

Sequence Breakdown – Summary of Sequence Purpose:

Presented by Max Timm and The Story Farm for ISA members and writers

Approaching your three paragraphs from an act break approach will help you organize your three-paragraph summary. The 3-Act structure is for a feature, or a half-hour comedy. A one-hour drama would encompass a 5-Act structure, thus giving you the option to divide the pilot synopsis into five paragraphs. You do not need to notate "Act 1", "Act 2", and so on before each paragraph.

Act 1 /Paragraph 1

Sequence 1 – Main Character Stage of Life, Arena, Show Flaws, Traits, Living in His Normal World. There is an emphasis on an unconscious emotional "want", motivation, and/or intention.

Sequence 2 – A New Opportunity and Series of Set-Up Events (some call this the Inciting Incident), but more importantly it is a presentation of how this opportunity can help solve a problem, and the character either actively pursues it or is forced into it. There is a direct connection to the emotional "want" from sequence 1.

Sequence 3 – The Secondary Character Introduction. If the Secondary Character has already been introduced, then we get to see her in action a bit more and how she will affect the main character to change. We can give the main character a glimpse into what he will experience in the 2nd Act, but now a plan of pursuit is firmly in place.

Act 2/Paragraph 2

Sequence 4 – Fun and Games. This is the full entry into the new world and the characters interacting with that world. No major problems are yet introduced other than how different the world is and how it will be a challenge dealing with the differences. This is the "trailer sequence", or in other words, a lot of the moments you see in a movie's trailer come from this sequence because of the importance and emphasis on the main character experiencing a new world of sorts.

Sequence 5 – Real Obstacles are Introduced. This is usually the first small twist or change of plan, but not enough to fully change the character or his flaws yet. They main character and secondary character are working together, on the same team, coming closer, learning and attempting to apply the new lessons, but we're still in the training ground, so to speak.

Sequence 6 – A series of events occur that officially Complicate and Twist the plot and character motivations, goals, intentions. This is a turning point which results in either a big victory which changes things for the better, or a loss that they don't know how to recover from, but...they can and will attempt to recover from it. They are not yet discouraged enough to quit. Instead, there is a new determination to push forward in spite of the Opponent or Villain gaining ground and becoming stronger.

Sequence 7 – This is the Honeymoon Period, whether we had a positive twist (like a first kiss) or a negative twist (like a failed attempt at achieving a goal). Regardless of the positive or negative twist, the characters are that much more determined to move forward, but cracks are showing in the relationship of the main character and secondary character. The Opponent's forces are

growing stronger, and may even achieve a small victory which then makes the main character's journey that much more challenging. What isn't working as well is the original way a character was approaching the problem, and this affects the main character's inner personal beliefs and flaws – which are rearing their ugly again (his flaws). A new plan is put into place.

Sequence 8 – The Opponent Takes Charge and the main character and secondary character are growing apart, but there are still attempts to achieve a goal, only the attempts are not working. The main character is determined to do it his way...which sets up the opportunity to rip the rug out from under him in sequence 9.

Sequence 9 – The Low Point, which means the main character's one last attempt at achieving the goal has failed, and it's all his fault. There is usually an estrangement from the secondary character, either by the secondary character leaving, or literally dying. Lessons are not learned. All is lost. The main character believes he has failed and is ready to quit. The Opponent has seemingly won.

Act 3/Paragraph 3

Sequence 10 – Reverting Back to Original Flaw and Emotional Problem. This is usually a short sequence of a scene or two where the main character is sitting in his or her "quit mode". Meaning, there is no hope. Why bother? It's The Dark Night of the Soul. If the main character was an alcoholic in the first sequence, he goes back to drinking in this sequence 10 (this is merely an example, of course).

Sequence 11 – It's the Rally of the Troops. Here, the secondary character returns to pull the main character out of his or her darkness and reminds him or her what they're fighting for and why the main character is the only one who can achieve the goal. They will just need to go about it differently...and sometimes the secondary character has an idea as to how to do so, and it's probably something the main character has never attempted before (either physically or emotionally).

Sequence 12 – This is the big Climax, the Battle Scene, where the main character applies everything he has learned and thus overcomes the Opponent or Villain specifically by doing something he was never able to do, especially not in the beginning of the story. Theme is stated through the actions that the character takes BECAUSE of the overcoming of a flaw, a fear, whatever was holding the character back in the first place. While it can be a literal physical victory (David defeats Goliath), the overcoming of the flaw is the true victory. They eventually return to their normal world changed for the better, even if it's just a little bit. If they are not better, there needs to be a very specific and literal reason why so that the theme can be expressed and we don't lose the audience. Case in point, Requiem For A Dream. There was a very obvious and clear thematic message - "drugs are bad, look at what they can do to you".

For TV Writers

TV NOTE: Instead of 12 sequences, you could do six, seven, or eight sequences IF you're writing a one-hour series, but the 12 overall story "beats" still exist. We're simply combining the beats and condensing them into fewer sequences. Remember, the Showtime/HBO shows do not have commercials, so you will be working with a longer page count than, say, a Law & Order.

A half-hour sit-com on a Hulu, Netflix or HBO will also be a bit longer in page count than, say, an episode of Ghosts. You're looking at a specific 24-28 pages for an NBC network sitcom, for example. A Hulu show will be a bit more lax in page count, ranging from 28-35 pages.

Here is an example (emphasis on just an "example"):

—Instead of 12 sequences for a movie...a one-hour drama could break up the sequences within the five acts per the example below.

- Act 1: the teaser – this is a combination of main character stage of life and the episode's A-story plot glimpse or set-up. There will be more emphasis on the A-story plot "glimpse/set-up" than there will be on Main Character stage of life. You're setting up and offering a glimpse into your A-story's primary conflict in the teaser. It could even be a scene that doesn't include your main character at all, but instead shows the monster of the week rising from the grave because some dumb kid accidentally cast a spell and woke the dead...or something. This is usually one scene.
- Act 2: two sequences – main character/A-story stage of life, B-story main character stage of life, finish with the set-up event (what propels the A-story main character on his/her adventure)
- Act 3: two sequences – fun and games, search and rescue, discovering the monster of the week, establishing a plan and following through, lead up to mid-point complication/twist
- Act 4: two sequences – a new direction and plan, the B-story is close to being resolved, the A-story is in jeopardy, end on the low point
- Act 5: one sequence – the climax – this is usually three, maybe four scenes that finish the episode's A-story and B-story

For a half-hour sitcom:

You're basically just removing the "Act 3" from the above example and condensing. BUT please note that the same beats that are explained in "Act 3" above still occur in the episode. In other words, you will (depending on your show) likely have a teaser which won't count as an Act. This will be a short, half or quarter-page moment to introduce the fun – it could be the B-story of the episode if that is how your show will work. If you choose to show the B-story teaser, then you should plan on starting every episode this way. It's not necessary – just an option.

- Act 1 will be roughly three or four scenes containing MC stage of life, set-up event for A-story/new objective or problem to resolve
- Act 2 will be three to four scenes presenting the fun and games and pursuit of the goal, the complication, and then finishing with the new direction needed due to the twist at the mid-point.
- Act 3 will include the low point/escalation of the problem, the boot straps/rally the troops moment, and then the climax (probably another three scenes).

- If you count out those scenes, you have roughly 10 – 14 scenes, which is actually a lot for a sitcom. Now, for TV writers in general...

Where and how this applies to a synopsis:

You won't be referencing "Sequence 1", Sequence 2", and so on before each paragraph of your synopsis, of course, but you do need to know what those big moments and scenes are in your story so that they can be referenced in your synopsis. Think of it this way; in a feature, there is a major twist, complication, information reveal, or victory/loss, every ten pages (roughly speaking). That means you have roughly 12 major moments that should be referenced in your synopsis. If you break that down into three paragraphs...a basic math problem exists. It means you will have three scenes/moments referenced in the first paragraph, six in the second paragraph, and three in the final paragraph.

For a one-hour drama, you could break it down by referencing your Act 1 in the first paragraph, then Acts 2, 3, and 4 in your second paragraph, and Act 5 in your final paragraph. But these are not hard and fast rules! The most important reminder for writing a synopsis is to encapsulate the full story of your pilot or feature without needing to detail every single moment. Beyond that, the project's tone and your personal voice becomes the glue that holds all of the structural components together.



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