

A couple stands on a balcony at night, looking out at a city. The woman is in the foreground, wearing a red t-shirt and jeans, her back to the camera. The man stands behind her, wearing a denim jacket over a white tank top. In the background, a building with a glowing 'VACANCY' sign is visible against a dark sky with stars. The city lights and a car are also visible in the distance.

The
**30-SECOND
BEAT SHEET**

Save the Cat cut down to 30 and 60 seconds: what survives, what merges, what goes.

Nobody remembers
the colour grade.
They remember
what happened.

Describe a film you loved to a friend. You won't mention the lens. You'll say what happened: a man digs a grave in the woods, and his partner keeps ringing about the dishes.

AI made polish cheap. Every frame looks good now, so good frames stop counting. What's still scarce is shape: someone wants something, something's in the way, and something turns.

The most-used shape in film was built for two hours. This guide cuts it to 30 and 60 seconds, then builds one spot with it, beat by beat: a fictional driving school called Fenwick's.

Save the Cat, on one page.

Blake Snyder's book *Save the Cat!* (2005) maps a feature film onto 15 beats, timed to a script of about 110 pages. It's probably the most-used structure in film development, and the beat names below are his. Read the book: it's short and worth it.

The shape, in our words: show the hero's ordinary life, knock it over, make them commit to a new road, let the premise play, raise the stakes, take everything away, then let them find the way through. The last frame proves they've changed.

- Act 1: Opening Image, Theme Stated, Set-Up, Catalyst, Debate.
- Act 2A: Break into Two, B Story, Fun and Games, Midpoint.
- Act 2B: Bad Guys Close In, All Is Lost, Dark Night of the Soul.
- Act 3: Break into Three, Finale, Final Image.

OUR CAVEAT

We scored 98 screenplays against how audiences received them. Hitting beats on the textbook page predicted nothing. The biggest flop signal was a hero things happen to.

Fifteen beats into 30 seconds: keep, merge, cut.

Keep both

OPENING IMAGE + FINAL IMAGE

Bookends. The last frame mirrors the first, changed. That's your arc.

Fold into the opening

SET-UP

You get three seconds. One frame says who, where and what they want.

Hide it in a line

THEME STATED

A line or object that means something else after the turn.

Keep, by second three

CATALYST

The obstacle is where attention starts. Nothing in the way, nothing to watch.

Merge into The Choice

DEBATE + BREAK INTO TWO

No hesitation scene. One action they choose. Nobody rescues them.

Becomes The Turn, moved late

MIDPOINT

The reframe is the reward for watching, so it lands past halfway.

Shrink to one gesture: Payoff

BREAK INTO THREE + FINALE

Show the change in a hand or a face. Never say it.

Cut at 30 seconds: B Story, Fun and Games, Bad Guys Close In, All Is Lost, Dark Night of the Soul. Two of them come back at 60.

Six beats. One turn. Brand last.

0:00

Opening Image

One frame: who, where, and what they want right now. No logo, no title card.

0:03

Catalyst

Something gets in the way. The audience should feel the cost before anyone explains it.

0:08

The Choice

Debate and Break into Two in one action. The character acts, on screen. Nobody saves them.

0:17

The Turn

Your Midpoint, moved late. One reveal that makes everything before it mean something else.

0:22

Payoff

Break into Three and Finale as one gesture. The change shows in a hand or a face.

0:26

Final Image

The opening frame again, changed. The brand lands here, if there is one, and not before.

The turn should come from what's already there.



Impossible Dates. The strange part is already in plain sight.

In *The Dishes*, a short our creative director made, a man digs a grave for someone tied up in his boot. His partner keeps ringing about chores. Then the captive mentions he used to be a therapist, and starts doing the job.

No one new arrives; what's on screen flips. The final image: bloodied, phone at his ear, and this time he's calling her.

ARISTOTLE GOT THERE FIRST

The best discovery grows out of the events themselves. A twist from nowhere feels like a trick, not a turn.

Double the time. Three beats come back.

0:00

Opening Image

Same job as in the 30: who, where, what they want. Now you can hold it a beat longer.

0:04

Set-Up

Plant one small thing you'll pay off later: a habit, an object, a line.

0:08

Catalyst

The problem arrives. Spend the extra time later, never on getting here.

0:12

The Choice

They act. One decision, on screen, that they can't take back.

0:16

Fun and Games

The premise played two or three ways, each bigger than the last. Your trailer moments live here.

0:32

All Is Lost

It nearly fails. Hold on the cost and drop the music. Silence makes the next beat land.

0:40

The Turn

Snyder puts the Midpoint halfway. In a minute, the turn sits two thirds in. It's the reward.

0:48

Payoff, Final Image

The plant from 0:04 pays off in one gesture. Then the opening frame, changed. Brand at 0:56.

The brief: Fenwick's Driving School.

Fenwick's is a fictional driving school: one office, three instructors, one town. The person we're talking to isn't the seventeen-year-old learner. It's the parent who pays for the lessons, then has to sit in the passenger seat.

The tension: parents don't doubt their kid can learn. They doubt they can let go.

The plan: one mechanism, a reveal. One device, the instructor's line, "Mirror. Signal. Breathe." One iconic beat: the wide shot that moves Dad into the passenger seat. Thirty seconds, for local social.

WRITE THIS FIRST

Who's watching, what they're scared of, and the one beat they'll retell. If you can't write those three down, don't open a generator yet.

The spot, beat by beat.

0:00

Opening Image

Tight on a man in his fifties. Jaw locked, knuckles white, indicator ticking, someone else's music on low.

0:03

Catalyst

A roundabout. A logging truck coming round it. A calm voice, off screen: "Mirror. Signal. Breathe."

0:08

The Choice

His hand goes for the handbrake. Stops. He puts it back on his knee. His call.

0:17

The Turn

Wide. He's in the passenger seat. His daughter, seventeen, is driving. The calm voice was hers.

0:22

Payoff

She takes the roundabout clean. The truck passes. He lets out a breath he's held since the driveway.

0:26

Final Image

The opening shot again. Jaw loose. He's humming along to her music. Card: Fenwick's. "We can only teach one of you."

Hide the theme in a line that flips.



Impossible Dates. One pole between them, eyes elsewhere. No line needed.

Snyder has someone state the theme early. In 30 seconds, said out loud, it's a slogan. So hide it.

"Mirror. Signal. Breathe." sounds like an instructor calming a learner. After the turn, it's a daughter calming her dad, and the whole spot is about who's ready. Nobody says that. The audience works it out, and what they work out themselves, they keep.

THE REWATCH TEST

Watch it twice. If the second viewing shows you clues you missed (his hand on his knee, someone else's music), the turn is earned.

The ad everyone's already seen.

THE MEDIAN

A nervous teen stalls, cries, practises with a smiling instructor, passes, hugs Mum. Soft piano. Card: "Fenwick's. Driving your future." Every frame is fine. Nobody will retell one of them.

THE AUTHORED VERSION

A dad grips something we can't see while a calm voice says "Mirror. Signal. Breathe." One wide shot reveals he's the passenger and his daughter is driving. She acts, he chooses to let go, the brand waits for the last two seconds, one line changes meaning, and nobody explains the feeling.

Struggle, rescue, triumph, piano, tagline. It's the most overdone shape in advertising, and the one AI falls into by default. The brand is the hero; the customer watches.

Eight moves that make it feel authored.

01 **The customer acts**

They choose; the brand never rescues them. In Thai Life's "Unsung Hero" a man keeps doing small kindnesses, and the insurer only appears at the end.

02 **Delay the brand**

No logo until it's earned. John Lewis Christmas films hold the shop back until the end card. Restraint reads as confidence.

03 **A device carries it**

An object or format that tells the story for you. Google's "Parisian Love" is nothing but search queries, and it's a love story.

04 **One turn, one beat**

One reveal that rewrites what came before, one image people retell. In Apple's "Misunderstood" the teen glued to his phone was making the family a film.

05 **Underneath, and specific**

Never narrate it. Sandy Hook Promise's "Evan" hides its story in the background. "A dad" is nobody; a dad humming to his daughter's music is someone.

06 **Music does the lifting**

Feeling arrives before thought. Pick a track with a reason to be there, like her music on the car stereo, not stock piano.

Your 30 seconds

Fill this in before you write a prompt or book a shoot. A line you can't fill is a beat you don't have yet.

Opening Image (0:00)

Who, where, what they want. One frame, no logo.

Catalyst (0:03)

What gets in the way. Show it, don't explain it.

The Choice (0:08)

The action they take. A verb, on screen. Nobody rescues them.

The Turn (0:17)

What the audience assumed, and what's actually true.

Payoff (0:22)

The change, in one gesture. A hand, a breath, a face.

Final Image (0:26)

Your opening frame again, changed. Brand here, not before.

The line that flips

One line or object that means something new after the turn.

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Anyone can make it look good now. Make it turn.

Fable8 is a film studio. We make films for brands with AI, and build our own tools to do it. This guide is how we actually work.

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