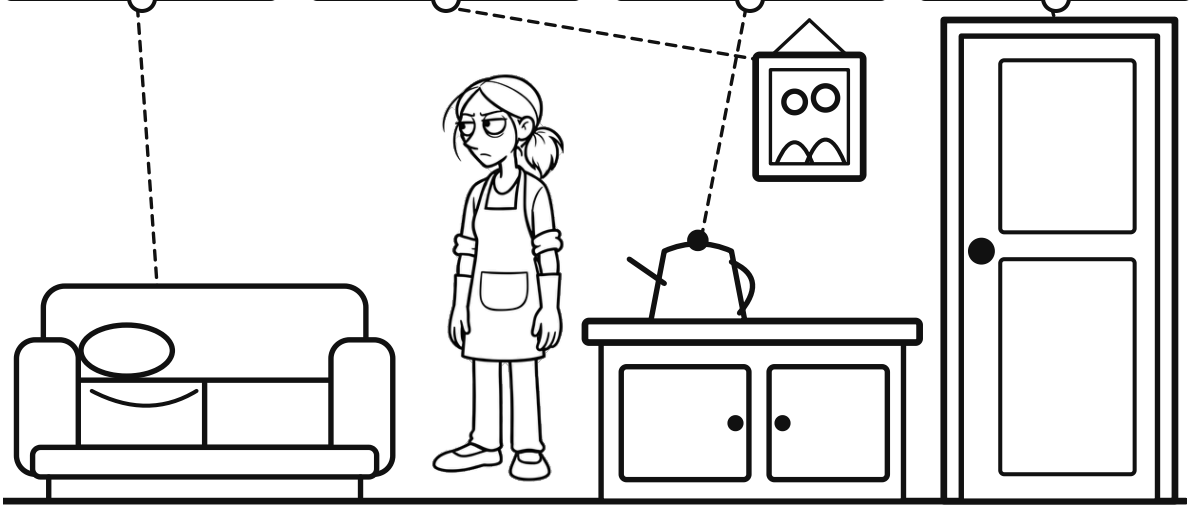
GOAL
what they're after now *Ben out of her place by Friday*

THE THING 1
The couch
WHAT THEY THINK OF IT NOW
His bed now.
Still has his dent.
☐ HELPS ☑ BLOCKS

THE THING 2
WHAT THEY THINK OF IT NOW
☐ HELPS ☐ BLOCKS

THE THING 3
WHAT THEY THINK OF IT NOW
☐ HELPS ☐ BLOCKS

THE THING 4
WHAT THEY THINK OF IT NOW
☐ HELPS ☐ BLOCKS



SAME ROOM, NEW GOAL
Give them a different goal. Watch each tag flip.

NEW GOAL *Impress Mom, who visits tonight*

TAG 1 NOW SAYS
Throw a blanket on it.

TAG 2 NOW SAYS

TAG 3 NOW SAYS

TAG 4 NOW SAYS



CAT CHECK: DOES EVERY TAG SHOW A REAL OPINION? OR DOES ONE STILL JUST SAY "IT'S FINE"? NO OPINION, NOTHING FOR THE CAT TO WATCH.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Title Number

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Build it like a song. A set piece is a big stretch of action: a chase, a fight, a dance. Build it the way a song is built, in ten short parts called bars. Every bar changes something.

Remember Ben and Jo carrying Mom's couch up three flights. Flight one is easy, and Jo counts. Then the stairwell narrows: that's a rule change. Now listen for the same bars in a movie.

THE MOVIE · SINGIN' IN THE RAIN (1952)

A musical comedy, directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen. It's set in Hollywood in the late 1920s, when movies were learning to talk.

Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) is a silent-film star. His new picture went badly at a preview, but tonight he and his friends found a way to save it: turn it into a musical. And Don has fallen for **Kathy Selden** (Debbie Reynolds), a young performer. He has just walked her home. It's raining, and he couldn't be happier.

WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

1. Don says goodnight to Kathy at her door and waves his car away. He wants to walk.
2. He starts home with his umbrella up. Then he closes it and lets himself get soaked.
3. Along the way: a lamppost, the shop windows, a gushing drainpipe, the curb.
4. At the high point, he stomps and splashes through a big puddle like a kid.
5. A policeman walks up and stares. Don stops, a little embarrassed.
6. He hands his umbrella to a passerby and strolls off.

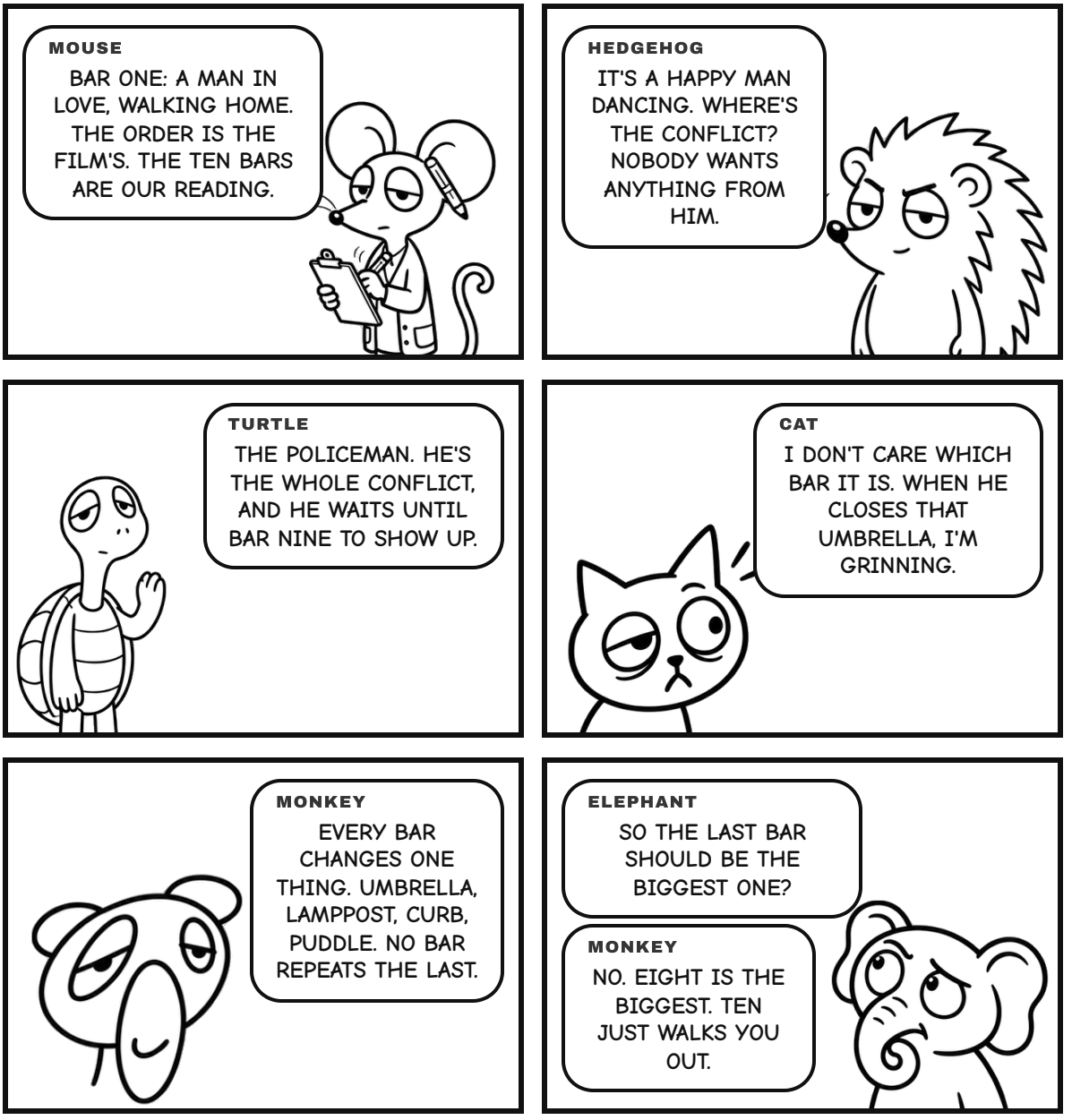
TEN BARS · HERE'S ONE WAY TO HEAR IT

The film doesn't label its bars. The order is the film's. The ten-way split is ours.

1 PROMISE In love, walking home.	**2 BASELINE** Umbrella up. Just walking.	**3 RULE CHANGE** He closes the umbrella.	**4 ESCALATE** A swing on the lamppost.	**5 VARIATION** Dancing past the shop windows.
6 RESET Still, under a gushing drainpipe.	**7 ESCALATE** One foot on the curb, one in the gutter.	**8 SIGNATURE** **The big puddle stomp.**	**9 AFTERTASTE** The policeman stares. Caught.	**10 BUTTON** Umbrella to a stranger.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER



FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHEN DO THE RULES OF THE SCENE CHANGE? WHAT DOES DON DO?
2. WHICH MOMENT WOULD YOU CALL THE SIGNATURE, THE ONE YOU'LL REMEMBER? WHY?
3. NOW PICK A DANCE, CHASE OR FIGHT FROM A MOVIE YOU LOVE. CAN YOU FIND A SMALL PAUSE JUST BEFORE ITS BIGGEST MOMENT?

Answers: 1. When he closes the umbrella. From then on he isn't trying to stay dry; he's playing. 2. Many people pick the puddle stomp, but any answer works if you can say what it changes. 3. If there's no pause, the biggest moment can feel like more of the same. A reset gives it room.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Bar Scene

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Want makes opinions. Once a character wants something, nothing around them is neutral. Every person and thing in the room either helps them get it or gets in the way.

Remember Jo: she wants Ben out of her place by Friday. So the couch isn't just a couch. It's his bed now, and it still has his dent. Now watch one goal sort a whole conversation.

THE MOVIE · THE SOCIAL NETWORK (2010)

A drama directed by David Fincher and written by Aaron Sorkin. It tells a dramatized story of how Facebook began at Harvard in 2003.

The first scene comes before any of that. **Mark Zuckerberg** (Jesse Eisenberg), a 19-year-old Harvard student, is having a drink in a bar with his girlfriend, **Erica Albright** (Rooney Mara). She goes to another school, Boston University. Mark wants one thing: to get into a final club, one of Harvard's exclusive social clubs. Erica is trying to have a date.

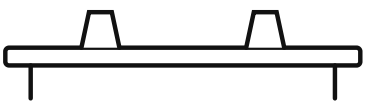
WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

1. Mark asks how you stand out in a place where everyone has a perfect test score.
2. He keeps steering the talk to final clubs and which one he could get into. Erica says he's obsessed. He says he's motivated.
3. Once he's in, he says, he'll take her to meet people she wouldn't meet otherwise. Erica tells him they're over.
4. She says she has to go study. He says she goes to BU, so she doesn't need to.
5. Erica walks out. That same night, he builds a website that is the first step toward Facebook.

TAG THE ROOM · WHO: MARK · GOAL: INTO A FINAL CLUB

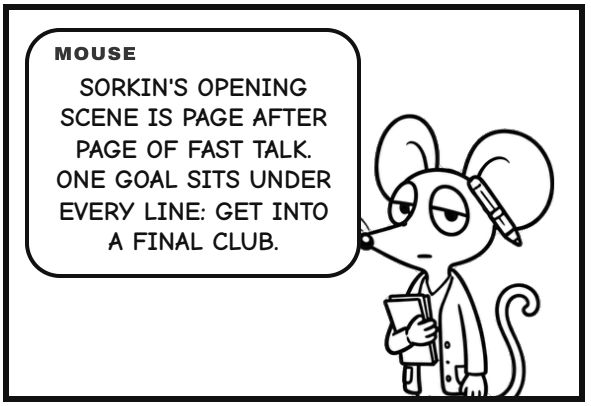
1 · PERFECT TEST SCORES	2 · ERICA	3 · HER SCHOOL	4 · "OBSESSED"
Everyone here has one. No way to stand out.	Someone to bring along once he's in.	It isn't Harvard, so why study?	Her word. He says "motivated."
☐ HELPS ☑ NO USE	☑ HELPS ☐ NO USE	☐ HELPS ☑ NO USE	☐ HELPS ☑ NO USE

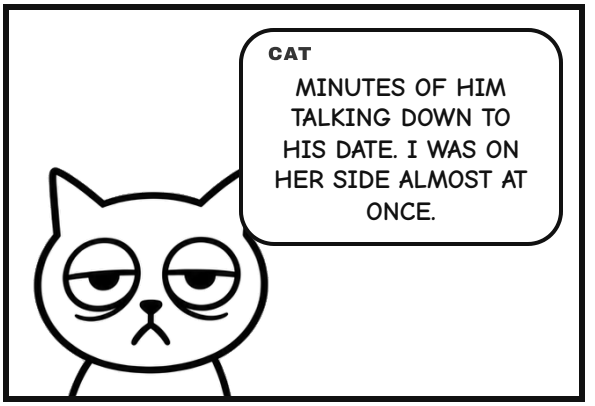
SAME BAR, NEW GOAL: IF MARK ONLY WANTED A GOOD NIGHT WITH ERICA, WOULD ANY TAG READ THE SAME?

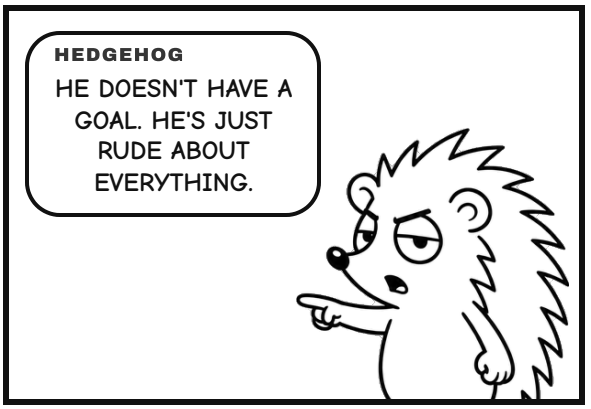


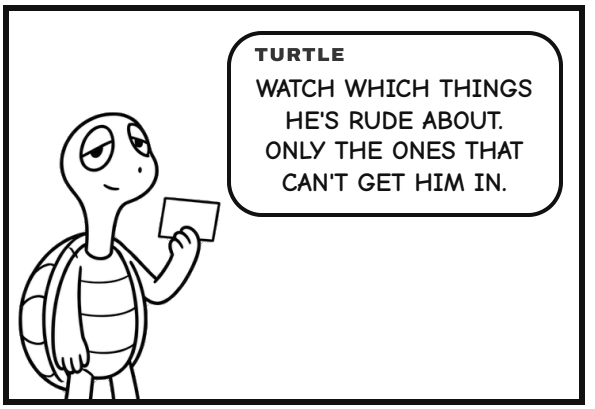
FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

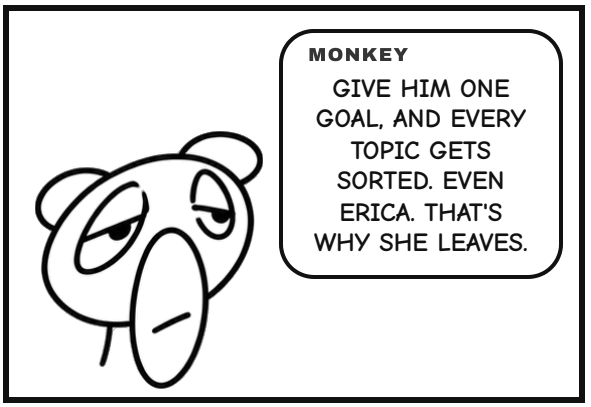
THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER

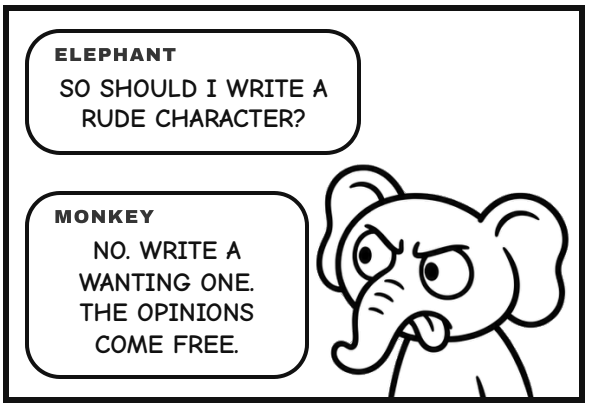












FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT DOES MARK WANT IN THIS SCENE? HOW CAN YOU TELL?
2. PICK ONE THING MARK HAS AN OPINION ABOUT. HOW DOES HIS GOAL SHAPE THAT OPINION?
3. NOW PICK A CHARACTER FROM A MOVIE YOU LOVE. GIVE THEM A GOAL FOR ONE SCENE. WHAT DO THEY SUDDENLY THINK OF THE ROOM THEY'RE IN?

Answers: 1. To get into a final club. Whatever they talk about, he steers it back there. 2. Erica's school: it can't help him get in, so he treats it as not worth much. Or Erica herself: he sees her as someone to bring along. 3. If they still feel neutral about everything, the goal isn't strong enough yet.

Flip the Coin

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

This page turns a character's best quality into a real flaw. Pick the thing they are best at, their gift, and think of it as a coin. Heads: the gift saves them, and we should see that first. Tails: on the night it matters most, the same gift is what trips them. Fill in the gift, then a few times it saves them, then the time it trips them, then finish the sentence at the bottom. The grey handwriting shows how Ben's charm fills it in.

WHO *Ben*

THE GIFT
STAMPED ON BOTH SIDES
the thing they are best at

charm

HEADS

IT SAVES THEM
TIMES THE GIFT WINS

- *Past a late fee*
- *Gets Jo to lend him the car*

TAILS

IT TRIPS THEM
THE TIME IT FAILS THEM

- *Jo can't believe his sorry*

THE MOMENT IT MATTERS MOST
The scene where the gift fails them. What do they lose if it does?

He says sorry for her birthday, and means it.

BEN
JO. I MEAN IT.



THE SENTENCE
Put it all together. If you can finish it, you have the flaw.

BECAUSE _____ IS SO GOOD AT _____,

THEY CAN'T _____ WHEN IT MATTERS MOST.



CAT CHECK: DID WE SEE THE GIFT SAVE THEM BEFORE IT TRIPPED THEM? TAKE THE GIFT AWAY. DOES THE SCENE CHANGE? IF IT DOESN'T, THE FLAW WAS ONLY A LABEL STUCK ON.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

Non-Line Jail

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

Real people rarely say exactly what they feel, so good dialogue hides the feeling and lets us work it out. **Part 1:** each grey box says what a character means. Write a line they could say out loud that means the same thing, without using any of the grey words, as Jo's first line does. **Part 2:** a non-line is a dead line that does no work. Find three in your own script, write each in its cell, then rewrite it so it does at least one job. The grey handwriting shows how Jo's lines fill it in.

1 · SAY IT WITHOUT SAYING IT · SAID is the line out loud. MEANT is the feeling under it.

JO
LAST SLICE IS YOURS.

MEANT
I LOVE YOU.

WHO

MEANT
I'M SCARED.

MONKEY
DON'T USE ANY OF THE GREY WORDS.

WHO

MEANT
GET OUT.

WHO

MEANT
I KNOW WHAT YOU DID.



THE EVIDENCE
One thing we can see that shows the feeling _____

2 · LOCK UP THE NON-LINES · The three jobs: moves the STORY, shows WHO they are, or carries the THEME (what it's really about).

CELL 1 · THE OBVIOUS
THE DEAD LINE
Jo: "You're late."

SAYS WHAT WE CAN SEE. "YOU'RE DOING THE DISHES."

PAROLE · THE REWRITE
the line, set free to do a job
Jo: "It's fine."
☐ STORY ☑ WHO ☐ THEME

CELL 2 · THE ECHO
THE DEAD LINE

SAYS BACK WHAT WE JUST HEARD. "LATE?" "LATE."

PAROLE · THE REWRITE
the line, set free to do a job
☐ STORY ☐ WHO ☐ THEME

CELL 3 · FILLER
THE DEAD LINE

FILLS THE AIR. "WELL, UM, SO, ANYWAY..."

PAROLE · THE REWRITE
the line, set free to do a job
☐ STORY ☐ WHO ☐ THEME



CAT CHECK: COVER THE GREY BOXES AND READ ONLY WHAT THE CHARACTERS SAY. CAN YOU STILL TELL WHAT THEY FEEL? DOES EVERY REWRITE TICK AT LEAST ONE JOB?

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

Joy Lets Go

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

The gift that trips them. Take the thing a character is best at, their gift. First let it save them. Then, when it matters most, let the same gift trip them.

Remember Ben: his charm talks him out of a late fee. But when he truly says sorry for Jo's birthday, she can't believe that charming voice. Now watch the same tool in a movie.

THE MOVIE · INSIDE OUT (2015) **SPOILER AHEAD**

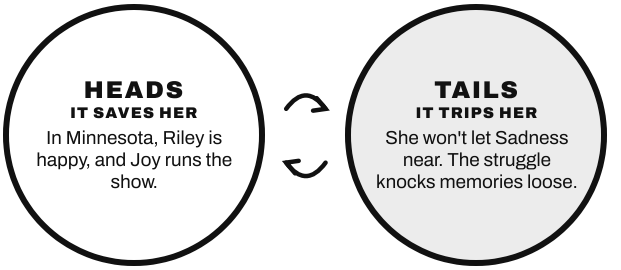
An animated film from Pixar, directed by Pete Docter. Most of it happens inside the mind of **Riley**, an 11-year-old girl. Five feelings run her mind from a control room called Headquarters: Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger and Disgust. Her most important memories, the core memories, build the islands of her personality.

Joy leads, and she wants Riley happy, always. She keeps **Sadness** away from the happy memories. Then Riley's family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco.

WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

1. On Riley's first day at her new school, Sadness touches happy memories and turns them sad. Riley cries in front of the class.
2. Joy tries to get rid of the sad memory. In her struggle with Sadness, the core memories get knocked loose.
3. Joy, Sadness and the core memories are sucked out of Headquarters. Riley snaps at her parents, and her islands start to crumble.
4. On the long way back, Joy learns that sadness is useful. In Headquarters, she steps back and lets Sadness touch the core memories.
5. Riley tells her parents she misses Minnesota. They miss it too.

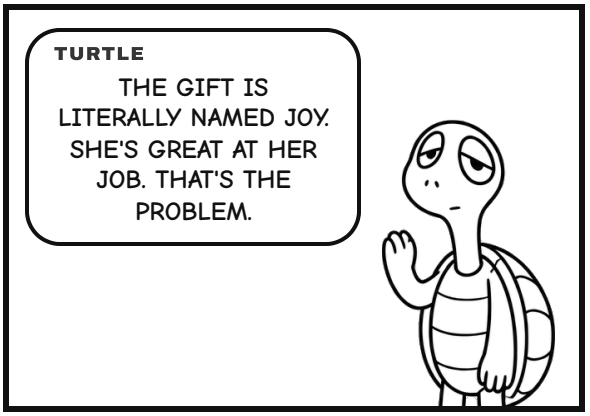
FLIP THE COIN · WHO: JOY · THE GIFT: KEEPING RILEY HAPPY



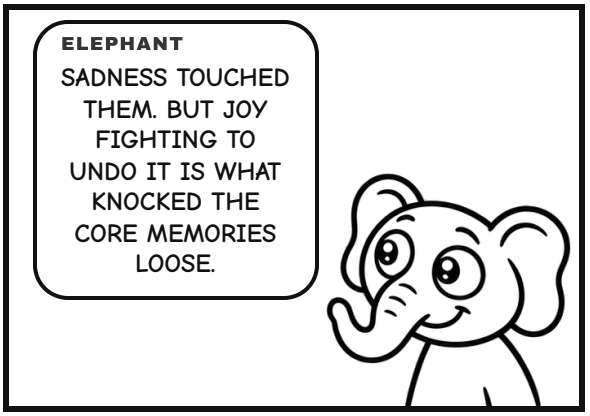
BECAUSE JOY IS SO GOOD AT KEEPING RILEY HAPPY, SHE CAN'T LET RILEY BE SAD WHEN IT MATTERS MOST. THE CHANGE: SHE LETS SADNESS TOUCH THE MEMORIES.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

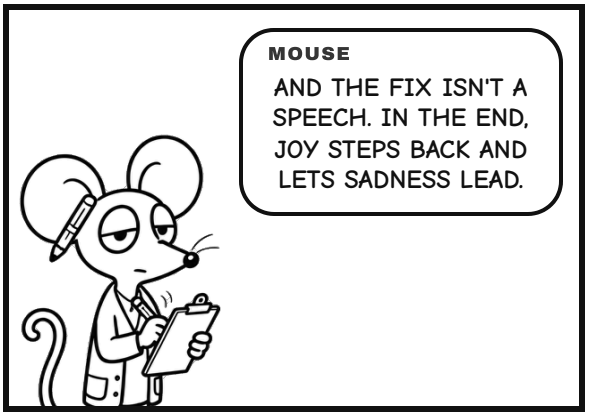
THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER

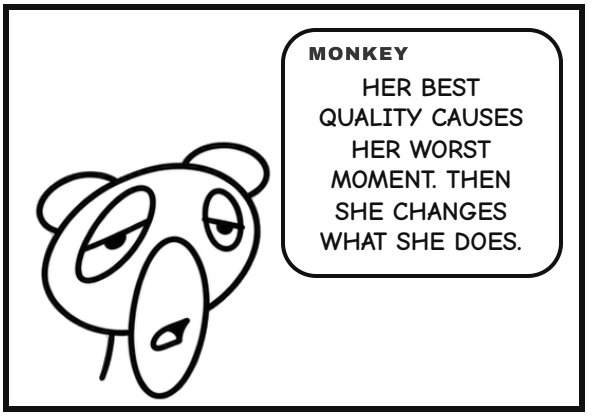












FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT IS JOY BEST AT? WHERE DO WE SEE IT HELP RILEY FIRST?
2. HOW DOES THAT SAME GIFT CAUSE THE TROUBLE?
3. NOW TAKE A CHARACTER FROM YOUR OWN PAGES. WHAT ARE THEY BEST AT? CAN YOU WRITE A MOMENT WHEN IT TRIPS THEM?

Answers: 1. Keeping Riley happy. In Minnesota, Riley's life is happy, and Joy runs the show. 2. Joy won't let Riley feel sad. Her struggle with Sadness knocks the core memories loose. 3. If the gift never costs them anything, it's only a sticker. Look for the moment it swings back.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

One Line, Two Meanings

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Said and meant. What a character says out loud is the SAID. The feeling underneath is the MEANT. Real people rarely say their feelings straight, so good dialogue hides the feeling and lets us find it.

Remember the example in Dialogue: Jo says "Last slice is yours." What she means is I love you. Now watch the same tool in a movie.

THE MOVIE · THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1987) SPOILER AHEAD

You met this film in the battle of wits. Here's its other trick.

A fairy-tale adventure, and a comedy, written by William Goldman from his own novel. A grandfather reads the story aloud to his sick grandson.

In the story, **Buttercup** lives on a farm. **Westley** is the farm boy who works for her. He loves her, but he never says it in plain words.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SCENE, STEP BY STEP

1. Buttercup gives Westley orders, one chore after another. Every time, he smiles and answers with the same three words: "As you wish."
2. The grandfather tells his grandson what those words really meant: I love you.
3. One day Buttercup understands, and she finds she loves him too.
4. Westley leaves to seek his fortune so they can marry. Pirates attack his ship, and Buttercup believes he is gone.
5. Years later, a masked stranger goes tumbling down a steep hill. As he falls, he calls out the same line, and Buttercup knows: it's Westley.

SAID AND MEANT

ON THE FARM

WESTLEY

AS YOU WISH.

MEANT

I love you.

ON THE HILL, YEARS LATER

MASKED STRANGER

AS YOU WISH.

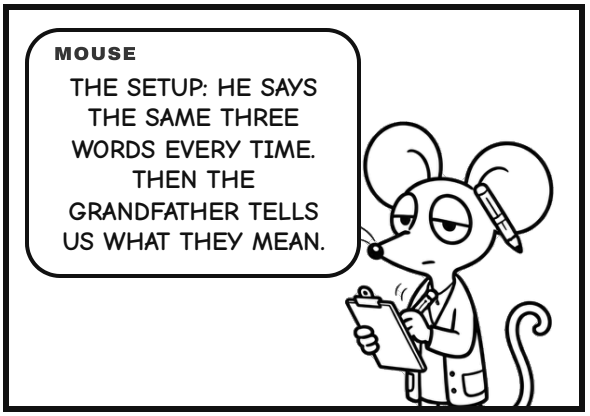
MEANT

It's me. I still love you.

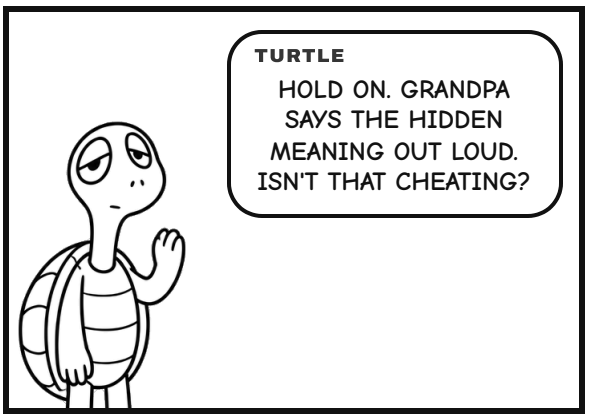
SAME LINE BOTH TIMES. THE SECOND TIME, NOBODY HAS TO EXPLAIN IT.

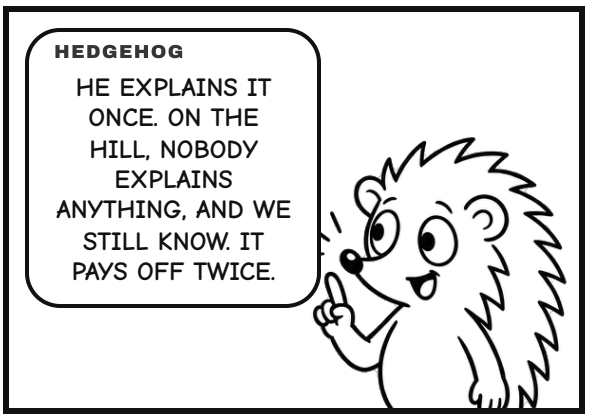
FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

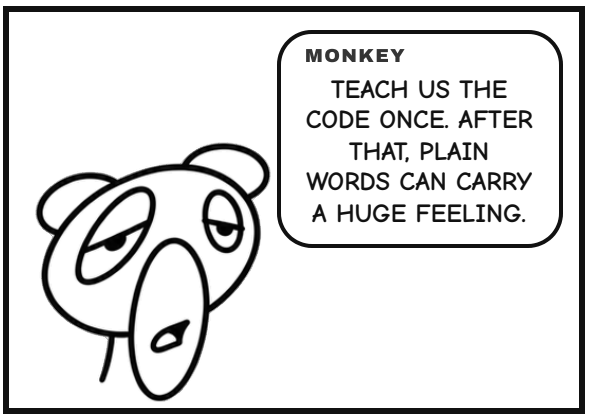
THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER

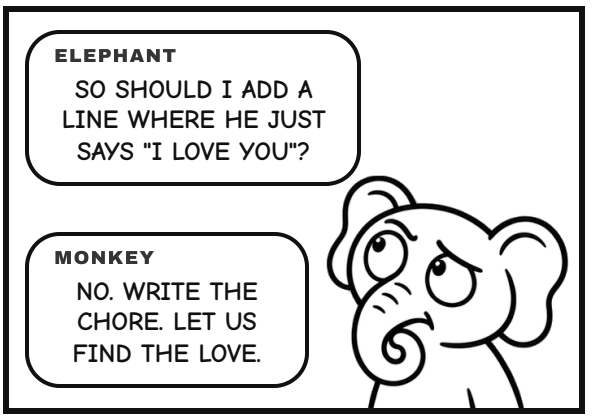












FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT DOES WESTLEY SAY TO BUTTERCUP? WHAT DOES HE MEAN?
2. ON THE HILL, NOBODY EXPLAINS THE LINE. WHY DO WE STILL UNDERSTAND IT?
3. NOW PICK A MOVIE YOU LOVE. FIND A LINE WHERE SOMEONE SAYS ONE THING AND MEANS ANOTHER.

Answers: 1. He says "As you wish," agreeing to do whatever she asks. He means that he loves her. 2. The farm scenes taught us the code, so the words carry the meaning for us and for Buttercup at the same moment. 3. Look for a line about something small, like a chore, a slice or a cup of coffee, that carries a big feeling.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

Open the Fridge

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

A specific detail is one that could only belong to this person. Open your character's fridge and write one detail on each shelf. Then tick each job the detail does: **Believe it** (it makes the world feel real), **Know them** (it shows who this person is), **Want more** (it makes us ask a question). Copy the detail that ticks the most up into the freezer. The grey handwriting shows Ben's fridge.

WHOSE FRIDGE Ben's

MONKEY
COULD IT BE IN ANYONE'S FRIDGE? SWAP IT.

FREEZER · THE KEEPER
THE DETAIL THAT TICKS THE MOST. CIRCLE IT, COPY IT HERE.

The bakery box marked JO

TAPED INSIDE THE DOOR
WHAT ONLY THEY WOULD SEE

	BELIEVE IT	KNOW THEM	WANT MORE
One lemon, gone soft	☑	☐	☐
Bakery box, note says JO	☑	☑	☑
	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐



THE FIVE SENSES · Stand at the open door. Write one thing for each sense, then circle the strongest.

SEE	HEAR	SMELL	TOUCH	TASTE



CAT CHECK: COULD ANY DETAIL SIT IN ANYONE'S FRIDGE? SWAP IT FOR ONE THAT COULDN'T. ONE TICK IS FINE; A DETAIL THAT TICKS ALL THREE IS GOLD. ONE RIGHT DETAIL BEATS TEN.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Verb Ladder

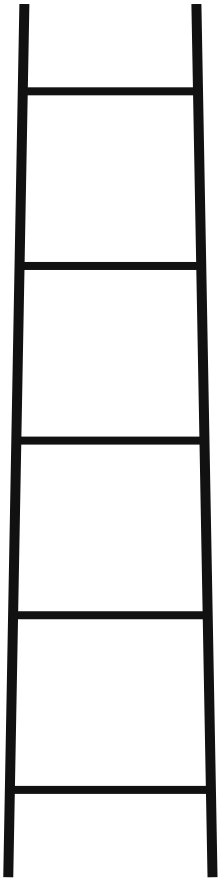
HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

Every good story has one action the main character does again and again, like hide, chase or prove. That action is the story's verb. Write it in one word at the top. Then climb from the bottom rung: on each rung, write a new place where they do the same verb, and what they do there. Each rung should have more to lose than the one below, and the first rung should show up in your first two pages. The grey handwriting shows Jo, whose verb is hide.

THE VERB
ONE WORD. AN ACTION.
something we can watch them do, not a feeling

WHOSE STORY Jo

hide



TOP RUNG · THE HARDEST PLACE TO DO IT · the most to lose

WHERE

WHAT THEY DO

RUNG 4 · MORE TO LOSE

WHERE

WHAT THEY DO

RUNG 3 · MORE TO LOSE

WHERE

WHAT THEY DO

RUNG 2 · MORE TO LOSE

WHERE Her birthday, Ben is late

WHAT THEY DO Says "It's fine." Washes one plate.

RUNG 1 · FIRST TWO PAGES

WHERE Breakfast

WHAT THEY DO Slides the late notice under the toast



CAT CHECK: IS IT THE SAME VERB ON EVERY RUNG? DOES EACH RUNG HAVE MORE TO LOSE THAN THE ONE BELOW? A RUNG WITH A NEW VERB, OR NOTHING MORE AT STAKE, IS WHERE THE CAT FALLS ASLEEP.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Sandwich Under the Hat

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Specifics. A specific detail is one that could only belong to this person. A detail can do three jobs: we **believe it**, we **know them**, and we **want more**. The best ones do all three at once. Most do one, and that's fine.

Remember Ben's fridge: one job per detail. The soft lemon made us believe it; the box marked JO made us want more. Now watch it in a movie.

THE MOVIE · PADDINGTON (2014)

A family comedy, written and directed by Paul King, based on Michael Bond's Paddington Bear stories.

Paddington is a young bear from the jungles of Peru, raised by his **Aunt Lucy** and **Uncle Pastuzo**. He travels alone to London, hoping to find a home. A family called **the Browns** finds him at Paddington station, takes him home and names him after the station.

WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

1. In Peru, Paddington lives with his aunt and uncle. The bears love marmalade.
2. Uncle Pastuzo gives him one piece of advice: always keep a spare marmalade sandwich under your hat, in case of emergencies.
3. Aunt Lucy encourages him to go to London, and he sets off on his own.
4. In London he meets the Brown family, who take him in.
5. All through the film, he keeps a spare sandwich under his hat, just as his uncle taught him.

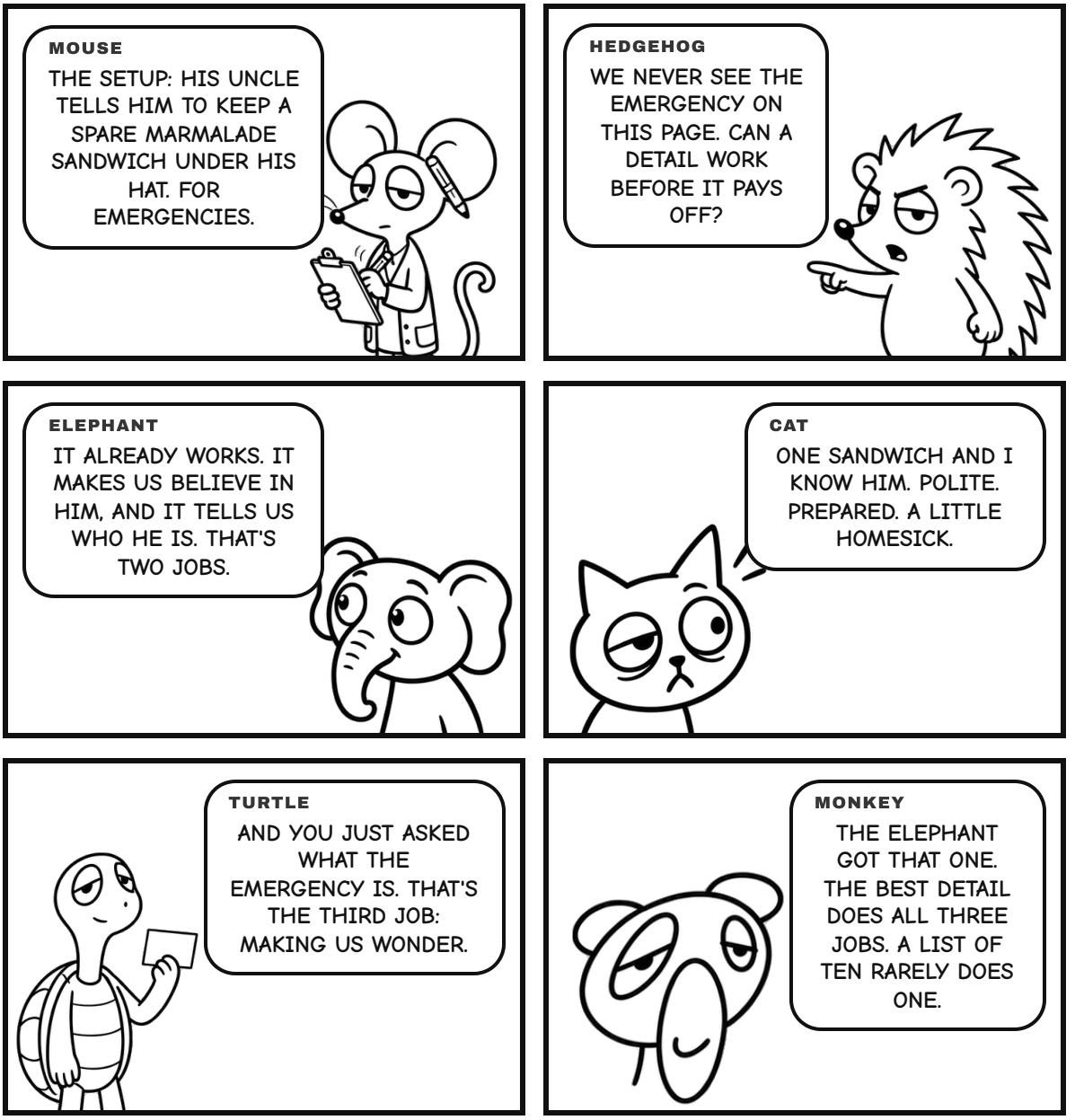
THE THREE JOBS

	BELIEVE IT	KNOW HIM	WANT MORE
A BEAR WHO LIKES SWEETS A weaker choice. Any bear could.	☑	☐	☐
A SPARE MARMALADE SANDWICH UNDER HIS HAT The detail the film chose.	☑ His family loves marmalade	☑ Polite, prepared, misses home	☑ What emergency?

THREE TICKS ON ONE SMALL OBJECT. THAT'S THE KEEPER.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER



FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT DOES THE SANDWICH UNDER THE HAT TELL YOU ABOUT PADDINGTON?
2. WHY IS "A BEAR WHO LIKES SWEETS" WEAKER THAN THE SANDWICH?
3. NOW PICK A CHARACTER YOU'RE WRITING. WHAT ONE OBJECT COULD ONLY BE THEIRS?

Answers: 1. He is polite and prepared, he listens to his family, and he carries a piece of home with him. 2. Any bear could like sweets, so it only makes us believe. The sandwich also tells us who he is and makes us wonder what emergency it's for. 3. Test the object with the three jobs. One tick is fine. If you can find one that ticks two or three, that's the keeper.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

Faking It, Minute One

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Name the verb. A story's verb is the one action the main character does again and again, in new places, with more to lose each time. We should see it in the first two pages.

Remember Jo: her verb is hide. At breakfast, she slides the late notice under the toast. Now watch the same tool in a movie.

THE MOVIE · FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF (1986) **SPOILER AHEAD**

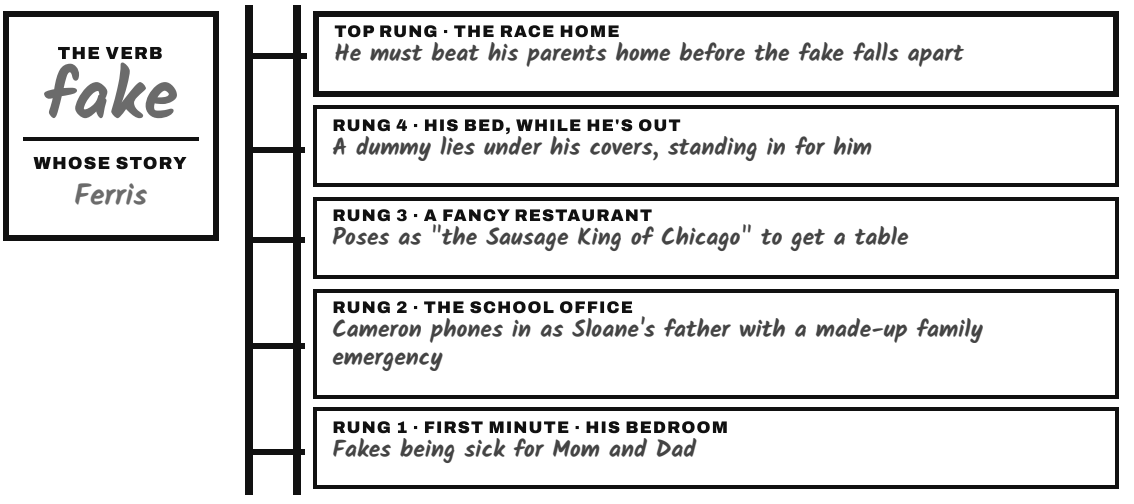
A comedy written and directed by John Hughes. **Ferris** is a high school student in the suburbs of Chicago. He wants one perfect day off from school with his friend **Cameron** and his girlfriend **Sloane**.

The dean of students, **Mr. Rooney**, wants to catch him skipping. Ferris's sister **Jeanie** is fed up that he always gets away with it.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE FIRST MINUTE, STEP BY STEP

1. Ferris lies in bed, acting sick. His mother and father fuss over him.
2. His parents believe every bit of it. They leave him home.
3. The moment they're gone, he hops out of bed, perfectly fine.
4. He turns and talks straight to the camera, telling us how to fool your parents.
5. His sister Jeanie isn't fooled at all.

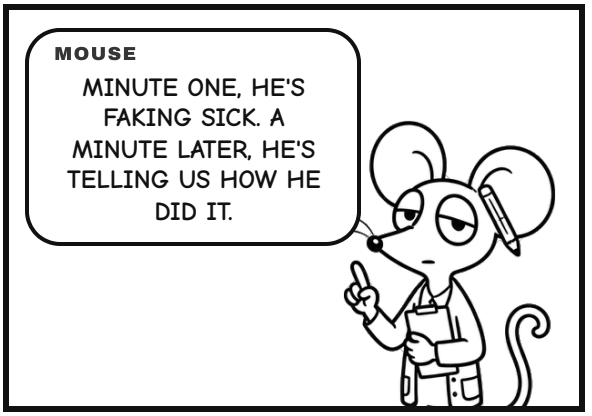
THE VERB LADDER



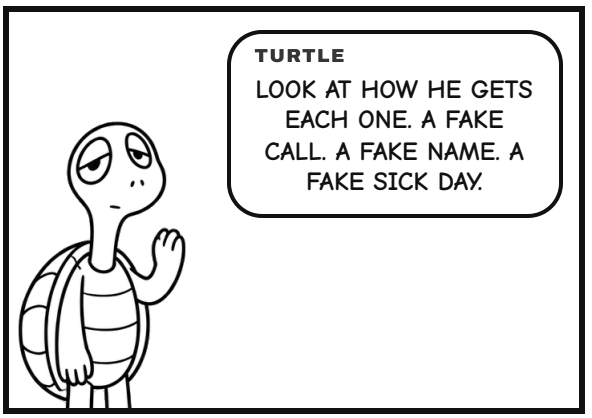
FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

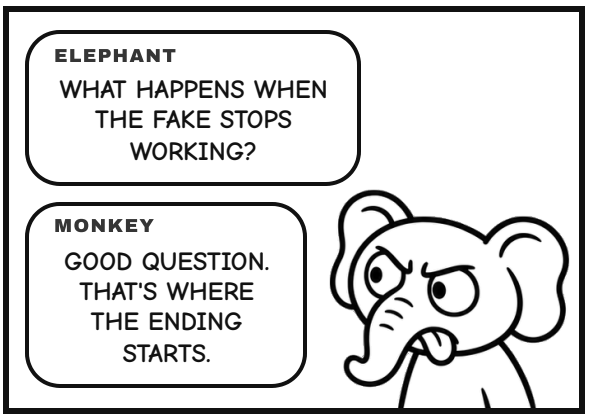
THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER

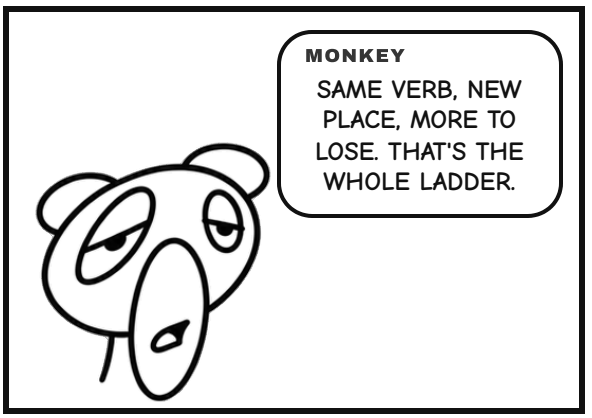












FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT IS FERRIS'S VERB? WHERE DO WE SEE IT FIRST?
2. NAME TWO OTHER PLACES HE FAKES IT. WHICH ONE HAS MORE TO LOSE?
3. NOW PICK A HERO FROM A MOVIE YOU LOVE. WHAT ONE ACTION DO THEY DO AGAIN AND AGAIN?

Answers: 1. Fake. We see it in the first minute, when he fakes being sick in bed. 2. Any two rungs work. The race home has the most to lose, because if his parents beat him there, the whole day's fake is over. 3. Say it in one word, an action we can watch. Then check that it shows up in the first two pages.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Backbone

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

A story's spine is who needs what, what's at stake, and what's in the way. "And then, and then" only lists events. "But" and "so" make each moment cause the next one.

Fill in the spine sentence. Write your five biggest moments down the backbone, in order. Between each pair, circle BUT or SO. If only AND THEN fits, fix that link. The grey handwriting shows Ben and Jo's scene.

THE SPINE SENTENCE · your whole story in one line

Ben (WHO) NEEDS *$500 from Jo tonight* (WHAT) TO KEEP *his apartment* (WHAT'S AT STAKE), BUT *taking it means one more IOU in her drawer, and he can't face that* (WHAT'S IN THE WAY).

1 START · where it begins

Ben asks Jo for $500.

circle one **BUT** **SO** | ~~AND THEN~~

2 NEXT · what happens because of it

Jo balks. He never paid her back.

BUT **SO** | ~~AND THEN~~

3 THE HINGE · where the story changes direction

Jo opens the IOU drawer.

BUT **SO** | ~~AND THEN~~

4 NEXT · what the hinge causes

BUT **SO** | ~~AND THEN~~

5 THE END · how it comes out

MONKEY

AND THEN MAKES A PILE. BUT AND SO MAKE A SPINE.



☐ **HINGE TEST**

COULD THE STORY GO ON UNCHANGED AFTER THIS? THEN IT ISN'T A HINGE.

☐ **END TEST**

COULD THEY HAVE WON THE SAME WAY AT THE START? THEN NOTHING CHANGED.



CAT CHECK: READ YOUR CIRCLED WORDS OUT LOUD, TOP TO BOTTOM. IS EVERY ONE A BUT OR A SO? DOES EACH MOMENT HAPPEN BECAUSE OF THE ONE BEFORE IT?

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The IOU Ledger

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

A payoff is a big moment that uses something the audience saw earlier. That earlier moment is the plant. Show the plant doing an ordinary, boring job, so nobody notices it until it matters. Every plant is an IOU: a promise the story pays back later.

Start on the right. Under PAID, write each payoff and its page number (P.). Then find where you planted it and write that on the left, with the ordinary job it was doing. Draw a string between them. The grey handwriting shows Ben and Jo's scene.

PLANTED WHERE IT FIRST SHOWS UP, DOING AN ORDINARY JOB		PAID WHERE IT PAYS OFF, DOING A NEW JOB
P. 3 *Jo's kitchen drawer* JOB *where the takeout menus go*	~	P. 41 *it's full of his IOUs* NEW JOB *she kept every one*
P. _____ JOB _____	• •	P. _____ NEW JOB _____
P. _____ JOB _____	• •	P. _____ NEW JOB _____
P. _____ JOB _____	• •	P. _____ NEW JOB _____
P. _____ JOB _____	• •	P. _____ NEW JOB _____

MONKEY

PLANT IT DOING A BORING JOB. NOBODY LOOKS TWICE.





PAID, P. 41



CAT CHECK: DOES EVERY PAYOFF HAVE A PLANT ON AN EARLIER PAGE? DOES EVERY PLANT GET PAID OFF BEFORE THE END? IF NOT, ADD THE PLANT OR CUT IT.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

One Sentence, One Spine

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

The spine. Who needs what, what's at stake, and what's in the way. "And then" only lists events. BUT and SO make each moment cause the next. The rule comes from Trey Parker and Matt Stone (an NYU class, filmed for mtvU's *Stand In*, 2011): between beats, "but" or "therefore," never "and then." (Kenn Adams's improv "Story Spine" is a cousin.)

Remember Ben: he needs $500 from Jo tonight to keep his apartment, but taking it means one more IOU in her drawer, and he can't face that.

THE MOVIE · BACK TO THE FUTURE (1985) **SPOILER AHEAD**

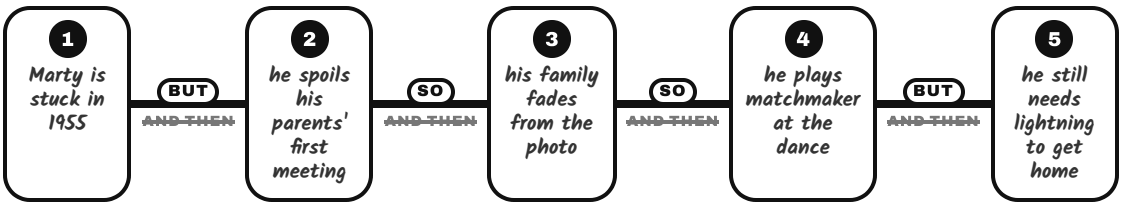
A science-fiction comedy directed by Robert Zemeckis. **Marty McFly** is a teenager in 1985. His friend **Doc Brown**, a scientist, has turned a car, a DeLorean, into a time machine. Marty wants one thing for the whole movie: to get home to his own time.

WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

1. An emergency sends Marty off in the time machine to 1955. BUT it has no fuel to take him back.
2. He saves his teenage father from a car accident, and that spoils the moment his parents were supposed to meet.
3. SO his mother falls for Marty instead, and his brother and sister start fading from a family photo.
4. SO he has to get his parents together at the school dance.
5. BUT the only power big enough to get him home is lightning. SO he uses a flyer he was handed back in 1985: it says when lightning will strike the town's clock tower.

THE BACKBONE

MARTY WANTS TO GET HOME, **BUT** HE BROKE UP HIS PARENTS' FIRST MEETING, **SO** HE MUST GET THEM TOGETHER BEFORE HE FADES AWAY.



FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER



FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. SAY THE STORY IN ONE SENTENCE. WHO WANTS WHAT? WHAT'S IN THE WAY?
2. FIND ONE SO IN THE STORY. WHAT CAUSES WHAT?
3. NOW TELL THE STORY YOU'RE WRITING USING ONLY BUT AND SO. WHERE DO YOU GET STUCK?

Answers: 1. Marty wants to get home, but he broke up his parents' first meeting, so he must get them together before he fades away. 2. Marty saves his father from the car, so his mother falls for Marty instead. 3. Where you get stuck saying AND THEN, the story has a loose link. Ask what that moment causes.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Carrot Pen

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

A prop isn't a plant. A payoff is a big moment that uses something we saw earlier, called the plant. Show the plant doing an ordinary job first, so nobody notices it until it matters.

Remember Ben and Jo: early on, Jo's kitchen drawer is just where the takeout menus go. Late in the story we learn it's full of Ben's IOUs. She kept every one.

THE MOVIE · ZOOTOPIA (2016) **SPOILER AHEAD**

An animated comedy from Walt Disney Animation Studios, directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore. It's set in a city where animals live like people.

Judy Hopps is a rabbit, the city's first bunny police officer. She wants to prove she's a real cop by finding some missing animals. **Nick Wilde** is a fox and a small-time con artist. He wants nothing to do with her case.

WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

1. Judy carries a carrot-shaped pen that is also a tiny voice recorder. It looks like a cute gadget.
2. Judy needs Nick's help, and he says no. So she gets him to admit he hasn't paid his taxes. The carrot pen records it.
3. Now Nick has to help her, or she'll report him. Later, when Judy asks Nick to be her partner, she gives him the pen. We forget about it.
4. At the end, in a museum, the villain is unmasked: Bellwether, the assistant mayor, a small sheep. Sure she has won, she explains her plan.
5. The carrot pen has recorded every word. Bellwether is arrested.

THE IOU LEDGER

PLANTED	PAID
RECORDS NICK'S TAX SECRET **JOB** a cop's trick to get help	RECORDS BELLWETHER'S PLAN **NEW JOB** catches the villain
SAME PEN **JOB** Judy's tool	A GIFT TO NICK **NEW JOB** says "we're partners"

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER



FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT ORDINARY JOB DOES THE CARROT PEN DO THE FIRST TIME JUDY USES IT?
2. WHY DOESN'T THE ENDING FEEL LIKE A CHEAT?
3. NOW PICK A MOVIE YOU LOVE. FIND ONE OBJECT THAT SAVES THE DAY. WHERE DID IT FIRST SHOW UP, AND WHAT JOB WAS IT DOING?

Answers: 1. It's a cop's trick. It records Nick admitting he hasn't paid his taxes, so he has to help her. 2. We've already seen the pen record, so the ending uses something old, not something new. 3. If the object first appears in the big moment, it's only a prop. Move it earlier and give it a small, ordinary job.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

Four Drawers

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

A mystery is a question you leave open on purpose. To keep the audience with you, pay rent on it: give small answers along the way, and make each answer cost somebody something.

List every secret or open question in your story. File each one in a drawer: explain it now, reveal it later, keep it shut until the end, or never explain it. The grey handwriting shows Ben and Jo's scene.

EXPLAIN NOW The audience needs it to follow along

Ben is broke

LATER Reveal it one piece at a time

Why she kept every IOU

KEEP SHUT The big question. It opens at the end

Can Ben ever be trusted?

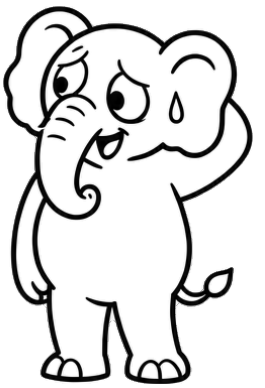
NEVER Some things work better unanswered

What the last IOU said

MONKEY
SOME DRAWERS STAY SHUT.



ELEPHANT
OOH. WHAT'S IN THE BOTTOM ONE?





CAT CHECK: FOR EVERY DRAWER YOU KEEP SHUT, DO YOU GIVE A SMALL ANSWER ALONG THE WAY? DOES EACH ANSWER COST SOMEBODY SOMETHING?

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Pulse Monitor

HOW TO USE THIS PAGE

An AI draft is often smooth and correct but average. Nothing is wrong with it, and nothing about it is alive. In this book the Elephant is the AI. A line has a pulse when only these people, at this moment, could say or do it.

Copy a line an AI wrote for you. Tick every box that fits it. "Could be anyone's" means you could swap in other names and it would still work. Then write your own line underneath. The grey handwriting shows Ben and Jo's scene.



ELEPHANT
SIX VERSIONS! EVERY ONE CORRECT!

MONKEY
CORRECT. IS ANY OF IT ALIVE?



THE ELEPHANT'S LINE A LINE THE AI WROTE

Jo looks at Ben with a mix of anger and love.

PULSE: NONE

☑ **SMOOTH** ☑ **CORRECT** ☑ **FORGETTABLE** ☑ **COULD BE ANYONE'S**

YOUR LINE ONLY THESE PEOPLE. ONLY NOW.

Jo smooths his IOU flat on the counter. Then tears it.

PULSE



THE ELEPHANT'S LINE A LINE THE AI WROTE

PULSE: NONE

☐ **SMOOTH** ☐ **CORRECT** ☐ **FORGETTABLE** ☐ **COULD BE ANYONE'S**

YOUR LINE ONLY THESE PEOPLE. ONLY NOW.

PULSE

THE ELEPHANT'S LINE A LINE THE AI WROTE

PULSE: NONE

☐ **SMOOTH** ☐ **CORRECT** ☐ **FORGETTABLE** ☐ **COULD BE ANYONE'S**

YOUR LINE ONLY THESE PEOPLE. ONLY NOW.

PULSE



CAT CHECK: COVER THE NAMES. COULD YOUR LINE SIT IN ANYONE'S STORY? IF YES, IT'S STILL THE ELEPHANT'S LINE. TRY AGAIN, THEN DRAW ITS PULSE.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

The Answer Up Front

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Pay rent on every mystery. A mystery is a question you leave open on purpose. To keep the audience with you, pay rent on it: give small answers along the way, and make each answer cost somebody something.

Remember Ben and Jo: we learn right away that Ben is broke. Why Jo kept every IOU comes out later. Whether Ben can ever be trusted stays shut until the end.

THE MOVIE · KNIVES OUT (2019) SPOILER AHEAD

A comedy murder mystery, written and directed by Rian Johnson. **Harlan Thrombey**, a rich writer of mystery novels, dies the night of his birthday party. His grown family all want his money. **Marta**, his nurse and friend, wants to keep out of trouble, but she can't tell a lie without throwing up. A detective, **Benoit Blanc**, is hired to find out what happened.

Most whodunits hide the answer until the end. Johnson has said he wanted to put "the engine of the Hitchcock thriller" into a whodunit: tell us the secret early, so we worry for Marta.

WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

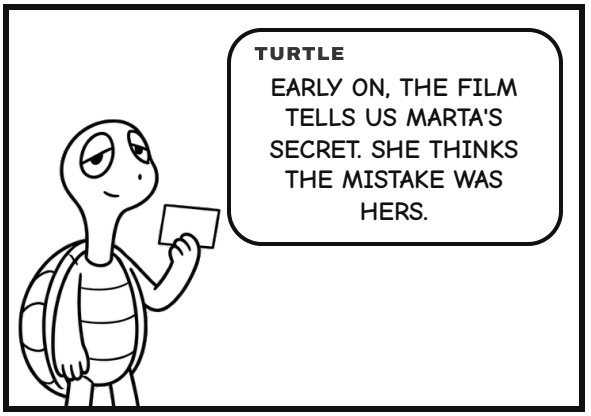
1. Early on, the film shows us what Marta believes: she mixed up Harlan's medicine by mistake and gave him too much.
2. Harlan tells her how to cover it up, so she won't be blamed. Then he dies.
3. Now Marta must answer the detective without lying. That first answer costs her every bit of calm.
4. Small answers keep coming. Harlan's will leaves Marta everything. Someone sends her a blackmail note. We learn who hired the detective.
5. The big question, what really happened that night, stays open to the end. Then the last answer flips the first: Marta gave the right medicine all along.

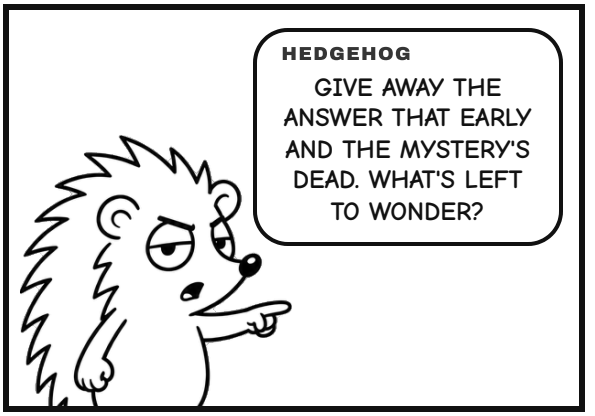
FOUR DRAWERS

EXPLAIN NOW What Marta thinks she did	**LATER** The will, the note, who hired the detective
KEEP SHUT What really happened that night	**NEVER** Empty. This film opens every drawer.

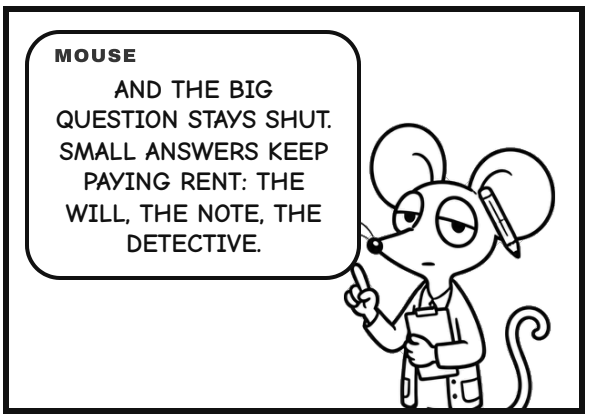
FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER













FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

1. WHAT DOES MARTA THINK SHE DID? WHEN DO WE FIND OUT?
2. NAME ONE SMALL ANSWER FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE FILM. WHO DOES IT COST?
3. NOW THINK OF A MYSTERY YOU LOVE. WHAT SMALL ANSWERS DOES IT HAND OUT BEFORE THE BIG ONE?

Answers: 1. She thinks she mixed up Harlan's medicine. The film tells us early, not at the end. 2. The will leaves Marta everything. It stuns the family and puts Marta at the center of the case. 3. If nothing is answered until the end, the audience is waiting, not watching. Hand out a small answer that costs someone.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

"I Know"

THE TOOL, ONE MORE TIME

Competent isn't alive. An AI draft is often smooth and correct, but average. A line has a pulse when only these people, at this moment, could say or do it.

Remember Ben and Jo: the Elephant wrote that Jo looks at Ben "with a mix of anger and love." Correct, and flat. The living version: Jo smooths his IOU flat on the counter. Then tears it.

THE MOVIE · THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK (1980) **SPOILER AHEAD**

The second Star Wars film, a space adventure directed by Irvin Kershner. **Han Solo** is a smuggler and pilot: cocky, guarded, never one to say what he feels. **Princess Leia** is a leader of the Rebels, fighting an evil empire.

The villain, Darth Vader, has captured them. He plans to freeze Han in a block of metal called carbonite and hand him to a bounty hunter. Leia wants Han to know how she feels before it's too late.

WHAT HAPPENS, STEP BY STEP

1. Han is led to the freezing chamber. Nobody knows if he'll come through it alive.
2. Just before, Leia finally tells him she loves him.
3. In the script, Han gave a more ordinary reply. It was correct. It did its job.
4. During filming, Harrison Ford, who plays Han, suggested something else to the director, Irvin Kershner. Kershner agreed.
5. In the film, Han answers with two words: "I know." Then he's frozen. (He survives, sealed inside.)

THE PULSE MONITOR

THE EXPECTED ANSWER

A MORE ORDINARY REPLY

Smooth. Correct. Could be anyone's.

PULSE: NONE



WHAT FORD SUGGESTED

"I KNOW."

Only Han. Only now.

PULSE



FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

THE ROOM TALKS IT OVER



FOR THE MENTOR · TALK IT THROUGH

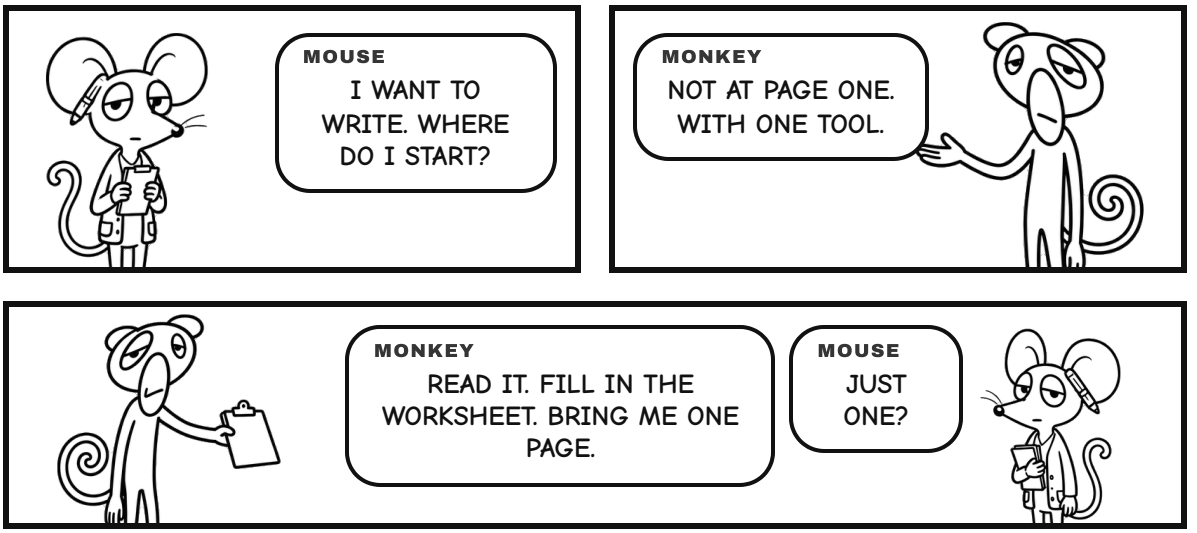
1. WHY CAN A REPLY BE CORRECT AND STILL FEEL FLAT?
2. WHAT DOES "I KNOW" TELL US ABOUT HAN THAT AN ORDINARY ANSWER WOULDN'T?
3. NOW PICK A LINE YOU LOVE FROM A MOVIE. COULD ANYONE ELSE IN THAT MOVIE SAY IT?

Answers: 1. Any hero could say it to anyone. It's smooth and right, and it could be anyone's. 2. That he's proud and guarded, and that he loves her too, even if he won't say it straight. 3. If anyone could say it, it's only competent. The lines we remember belong to one person at one moment.

FREE TO COPY AND SHARE · CC BY-NC 4.0

With a Mentee

If you're helping a new writer, you don't need to be a writer yourself. This book is a box of tools. Each tool teaches one idea with a short comic and a tiny scene starring Ben and Jo, a brother and sister. Read a tool together and let the pictures do the explaining.



ONE TOOL. ONE SESSION. ONE PAGE.

A SESSION, STEP BY STEP

1. **Pick one tool.** For the first six sessions, follow Start Here, at the front of the book. After that, pick the tool for whatever your mentee is stuck on: Find a Tool, on the next two pages, lists problems in plain words.

2. **Read it together, out loud.** A tool takes about ten minutes. Each one shows the idea in a short comic, then plays it out in a tiny scene with Ben and Jo.

3. **Play Spot the Miss.** Every full tool has a page with two drafts of the same scene. Usually one works and one doesn't. In four tools it's a close call: two good drafts that do different things. Cover the answers (they're printed upside down) and ask which draft serves the scene, and why.

4. **Pencil first.** Your mentee fills in that tool's full-size worksheet from the back of the book, using their own story, not Ben and Jo's.

5. **One page by next time.** They write one page with the tool in mind. Next session, read it together and ask the "Cat check" questions at the bottom of the worksheet (yes-or-no questions about whether the reader stays awake). Then pick the next tool.



WHERE TO START

The six-session path is at the front: Start Here. 12

Six tools in order, each with what to do and what to bring, for a mentor with a mentee or a writer on their own.

AFTER SIX SESSIONS, LET YOUR MENTEE CHOOSE. THE TOOLS SIT IN EIGHT "DRAWERS," FROM STARTING TO KEEP GOING. OPEN ANY DRAWER: EVERY TOOL STANDS ON ITS OWN.

FOR THE MENTOR

- **Name the problem, not the fix.** Tell your mentee where you got lost, bored or confused, then let them find the fix. It's their story, and finding the fix is how they learn.
- **Ask where the Cat fell asleep.** In this book the Cat is the reader, and the Cat dozes off when a page loses her. "Where did the Cat fall asleep?" is easier to hear than "this doesn't work," and it points to a spot on the page.
- **Already have a draft? Use it.** Read one scene of your mentee's pages together and find where the Cat fell asleep. Pick the tool for that spot, then ask its tool card questions about that scene, not Ben and Jo's.
- **Let it suck, for now.** A first draft only has to exist. Judge it next week, not today.
- **The AI parts are optional.** Each tool's Ask-for-it page and its AI note are marked with a small AI tab. Every tool works with just a pencil. Skip the AI notes if you like, but still fill in the brief: it's your mentee's plan before they write.

FREE TO COPY

This book is free.

PRINT IT. COPY IT. PASS IT ON. COPY ANY WORKSHEET FOR YOURSELF, YOUR CLASS, YOUR WRITING GROUP OR YOUR MENTEE.

Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0. Share it and adapt it, with credit. Just don't sell it.



Find a Tool for This Problem

Find the problem that sounds like yours, in your own words. Then try the tool next to it; the number is the page where the tool starts. If a tool doesn't help, try the next one in the same group. This is a copy of the guide at the front of the book. Copy these two pages, or tear them out, and keep them by your desk.

GETTING STARTED		
"I CAN'T SAY WHAT MY STORY IS ABOUT."	**The Question on a Sticky Note**	26
"THE PAGE IS BLANK, AND IT STAYS BLANK."	**Collect First, Connect Later**	36
"MY IDEA ALREADY FEELS BORING."	**Let It Suck (For Now)**	34
"MY IDEA IS FINE, BUT NOBODY LEANS IN."	**Turn It Up to Eleven**	44
"MY HERO JUST WANTS TO FIND THEMSELVES."	**Do, Not Feel**	42

SCENES		
"MY SCENE IS FLAT. NOTHING CHANGES."	**Scene and Sequel**	52
"THEY ARGUE THE WHOLE TIME, AND NOTHING MOVES."	**Who Holds the Upper Hand**	60
"MY HERO GETS A YES ON THE FIRST TRY."	**Every Fix Makes a Problem**	68
"THE READER GOT BORED ON PAGE 3."	**A Pop Every Thirty Seconds**	90
"MY SCENE TAKES FOREVER TO GET GOING."	**Start Late, Leave Early**	80

PEOPLE		
"MY CHARACTER IS BUSY, WITH NO OPINIONS."	**Want Makes Opinions**	98
"MY CHARACTER EXPLAINS HER FEELINGS OUT LOUD."	**Play the Try**	114
"READERS SAY MY LEAD IS COLD."	**Something They Love**	118
"HE'S 'CHARMING,' BUT IT NEVER COSTS HIM A THING."	**The Gift That Trips Them**	106

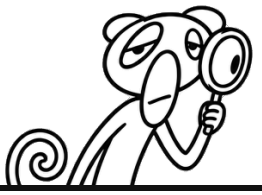
WORDS ON THE PAGE		
"EVERYONE SAYS EXACTLY WHAT THEY FEEL."	**Dialogue: Said and Meant**	134
"HER APARTMENT COULD BE ANYBODY'S."	**Specifics**	142
"HALF A PAGE OF TALK, AND NOBODY MOVES."	**Break Up the Talking Heads**	154
"MY PAGE SHOWS EVERY STEP, FROM A TO B TO C."	**Leave It in the Gutter**	150

SHAPE		
"MY STORY IS 'AND THEN, AND THEN, AND THEN.'"	**The Spine, Not "And Then"**	160
"THE BIG SAVE COMES OUT OF NOWHERE."	**A Prop Isn't a Plant**	168
"THE MIDDLE FEELS SLOW."	**Curious, Then Hunted**	178
"MY BIG MOMENT LANDS, AND NOBODY FLINCHES."	**Care Before Danger**	184
"I CAN GUESS THE NEXT LINE OF MY OWN SCENE."	**Give the Old Beat a New Job**	188

REWRITING		
"MY NOTES CONTRADICT EACH OTHER."	**Name the Problem, Not the Fix**	200
"THE DRAFT FEELS LONG AND CROWDED."	**Cut What Changes Nothing**	196
"READERS DRIFT IN THE PART I'M PROUDEST OF."	**Realign or Remove**	194
"I'M SCARED A REWRITE WILL LOSE WHAT I LOVE."	**Protect the One Thing**	198
"MY DRAFT IS ABOUT NOTHING IN PARTICULAR."	**The Missing Word**	202
"I HAVE NOTES AND DON'T KNOW WHAT TO FIX FIRST."	**One Scene, Start to Finish**	204

WORKING WITH OTHERS AND AI		
"IT WORKS, BUT IT FEELS DEAD."	**Competent Isn't Alive**	216
"THE AI GAVE ME NICE. NOT WHAT I WANTED."	**Bring the Want First**	226
"THE AI MAKES ALL MY CHARACTERS SOUND THE SAME."	**Your Rewrite Teaches the Rules**	234
"MY HEAD IS FULL, AND THE PAGE IS STILL EMPTY."	**Talk It Out, Then Decide**	230
"MY FIRST IDEA IS THE ONE EVERYBODY HAS."	**Three Versions, Pick One**	232
"MY DRAFT IS READY TO SHOW, AND I'M NERVOUS."	**Fake Readers, Then Real Ones**	236

KEEPING GOING		
"I'M STUCK."	**Bored or Stuck?**	242
"I KEEP GOING BACK TO FIX PAGE 3."	**Keep a Fix-It List**	246
"I WAS BUSY ALL DAY AND FINISHED NOTHING."	**What Did You Make Today?**	244
"I GOT ANOTHER REJECTION."	**The Pile Is the Apprenticeship**	248
"A READER SAW MY BIG MOMENT COMING."	**Box Up Your Old Tricks**	250



MONKEY

PROBLEM NOT ON THE LIST? SAY IT IN PLAIN WORDS FIRST. THEN OPEN THE DRAWER IT BELONGS TO: EACH DRAWER STARTS WITH A MAP OF ITS TOOLS.

Tool Cards

Every tool in the book, one card each. **Cut them out and keep them by your desk.** When you're stuck, deal one and answer its question. Free to copy.

FRONT OF THE BOOK — FULL

Know What You Want

Can't say it?
Can't ask for it. DRILL

1. WHEN THE SCENE ENDS, WHAT SHOULD THE AUDIENCE FEEL, THINK OR SUSPECT?
2. CAN YOU SAY IT IN ONE SENTENCE?
3. DOES YOUR SENTENCE HELP YOU EXPLAIN WHICH DRAFTS SERVE YOUR PURPOSE, AND WHY?
4. IS IT ABOUT THE AUDIENCE, AND NOT JUST WHAT HAPPENS?

Room Talk: The Night Dive (Jaws), 258

DRAWER 1 · STARTING — FULL

The Question on a Sticky Note

Every scene pushes yes or no.
Or it drifts. DRILL

1. CAN YOU WRITE YOUR QUESTION ON A STICKY NOTE RIGHT NOW?
2. IS IT ABOUT A PERSON, AND IS IT YES OR NO?
3. DOES THIS SCENE PUSH TOWARD YES, OR TOWARD NO?
4. IS THE ANSWER STILL OPEN UNTIL THE END?

Room Talk: Can Marlin Let Go? (Finding Nemo), 260

DRAWER 1 · STARTING — QUICK

Let It Suck (For Now)

Don't judge it today.
Give it a week.

1. ARE YOU THROWING OUT AN IDEA TOO SOON?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 1 · STARTING — QUICK

Collect First, Connect Later

Collect first.
Connect later.

1. DID YOU LIST EVERYTHING THAT MIGHT BELONG?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 1 · STARTING — QUICK

What Else Could Be True?

Don't explain it away.
Ask what else could be true.

1. WHAT ELSE COULD BE TRUE HERE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 1 · STARTING — QUICK

Start From What You Love

Start from what you love.
Add what only you found.

1. WHAT WOULD YOU WRITE IF IT COULD NEVER SELL?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

STARTING · SCENES

DRAWER 1 · STARTING — QUICK

Do, Not Feel

Something to do. A price for failing. Someone in the way.

1. WHAT MUST YOUR HERO GET DONE, AND BY WHEN?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 1 · STARTING — QUICK

Turn It Up to Eleven

Turn it up to eleven. Then pick your number.

1. ARE YOU HOLDING YOUR IDEA BACK?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 1 · STARTING — QUICK

Choose a Size

Same idea, different box. Pick the size first.

1. WHICH SIZE IS YOUR STORY, AND WHY?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 1 · STARTING — QUICK

Say It Out Loud First

Say what changes in one line. Then say the scene, three times.

1. DID YOU SAY IT BEFORE YOU TYPED IT?

Room Talk: Talking Over Each Other (His Girl Friday), 264

DRAWER 2 · SCENES — FULL

Scene and Sequel

Don't say it. Show the choice. DRILL

1. WHAT IS EACH PERSON'S GOAL IN THIS SCENE?
2. WHERE DOES THE SCENE TURN?
3. AFTERWARD, WHAT DO THEY DECIDE, AND HOW DO WE SEE IT?

Room Talk: The Bridge, Then the Hill (The Fellowship of the Ring), 266

DRAWER 2 · SCENES — FULL

Who Holds the Upper Hand

What changed? Power, knowledge, commitment, danger, or the relationship?

1. WHO HOLDS THE UPPER HAND WHEN THE SCENE STARTS?
2. WHO HOLDS IT WHEN IT ENDS?
3. CAN WE SEE IT CHANGE HANDS?
4. IF IT DIDN'T CHANGE HANDS, WHAT DID CHANGE: KNOWLEDGE, COMMITMENT, DANGER, OR THE RELATIONSHIP?
5. HOW DOES THE SCENE LOOK FROM THE OTHER PERSON'S SIDE?

Room Talk: The Battle of Wits (The Princess Bride), 270

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

SCENES

DRAWER 2 · SCENES FULL

Every Fix Makes a Problem

First try works?
Scene over. DRILL

1. WHAT SHUTS THE EASY WAY OUT?
2. WHAT NEW PROBLEM DOES EACH TRY MAKE?
3. DOES EACH TRY COST MORE THAN THE LAST, ALL THE WAY UP TO A TWIST?

Room Talk: Out the Window (Toy Story), 272

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

Build It Like a Song

Change every bar. DRILL
Pause before the big hit.

1. WHERE IS YOUR RESET?

Room Talk: The Title Number (Singin' in the Rain), 276

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

Do the Worst Thing

Find the worst thing for them, now.
Then let it happen.

1. WHAT'S THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN RIGHT NOW?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

Start Late, Leave Early

Come in on a move.
Get out when it lands.

1. WHERE DOES YOUR SCENE REALLY START?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

The Room Pushes Back

Pick a place that pushes.
Make it hard to walk away.

1. WHAT DOES THIS PLACE FORCE THEM TO DO?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

Whose Eyes Are We In?

Pick one person.
See what they see. DRILL

1. WHOSE EYES ARE WE IN, AND DO WE EVER LEAVE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

SCENES · PEOPLE

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

Explain While Moving

Busy hands.
Biggest fact, hardest step.

1. WHAT ARE THEIR HANDS DOING WHILE THEY EXPLAIN?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

Put a Clock on It

Show the clock.
Show it again, closer.

1. WHAT RUNS OUT IF THEY TAKE TOO LONG?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

A Pop Every Thirty Seconds

Something new.
Every thirty seconds.

1. WHAT'S NEW ON THIS HALF PAGE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

Pay the Cost on Screen

If it looks fun, show the price.
Same scene. DRILL

1. WHO PAYS FOR THE FUN, AND WHERE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 2 · SCENES QUICK

The Face Tells Us

Hold on the face.
One small receipt. Then cut.

1. WHO DOES THIS MOMENT HIT HARDEST?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE FULL

Want Makes Opinions

Want something?
Nothing is neutral. DRILL

1. WHAT IS THIS CHARACTER'S GOAL RIGHT NOW?
2. PICK ANYTHING IN THE ROOM. WHAT DO THEY THINK OF IT, AND DOES IT HELP OR BLOCK?
3. GIVE THEM A NEW GOAL. WHICH OPINIONS FLIP?

Room Talk: The Bar Scene (The Social Network), 278

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

PEOPLE

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE FULL

The Gift That Trips Them

It saves them. Then it sinks them.

1. IS YOUR HERO GREAT AT SOMETHING SPECIFIC?
2. DOES THAT VERY THING GET THEM INTO TROUBLE?
3. DID WE SEE IT WORK BEFORE IT FAILED?
4. WHEN THEY CHANGE, DO WE SEE IT IN AN ACTION, NOT A SPEECH?

Room Talk: Joy Lets Go (Inside Out), 282

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE QUICK

Play the Try

Body first. Then a choice.
Then, maybe, words. DRILL

1. WHAT IS YOUR CHARACTER TRYING NOT TO SHOW?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE QUICK

Emotional Sense Beats Logic

Not smart? Fine.
True to them? Must be.

1. WHAT FEELING MAKES THIS CHOICE TRUE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE QUICK

Something They Love

Give them one thing to love.
Show it early.

1. WHAT DOES THIS PERSON LOVE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE QUICK

First Look Makes a Promise

Their first move
is who they are.

1. WHAT DO THEY DO FIRST?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE QUICK

Read the Wear

One thing that's worn.
One thing for show.

1. WHAT GIVES THEM AWAY?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

PEOPLE · WORDS ON THE PAGE

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE — QUICK

The Costume Test

Two or three pieces.
Could a fan go as them?

1. WHAT WOULD A FAN WEAR TO BE YOUR CHARACTER?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE — QUICK

The Villain's Plan Hits Home

The opponent's plan
lands on the hero's life.

1. IF THE OPPONENT WINS, WHAT DOES THE HERO LOSE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE — QUICK

Find the Love Story

Inside every premise,
find the bond.

1. WHO HERE MATTERS TO WHOM?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 3 · PEOPLE — QUICK

Everyone Has a Job

One job each.
Only they can do it. DRILL

1. WHAT CAN ONLY THIS PERSON DO?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 4 · WORDS ON THE PAGE — FULL

Dialogue: Said and Meant

Hide the feeling. Show the evidence. DRILL

1. WHAT DOES EACH LINE MEAN THAT IT DOESN'T SAY OUT LOUD?
2. IS ANY LINE A NON-LINE: AN EMPTY ECHO, FILLER, THE OBVIOUS OR AN ANNOUNCEMENT?
3. WHAT CAN WE SEE THAT SHOWS THE FEELING?
4. READ ONLY THE DIALOGUE. CAN YOU STILL TELL WHAT EVERYONE FEELS?

Room Talk: One Line, Two Meanings (The Princess Bride), 284

DRAWER 4 · WORDS ON THE PAGE — FULL

Specifics (Haecceity)

One right detail beats ten. DRILL

1. WHAT JOB IS EACH DETAIL DOING: BELIEVE IT, KNOW THEM OR WANT MORE?
2. COULD THIS DETAIL BELONG TO ANYONE? THAT'S THE SWAP TEST.
3. WOULD SOMEONE WHO LIVES THIS LIFE SAY, "YES, THAT'S EXACTLY HOW IT IS"?

Room Talk: The Sandwich Under the Hat (Paddington), 288

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

WORDS ON THE PAGE · SHAPE

DRAWER 4 · WORDS ON THE PAGE — QUICK

Leave It in the Gutter

Show the before and after.
Skip the middle.

1. WHICH STEP CAN THE READER SUPPLY?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 4 · WORDS ON THE PAGE — QUICK

Cause Before Effect

First the thing.
Then the reaction. DRILL

1. DOES ANYONE REACT BEFORE WE SEE WHY?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 4 · WORDS ON THE PAGE — QUICK

Break Up the Talking Heads

Two people talking?
Give their hands a job.

1. WHAT ARE THEY DOING WHILE THEY TALK?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 4 · WORDS ON THE PAGE — QUICK

Read Only the Pictures

Read each layer alone.
Then check they work together.

1. WHAT LIVES IN ONLY ONE LAYER? CAN THAT LAYER CARRY IT?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE — FULL

The Spine, Not "And Then"

Can't say it in one sentence?
You don't know it yet. DRILL

1. WHO WANTS WHAT, AND WHAT'S AT STAKE?
2. WHAT'S IN THE WAY?
3. IS EVERY LINK A BUT OR A SO?

Room Talk: One Sentence, One Spine (Back to the Future), 294

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE — FULL

A Prop Isn't a Plant

Plant it early.
Give it a boring job. DRILL

1. WHAT DOES THIS PAYOFF USE?
2. WHERE DID WE FIRST SEE IT, AND WHAT ORDINARY JOB WAS IT DOING?
3. BEFORE YOU INVENT SOMETHING NEW, WHAT HAS THE STORY ALREADY PLANTED?

Room Talk: The Carrot Pen (Zootopia), 296

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

SHAPE

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE **QUICK**

Name the Verb

Name it in one word.
Show it early. Play it again. DRILL

1 WHAT DOES YOUR HERO DO, OVER AND OVER?

Room Talk: Faking It, Minute One (Ferris Bueller's Day Off), 290

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE **QUICK**

Curious, Then Hunted

Start curious.
Then let something come.

1 WHEN DOES SOMETHING START COMING?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE **QUICK**

Pay Rent on Every Mystery

Keep the big one shut.
Pay rent, and make it cost. DRILL

1 WHAT DOES YOUR NEXT ANSWER COST?

Room Talk: The Answer Up Front (Knives Out), 300

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE **QUICK**

Show Us the Danger

Show us the danger.
Don't show them.

1 WHAT DO WE KNOW THAT THEY DON'T?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE **QUICK**

Care Before Danger

Calm first.
It's what the danger takes.

1 WHAT DO WE LOVE BEFORE IT'S IN DANGER?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE **QUICK**

Small Wrong Things

Open on something wrong.
Nobody points.

1 WHAT'S A LITTLE OFF, FROM THE VERY FIRST MOMENT?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

SHAPE · REWRITING

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE QUICK

Give the Old Beat a New Job

Let the old beat arrive.
Give it a new job.

1 WHAT NEW JOB DOES YOUR FAMILIAR BEAT DO?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 5 · SHAPE QUICK

Make the Present Matter

Tell the past
to win something now.

1 WHAT IS THE TELLER'S GOAL RIGHT NOW?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 6 · REWRITING QUICK

Realign or Remove

Does it touch the question?
Bend it, or cut it. DRILL

1 DOES THIS MOMENT TOUCH THE BIG QUESTION?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 6 · REWRITING QUICK

Cut What Changes Nothing

Take it out. If nothing else
has to change, leave it out. DRILL

1 WHAT BREAKS IF I CUT THIS?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 6 · REWRITING QUICK

Protect the One Thing

Write down what stays.
Then rewrite. DRILL

1 WHAT MUST SURVIVE THIS REWRITE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 6 · REWRITING QUICK

Name the Problem, Not the Fix

Say what you felt, and where.
Leave the fix to the writer.

1 WHERE DID YOU STOP CARING?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

REWRITING · THE ROOM

DRAWER 6 · REWRITING — QUICK

The Missing Word

Name the word.
Make someone pay for it. DRILL

1. WHERE DOES SOMEONE PAY FOR YOUR WORD?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 7 · THE ROOM — FULL

Competent Isn't Alive

Don't name the feeling. DRILL
Find what only they would do.

1. COVER THE NAMES. COULD THIS LINE BE ANYONE'S?
2. WHAT DO ONLY THESE PEOPLE HAVE: AN OBJECT, A HABIT, A HISTORY?
3. CAN WE SEE THE FEELING IN SOMETHING SOMEONE DOES?

Room Talk: "I Know" (The Empire Strikes Back), 302

DRAWER 7 · THE ROOM — QUICK

Bring the Want First

Bring a want, an obsession, a theory.
Never a blank request. DRILL

1. WHAT ARE YOU BRINGING TO THIS SCENE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 7 · THE ROOM — QUICK

Pitch That Builds

Say the good part first.
Then fix the hole.

1. WHAT WAS GOOD IN THE LAST IDEA YOU KILLED?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 7 · THE ROOM — QUICK

Talk It Out, Then Decide

Talk it out. Let AI sort.
You make every choice.

1. WHICH CHOICE ON THE LIST IS YOURS?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 7 · THE ROOM — QUICK

Three Versions, Pick One

Make three.
Let the want pick one.

1. WHAT WERE THE OTHER TWO OPTIONS?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

THE ROOM · KEEP GOING

DRAWER 7 · THE ROOM QUICK

Your Rewrite Teaches the Rules

Rewrite one sample.
Turn your changes into rules.

1 WHAT DO YOU FIX EVERY TIME?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 7 · THE ROOM QUICK

Fake Readers, Then Real Ones

Fake readers first.
Then a real one.

1 WHERE DID A REAL PERSON STOP READING?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 7 · THE ROOM QUICK

Rehearse on a Stand-In

Rehearse on a stand-in.
The real person decides.

1 WHICH QUESTION ARE YOU AFRAID OF?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 8 · KEEP GOING QUICK

Bored or Stuck?

Bored? Walk, then come back.
Stuck? Stay ten more minutes.

1 WHICH ONE IS IT, REALLY?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 8 · KEEP GOING QUICK

What Did You Make Today?

Count what you made,
not the hours you spent.

1 WHAT DID YOU MAKE TODAY?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 8 · KEEP GOING QUICK

Keep a Fix-It List

Spot it. Write it down.
Keep going.

1 IS IT ON THE LIST, OR ARE YOU FIXING IT NOW?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

✂ CUT ALONG THE DASHED LINES.

KEEP GOING · BLANK CARDS FOR YOUR OWN TOOLS

DRAWER 8 · KEEP GOING QUICK

The Pile Is the Apprenticeship

Finish it. Learn from it.
Start the next one.

1 WHAT DID YOUR LAST FINISHED SCRIPT TEACH YOU?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 8 · KEEP GOING QUICK

Box Up Your Old Tricks

List your favorite moves.
Make each one earn its place.

1 WHICH MOVE DID YOU MAKE WITHOUT CHOOSING IT?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

DRAWER 8 · KEEP GOING QUICK

The Story You Keep Telling

Find your story.
Go deeper, not away.

1 WHAT HAPPENS IN EVERYTHING YOU WRITE?

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

YOUR OWN TOOL BLANK

Name it:

The rule:

1 THE QUESTION:

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

YOUR OWN TOOL BLANK

Name it:

The rule:

1 THE QUESTION:

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

YOUR OWN TOOL BLANK

Name it:

The rule:

1 THE QUESTION:

SCRIBBLER'S TOOLBOX · FREE TO COPY

The Brief



A **brief** is what you write before anyone drafts a scene, the Elephant (your AI) or you. Copy this page and fill in what you know; skip what doesn't fit. "Make it better" is not a brief.

THE WANT
When the scene ends, what should the audience feel, think or suspect?

THE QUESTION
Your sticky note, word for word: the question the whole story keeps asking.

THE SCENE
Who is in it, where it happens, and how long it runs.

GOAL
What the main character is trying to get, from whom, and by when.

IN THE WAY
Who or what stands in the way of that goal, and why.

TACTICS
The ways they try, in order. Each try costs more than the last.

SHOW IT
One thing we can see that carries the feeling, so nobody has to say it.

TRUE AT THE END
What is different now? Who holds the upper hand, or what else changed: knowledge, commitment, danger, the relationship?

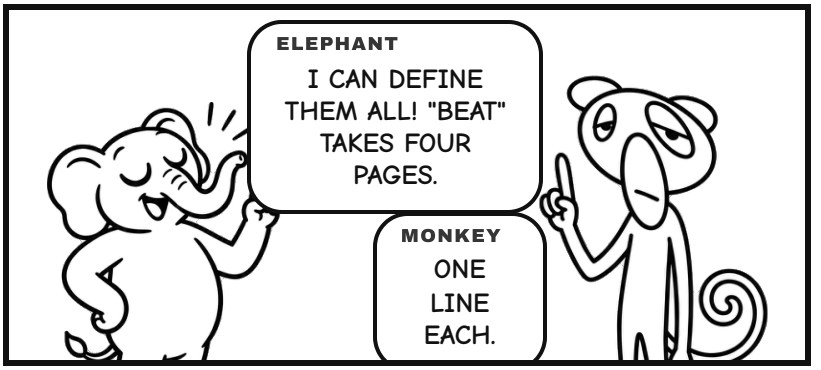
PROTECT
What the draft must keep: a line, an object, a moment.

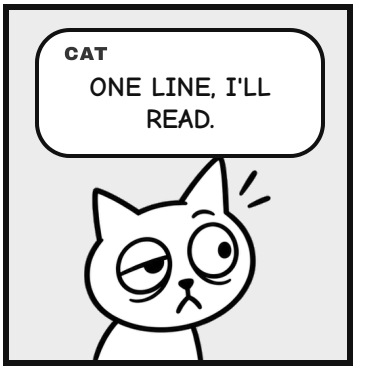
FORBID
Words and moves the draft must not use, such as named feelings, speeches or a hug.

See a filled-in brief: every FULL tool fills one in for a Ben and Jo scene. Pencil first. Elephant later.

Glossary

Every craft word this book teaches, in one plain line, in A to Z order. Under each word is the tool where you'll meet it, and its drawer. Stuck on a word in a tool? Look here, then go back.





A

Action line Any line in a script that isn't a name, a heading or dialogue: what the camera would see.
READ ONLY THE PICTURES · WORDS ON THE PAGE

AI note A dashed box with a dated tip about using AI writing tools. Every tool works without it.
FULL TOOLS · WITH A MENTEE

AI writing tool A computer program that writes a draft when you type a request. In this book, it's the Elephant.
BRING THE WANT FIRST · THE ROOM

Alive A line is alive when only these people, at this moment, could say or do it.
COMPETENT ISN'T ALIVE · THE ROOM

"And then" A link that only says what came next, never why. Swap it for BUT or SO.
THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN" · SHAPE

Antagonist The main opponent. Doesn't have to be evil: a boss, a neighbor or a rival will do.
THE VILLAIN'S PLAN HITS HOME · PEOPLE

Apprenticeship How a beginner learns a trade: by doing the job, over and over. Your pile of finished scripts is yours.
THE PILE IS THE APPRENTICESHIP · KEEP GOING

Average The most usual choice, the one a thousand other scenes would make. AI drafts tend to land on it.
COMPETENT ISN'T ALIVE · THE ROOM

B

Backstory What happened to your characters before the scene we're watching.
MAKE THE PRESENT MATTER · SHAPE

Bars The ten short parts of a set piece, built like a song. Every bar changes something.
BUILD IT LIKE A SONG · SCENES

Beat One small step in a scene: one move and the answer to it, like an ask, a no or a slammed door.
WHO HOLDS THE UPPER HAND · SCENES; GIVE THE OLD BEAT A NEW JOB · SHAPE

Brief The short set of instructions you write before anyone drafts a scene, for the Elephant or for yourself. Each line names one part, starting with the want (what the audience should feel) and the goal (what the character is after).
EVERY FULL TOOL · HOW THIS TOOLBOX WORKS

BUT and SO The two links between beats. BUT: something gets in the way. SO: this happened because of that.
THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN" · SHAPE

Button The last beat of a scene, where it clicks shut.
START LATE, LEAVE EARLY · SCENES

C

Cat check Yes-or-no questions at the bottom of each worksheet that ask whether the Cat, your reader, would stay awake.
HOW THIS TOOLBOX WORKS · THE WORKSHEETS

C

Character A person in your story. We only know them by what they do, hide and choose.
PEOPLE (DRAWER OPENER)

Cold reader Someone who reads your scene with no explanation from you.
SCENE AND SEQUEL · SCENES

Competent Does its job, but anyone could have said it. Competent isn't alive yet.
COMPETENT ISN'T ALIVE · THE ROOM

Condition One particular person in one particular situation: a problem pressing on them that they can't ignore.
DO, NOT FEEL · STARTING

Container The size you tell a story at: a short, a feature or a series. It decides how much story fits.
CHOOSE A SIZE · STARTING

CONTINUOUS Written in a scene heading in place of DAY or NIGHT: this scene follows straight on from the one before, with no time skipped.
SOMETHING THEY LOVE · PEOPLE; SHOW US THE DANGER · SHAPE

Core story The kind of trouble a writer keeps coming back to. Not a rut: your fingerprint.
THE STORY YOU KEEP TELLING · KEEP GOING

Cost What a choice or a stunt takes from someone, shown in the same scene where we can see it.
PAY THE COST ON SCREEN · SCENES

Coverage A reader's written report on a script: a summary, then notes. Treat it as information, not orders.
FAKE READERS, THEN REAL ONES · THE ROOM

Curiosity One of a story's two engines: there's something to find out, so we lean in to learn it.
CURIOUS, THEN HUNTED · SHAPE

D

Default moves Favorite tricks a writer, or the Elephant, reaches for without deciding to.
BOX UP YOUR OLD TRICKS · KEEP GOING

Distinct Easy to picture, and impossible to mix up with anyone else.
THE COSTUME TEST · PEOPLE

Draft A first written try. A first draft has one job: reach THE END.
EVERY FULL TOOL; KEEP A FIX-IT LIST · KEEP GOING

Drawer A group of tools in this box, sorted by when a writer needs them. There are eight.
HOW THIS TOOLBOX WORKS

Drill A strict rule for practice. Pros break it on purpose, once they can do it on purpose. In this book, when a tool's main rule is a drill, it wears a DRILL tag.
HOW TO READ THIS BOOK · FRONT

E

Easy way out A simple yes that gives a character what they want on the first try. Close it.
EVERY FIX MAKES A PROBLEM · SCENES

Emotional sense A choice makes emotional sense when it's true to how that person feels right now, even if it's the worst move on paper.
EMOTIONAL SENSE BEATS LOGIC · PEOPLE

Ensemble A story with a group of main characters instead of one hero: a crew, a team, a family.
EVERYONE HAS A JOB · PEOPLE

Escalation Each try is bigger or riskier than the last. Ten polite asks in a row are flat ground, not stairs.
EVERY FIX MAKES A PROBLEM · SCENES

Exposition Information the audience needs to follow the story: what happened before, who's who, the rules, the stakes.
EXPLAIN WHILE MOVING · SCENES

F

Fake reader The Elephant reading your pages with one job, like "tell me where you got bored."
FAKE READERS, THEN REAL ONES · THE ROOM

Feature film The kind you see in a theater: about 90 minutes to two hours, one big change.
CHOOSE A SIZE · STARTING

Fix-it list One page beside your draft. Spot a problem, write it there with the page number, and keep going.
KEEP A FIX-IT LIST · KEEP GOING

Flashback A scene from the past cut into the present one.
MAKE THE PRESENT MATTER · SHAPE

Flawed hero A main character with a real weakness.
THE GIFT THAT TRIPS THEM · PEOPLE

F

Flip The moment something starts coming. To flip a beat is to turn it around, so the surprise lands on someone else.
CURIOUS, THEN HUNTED; GIVE THE OLD BEAT A NEW JOB · SHAPE

Frame A present-day scene that only opens and closes a flashback. If it wants nothing, readers skip it.
MAKE THE PRESENT MATTER · SHAPE

Full tool A tool that teaches one big idea over eight pages: a scene, the tool, a practice test, a brief, a worksheet and a card.
HOW THIS TOOLBOX WORKS

G

Gap Something that doesn't fit, shown and not explained. Also the space between who a person is and who they're trying to look like.
SMALL WRONG THINGS · SHAPE; READ THE WEAR · PEOPLE

Goal What a character is trying to get, right now: Ben's $500, tonight. Not the same as the want, which is yours, for the audience.
SCENE AND SEQUEL · SCENES

Gauge A danger with no face, made visible: rising water, a phone battery, a fuel needle.
PUT A CLOCK ON IT · SCENES

Gift The thing a character is best at. First it saves them; when it matters most, it trips them.
THE GIFT THAT TRIPS THEM · PEOPLE

Gutter In comics, the white strip between panels. On a script page, the cut between two moments, where the reader imagines what happened.
LEAVE IT IN THE GUTTER · WORDS ON THE PAGE

H

Haecceity Say hek-SEE-it-ee: the thisness of a thing. This book just calls it specifics.
SPECIFICS · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Hinge The step on a spine outline where that outline changes direction. In the Reel 1 outline, it's Jo opening the drawer. Not the same as the turn.
THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN" · SHAPE

Hook The lean a reader makes to close a gap. Explain the gap right away and there's no hook.
SMALL WRONG THINGS · SHAPE

I

INSERT A close shot of something we need to read or see, like a note or a phone screen, cut into the scene.
THE MISSING WORD · REWRITING

Index card A small paper card holding one moment of an outline, pinned to a board so you can move it.
THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN" · SHAPE

Introduction A character's first moment on screen. Make it something only this person would do.
FIRST LOOK MAKES A PROMISE · PEOPLE

K

Killer The writers' room job of hunting for holes. In this book, the Hedgehog.
PITCH THAT BUILDS · THE ROOM

L

Leverage Something you can use to push someone: a secret, a favor, the keys.
WHO HOLDS THE UPPER HAND · SCENES

Love story Any bond between two people inside the premise: brother and sister, best friends, partners, even rivals.
FIND THE LOVE STORY · PEOPLE

M

Meant The feeling under a line. What a character says out loud is the SAID.
DIALOGUE: SAID AND MEANT · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Motivation and reaction First the thing that happens, then the response to it. Never the other way round.
CAUSE BEFORE EFFECT · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Mystery Any question your story leaves open on purpose. It doesn't need a crime.
PAY RENT ON EVERY MYSTERY · SHAPE

N

Non-line A line that does no job: an echo, filler, the obvious, or an announcement of a feeling. While you practice, cut it.

DIALOGUE: SAID AND MEANT · WORDS ON THE PAGE

O

(O.S.) Off screen. Written after a name when the person is in the scene's place but out of sight, like a voice from the next room.

FIRST LOOK MAKES A PROMISE · PEOPLE; CURIOUS, THEN HUNTED · SHAPE

One Emo Q Short for the one emotional question: the yes-or-no question a story keeps asking about one person. Ben's: Can Ben ever be trusted?

THE QUESTION ON A STICKY NOTE · STARTING

Opening The first moments of a story or scene. Their one job: make the reader want the next moment.

SMALL WRONG THINGS · SHAPE

Opponent Anyone whose goal gets in the hero's way. The main one is the antagonist.

THE VILLAIN'S PLAN HITS HOME · PEOPLE

Opposition The person in the way of a character's goal.

SCENE AND SEQUEL · SCENES

Outline A story's big moments in order, written before the script.

THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN" · SHAPE

P

Payoff A big moment that uses something we saw earlier.

A PROP ISN'T A PLANT · SHAPE

Pitch An idea said out loud. Also: telling your whole story aloud, in a few minutes, to someone who could help make it.

PITCH THAT BUILDS; REHEARSE ON A STAND-IN · THE ROOM

Plant Something we see early, doing an ordinary job, that the story pays off later.

A PROP ISN'T A PLANT · SHAPE

Point of view (POV) The person a scene is lived through: we see what they see and learn what they learn, when they learn it.

WHOSE EYES ARE WE IN? · SCENES

Pop Anything new the audience gets: a small reveal, a surprise or a jolt of feeling.

A POP EVERY THIRTY SECONDS · SCENES

Premise Your story's starting point in one line: who is in what trouble.

TURN IT UP TO ELEVEN · STARTING

Producer The person who finds the money and the team to make a film or show.

REHEARSE ON A STAND-IN · THE ROOM

Promise A character's first look is a promise about who they are. The story keeps it, or breaks it on purpose.

FIRST LOOK MAKES A PROMISE · PEOPLE

Prop Any object in a scene. It becomes a plant only when the story pays it off.

A PROP ISN'T A PLANT · SHAPE

Protect list The few things that must survive every rewrite. Put first the thing nobody has seen before.

PROTECT THE ONE THING · REWRITING

Q

Quick tool A tool that fits one idea on two facing pages.

HOW THIS TOOLBOX WORKS

R

Reaction shot A shot of someone's face as they take in what just happened. The face tells us what the moment means.

THE FACE TELLS US · SCENES

Receipt One small action that proves the moment touched someone.

THE FACE TELLS US · SCENES

Reel One of the four parts this book builds a story in. Each Reel is a small story that ends on a change. Ben and Jo's four: THE ASK, THE COUCH, THE CLIMB and THE MOVE.

SHAPE (DRAWER OPENER)

Rent A small answer to an open mystery, and it should cost somebody something.

PAY RENT ON EVERY MYSTERY · SHAPE

R

Reset A short pause in a set piece (bar 6): a breath, a look, a stumble. It loads the next hit.
BUILD IT LIKE A SONG · SCENES

Reverse angle Running a test again from the other person's side of the room. What is their goal, and do they get it?
WHO HOLDS THE UPPER HAND · SCENES

Rewrite Your next pass at a draft, made when the whole story is in view.
KEEP A FIX-IT LIST · KEEP GOING

Room Talk A spread in the back where the writers' room talks over one real film scene that uses a tool.
BACK OF THE BOOK

Rooting interest Wanting a character to get what they want.
SOMETHING THEY LOVE · PEOPLE

Runway words Little words that let people cut in on each other: look, listen, hang on, wait, yeah, but.
SAY IT OUT LOUD FIRST · STARTING

S

Said What a character says out loud. The feeling underneath is the MEANT.
DIALOGUE: SAID AND MEANT · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Scene Someone goes after what they want, someone stands in the way, and it ends with a turn.
SCENE AND SEQUEL · SCENES

Scene heading A scene's top line: inside (INT.) or outside (EXT.), where, and when.
SCENE AND SEQUEL · SCENES

Script Also called a screenplay: a plan for a movie or show, written down before anyone films it.
WORDS ON THE PAGE (DRAWER OPENER)

Sequel Right after a scene: the character reacts, faces a hard choice and decides. That decision is the next goal.
SCENE AND SEQUEL · SCENES

Series Many episodes, 30 or 60 minutes each. Series get their own book: Volume Two.
CHOOSE A SIZE · STARTING

Set piece A big stretch of action: a chase, a fight, a dance, a heist.
BUILD IT LIKE A SONG · SCENES

Short film A whole movie that runs about 5 to 20 minutes: one moment, one turn.
CHOOSE A SIZE · STARTING

Showrunner The one person in a writers' room who makes the final call.
THE ROOM (DRAWER OPENER)

Signature move The one moment of a set piece people remember (bar 8).
BUILD IT LIKE A SONG · SCENES

Situation A problem, a place or a deadline, before a particular person is put in it.
DO, NOT FEEL · STARTING

Specifics The detail that could only belong to this person. A detail can do three jobs: make us believe it, help us know them, make us want more. The best do all three; most do one.
SPECIFICS · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Spine A whole story, or one Reel of it, in one sentence: who needs what, and what stands in the way. Ben's, for Reel 1: he needs $500 from Jo tonight to keep his apartment, but taking it means one more IOU in her drawer, and he can't face that.
THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN" · SHAPE

Spot the Miss A page with two drafts of the same scene. One works and one doesn't. Say which, and why. In a close call, both work: say which one the want needs.
EVERY FULL TOOL

Stake What someone could lose. Bold doesn't mean louder; it means more is at stake.
TURN IT UP TO ELEVEN · STARTING

Stand-in A practice listener: the Elephant playing the kind of person you'll pitch to later, like a producer, built only from public material, with every guess marked. It rehearses from the table and never takes a seat.
REHEARSE ON A STAND-IN · THE ROOM

Sticker A label stuck on a character that never changes what happens.
THE GIFT THAT TRIPS THEM · PEOPLE

Subtext The hidden meaning under a line: what it really means underneath.
DIALOGUE: SAID AND MEANT · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Surprise A jolt nobody sees coming, not even us. It's over in a second.
SHOW US THE DANGER · SHAPE

T

Tactic One way of trying to get what you want. Each should climb: bigger or riskier than the last.
SCENE AND SEQUEL; EVERY FIX MAKES A PROBLEM · SCENES

Talking heads Two faces trading lines, with nothing else to look at.
BREAK UP THE TALKING HEADS · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Theme What the story is really about.
DIALOGUE: SAID AND MEANT · WORDS ON THE PAGE

Ticking clock A deadline the audience can see: a time, a countdown, a number that keeps climbing.
PUT A CLOCK ON IT · SCENES

Tool One small trick you can use again and again: a question you ask about a scene, or a check you run on it.
HOW THIS TOOLBOX WORKS

Tool card One page at the end of a full tool that sums it up, for you to keep.
HOW THIS TOOLBOX WORKS

Try What a person does to hide or handle a feeling: body first, then a choice, then (maybe) words.
PLAY THE TRY · PEOPLE

Turn In a scene, the moment it changes direction. In the whole story, the turn is its big change of direction: the bridge between Reel 2 and Reel 3, where Jo tells Ben's new boss. Not a Reel.
SCENE AND SEQUEL · SCENES; SHAPE (DRAWER OPENER)

Twist A surprise at the top of the tactics that changes what the scene was about.
EVERY FIX MAKES A PROBLEM · SCENES

U

Unease The quiet sense that something is off, built from small wrong things nobody mentions.
SMALL WRONG THINGS · SHAPE

Upper hand It belongs to whoever has what the other person needs: the keys, a secret, a yes. Not whoever is loudest. The tool asks what changed: power, knowledge, commitment, danger or the relationship.
WHO HOLDS THE UPPER HAND · SCENES

Urgency A story's other engine: something is coming, and we lean in to see if they get away.
CURIOUS, THEN HUNTED · SHAPE

V

Verb The one action a main character does again and again, in new places, with more to lose. Never a feeling.
NAME THE VERB · SHAPE

V.O. Voice-over: a voice we hear over the pictures.
SCENE AND SEQUEL · SCENES

Voice A character's voice is how they sound: the words they pick, and what they'd never say. Yours is your want, your taste and what only you notice.
YOUR REWRITE TEACHES THE RULES · THE ROOM; THE BOOK'S LAST PAGE · KEEP GOING

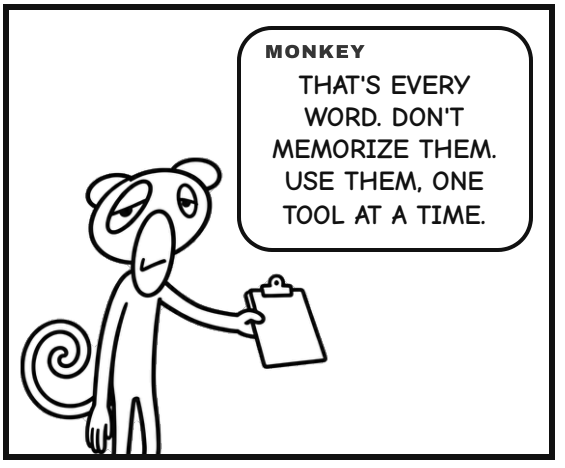
W

Want Your want, as the writer: what the scene should make the audience feel, suspect or wonder when it ends. A character's aim is their goal.
KNOW WHAT YOU WANT · FRONT

Wear Scuffs, tape, patches, things worn smooth: evidence of who a person really is.
READ THE WEAR · PEOPLE

Worksheet A full-page drawing to fill in by pencil, in the back of the book. There are sixteen: one for each full tool, and four for quick tools.
WORKSHEETS, FULL SIZE · BACK OF THE BOOK

Writers' room A few writers around one table, breaking a story together and pinning what's decided to a board.
THE ROOM (DRAWER OPENER)



Where These Tools Came From

> Some tools borrow an idea from someone else. Each one is named here, with the tool where the idea appears and what the idea is. The same credit is on that tool's page.

Dwight V. Swain writing teacher	SCENE AND SEQUEL · SCENES; PLAY THE TRY · PEOPLE; CAUSE BEFORE EFFECT · WORDS ON THE PAGE Named the scene and the sequel. Also the order a person shows a feeling (body, then choice, then words), and motivation before reaction.
Howard Hawks film director	SAY IT OUT LOUD FIRST · STARTING Had dialogue written to overlap, and encouraged his actors to add lines on set.
Trey Parker and Matt Stone writers	THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN" · SHAPE Between the beats of a story, "but" or "therefore," never "and then."
Kenn Adams improv teacher	THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN" · SHAPE His improv "Story Spine" is a cousin of the spine.
Anton Chekhov playwright	A PROP ISN'T A PLANT · SHAPE A gun shown on the wall early must go off later.
Alfred Hitchcock film director	SHOW US THE DANGER · SHAPE Made famous the difference between surprise (one jolt) and suspense (the long wait).
Game design a field, not a person	NAME THE VERB · SHAPE The test for a story's verb: does it feel good to repeat?
Ray Bradbury novelist	COLLECT FIRST, CONNECT LATER · STARTING Kept long lists of nouns and found his stories in them.
Scott McCloud cartoonist	LEAVE IT IN THE GUTTER · WORDS ON THE PAGE The word "gutter," from his book Understanding Comics. This whole book is drawn in its spirit.
Wally Wood comic artist	BREAK UP THE TALKING HEADS · WORDS ON THE PAGE His sheet "22 Panels That Always Work," made for pages full of people talking.
Neil Gaiman novelist	NAME THE PROBLEM, NOT THE FIX · REWRITING Readers are almost always right that something is wrong, and almost always wrong about how to fix it.

Everything else

Most of the tools grew from Jesse Alexander's own blog posts, courses and worksheets: the Scribbler's Playbook and the Modular Story Method (the four Reels in the Shape drawer). The One Emo Q, the one emotional question, is his own idea.

Room Talk: the films

Sixteen Room Talk spreads sit among the worksheets. In each one, the writers' room talks over one real film scene that uses a tool. Here they are, with the tool each one goes with. Where each one's facts came from is on the next two pages.

1	**Jaws (1975)** KNOW WHAT YOU WANT	The night dive: Hooper finds a shark tooth in a sunken boat, and Spielberg went back for one more scare.
2	**Finding Nemo (2003)** THE QUESTION ON A STICKY NOTE	Marlin, a worried clownfish dad, crosses the ocean for his son. Can Marlin let go?
3	**His Girl Friday (1940)** SAY IT OUT LOUD FIRST	Hildy, who has already left the paper, tells Walter, her ex-husband and old boss, that she's getting married. They talk right over each other.
4	**The Fellowship of the Ring (2001)** SCENE AND SEQUEL	Gandalf falls from the bridge in Moria. Outside, Aragorn decides they must keep moving.
5	**The Princess Bride (1987)** WHO HOLDS THE UPPER HAND	The battle of wits: Vizzini, the Man in Black and two cups of wine.
6	**Toy Story (1995)** EVERY FIX MAKES A PROBLEM	Woody tries to get rid of Buzz, and every fix lands them in worse trouble.
7	**Singin' in the Rain (1952)** BUILD IT LIKE A SONG	The title number: Don Lockwood dances his way home from Kathy's door.
8	**The Social Network (2010)** WANT MAKES OPINIONS	The opening bar scene: Mark talks about final clubs until Erica breaks up with him.
9	**Inside Out (2015)** THE GIFT THAT TRIPS THEM	Joy guards Riley's core memories from Sadness, and her struggle knocks them loose.
10	**The Princess Bride (1987)** DIALOGUE: SAID AND MEANT	"As you wish": what Westley says to Buttercup, and what he means.
11	**Paddington (2014)** SPECIFICS	The spare marmalade sandwich Paddington keeps under his hat.
12	**Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)** NAME THE VERB	Minute one: Ferris fakes being sick, and keeps faking all day.
13	**Back to the Future (1985)** THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN"	Marty's trip to 1955, told with BUT and SO.
14	**Zootopia (2016)** A PROP ISN'T A PLANT	Judy's carrot pen, a cute gadget that is also a recorder.
15	**Knives Out (2019)** PAY RENT ON EVERY MYSTERY	The answer up front: early on, we learn what Marta believes she did.
16	**The Empire Strikes Back (1980)** COMPETENT ISN'T ALIVE	"I know": Han's answer to Leia, just before he is frozen.

How these were checked. Each scene was checked against the published script where one exists, and against the interviews, articles and reference sites listed on the next two pages. Check anything that matters to you. The scenes are described, never drawn, and quoted only in short phrases. The films belong to the people who made them. This book's free license (CC BY-NC 4.0) covers its own words and pictures; the ideas credited on these pages stay with the people who had them.

Room Talk: the sources

Where each Room Talk's facts came from: the script where there is one, then interviews, articles and, listed plainly as reference, sites like Wikipedia. Go and look for yourself.

1 Jaws (1975)
KNOW WHAT YOU WANT

INTERVIEW Steven Spielberg, "Inside Steven Spielberg's Jaws Vault," *Empire*, Sept. 28, 2014. **empireonline.com/movies/features/steven-spielberg-jaws-vault**

ARTICLE Joe Roberts, "The Biggest Scare in Jaws Was Literally Filmed in a Swimming Pool," /Film, June 19, 2025. **slashfilm.com/1885831/jaws-scariest-scene-filmed-swimming-pool**

REFERENCE Wikipedia, "Jaws (film)."

2 Finding Nemo (2003)
THE QUESTION ON A STICKY NOTE

INTERVIEWS "Finding Nemo (2003)," Writers Guild of America, *101 Greatest Screenplays of the 21st Century*, quoting Andrew Stanton to the Associated Press. **wga.org/writers-room/101-best-lists/101-best-screenplays-of-the-21st-century-so-far/finding-nemo** · "Fishy Story," *North Bay Bohemian*, June 5–11, 2003. **bohemian.com/papers/sonoma/06.05.03/nemo-0323.html**

REFERENCE Wikipedia, "Finding Nemo."

3 His Girl Friday (1940)
SAY IT OUT LOUD FIRST

ARTICLES Frank Miller, "His Girl Friday," TCM, Mar. 24, 2005. **tcm.com/articles/88198/his-girl-friday** · UCLA Film & Television Archive, "His Girl Friday / The Awful Truth," screening notes, Oct. 4, 2015. **cinema.ucla.edu/events/his-girl-friday-the-awful-truth-10-04-15**

REFERENCE Wikipedia, "His Girl Friday" (for Hawks's words added before and after lines).

4 The Fellowship of the Ring (2001)
SCENE AND SEQUEL

SCRIPT Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens and Peter Jackson. No published edition; an unofficial script text is at **imsdb.com/scripts/Lord-of-the-Rings-Fellowship-of-the-Ring,-The.html**.

REFERENCE Tim Dirks, Filmsite. **filmsite.org/lordofrings-fellowshipofring.html** · Wikipedia, "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring."

Room Talk: the sources

5 The Princess Bride (1987)

WHO HOLDS THE UPPER HAND, AND NO. 10, DIALOGUE: SAID AND MEANT

SCRIPT William Goldman, *Four Screenplays with Essays* (Applause Books, 1995).

ARTICLE Cassidy Ward, "Can you really build an immunity to iocane powder?" SYFY Wire, Sept. 21, 2022. **syfy.com/syfy-wire/princess-bride-iocane-powder-poison-immunity**

REFERENCE AFI Catalog. **catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/57788** · Wikipedia, "The Princess Bride (film)."

6 Toy Story (1995)

EVERY FIX MAKES A PROBLEM

REFERENCE AFI Catalog, "Toy Story (1995)." **catalog.afi.com/Film/55210-TOY-STORY** · Wikipedia, "Toy Story."

7 Singin' in the Rain (1952)

BUILD IT LIKE A SONG

REFERENCE Tim Dirks, "Singin' in the Rain (1952)," Filmsite, the title number shot by shot. **filmsite.org/sing3.html**

ARTICLE Graeme Coffin, "Great Movie Scenes: Singin' in the Rain, Title Song," The Needle Fish, Feb. 15, 2024. **theneedlefish.com/2024/02/15/great-movie-scenes-singin-in-the-rain-title-song**

8 The Social Network (2010)

WANT MAKES OPINIONS

SCRIPT Aaron Sorkin, *The Social Network*, screenplay released by Sony Pictures for awards voters, Jan. 2011. Archived at **web.archive.org/web/20111222180414/http://flash.sonypictures.com/video/movies/thesocialnetwork/awards/thesocialnetwork_screenplay.pdf**

ARTICLE Katie Baker, "Fincher Moments: Mark Zuckerberg Walks Into a Bar," The Ringer, Sept. 21, 2020. **theringer.com/2020/09/21/movies/social-network-opening-scene-david-fincher**

Room Talk: the sources

9 **Inside Out (2015)**
THE GIFT THAT TRIPS THEM

STUDIO Pixar, "Inside Out." **pixar.com/inside-out**

ARTICLE "At the End of 'Inside Out,' Why Did Joy Give Sadness the Core Emotions?" The Take, no date. **the-take.com/read/at-the-end-of-ainside-outa-why-did-joy-give-sadness-the-core-emotions**

REFERENCE Wikipedia, "Inside Out (2015 film)."

10 **The Princess Bride (1987)**
DIALOGUE: SAID AND MEANT

Same sources as item 5 (The Princess Bride).

11 **Paddington (2014)**
SPECIFICS

REVIEWS Dom Robinson, "Paddington on Blu-ray: The DVDfever Review," DVDfever, Mar. 22, 2015. **dvd-fever.co.uk/paddington-on-blu-ray-the-dvdfever-review** · Edward Frost, "DVD Review: Paddington," CineVue, Mar. 24, 2015. **cine-vue.com/2015/03/dvd-review-paddington.html**

REFERENCE Wikipedia, "Paddington (film)."

12 **Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)**
NAME THE VERB

REFERENCE AFI Catalog. **catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/57318** · Polly Barbour, "Ferris Bueller's Day Off Summary," GradeSaver, Jan. 11, 2019. **gradesaver.com/ferris-buellers-day-off/study-guide/summary** · Wikipedia, "Ferris Bueller's Day Off."

Room Talk: the sources

13 Back to the Future (1985)
THE SPINE, NOT "AND THEN"

REFERENCE AFI Catalog (the flyer handed to Marty in 1985). **catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/55763** · Tim Dirks, Filmsite. **filmsite.org/backtothefuture.html** · Wikipedia, "Back to the Future."

THE RULE "Matt Stone and Trey Parker of South Park Crash NYU Class," HuffPost, Sept. 8, 2011 (mtvU's *Stand In*). **huffpost.com/entry/matt-stone-trey-parker-stand-in_n_953696**

14 Zootopia (2016)
A PROP ISN'T A PLANT

ARTICLES Cory Milles, "Zootopia Beat Sheet," Save the Cat!, Mar. 25, 2016. **savethecat.com/beat-sheets/zootopia-beat-sheet** · Sydney Baum Haines, "The Ending of Zootopia Explained," Looper, Feb. 16, 2022. **looper.com/770116/the-ending-of-zootopia-explained**

REFERENCE Wikipedia, "Zootopia."

15 Knives Out (2019)
PAY RENT ON EVERY MYSTERY

INTERVIEWS Jordan Zakarin, "Why Rian Johnson doesn't want to give genre fans exactly what they think they want," SYFY Wire, Nov. 24, 2019. **syfy.com/syfy-wire/rian-johnson-on-knives-outs-vomit-mystery-history-and-the-scorsese-cinema-debate** · Isaiah Colbert, "Director Rian Johnson talks 'Knives Out'…," *Columbia Chronicle*, Oct. 28, 2019. **columbiachronicle.com/campus/director-rian-johnson-talks-knives-out-exploring-genres-and-hitchcock-at-columbia-film-row**

REFERENCE Wikipedia, "Knives Out."

16 The Empire Strikes Back (1980)
COMPETENT ISN'T ALIVE

STUDIO Lucas O. Seastrom, "Defining Moments: 'I Know'," Lucasfilm, May 26, 2020. **lucasfilm.com/news/defining-moments-i-know**

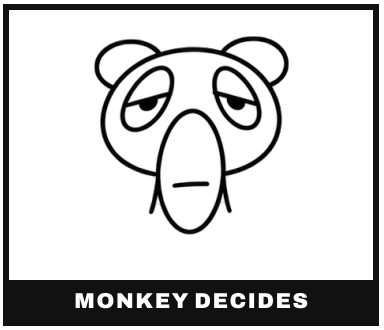
ARTICLES Associated Press, "Director of 'Empire Strikes Back' Dies," CBS Sacramento, Nov. 29, 2010. **cbsnews.com/sacramento/news/director-of-empire-strikes-back-dies** · Wikipedia, "The Empire Strikes Back."

FINDING THEM

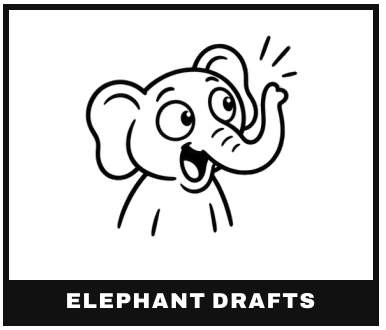
Each address is a link: tap it in the PDF. On paper, type **https://** in front of it. Wikipedia articles are at **en.wikipedia.org/wiki/** followed by the article's title. Dates are as shown on each page ("no date" where none is given). Every address was checked on October 10, 2026.

How This Book Was Made

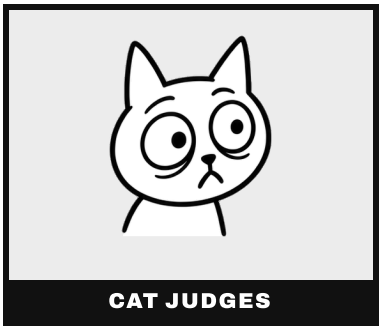
This is a book about writing with AI, and it was made with AI. Here is what that means, part by part, so you can judge the pages knowing where they came from.



MONKEY DECIDES



ELEPHANT DRAFTS



CAT JUDGES

1. **The ideas and the tools** come from Jesse Alexander's own blog posts, courses and worksheets. Where a tool builds on another writer's idea, that writer is named in "Where These Tools Came From." One Emo Q, the question on the sticky note, is his own.

2. **The words and the layout** were drafted with Claude, an AI made by the company Anthropic, working under his direction. He decided which tools went in and what stayed on every page.

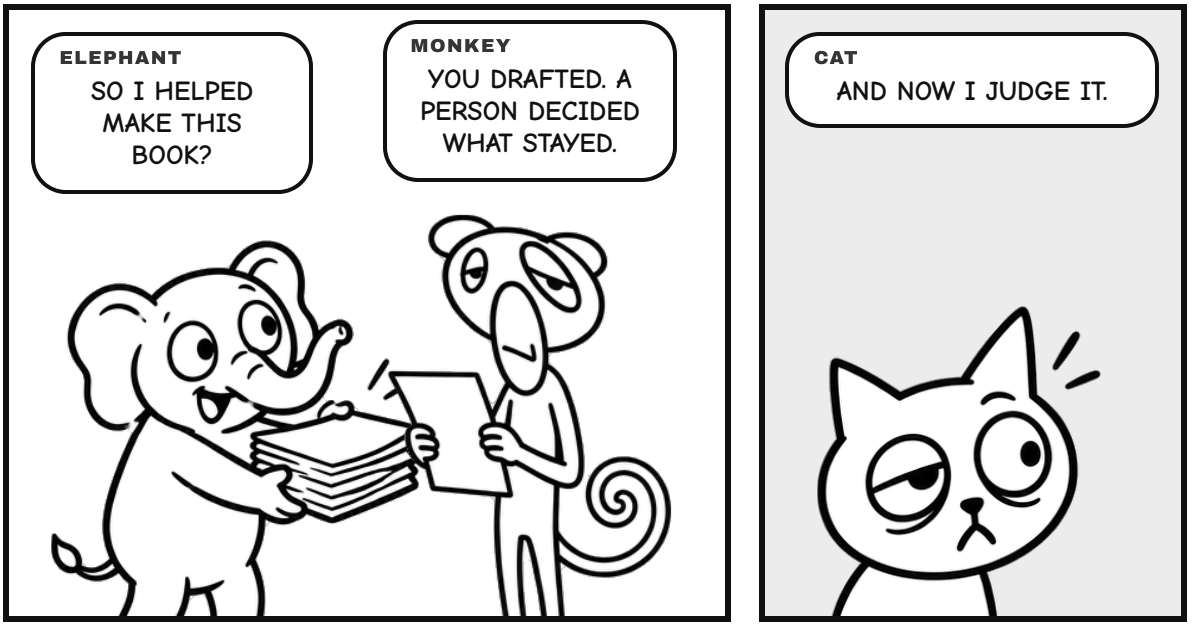
3. **The drawings of the cast** were made with an AI image tool, working from the book's character designs. Then each drawing was checked by hand for mistakes, such as an extra arm, and any drawing that failed was left out.

4. **The Elephant's drafts.** The bad ones (the ones that put the Cat to sleep) were written for this book to show how AI drafts tend to miss. They are made-up examples. The scenes that work were drafted with AI too, from briefs like the ones in this book, and a person chose what stayed. One draft is real and unedited: in Competent Isn't Alive (216), an AI was given a plain request that ended "Make it emotional," and its answer is printed in full, with the complete request, the date and the AI's name.

5. **Ben and Jo** and every scene they play were invented for this book, so no tool depends on a movie you haven't seen.

6. **The real movie scenes** in the Room Talk pages were checked against the published script where one exists, and against the sources listed in the credits, with titles, dates and links. Check anything that matters to you.

WHY TELL YOU THIS?



The whole book argues one thing: an AI can draft fast and smooth, but it can't know what *you* want. The writer's job is to **know what they want**, **recognize a draft that misses it**, and **ask for what steers it**. That's the book's tagline: **Monkey decides. Elephant drafts. Cat judges.**

This book was made the same way. A person brought the ideas and made the decisions. An AI drafted pages and laid them out. And the last judge is you, the reader. If a page lost you, the page missed. That's not your fault.

WORK THE SAME WAY

1. **Bring the want first.**
   Before you ask an AI for anything, fill in the brief. See Know What You Want and Bring the Want First.
2. **Let it draft. Then read it as the Cat.**
   Smooth isn't the same as alive. See Competent Isn't Alive.
3. **Keep only what you would have written.**
   Every choice that stays is yours. See Talk It Out, Then Decide.

MONKEY DECIDES.
ELEPHANT DRAFTS.
CAT JUDGES.