

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF STORIES  
THAT MOVE, ESCALATE,  
AND TRANSFORM

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THE

by Quentin Lucas

ONE-MINUTE  
STORY SPINE  
BASICS

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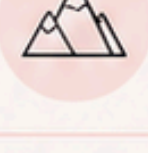


A SIMPLE FRAMEWORK  
FOR UNDERSTANDING  
HOW STORIES WORK

## One-Minute Story Spine

# The Storyteller's Starter Kit

A practical guide to understanding and building stories through the Story Spine framework.

## THE STORY SPINE

THE STORY SPINE	STRUCTURE	FUNCTION
 Once upon a time...	Beginning	The world of the story is introduced and the main character's routine is established.
 Every day...		
 But, one day...	The Event	The main character breaks the routine.
 Because of that...	Middle	There are dire consequences for having broken the routine.
 Because of that...		
 Because of that...		
 Until finally...	The Climax	The main character embarks upon success or failure.
 And, ever since then...	End	The main character succeeds or fails, and a new routine is established.


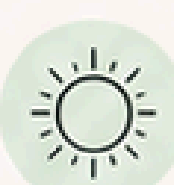

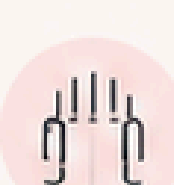

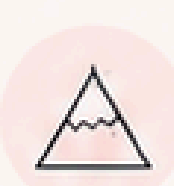
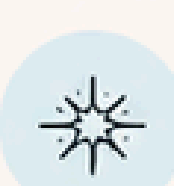

Created by Kenn Adams in 1991

### Inside:

- Story Spine steps, demos, and a reusable template
- Guided worksheets
- Common storytelling mistakes
- Story-building exercises
- A list of Story Spine strengths and use cases

# STORY SPINE EXAMPLE

## JACK AND THE BEANSTALK

THE STORY SPINE		STRUCTURE	EXAMPLE (SUMMARY)
 Once upon a time...		<b>Beginning</b>	Once upon a time there was a poor boy named Jack who lived with his widowed mother.
 Every day...			Every day, life was hard and they had very little money or food.
 But, one day...		<b>The Event</b>	But one day, Jack's mother told him to sell their cow at market.
 Because of that...		<b>Middle</b>	Because of that, Jack met a mysterious man who tricked him into trading the cow for magic beans.
 Because of that...			Because of that, Jack's mother was angry and threw the beans out the window.
 Because of that...			Because of that, the next morning a giant beanstalk had grown, reaching up into the clouds.
 Until finally...		<b>The Climax</b>	Until finally, Jack climbed the beanstalk, entered the giant's castle, and took the golden goose.
 And, ever since then...		<b>End</b>	And ever since then, Jack and his mother lived happily and never had to worry about being poor again.

# Storytelling Snapshots

Explore further in the One-Minute Story Playbook

## Business writing spine

1) Once upon a time ... A nonprofit struggled to connect with donors.

3) But one day ... They began sharing personal stories from the people they helped.



7) Until finally ... Donations and community engagement increased.

8) And ever since then ... Their audience felt emotionally connected to the organization.

- brands
- nonprofits
- communication

## Media literacy spine

1) Once upon a time ... A social media platform promised to keep people informed.

2) Every day ... Users consumed increasingly emotional content.



3) But one day ... The platform's algorithm began prioritizing outrage and conflict.

8) And ever since then ... People became more divided as the stories quietly shaped their beliefs.

Understanding how stories shape culture and belief

# Storytelling Snapshots

Explore further in the One-Minute Story Playbook

## Personal writing spine

1) Once upon a time ... I believed being productive meant never slowing down.

3) But one day ... I collapsed from exhaustion during a meeting.



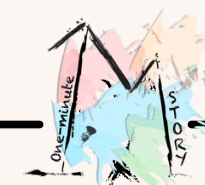
8) And ever since then ... I've approached work and rest differently.

Structuring memoirs, essays, and lived experiences.

## Creative writing spine

1) Once upon a time ... A grieving musician stopped performing after losing his brother.

3) But one day ... He discovered unfinished songs they had written together.



7) Until finally ... He performed the music publicly for the first time.

8) And ever since then ... He began reconnecting with both his art and his grief.

Emotional arcs through fiction and imagination.

# The Beginning

The world of the story is introduced, and the main character's normal routine is established.

## 1) ONCE UPON A TIME ...

Introducing the story's foundation before the story's conflict, including:

- the world of the story
- the main character and supporting characters
- the normal states of being and emotional atmospheres

A strong beginning creates emotional investment and gives the audience a clear understanding of what will later change, why it matters, and what is at stake.

## 2) EVERY DAY ...

Establishing the routines, patterns, and expectations that define the story's normal world, including:

- the character's daily behaviors, relationships, and environments
- emotional patterns and tensions
- the expectations that shape the character's life

Strong routines amplify the drama and help the audience recognize disruption when the story changes direction.

# The Event

After the routine is disrupted, the main character must confront change, conflict, uncertainty, or opportunity.

## 3) BUT ONE DAY ...

The story's normal world is interrupted and creates drama by challenging the routines, expectations, emotional patterns, and desires established earlier in the story.

Also known as the "Inciting Incident," this section:

- creates meaningful change
- raises narrative stakes
- introduces new desires or obstacles
- forces characters to act, react, or adapt

Without disruption, stories risk feeling emotionally lifeless or directionless.

+ Inciting Incident: the event that disrupts the story's normal world and sets the plot in motion.

# The Middle

Consequences of “the event” unfold. Tension rises, problems deepen, and the outcome becomes uncertain.

## 4) BECAUSE OF THAT ...

The main character begins navigating the story’s new reality, including:

- immediate consequences and disruptions
- emotional reactions and uncertainty
- new desires, obstacles, or conflicts
- attempts to restore stability or regain control

The beginning of the middle is often where subplots begin:

- deepening characters
- reinforcing themes
- complicating the main conflict
- sustaining the pace

Strong middles maintain momentum by forcing characters to adapt as consequences continue unfolding.

# The Middle (continued)

Consequences of “the event” unfold. Tension rises, problems deepen, and the outcome becomes uncertain.

## 5) BECAUSE OF THAT ...

The consequences of the character’s actions deepen, escalating the story’s tension and forcing more difficult choices, including:

- rising stakes and complications
- failed plans or unintended consequences
- increasing emotional, social, or environmental pressure
- growing opposition from antagonistic forces

This section deepens the story’s conflict as the character struggles to adapt to the story’s changing reality.

This section often functions as “The Midpoint,” where the audience gains a deeper understanding of:

- the story’s central conflict
- the true difficulty of the character’s journey
- what the character stands to gain or lose

Midpoints deepen emotional investment by revealing the true weight of the conflict.

# The Middle (concluded)

Consequences of “the event” unfold. Tension rises, problems deepen, and the outcome becomes uncertain.

## 6) BECAUSE OF THAT ...

The story’s conflicts intensify toward a breaking point as antagonistic forces gain greater control over the story’s direction, including:

- major setbacks or sacrifices
- collapsing plans or emotional stability
- increased danger, pressure, or uncertainty
- stronger opposition from antagonistic forces

This section often marks a turning point where the character realizes the true difficulty of their journey and the growing possibility of failure.

The end of Act II usually contains something very important:

The collapse of the protagonist’s old way of thinking.

# The Climax

The character confronts the central conflict and moves toward success or failure.

## 7) UNTIL FINALLY ...

The main character confronts the central conflict, forcing a decisive action, sacrifice, realization, or transformation, including:

- irreversible choices
- emotional, moral, or physical risk
- the culmination of the character's internal and external struggles
- the possibility of success, failure, or change

Quick tips for writing your climax:

- strong climaxes often feel like the biggest and most emotionally significant moment in the story.
- strong climax scenes force audiences to wonder, "How can the character possibly succeed now?"
- nothing should ever be completely the same after the climax, whether the character succeeds or fails.

# The End

A new normal is established. The character, world, or situation has changed.

## 8) AND EVER SINCE THEN ...

The story establishes a new reality shaped by the consequences of the climax, including:

- changes in the character's world, relationships, or emotional state
- the resolution of central conflicts or tensions
- the lasting impact of the character's choices and experiences
- a new routine, perspective, or understanding of the world

Effective endings often leave the audience with:

- emotional payoff
- thematic meaning
- reflection or interpretation
- a sense of completion, ambiguity, or possibility

**“The happy ending of the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedy of the soul is to be read, not as a contradiction, but as a transcendence of the universal tragedy of [humanity].”**

**-From The Hero's Journey, Joseph Campbell**

# Your “Printable” Story Spine

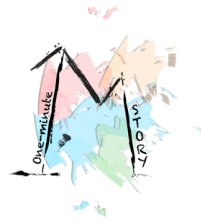
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**Tip #1: What kind of world is your character living in emotionally, socially, or physically?**

**Once upon a time ...**

**The beginning: The world of the story is introduced.**

**Mistake to avoid: Beginning the action before the audience can grasp the character, world, or emotional atmosphere.**



2

**Tip #2: What routines, habits, or expectations define your character's daily life?**

**Every day ...**

**The beginning: The main character's routine is established.**

**Mistake to avoid: Establishing routines without tension, contrast, or emotional significance.**

# Your “Printable” Story Spine

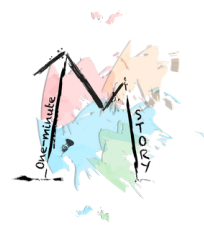
**Tip #3: How does this moment permanently alter the direction of the story?**

3

**But one day ...**

**The event (or the inciting incident): The main character breaks the routine.**

**Mistake to avoid: Introducing a disruption that feels random or emotionally insignificant.**



**Tip #4: How does the character react when forced into a new reality?**

4

**Because of that ...**

**Entering the new world: There are dire consequences for having broken the routine.**

**Mistake to avoid: Expanding the story’s world without changing the character emotionally or strategically.**

# Your “Printable” Story Spine

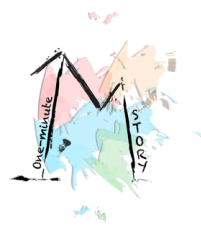
**Tip #5: How do the consequences become more difficult, personal, or emotionally costly?**

5

**Because of that ...**

**Understanding the conflict: The consequences of breaking the routine become more complex.**

**Mistake to avoid: Repeating similar obstacles without escalating pressure or stakes.**



**Tip #6: How does the antagonist gain greater control over the story?**

6

**Because of that ...**

**The old self cannot survive unchanged: It is unclear if the main character will come out alright in the end.**

**Mistake to avoid: Reducing tension before the story reaches its climax.**

# Your “Printable” Story Spine

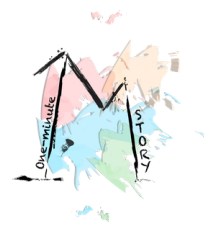
**Tip #7: What transformation or emotional truth is revealed during the climax?**

7

**Until finally ...**

**The climax: The main character embarks upon success or failure.**

**Mistake to avoid: Creating a climax that feels smaller than the story’s earlier conflicts.**



**Tip #8: How has the character or world changed because of the story’s events?**

8

**And ever since then ...**

**The end: The main character succeeds or fails, and a new routine is established.**

**Mistake to avoid: Explaining every detail instead of leaving room for reflection or interpretation.**

# Story Spine Pro Tip:

**Pro tip for fast (even one-minute) stories:**

**“In media res” is a Latin phrase literally translating to “in the midst of things.” It is a literary technique where a narrative begins right in the middle of the action or plot (around Story Spine Step 4/5), rather than at the chronological start.**

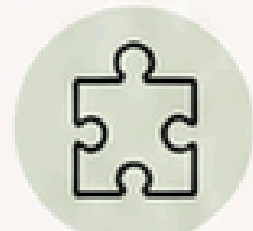
**One more tip for fast stories:**



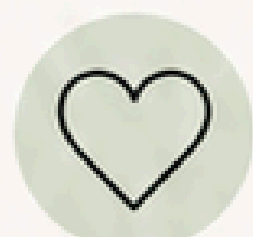
# Final Story Spine Tips

The Story Spine is a simple tool for understanding how stories move, escalate, and change.

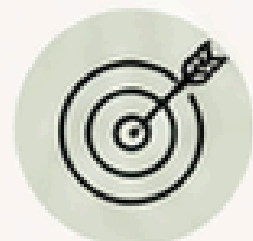
## WHAT MAKES IT STRONG



Helps writers understand cause and effect.



Encourages clear emotional progression.



Helps writers identify stakes, conflict, and transformation.

## QUICK REMINDERS



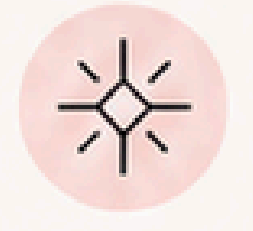
Stories become compelling when routines are disrupted.



Conflict reveals character.



Escalation matters more than repetition.



Strong climaxes force meaningful choices.

## USE IT ANYWHERE

Apply the Story Spine to any kind of story:



Fiction



Speeches



Screenwriting



Marketing



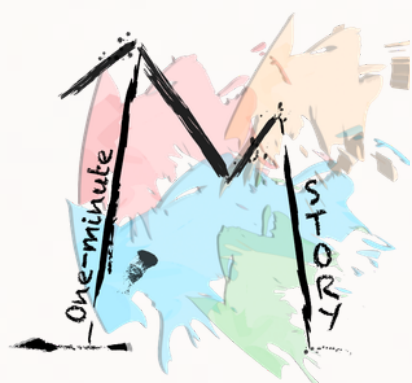
Essays



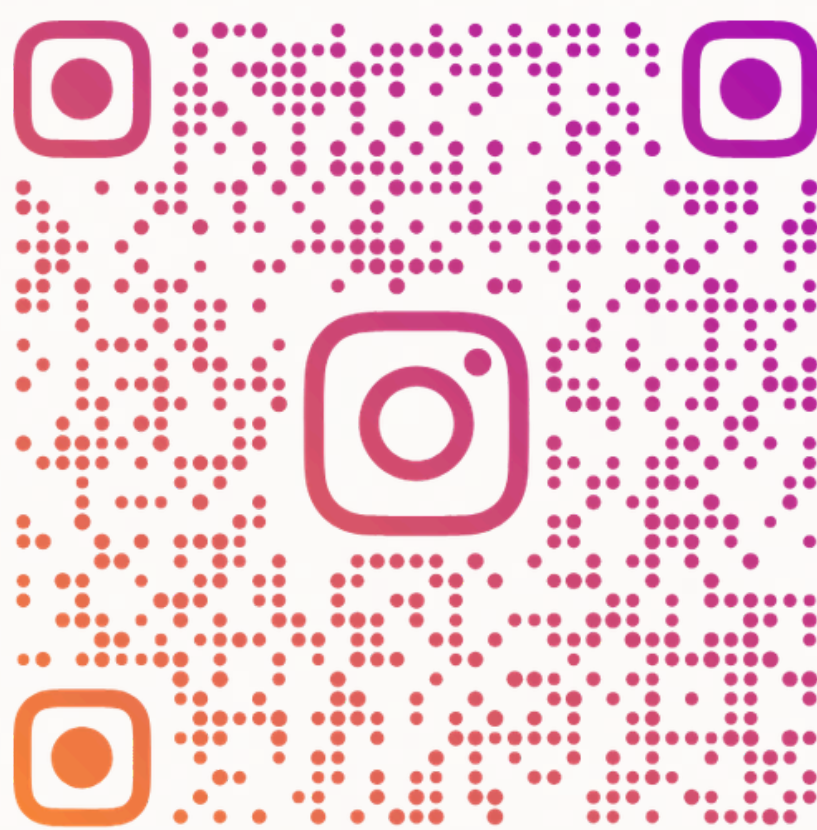
### THE HEART OF THE STORY SPINE

At its core, the Story Spine is about disruption, consequence, adaptation, pressure, and transformation. These forces change how the character sees themselves, others, or the world.





Scan or click for the  
one-minute Story Spine demo:



POST SHARED ON DEC 11, 2020  
BY @ONEMINUTESTORYTELLING

Scan or click to print  
more Story Spine templates:





# Tell Your Story