

THE STEP OUTLINE

Getting to the Barebones of Your Idea

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You have an idea for a story. It's been rolling around in your head a while. Characters are starting to take shape, as well as a key scene or two. But right now, they are all just fragments. How do you begin putting these fragments together? Screenwriting guru Robert McKee suggests in his book, "Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting," that you begin writing "from the inside out" by using a step-outline.

What's a step outline?

"As the term implies, a step-outline is the story told in steps," McKee says. It's a method that combines the traditional outline form with "story boards," or pictures depicting each scene. However, rather than using pictures, you use one- or two-sentence statements to describe the action in the scene and how it builds.

On paper, you build a list of these statements, one statement per scene. Each of the statements should clearly describe what happens in that scene. At this point, you're not really concerned about the details: no dialogue, no set dressing, no minor characters unrelated to the central action of the scene. All of that will come later.

For example, say you're writing a story about two lovers torn apart by an old family feud (Romeo and Juliet). You decide your first scene should take place in the city streets, where your hero and his gang meet the gang of the rival family. They fight, and the hero kills the rival family's leader. You might write a statement like this:

"Romeo and Tybalt meet in the city. They fight and Romeo kills Tybalt."

Simply stated, but it captures the main tension in the scene. A step-outline is your entire story, written in this simple outline form.

Why do you need a step-outline?

A step-outline is your road map, where you find the direction of your story. As you search for what works and what doesn't, technically you're flushing out and gutting your story to prevent yourself from writing a story that has no real direction.

You may only use twenty percent of your first step-outline, and may write the same scene over fifteen times. Robert McKee, a true master of the art of storytelling says, "A writer secure in his talents knows there's no limit to what he can create, and so he trashes everything less than his best on a quest for a gem quality story." A writer should never fear that he/she has run out of ideas, they should only fear if they settle for mediocrity. Once your step-outline is created, the dialogue will pour onto the pages and into your characters more truthfully because you know exactly what they're doing and where they are going.

Destroying your own work: Writing is re-writing.

When you write a step outline, you're free to explore all your options in order to discover the best way to present your story. Or, as McKee says, you should try to "destroy" your work: "Taste and experience tell (the writer) that ninety percent of everything he writes, regardless of his genius, is mediocre at best. In his patient search for quality, he must create far more material than he can use, then destroy it." In all this extra material, the remaining exceptional ten percent will emerge, and you'll be well on your way to a great screen story.

Example Step-Outline: Eyeball Eddie

- Scene 1** A montage of black and white photographs introduces Eddie (our hero), a high school wrestler with a glass eye.
- Scene 2** Before wrestling practice, Skelly, the team bully, brags about being mean, and makes a joke about Eddie's eye.
- Scene 3** During practice, Eddie tries to be a meaner wrestler like Skelly, but it doesn't work.
- Scene 4** Coach tells Eddie he's an embarrassment, needs to get some fire in him.
- Scene 5** At home that night, Eddie practices mean poses in the mirror. He wants to be tough and learn to win.
- Scene 6** At next day's match, Eddie's glass eye accidentally comes out, distracting his opponent. Eddie wins the match. Layla photographs it all - she likes him.
- Scene 7** Coach talks with Eddie in his office. Eddie wants to quit, but Coach tells him he's a winner now.
- Scene 8** Next match, Eddie pops his eye out on purpose, freaks out his opponent and wins the match.
- Scene 9** Montage - Eddie is winning matches and becoming popular. Layla's photos of Eddie are in the school newspaper. Eddie's glass eye has become an icon at the school.
- Scene 10** Eddie gets attention from some girls at lunch. Skelly invites him to a hotel party. Layla watches, disapproving.
- Scene 11** Skelly and Eddie look at old wrestling photos in the school trophy case. Skelly brags in order to intimidate Eddie. He is jealous of Eddie, but not ready to act on it yet.
- Scene 12** Layla finds Eddie at his locker, enjoying his new popularity. She invites him to "come and see something."
- Scene 13** Layla shows Eddie her photos of him losing matches. She tells him he's exploiting himself. Eddie defends his wanting to win, walks out on her.
- Scene 14** Big match - Eddie's opponent knows about Eddie's eye trick, and isn't scared. Eddie reveals the eye in his mouth, then pins the shocked wrestler. The crowd cheers.
- Scene 15** Skelly and the others are leaving for the hotel party, but tell Eddie they don't have room for him in their car. Skelly gets Eddie to loan his eye for the party. They drive off without him. Coach watches from a distance.
- Scene 16** Eddie spends the night at home without his eye, lonely.
- Scene 17** Skelly parties all night at the hotel, using Eddie's eye to get attention.
- Scene 18** At next morning's big match, Eddie waits anxiously in the locker room for Skelly to show up.
- Scene 19** Meanwhile, in the gym, the referees are getting impatient with Coach because Eddie is late for his match.
- Scene 20** At last, Skelly shows up. He gives Eddie back his eye, ruined. Eddie pounces on Skelly, and they fight.
- Scene 21** The fight moves into the stairwell and draws a crowd. Eddie pins Skelly, and Layla snaps a photo. Eddie has beaten Skelly on his own. Eddie hurls his eye down the stairwell, shattering it. Layla is impressed.
- Scene 22** The next day, Layla's photo of Eddie pinning Skelly shows up in the school newspaper.
- Scene 23** Skelly is mad to find someone has taped a copy of the photo to his school locker.
- Scene 24** Outside the school, Layla and Eddie take pictures together, laughing and joking. Eddie has won Layla's respect and friendship.