

Story Spine Template

CELT^X

Use this template to find the simplest, clearest version of your story before expanding it into a beat sheet, outline, or screenplay.

What to Include

A strong Story Spine should show:

- Who the story follows
- What their normal life looks like
- What disrupts that life
- How each choice creates the next consequence
- What final decision or confrontation changes everything
- How the character or world is different by the end

Once upon a time...

Introduce your protagonist and the world they live in.

Who is this story about, and what kind of life are they living when we first meet them?

Once upon a time, there was...

Every day...

Establish the character's normal pattern, routine, problem, flaw, or emotional comfort zone.

Prompt: What do they keep doing, avoiding, believing, or repeating?

Every day...

Until one day...

Introduce the event that breaks the pattern and forces the story to begin.

Prompt: What happens that means life cannot simply continue as normal?

Until one day...

Because of that...

Show the first major consequence, choice, or reaction.

Prompt: What does the protagonist do in response?

Because of that...

Because of that...

Escalate the situation.

Prompt: How does that first choice create a bigger problem, opportunity, or conflict?

Because of that...

Because of that...

Push the character towards the deeper truth of the story.

Prompt: What becomes harder to avoid, hide from, or deny?

Because of that...

Until finally...

Bring the story to its decisive moment.

Prompt: What final choice, confrontation, sacrifice, reveal, or action defines the ending?

Until finally...

And ever since then...

Show what has changed.

Prompt: How is the protagonist, relationship, world, or emotional situation different by the end?

And ever since then...

Final Check

Before moving on, ask:

- ☐ Does each line cause the next one?
- ☐ Is the protagonist making choices, not just reacting?
- ☐ Does the ending connect back to the beginning?
- ☐ Can I clearly see what has changed?
- ☐ Is this the simplest version of the story?