

THE SCREENPLAY ENGINE

A Repeatable Methodology for Generating and Structuring Screenplays

Adapted and expanded from the Contour story-structure system (Mariner Software),
reworked as a personal creative-development playbook.

*Written by Garland Smith. Disclosure: AI used for research, analysis, organization, fact-finding,
formatting, and drafting.*

Attribution & Source

The structural methodology in this document — the three-act framework, the Four Questions, the Orphan/Wanderer/Warrior/Martyr archetype system, the Central Question, the Formula, the 44-plot-point breakdown, the Yes/No reversal engine, and the twelve-beat Landmarks / Mnemonic Guide — is drawn from Contour: Step-By-Step Screenplay Structure Software, © 1998–2009 Mariner Software, Inc. All rights to the original software, documentation, and branding belong to Mariner Software, Inc.

Contour's story-structure system originated with Jeffrey Alan Schechter, who developed the program as the shareware TotallyWrite before Mariner Software acquired it and renamed it Contour. Schechter's system is also the subject of his book *My Story Can Beat Up Your Story!* Credit for the underlying methodology belongs to him and to Mariner Software, Inc.

This document is an independent, personal study aid: the underlying concepts have been restated in original language, reorganized, and — in Parts Seven and Eight — substantially extended with material that does not appear in Mariner's original guide (the but/therefore engine, the two-person practice exercise, the standing idea log, and the revision checklist). Several further extensions are folded in as well, developed alongside a companion framework for general story-structure and from other screenwriting worksheets encountered independently: the Tactics, Emotion, and Flaw questions added to Part One, Section 2 (expanding the original Four Questions into Seven); the Central Image technique appended to Part Six; the backslide beat added to Part Four and to the Landmarks detail; the one-line logline shortcut and worksheet appended to Part One, Section 5; and the supporting-character check added to the Part Eight Revision Checklist. One further note is a restoration rather than an extension: Mariner's original guide observes that the Martyr beat can belong to a character other than the protagonist; that observation was dropped during an earlier condensing pass and has been restored to Part One, Section 3. It is not an official Mariner Software or Contour publication, is not endorsed by or affiliated with Mariner Software, and is not intended for resale or redistribution — it exists to support one writer's personal use of a methodology learned from that software.

One additional citation appears directly in Part Three: the quotation on sympathetic characters and insurmountable obstacles is drawn from Michael Hauge's *Writing Screenplays That Sell*, as quoted in the Contour documentation itself.

Introduction: A Process, Not a Waiting Game

The premise of this playbook is simple: story structure is a repeatable, mechanical process. You do not need to wait for the "right" idea to strike before you can start building a screenplay. You need a small set of prompts, applied in a fixed order, that turn a vague premise into a complete, produceable outline.

This is the same principle behind two things worth keeping in mind as you work through this document:

- The "but/therefore" rule — every story beat should be connected to the next by a consequence ("but" or "therefore"), never by simple sequence ("and then"). This single substitution is what keeps a story causally alive instead of just being a list of events.
- The offer-and-complication game — one beat is stated as fact, a complication is introduced, and the next beat must resolve that complication logically. This is the engine behind improv's "yes, and," and it is also, not coincidentally, the exact mechanism this methodology uses to build the middle of a screenplay.

Everything below is built around that same idea: a small number of concrete questions, asked in sequence, that force forward motion even when inspiration hasn't shown up yet.

Spontaneous ideas are still welcome — and in fact this system gives them somewhere to land — but the system itself does not depend on them.

Part One: Six Foundational Concepts

There are only six ideas you need to internalize before you can start applying this methodology to any premise, in any genre.

1. Three-Act Structure

A screenplay divides into three acts. Act I and Act III are roughly equal in length; Act II is as long as the other two combined, and this methodology splits Act II into two equal halves — giving four working sections of roughly equal size.

Act I	Act II — Part 1	Act II — Part 2	Act III
Pages 1–27	Pages 28–54	Pages 55–81	Pages 82–108

2. The Seven Questions

Before developing a single scene, subject any premise to these seven questions. Vagueness in any answer means the premise isn't ready yet.

- Who is your main character?
- What is he or she trying to accomplish?
- Who is trying to stop him or her?
- What happens if he or she fails?
- How does he or she go about it? (Tactics)
- Why does this matter so much to him or her? (Emotion)
- What flaw or false belief do they carry into the story? (Flaw)

Title	Main Character	Goal	Opposition	Stakes
Titanic	Jack Dawson	Save himself and Rose from the sinking ship	Cal Hockley (Rose's fiancé)	He and the woman he loves both die
Star Wars	Luke Skywalker	Rescue the princess and destroy the Death Star	Grand Moff Tarkin	The princess dies and the rebellion is crushed
E.T.	Elliot	Save E.T. and get him home	The government scientist ('Keys')	E.T. dies

Title	Main Character	Goal	Opposition	Stakes
Jurassic Park	Dr. Alan Grant	Get everyone off the island alive	The dinosaurs	Everyone dies, including the children
Spider-Man	Peter Parker	Defeat the Green Goblin and save Mary Jane	Norman Osborn (the Green Goblin)	Mary Jane and other victims die

Guidelines for strong answers:

- The protagonist should be sympathetic — someone the audience can root for.
- The goal should be compelling to the audience, not just to the character.
- The opposition should be as committed to the protagonist's failure as the protagonist is to success.
- The stakes should be life-or-death — literally or figuratively.

On Tactics:

Two protagonists can share an identical goal and an identical opposition and still play as completely different characters, because of how they go after it — one talks their way through, one manipulates, one asks for help, one bulls straight ahead. Naming the tactic before writing is what keeps a character's choices consistent scene to scene, and it's usually where personality actually shows up on the page, more than in any physical description. The Yes/No worksheets in Parts Three and Four already track outcome — whether a beat moves the hero toward the goal or away from it. Tactics is the question of how, asked before those worksheets get filled in.

On Emotion:

This is different from the opposition named in Question 3, which is what blocks the character in the moment. Emotion is the older wound or unmet need underneath the goal — the reason this particular objective carries this much weight for this particular character. Two protagonists can share an identical answer to all four original questions and still be different stories, because one is driven by an old humiliation and the other by simple ambition. None of this has to be stated to the audience; it has to be known by the writer, so the character's choices under pressure stay proportional to something real instead of reading as generic screenplay behavior.

On Flaw:

This is the specific wrong belief the protagonist holds about themselves or the world before the story starts — not just a character trait, but something they'd defend as true. It's what the Orphan phase (Part One, Section 3) is really establishing, and it's the thing the Obstacle in Question 3 should be built to attack directly: a strong Obstacle doesn't just block the Goal, it

makes the Flaw impossible to keep believing. An anxious ex-climber's flaw might be "I can only trust myself"; the avalanche that traps his family should be exactly the kind of crisis that belief can't survive. Naming the Flaw before writing means every obstacle can be chosen for how hard it presses on this one specific soft spot, rather than being generically difficult.

3. The Four Archetypes

Over the course of a well-built story, the protagonist typically passes through four archetypal stages, one per structural quarter. These four — Orphan, Wanderer, Warrior, Martyr — are drawn from a broader set of six archetypes that real-life people are said to live by (the other two, Innocent and Magician, aren't part of this methodology). The theory holds that people make characteristic choices about how to live and how to respond to problems based on which archetype defines them; tracking how a protagonist moves through the four story-relevant ones brings a writer close to a character-driven script.

Act I	Act II, First Half	Act II, Second Half	Act III
Orphan	Wanderer	Warrior	Martyr

Orphan (Act I)

The protagonist is literally or figuratively cut off — an outsider, whether by circumstance or by his own emotional distance. He lacks something fundamental (family, purpose, belonging), and often doesn't yet fully understand the problem he's facing. This phase establishes the character's starting state and the central problem that will drive his need to change.

Examples: Clark Kent in Superman; Cole in The Sixth Sense; Harry Potter, a literal orphan disconnected from his own heritage; Luke Skywalker, isolated and held back on his uncle's farm.

Ask yourself: How is my main character an Orphan in Act I?

Wanderer (Act II, first half)

The protagonist searches — gathering allies, tools, and information he believes he needs to resolve the Central Question. He experiments, fails, and slowly learns the rules of the new situation he's been thrust into, often while still lacking real direction or confidence.

Examples: Indiana Jones navigating the mystery of the Ark in Raiders of the Lost Ark; Elsa exploring her powers and freedom in Frozen, unaware of the consequences.

Ask yourself: How is my main character a Wanderer in Act II?

Warrior (Act II, second half)

Enough has been learned, or time has run out — the protagonist shifts from reactive to proactive, confronting the opposition head-on. This half ends in a figurative or literal "death,"

usually staged in a confined or dark space, from which the character is reborn with new understanding.

Examples: Frodo accepting his role in the fellowship and taking direct action to protect the ring; Katniss actively engaging in combat and survival to protect herself and others.

Ask yourself: How is my main character a Warrior in Act II?

Martyr (Act III)

The protagonist is no longer driven by the hope of winning, but by the need to do what's right regardless of outcome — willing to sacrifice everything, sometimes literally. Paradoxically, letting go of the desire to win is what allows victory.

Examples: Iron Man carrying the nuclear missile through the wormhole in The Avengers; Neo embracing his role as "The One" in The Matrix, risking his life to save others.

One variation worth knowing: the Martyr beat doesn't have to belong to the protagonist. It can belong to another character instead, with the protagonist learning from — and being motivated by — that other character's example rather than making the sacrifice himself. Obi-Wan's death in Star Wars is exactly this: it's Obi-Wan who is the Martyr in that moment, and Luke who carries the lesson forward into his own eventual test. This is the one place in the four-archetype structure with built-in flexibility; the other three phases are much harder to hand off to someone else without the story losing its throughline.

Ask yourself: How is my main character a Martyr in Act III?

4. The Central Question

Act I ends, and Act II begins, with an explicit statement of the Central Question — the single question that, once answered yes or no, ends the story. It functions in three ways:

- Clear transition point — it marks the shift from setup (introducing character, world, and problem) to action (the protagonist actively working toward resolution).
- Guiding narrative focus — it gives the audience one overarching thing to stay invested in; every obstacle and success builds suspense around this single question.
- Definitive resolution — once answered, the story's primary tension dissolves and the ending can begin.

A strong Central Question braids together three areas of conflict: professional (the external goal), personal (the relationship at stake), and private (the internal flaw being resolved).

Examples: "Will Luke destroy the Death Star?" (Star Wars). "Will Frodo destroy the One Ring?" (The Lord of the Rings). "Will Elle Woods win her case and prove herself a capable lawyer?" (Legally Blonde). "Will Sheriff Brody kill the shark and win back the town's respect?" (Jaws).

5. The Formula (The Four-Part Story Sentence)

The Formula is a single sentence, built from four labeled parts — one part per archetypal phase (Orphan, Wanderer, Warrior, Martyr) — that forces a protagonist's entire arc to cohere in one breath. If any one of the four parts is vague or missing, the premise isn't structurally sound yet, no matter how good it sounds as a one-line pitch. It has two jobs: it's a diagnostic (a way to test whether a premise actually holds together before you invest in outlining it) and, once it holds together, a usable pitch line for an agent, studio, or producer.

The template below is the Formula's four-part structure. Every later reference to "the Formula" or to "A/B/C/D" in this document points back to this exact sentence.

When a [TYPE OF PERSON] has/does/wants/gets A, he gets/does/tries/learns B, only to discover that C now happens, and he must respond by doing D.

A = the Orphan statement. B = the Wanderer statement. C = the Warrior statement. D = the Martyr statement.

Worked example (E.T.): When a lonely boy finds a stranded alien (A), he decides to keep it as a pet (B), only to discover the alien is dying and must get home (C), so he must outwit a team of government scientists to make that happen (D).

A Faster Alternative: The One-Line Logline

Before committing to the full Formula, it can help to test a premise with something faster — a single sentence built from three of the Seven Questions plus the stakes from Question 4:

A flawed protagonist must achieve a goal while tackling an obstacle, or face disaster.

This isn't a replacement for the Formula — it's a faster filter to run before investing the time to build one. If the Protagonist, Goal, and Obstacle from Questions 1–3 don't combine into a clean version of this sentence, the Formula built from it will likely feel forced too.

Examples:

- *An anxious ex-free climber must rescue his family from a ski cabin buried by an avalanche, or lose them for good.*
- *An absent-minded 21st-century student, transported back to the court of Henry the Eighth, must outwit the king's men to get home, or be trapped in the past forever.*
- *When the lead dancer of Hillside Dance School goes missing a week before a competition, an awkward janitor is forced to take her place to stop the school from being shut down.*

Worksheet: The Logline

Fill in each box in order, then assemble the Logline last.

PROTAGONIST & FLAW

- Who is your protagonist, and what flaw or false belief do they carry? (Questions 1 & 7)
- You can only have one protagonist.
- They are the character who has the goal — the one who changes the most.

Examples: an anxious ex-free climber, an awkward janitor, an absent-minded student.

PROTAGONIST & FLAW: _____

GOAL

- What is the goal?
- What must they achieve by the end? (Question 2)

Examples: rescue their family, win a dance contest, return home.

GOAL: _____

OBSTACLE

- What's the main obstacle in their way? The main problem the protagonist faces? (Question 3)
- How does it attack the flaw named above and force them to change?

Examples: an avalanche, bad physical coordination, being stuck in the past.

OBSTACLE: _____

LOGLINE

- Combine the above with a little rephrasing, and add the stakes — what happens if they fail? (Question 4)
- Use roughly this model: “A flawed protagonist must achieve a goal while tackling an obstacle, or face disaster.”

Examples:

- *An anxious ex-free climber must rescue his family from a ski cabin buried by an avalanche, or lose them for good.*
- *An absent-minded 21st-century student, transported back to the court of Henry the Eighth, must outwit the king's men to get home, or be trapped in the past forever.*

- *When the lead dancer of Hillside Dance School goes missing a week before a competition, an awkward janitor is forced to take her place to stop the school from being shut down.*

LOGLINE:

Building the Formula, Step by Step

Seeing the finished Formula is one thing; building one from scratch is another. Work through the four statements in order, writing each on its own before joining them together. The walkthrough below uses *Home Alone* as the running example.

The A (Orphan) statement — "When a [type of person]..."

Don't write "when a person" — write "when a type of person." Choose an adjective or short phrase that names the misfortune or trait the hero needs to overcome: not just "a boy" but "an overlooked boy," not just "a woman" but "a woman trapped in an arranged marriage." The adjective is a promise — it tells the audience what will be different by the end, since the overlooked boy won't stay overlooked and the trapped woman won't stay trapped.

Home Alone: "When an overlooked boy is accidentally left behind by his family on a European vacation..."

The B (Wanderer) statement — "...he gets/does/tries/learns B..."

This is where the Orphan starts wandering — gathering whatever skill, knowledge, or support the hero believes will resolve the Central Question. Name specifically what the hero sets out to get, do, or learn.

Home Alone: "...he must learn how to take care of himself and be the man of the house..."

The C (Warrior) statement — "...only to discover that C now happens..."

"Only to discover" is the load-bearing phrase — it has to signal a genuine surprise, not just the next item on a list. This is the moment the Wanderer's search runs into something the hero didn't see coming, forcing a shift from searching to acting.

Home Alone: "...only to discover that his house has been targeted by bumbling burglars, whom he thwarts several times before realizing they know he's alone and are coming back..."

The D (Martyr) statement — "...and he must respond by doing D."

The hero could hand this problem to someone else — a parent, a cop, a mentor. The Martyr statement is what the hero does instead: acting alone, with no guarantee of winning.

Home Alone: "...and he must single-handedly defend the house."

Write each statement in its own space before joining them into one sentence with commas — the four-part join is the last step, not the first. Assembled, the full Home Alone Formula reads: "When an overlooked boy is accidentally left behind by his family on a European vacation, he must learn how to take care of himself and be the man of the house, only to discover that his house has been targeted by bumbling burglars, whom he thwarts several times before realizing they know he's alone and are coming back, and he must single-handedly defend the house." If any of the four joins feels like "and then" rather than "but" or "therefore," that statement isn't done yet — see Part Seven for the but/therefore test.

6. Plot Points

A plot point is a discrete, essential chunk of story information — bigger than a scene or a beat, smaller than an act. This methodology uses exactly forty-four of them across the four structural sections:

Section	Archetype	Plot Points
Act I	Orphan	12 (ending in the Central Question)
Act II, first half	Wanderer	14 (as seven Yes/No pairs)
Act II, second half	Warrior	14 (as seven Yes/No pairs)
Act III	Martyr	4 (Big Yes → No → Big No → Final Yes)

Part Two: Act I — The Orphan (12 Plot Points)

Act I establishes who the protagonist is, what's broken in his life, and forces him toward a decision he can no longer avoid. Work through these twelve beats in order.

Plot Point 1

Meet the Hero, the Victim/Stakes Character, or the Antagonist.

Any of the three can open the story. If you open on the victim, it's usually just before the moment of victimization. If you open on the antagonist, it establishes threat before the hero even appears.

Examples: Forrest Gump opens on the hero, sitting on a bench in his ordinary world. Star Wars opens on the antagonist, with Vader's ship firing on Leia's. E.T. and Jaws both open on the victim, just before E.T. is left behind and just before Chrissie's fatal swim.

Plot Point 2

Show the Hero's flaw in relation to the Stakes Character.

The Stakes Character often has the qualities the hero lacks or needs. Their situation implicitly shows what's wrong with the hero's life, even before the hero and Stakes Character meet.

Examples: Luke is stuck milking space-cows on the farm while Leia is already out fighting Stormtroopers — she has the adventure he lacks. In Die Hard, John McClane gets no respect while his wife Holly is respected by everyone; we learn his flaw through her.

Plot Point 3

Meet the Antagonist, or something symbolic of him.

This can be the villain directly, or a scene that represents what he's trying to accomplish.

Examples: Leia's capture by Stormtroopers in Star Wars represents the Empire before Vader appears. In The Sixth Sense, Dr. Crowe is shot by a former patient — a scene that stands in for the threat to come.

Plot Point 4

The Deflector slows the hero down.

A Deflector is anyone who pulls the hero off his path — not always a villain, sometimes a misguided ally. There can be several minor deflectors alongside one main one.

Examples: Vader is the main Deflector in Star Wars, with the Jawas, Sand People, and Stormtroopers as minor ones. In Die Hard, Hans Gruber is the antagonist while the flashy Karl works as the main Deflector, with nearly everyone else — cops, FBI agents, a smarmy executive — functioning as minor Deflectors.

Plot Point 5

Inciting Event — the hero becomes emotionally invested.

This is the moment the hero (or the audience, on his behalf) starts caring about the adventure ahead.

Examples: Luke sees the hologram of the Princess and asks, "Who is she?" In The Sixth Sense, Dr. Crowe notices the scratches on Cole's wrists.

Plot Point 6

The Hero's goal is clarified through the Stakes Character or love interest.

Often delivered via the overused but effective line: "Do you know what your problem is?" This beat states in plain terms the emotional arc the hero must complete.

Examples: In Titanic, we meet Rose and understand her reluctant engagement to Cal. In The Incredibles, Bob is unfulfilled at his desk job and disconnected from his family — both beats state exactly what the hero needs to resolve by the end.

Plot Point 7

An ally — intentional or not — pushes the Hero out of the status quo.

Wants and needs are often different; the hero usually gets what he wants only after getting what he needs. The ally's push (sometimes accidental) starts this process.

Examples: R2-D2 runs off in Star Wars, forcing Luke to go looking for him — which is why Luke isn't on the farm when the Stormtroopers arrive and kill his aunt and uncle. In Titanic, a stranger losing his ticket to Jack in a card game is what puts Jack on the ship at all.

Plot Point 8

The Hero seems ready to move toward the goal, but can't.

The classic Call to Adventure / Refusal of the Call. The heart says yes; practical obligations say no.

Examples: Jack sees Rose in Titanic but doesn't dare approach — he's steerage, she's first class. Luke wants to go with Obi-Wan in Star Wars but feels bound to the farm and his uncle's need for help.

Plot Point 9

The Antagonist or Deflector escalates, threatening the emotional stakes.

What was in the background moves into the foreground.

Examples: The Jawas are found dead in Star Wars, and it's deduced to be the work of Stormtroopers. In The Sixth Sense, Tommy — who'd seemed like Cole's friend — calls him a "freak."

Plot Point 10

The depth of feeling — or the severity of the threat — is made unmistakably clear.

By this point the reader should know exactly who's at stake and how much.

Examples: Luke discovers his aunt and uncle murdered in Star Wars. In The Sixth Sense, Cole stands outside his school, too afraid to go in.

Plot Point 11

The Deflector or Antagonist threatens to take the Stakes Character away.

The hero may not even be aware this is happening yet — but the audience needs to feel the urgency building.

Example: In Star Wars, Vader begins interrogating Leia in her cell — Luke has no connection to her yet and doesn't know this is happening, but the audience is made anxious on his behalf.

Plot Point 12

The Hero decides he must act.

The call to adventure can no longer be refused. Life will not go back to normal from here.

Examples: Luke returns to Obi-Wan and commits to going to Alderaan to learn the ways of the Force. In The Sixth Sense, Dr. Crowe tells his wife that saving Cole could make up for having failed a patient before him.

Act I closes with the explicit statement of the Central Question (see Part One, Section 4).

Part Three: Act II, First Half — The Wanderer (14 Plot Points)

This is where the offer-and-complication engine takes over directly. The hero alternates between moving closer to answering the Central Question (a "Yes") and being pushed further away (a "No") — seven pairs, back to back.

Treat each Yes/No pair as a single but/therefore unit: the Yes is the offer, the No is the complication, and the next Yes has to resolve that complication rather than simply pile on a new, unrelated event.

Worked example (Star Wars): YES — Luke sets off toward Mos Eisley with Obi-Wan; he's on his way. NO — they're stopped by Stormtroopers; capture seems certain. YES — Obi-Wan uses the Force to talk their way past. NO — Luke is attacked in the cantina. YES — Obi-Wan saves him and they strike a deal with Han Solo. NO — Han is confronted by a bounty hunter who wants him dead. YES — Han survives the confrontation and they now have enough resources to leave.

As you build your own seven pairs, keep in mind what should be happening underneath the back-and-forth:

- The hero gains allies, often including a mentor figure.
- The opposition is established as genuinely formidable, not just an inconvenience.
- The hero begins learning what he thinks he needs — while the story quietly plants what he'll actually need later.
- Obstacles start small ("training exercises") and escalate.
- Any secondary or romantic storyline gets underway.
- By the end of this half, the antagonist becomes aware of the hero, and the stakes rise to life-or-death.

"[Your story must] enable a sympathetic character to overcome a series of increasingly difficult, seemingly insurmountable obstacles and achieve a compelling desire." — Michael Hauge, Writing Screenplays That Sell. Note the three load-bearing words: sympathetic character, insurmountable obstacles, compelling desire. Weak versions of any one of the three are usually why a Yes/No sequence goes flat.

Worksheet: Act II, First Half

Filled in below with a worked Star Wars example, continuing directly from the partial version above — clear the cells and use them for your own story when you're ready.

How to Use This Worksheet

- Fill the pairs in order, top to bottom — each row builds on the one directly above it. This isn't seven independent scenes; it's one chain.
- Every Yes must resolve the specific complication from the No right above it, not just represent forward progress in general.
- Test each transition with “but” or “therefore” — never “and then” (see Part Seven). If a beat doesn't pass that test, it's disconnected from the chain.
- Obstacles should start small (“training exercises”) and escalate as the seven pairs progress.

Beat	Yes (moves toward goal)	No (moves away / complication)
Pair 1	Luke joins Obi-Wan and sets off for Mos Eisley, on his way off Tatooine at last.	Stormtroopers stop their transport at a checkpoint; capture looks certain.
Pair 2	Obi-Wan uses the Force to talk their way past the checkpoint.	Luke is attacked by a hostile alien in the cantina.
Pair 3	Obi-Wan intervenes, and they strike a deal with smuggler Han Solo for passage off-world.	A bounty hunter confronts Han in the cantina, threatening to blow the deal before it starts.
Pair 4	Han survives the confrontation; they now have a ship and enough resources to leave.	The Millennium Falcon is captured by the Death Star's tractor beam.
Pair 5	They hide before the boarding party arrives and slip undetected into the station.	Obi-Wan realizes the “space station” is a mobile superweapon capable of destroying planets.
Pair 6	They steal Stormtrooper armor and move through the station disguised as guards.	They learn Princess Leia — the Central Question's Personal stakes — is aboard, scheduled for execution.
Pair 7	Luke insists on rescuing her despite Obi-Wan's more cautious plan, and the group heads for the	The rescue goes loud fast — alarms sound, and they're pinned down with no clear way out,

Beat	Yes (moves toward goal)	No (moves away / complication)
	detention block.	forcing a shift from planning to direct action.

Part Four: Act II, Second Half — The Warrior (14 Plot Points)

The Wanderer has learned (or run out of time) — now the hero acts. The same seven Yes/No pairs continue, but the intensity escalates until the hero hits a genuine low point: a figurative or literal death, usually staged in a confined, dark, or enclosed space, from which he is reborn with the understanding needed to finish the story.

Underneath the back-and-forth in this half:

- Direct confrontation replaces indirect searching.
- Initial successes are followed by the opposition tightening its grip.
- The story's thematic argument gets voiced explicitly — often by two different characters taking opposite sides, with the hero caught between them.
- The hero eventually realizes he still lacks something essential — setting up the death/rebirth moment.
- Under pressure, the hero backslides — reverts to the flawed belief named in Question 7 rather than the new understanding gained so far. This isn't the worst-case scenario itself; it's what causes it. The rock bottom below should read as the direct, earned consequence of that regression, not as bad luck.
- After rebirth, the worst-case scenario the story has been building toward actually happens: the mentor is lost, the plan fails, the ally is captured. The hero hits rock bottom.

Worksheet: Act II, Second Half

Filled in below continuing the same Star Wars example from the First Half worksheet, through the Death/Rebirth beat — clear the cells and use them for your own story when you're ready.

How to Use This Worksheet

- Same chain rule as the first half: each Yes resolves the No directly above it, tested with “but” or “therefore,” never “and then.”
- The tone shifts here from indirect searching to direct confrontation — initial successes should get punished by the opposition tightening its grip.
- Somewhere in the later pairs, work in the backslide beat (Part Four's landmark notes): the hero reverts to the flaw from Question 7, and that regression — not bad luck — is what earns the rock-bottom moment right before rebirth.

Beat	Yes (moves toward goal)	No (moves away / complication)
Pair 8	Luke and company shoot their way to Leia's cell and free her.	Their escape route is blocked; Stormtroopers close in from every

Beat	Yes (moves toward goal)	No (moves away / complication)
		corridor.
Pair 9	They dive into a garbage chute, buying themselves a moment's cover.	The trash compactor activates, and the walls begin closing in around them.
Pair 10	R2-D2 remotely shuts down the compactor just before they're crushed.	They emerge to find their route back to the ship guarded and cut off.
Pair 11	They fight their way back toward the Millennium Falcon, clearing a path as they go.	Obi-Wan stays behind to face Vader alone so the others can get through — Luke realizes he's about to lose his mentor.
Pair 12	The group makes it aboard the Falcon and escapes the Death Star.	Luke watches Vader strike Obi-Wan down — the mentor is gone, and the flawed belief he backslides into is that he's now on his own with no one left to guide him.
Pair 13	Luke reaches the Rebel base with the stolen plans, choosing to trust what Obi-Wan taught him rather than give in to that isolation.	The Death Star arrives at the Rebel base, minutes from firing — the worst-case scenario the story has been building toward.
Pair 14	Luke joins the assault on the Death Star despite the odds.	Wave after wave of fighters are shot down ahead of him; the trench run looks unwinnable, and time is nearly out.

Part Five: Act III — The Martyr (4 Plot Points)

Act III uses the same Yes/No language, but only four beats, in a fixed order: Big Yes → No → Big No → Final Yes.

Big Yes

The hero achieves a substantial victory.

Rose reaches a lifeboat and is being lowered to safety (Titanic). Brody, Quint, and Hooper head out to hunt the shark (Jaws).

No

A real but non-fatal setback.

Rose jumps back out of the lifeboat rather than leave Jack behind. The boat's engine blows.

Big No

Disaster. The situation looks hopeless.

The ship is breaking apart with a murderer in pursuit. The shark has wrecked the boat and seemingly killed two of the three men aboard.

Final Yes

Success is pulled from the jaws of failure — sometimes at real cost, and sometimes not the victory the hero originally wanted.

Jack saves Rose's life at the cost of his own. Brody shoots the compressed air tank and destroys the shark.

Before the Final Yes lands, this methodology recommends resolving the three areas of conflict from the Central Question in sequence: private (internal) first, which unlocks personal (relational), which in turn unlocks professional (external). The closer together these land, the more satisfying the ending — resolving all three simultaneously is the strongest version.

Close with a short denouement: the hero back in the ordinary world, visibly changed, now embodying the value the story argued for all along.

Part Six: The Twelve-Beat Guide (Landmarks)

If forty-four individual plot points feel like too many pieces to hold at once, zoom out. The same structure collapses into twelve broader movements, each with an approximate page range and a memorable name. This is often the faster way to rough out a story before drilling into individual plot points — filling in these twelve movements first can leave roughly a quarter of the forty-four plot points effectively already answered.

Pages	Movement	What has to happen here
1-6	I Don't Get No Respect	Establish the hero as an outsider — someone the world doesn't fully see or value.
6-12	You Know What Your Trouble Is?	Make the hero's core flaw explicit, to the reader and often to the hero himself.
12-17	Calls & Busy Signals	Deliver the Call to Adventure — immediately followed by its Refusal.
17-28	Through the Looking Glass	Force the hero out of the ordinary world, by choice or by circumstance.
28-35	Kick the Dog	Prove the opposition is genuinely formidable, not just an inconvenience.
35-45	Which Way Is Up?	Alternate small wins and losses as the hero starts acquiring real skill.
45-55	When Life Gives You Lemons...	Pull the rug out. Wandering stops; fighting starts.
55-65	...Make Lemonade	Direct, large-scale confrontation begins.
65-75	Inside the Whale	The hero enters a literal or figurative enclosed space and faces his deepest fear.
75-85	Death & Rebirth	The hero symbolically dies, then returns changed and self-actualized.
85-95	What's the Worst That Can Happen?	The exact thing the hero has been dreading happens.
95-105	Good Guy vs. Bad Guy	The protagonist — not a sidekick —

Pages	Movement	What has to happen here
	Over Stakes	personally settles the story's central conflict.

Landmarks in Detail: The Twelve Movements

The one-line summaries above are enough to rough out a story fast. When a movement isn't coming together, this expanded version breaks each one into its component beats, with additional film examples.

I Don't Get No Respect

- The theme is stated, explicitly or implicitly, often through a visual — think *Gladiator's* Maximus running his hand over the tall grass, a quiet statement of "there's no place like home."
- The hero is established in his or her ordinary world as the "greatest" or "most" something — sometimes a negative extreme.
- The hero has only limited awareness of what's broken in him or her, often tied to an unresolved "ghost" from the past that's coming to a head.

Examples: Shrek is hunted by villagers who hate ogres. Elliot is ignored and disrespected by his brother and friends in E.T. Peter Parker is a slight, overlooked kid before the spider bite in Spider-Man.

You Know What Your Trouble Is?

- The inciting incident occurs.
- The hero's awareness of his or her own need increases.
- The stakes are made clear — what the hero stands to lose.
- The call to adventure occurs or is hinted at, though the hero doesn't yet answer it.

Examples: Luke wants to leave the farm early but his uncle refuses in Star Wars. Elliot is told he needs to think about how others feel in E.T. Hooper declares "this was no boating accident" in Jaws.

Calls & Busy Signals

- The hero is confronted about his or her core flaw, often through a pointed question from an ally.
- The Orphan status and the theme are both amplified.
- The call to adventure is stated outright — and the refusal of the call follows immediately.

Examples: Jack sees Rose but doesn't dare pursue her given the class gap in Titanic. Obi-Wan tells Luke he must learn to be a Jedi; Luke says he can't leave the farm in Star Wars. Fletcher chooses trial prep over his son's wrestling match in Liar Liar.

Through the Looking Glass

- The intensity of the threat, or the depth of feeling, is made unmistakable.
- The hero can no longer just think about acting — the call to adventure is accepted.
- The three areas of conflict — professional, personal, private — come clearly into focus.
- The Central Question is raised, ideally touching all three areas at once.

Examples: Neo chooses the red pill in The Matrix. Luke's aunt and uncle are killed, severing his last tie to Tatooine in Star Wars. Will Turner joins Jack Sparrow to pursue Elizabeth in Pirates of the Caribbean.

Kick the Dog

- The hero gains allies, often including a mentor figure.
- The opposition is shown to be genuinely formidable, not just an inconvenience.
- The hero begins pursuing what he or she thinks is needed, while the story quietly plants what will actually be needed later.
- Low-stakes "training exercise" obstacles appear, along with any secondary or romantic storyline.

Examples: The Death Star destroys an entire planet in Star Wars. Butch and Sundance are pursued by the "super posse" in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Dr. Neville's new serum fails spectacularly in I Am Legend.

Which Way Is Up?

- The hero keeps wandering, learning with more clarity what's needed, while testing new abilities.
- Obstacles increase in intensity.
- The opposition becomes aware that the hero exists.

Examples: Dr. Crowe makes progress getting Cole to open up in The Sixth Sense. Kevin gets groceries, orders food, and starts defending the house in Home Alone. Jack starts crossing the class divide with Rose in Titanic.

When Life Gives You Lemons...

- The threat to the Stakes Character rises to life-or-death, literally or figuratively.
- The opposing value of the theme gets stated outright by another character.
- The hero has learned all that wandering can teach — it's time to fight.

Examples: Batman realizes fighting the Joker by the rules won't work in The Dark Knight. Luke and company discover Leia is being held aboard the Death Star in Star Wars. Lester and Carolyn argue over their marriage in American Beauty.

...Make Lemonade

- The hero shifts into direct action and decision-making.
- Initial successes appear, met by the opposition tightening its grip.
- The thematic argument is voiced explicitly, often by two characters on opposite sides of it.
- The hero unknowingly begins preparing for the big change ahead.

Examples: Tony Stark uses the suit to defend a village in Iron Man. Luke frees Leia and brings the Stormtroopers down on them in Star Wars. Brody's own son is nearly attacked, forcing the mayor's hand in Jaws.

Inside the Whale

- Direct, intense conflict breaks out between the hero and the opposition.
- The hero realizes he or she still lacks something essential — often because he or she backslides into the flawed belief from Question 7 rather than the ground already gained. That regression, not chance, is what earns the descent below.
- The hero enters his or her darkest internal space — often a literal enclosed setting — for the Ultimate Test.

Examples: Indiana Jones is trapped in the snake-filled Well of Souls in Raiders of the Lost Ark. Luke faces a vision of Vader in the cave in The Empire Strikes Back. Kevin confronts the terrifying furnace in the basement in Home Alone.

Death & Rebirth

- The hero emerges from the death-moment reborn, more fully realized, though not quite ready for the final test.
- The worst-case scenario the story has been building toward actually happens.
- The hero becomes the standard-bearer for the story's positive thematic argument.

Examples: E.T. "dies" and is reborn as the spaceship returns in E.T. Obi-Wan is killed, leaving Luke to carry the Force forward in Star Wars. Bob is presumed destroyed in The Incredibles.

What's the Worst That Can Happen?

- The hero, having embraced the theme's positive value, commits to change — resolving the Private conflict.
- That private commitment drives the hero to accept sacrifice for the Stakes Character — resolving the Personal conflict.
- The hero acts with real courage, setting up the Professional conflict's resolution.

- A failure follows, but the hero presses on rather than retreating.

Examples: Luke is outgunned as the Death Star closes on the Rebel base in Star Wars. The ship breaks apart as Jack and Rose flee Cal in Titanic.

Good Guy vs. Bad Guy Over Stakes

- The Central Question nearly resolves in the negative; the hero and allies make a real sacrifice.
- Any Third-Act "solution" planted earlier gets used now.
- Private resolves first, unlocking Personal, which in turn unlocks Professional — ideally landing close together.
- A short denouement shows the hero back in the ordinary world, visibly changed.

Examples: Brody faces the shark alone on the sinking Orca in Jaws. Luke destroys the Death Star and saves Leia in Star Wars. Sam finds Jonah atop the Empire State Building in Sleepless in Seattle.

Beats With Double Duty: The Central Image Technique

A beat's first job is to move the plot. Its second, optional job is to carry the story's meaning — not by stating it, but by embodying it in something concrete that recurs and changes across the screenplay. A beat doing both jobs at once is what separates a script that lands as more than "things happened" from one that doesn't.

How to build this in:

- Pick one Central Image — a physical object, place, or recurring gesture connected to the hero's goal or opposition. Keep it concrete enough to describe in one shot.
- Plant it early — in Plot Point 1 or 2 — in its "before" state.
- Let it reappear, unchanged or worse, at the Big No — this is often what makes rock bottom actually hurt: the same image, now representing loss instead of hope.
- Transform it at the Final Yes or in the denouement — same image, changed state, showing the change instead of announcing it.
- Resist adding a second symbol. One image, used three or four times, does more work on screen than three images used once each.

This is optional — plenty of tight scripts work fine without a Central Image. But when a 44-point outline is fully filled in and the story still reads flat, this is usually the fix: not a new plot point, but choosing one image already in the outline and making it recur.

Part Seven: Running the Engine — A Practice, Not a Waiting Game

Everything above is a container. This section is about how to actually fill it on demand, without waiting for inspiration — building directly on the offer-and-complication technique.

The three techniques below cover three different moments, in this order: the Standing Idea Log is a good-to-do habit for catching raw premises before you have a project at all; Testing a Premise is the filter that tells you whether something pulled from that log is actually ready to develop; and the But/Therefore Chains and Wilde Game are what you use once a premise has passed that filter and you're generating the actual Yes/No beats inside it.

The Solo Version: But/Therefore Chains

Working alone, the risk is that you can't surprise yourself — you already know where you're steering the story. Counter this with a hard rule: every time you're tempted to connect two beats with "and then," stop and force either a "but" (a complication) or a "therefore" (a consequence) instead. Read your last beat out loud, finish the sentence with "but" or "therefore," and write the first thing that completes it — don't pre-edit. This is exactly the mechanism behind the Yes/No pairs in Act II; it works because it removes the option of a lazy, disconnected next beat.

The Two-Person Version: Run the Wilde Game on the Yes/No Worksheets

The strongest version of this process uses a second voice — a co-writer, a friend, or anyone willing to play — precisely because someone else's complication is one you didn't see coming.

- You state a Yes beat as fact.
- The other person has to introduce a No — an obstacle, a contradiction, a cost.
- You have to resolve it with a beat that follows logically — "but/therefore," never "and then."
- Trade off who introduces the next Yes and who blocks it, so neither person is steering the whole thing.

This maps directly onto the seven Yes/No pairs in each half of Act II — it's a way of generating those pairs live instead of staring at a blank worksheet cell.

A Standing Idea Log

Keep a running, dated list of raw material — premises, images, lines of dialogue, "what if" questions — completely separate from any specific project. The point isn't to judge these on arrival; it's to give a spontaneous idea somewhere to land the instant it shows up, so it survives long enough to be useful later. Review it periodically when you're stuck on the Seven Questions for a new premise — often the seed of an answer is already sitting in the log.

A "what if" costs nothing to write down and can spark an entire premise later. Some examples of the kind of raw, unjudged prompt worth logging:

- What if an alien from outer space were stranded on Earth?
- What if a young boy could see dead people?
- What if you could be a fly on the wall in a beauty shop and hear what people really say while getting their hair done?
- What if a member of a high school basketball team discovered his family were werewolves?
- What if a cruise ship were struck by a massive wave and flipped over?

The source doesn't matter — a news story, a stray lyric, an overheard conversation. What matters is capturing it before it's gone.

Testing a Premise Before Committing

Before outlining a full 44-point structure, run any new premise through this fast filter, in order:

- Can you answer all Seven Questions without vagueness? If not, the premise isn't ready — keep it in the idea log and revisit later.
- Can you write the Formula (A/B/C/D) as one clean sentence? If it takes several tries and still feels forced, the underlying causality is probably weak.
- Is the Central Question answerable with a clean yes or no, and does it touch all three areas of conflict — professional, personal, private?

A premise that clears all three is ready for full development. One that doesn't isn't a bad idea — it's an idea that needs a few more but/therefore passes before it's ready.

Part Eight: The Revision Checklist

A completed 44-point outline is not a finished outline — it's a first pass. Before moving into actual screenplay pages, go back through everything above and pressure-test it against these questions. This is the same self-audit the original methodology recommends before you leave the outlining stage.

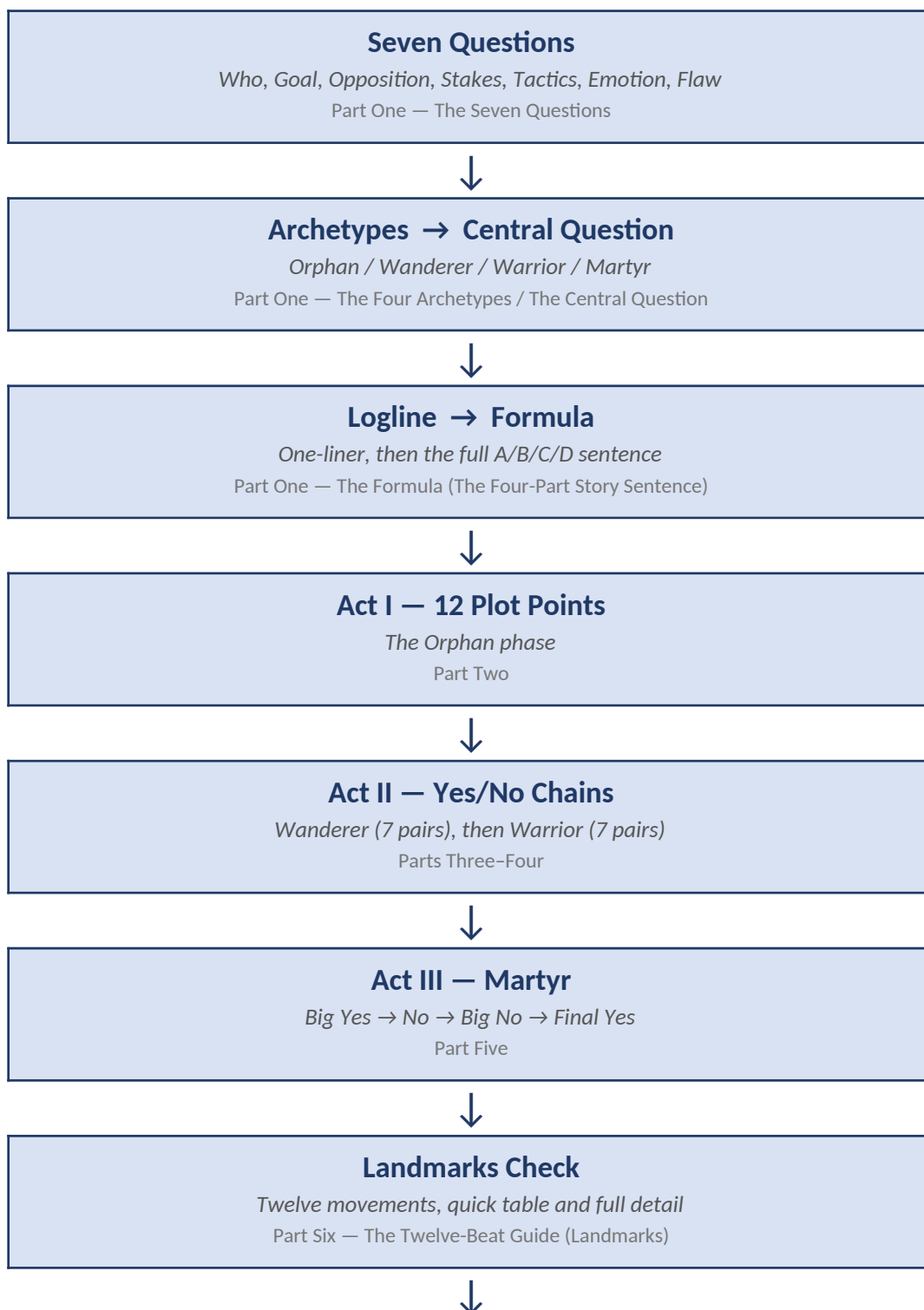
- Is Act I set up sufficiently? Does the reader know exactly who the hero is, what's broken, and what's at stake before the Central Question is even stated?
- Do the Yes/No reversals in Act II actually escalate, pair over pair — or do the middle beats feel interchangeable with each other?
- Is the protagonist's goal compelling enough to sustain two hours of attention, not just plausible enough to justify a plot?
- Is the Deflector (and the Antagonist) a real threat — someone capable of genuinely standing up to the protagonist — or a pushover who would fold under pressure? A famous weak-Deflector problem: compare how differently Hans Gruber functions as a threat in *Die Hard* versus a thinner antagonist in a lesser sequel like *Live Free or Die Hard*.
- Do the private, personal, and professional threads of the Central Question all actually resolve — and do they land close enough together to feel like one ending rather than three separate wrap-ups?
- What happens to every named supporting character after the climax — not just the protagonist? Check the Deflector, the Stakes Character, allies, and the antagonist by name. A thread that mattered enough to earn a Plot Point earns a stated ending; "presumably fine" is not an ending.

Only once these hold up is it time to move from outline into prose or script pages.

The Screenplay Engine Roadmap

A one-page path through the full method — use this section once you already know the system and just need the order, or a pointer to the right Part.

The Path, Start to Finish



Revision Checklist

Including the supporting-character check

Part Eight — The Revision Checklist

↑ loop back anytime via the Idea Log, But/Therefore Chains, or the Wilde Game (Part Seven) ↑

The Fourteen Steps: From Raw Idea to Revised Outline

The same path as the diagram above, broken into one concrete action per step. Work top to bottom.

1. Start with a raw premise, image, or "what if" — even a rough one. If it's not ready to develop yet, jot it in the Standing Idea Log (Part Seven — A Standing Idea Log) rather than letting it disappear.
2. Test the premise against the Seven Questions, including Flaw (Part One — The Seven Questions).
3. Try the One-Line Logline shortcut before committing further (Part One — A Faster Alternative: The One-Line Logline).
4. Fill in the Logline Worksheet if the shortcut sentence isn't clicking yet (Part One — Worksheet: The Logline).
5. Map the protagonist's four Archetypes across the acts (Part One — The Four Archetypes).
6. Write the Central Question, touching Professional, Personal, and Private conflict (Part One — The Central Question).
7. Build the full Formula, statement by statement (Part One — Building the Formula, Step by Step).
8. Draft Act I's 12 Plot Points (Part Two).
9. Fill Act II, First Half's seven Yes/No pairs — the Wanderer (Part Three).
10. Fill Act II, Second Half's seven Yes/No pairs — the Warrior, including the backslide beat (Part Four).
11. Draft Act III's four beats: Big Yes, No, Big No, Final Yes (Part Five).
12. Cross-check the outline against the Landmarks, and consider a Central Image (Part Six).
13. Run the Revision Checklist, including the supporting-character check (Part Eight).
14. Keep the Appendix's one-page table nearby for fast reference on later passes.

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Appendix: One-Page Quick Reference

Appendix: One-Page Quick Reference

Stage	Archetype	Plot Points	Core Question to Answer
Act I	Orphan	1-12	Who is this person, what's broken, and what forces them to act?
Act II, Pt. 1	Wanderer	13-26 (7 Yes/No pairs)	What does the hero think they need, and who helps or blocks the search?
Act II, Pt. 2	Warrior	27-40 (7 Yes/No pairs)	What does direct confrontation cost, and what has to symbolically die?
Act III	Martyr	41-44 (Big Yes / No / Big No / Final Yes)	What is the hero willing to sacrifice, with no guarantee of winning?

The Formula, one more time:

When a [TYPE OF PERSON] has/does/wants/gets A, he gets/does/tries/learns B, only to discover that C now happens, and he must respond by doing D.

The rule to keep in your head while filling in every worksheet above:

Never "and then." Always "but" or "therefore."
