

Blake Snyder and *Save the Cat*

Blake Snyder is someone who knows a lot about beat sheets. In his comprehensive screenwriting book *Save the Cat* (often abbreviated as STC) he provides a plot structure template that's trusted by screenwriters everywhere. We'll use the Save the Cat beat sheet as the basis for our guide.

For more nuggets from Blake Snyder's brain, it's well worth picking up a copy of *Save the Cat*.

How to write the perfect beat sheet

Quick note: The page numbers listed for each beat aren't strict rules. They're simply a guideline for where beats should roughly land in a 110-page screenplay.

Beat 1. Opening image (p. 1)

The goal of your opening beat is to immediately command the audience's attention. Your first visual should represent the struggle and tone of your story, giving a snapshot of your main character's problem before your screenplay starts in earnest.

For example, the [opening scene of Rocky](#) (1976) shows the embattled protagonist fighting inside an old church for a prize of \$40. We immediately sense that Rocky's down on his luck, and struggling to get by.

This opening image serves as a crucial storytelling device, encapsulating the film's central theme and the protagonist's initial state of being. The setting of the church hints at a battle of biblical proportions for the character, setting a tone of an everyman fighting against the odds, which is an overarching theme throughout the movie. The meagre sum he fights for highlights the dire economic circumstances and the lengths to which he must go to survive. This powerful visual metaphor effectively primes the audience for a story about hope, perseverance, and resilience.

Your opening image should strive to evoke an immediate emotional response that aligns with the journey the protagonist will undertake. It's not just about presenting a problem, but about evoking a feeling, a mood, that will stay with the audience, compelling them to watch as the story unfolds. This beat should seamlessly introduce the narrative's world, hinting at the larger backdrop against

which your story will play out, and foreshadowing the personal growth that the character is set to undergo.

Beat 2. Set-up (pp. 1-10)

In the set-up, you need to present the status quo of the main character's world, and describe their struggle or what's missing. This gives your screenplay a sense of reality, and provides a context for your characters before you dive into the overall story.

With this beat, you want to try to answer the following questions:

- Where does your story take place?
- What's the culture like?
- What are the people like?
- Is your story set in the past, present, or future? (And is it the past, present, or future we know, or a different reality?)

This early exposition is crucial because it acts as the narrative soil from which the rest of your story will grow. By establishing the 'normal world' of your protagonist, you set up a baseline, a contrast for the extraordinary events that will soon shake up the protagonist's life. It's essential that these opening pages are filled with details that are specific and evocative; they should paint a clear picture not just of the physical surroundings but of the societal and emotional landscape as well.

In the set-up, you should also subtly plant the seeds of change. These could be small details or interactions that foreshadow the coming transformation, hinting at the internal and external conflicts that will drive the story forward.

The set-up should also begin to introduce the supporting cast of secondary characters—friends, family, mentors, and antagonists—each of whom will play a crucial role in the protagonist's journey. Their relationships with the main character will provide depth and stakes as the narrative progresses. Remember, every element introduced in this section should be intentional, serving the story and hinting at the transformation that is to come.

Beat 3. Theme stated (p. 5)

While you lay the groundwork, you need to explain what your story's about (usually during the set-up). This is often spoken to the main character, or at least in their presence. But they might not understand this message or truth until they have the experience and context to support it. It's important that this theme is woven organically into the story, providing a lens through which the audience will view the character's actions and decisions.

In this beat, it's crucial to give your audience the main character's name, a bit of their story, and set out any defining character traits they have.

Beat 4. Catalyst / inciting incident (p. 12)

An inciting incident where the main character realizes their spouse is cheating on them, or something is wrong, or they meet someone that changes their life.

This beat is the first major story beat after the set-up, a jolt to the status quo that propels the narrative into motion. It ignites the fuse of your plot and is a point of no return for your protagonist. Whether it's as intimate as a whispered confession or as grand as the discovery of a new world, this incident disrupts the mundane pattern of the protagonist's life and challenges their initial want or need. It also serves to engage the audience's curiosity, hooking them into the story as they anticipate how the protagonist will react to this upheaval. In terms of story beats, the catalyst is what definitively separates the introduction from the rising action that will follow. As the old world falls away, they can begin their journey to a new destination.

Beat 5. Debate (pp. 12-25)

After the inciting incident happens, it's clear that things can't stay the same. But change is scary, so your main character will almost certainly doubt the journey ahead of them. Can they stomach the hero's journey? Do they have what it takes?

It's a great opportunity to establish your character's internal and external conflicts. What is it that's holding them back from embarking on the journey? What attitudes or experiences are going to help or impede them going forward? How will that influence their choices?

Within the structure of a beat sheet, this is where you ratchet up the tension by questioning the path forward and really diving into the character's psyche. This is

where you flesh out the stakes and lay out the emotional groundwork for the transformation that the journey promises. As the audience teeters on the edge of commitment alongside the protagonist, this beat ensures they are invested in the character's decision-making process. It tests the protagonist's resolve and in doing so, invites the audience to reflect on their own reactions to such crossroads.

Beat 6. Break into two (p. 25)

This is where your screenplay starts hotting up, as your main character makes a choice and their journey begins. At this point, it's important to set out the reasons why your protagonist is making this decision.

- Are they searching for something?
- Do they want to save something, or just themselves?
- Are they hoping to change the world, or just their lives?
- Is their main motivation internal or external?

Writing answers to these questions on your beat sheet will be invaluable as you get further into the screenwriting process.

This moment is where you distinctly mark the beginning of a transition - it's not just a physical shift in action but an emotional commitment as well. The protagonist's choice should be a direct response to the inciting incident and the debate that followed, providing a clear motivation for their actions that will drive the rest of the screenplay. On your beat sheet, this beat serves as a pivot point for the narrative, a bridge between the old world and the new challenges and experiences that will transform your main character.

Beat 7. B story / subplot (p. 30)

Now, there's a discussion about the theme, or your nugget of truth. If your story has a love interest, the main character will discuss the theme with them – which is why the B story (or subplot) is often called the love story.

This usually contrasts with the main plot, providing a different perspective on the theme and enriching the overall narrative. It often explores secondary relationships and subplots that ultimately tie back into the A story, enhancing the protagonist's journey by mirroring or contradicting it. This beat is where these threads start to intertwine, creating a richer tapestry for your screenplay and

deeper engagement for your audience. Not only does the B story offer a reprieve from the main action, it also serves to deepen the thematic exploration, ensuring the screenplay feels layered and complex. On your beat sheet, carefully plotting this beat ensures that the subplot is interlaced with the main storyline, enriching it without derailing it.

Some people worry about their B story overshadowing their main story, but this won't happen as long as your main storyline is strong. Instead, your B story should complement the main plot, and weave together at the end.

The B story also marks your main character's entry into the second act of your screenplay.

Beat 8. Promise of the premise / fun and games (pp. 30-55)

The promise of the premise is the in-between moment of your storyline. It's a chance to have fun with action sequences, shoot-outs, big laughs, dramatic moments, and other events that'll look good in a trailer.

Beat 8 serves as the heart of your story where the premise that you promised in your logline and setup must be delivered. This is where you exploit the concept to its fullest, giving the audience what they came for. In terms of structure, this beat is where you can revel in the central idea of your story, showcasing your protagonist's reaction to the new world and its challenges. Whether it's through exhilarating chases, budding romance, or heart-wrenching drama, these scenes are often what audiences remember most.

As your protagonist starts to interact with the world they've landed in, they might start to have some victories and build their confidence. Although that probably won't last too long...

Beat 9. Midpoint (p. 55)

As you hit the halfway mark in your screenplay, things are either amazing or terrible for your main character. In some stories, the character will have everything they want, and feel on top of the world – often called a false victory. In others, they'll be at rock bottom.

This is where the stakes are raised higher than before; if the protagonist is riding high, a revelation or event typically occurs that hints at greater challenges ahead.

Conversely, if they're at their lowest, a glimmer of hope or a crucial discovery is introduced that reinvigorates their resolve. This beat on your beat sheet is a reminder to evaluate the pacing and ensure that the transformation arc of your main character is on track. It's a moment that redefines their journey, either by upping the ante or by providing a new direction or deeper motivation, and sets the tone for the second half of the screenplay.

Naturally, this situation creates a turning point in your main character's life. It's a now or never moment, where we see the character's best and worst traits, and learn how they'll deal with the results of their actions.

Beat 10. Bad guys close in (pp. 55-75)

If your main character was on top of the world at the midpoint, they're about to be brought back down to earth. As the bad guys close in, your protagonist will have a crisis of confidence, battling fear, doubt, anger, frustration, and emotional exhaustion.

The "bad guys" — whether they be actual villains, inner demons, competing desires, or external pressures — tighten their grip, challenging the protagonist's resolve in ways they've never experienced before. This segment of your beat sheet is essential for ramping up the conflict and ensuring that the narrative doesn't sag in the middle; it's where the protagonist's progress is met with substantial resistance, creating a sense of doubt that perhaps their goals are unattainable. Here, you document the protagonist's reaction to these trials, setting the stage for the final push towards the climax. The obstacles they face during this beat will typically culminate in the story's dark night of the soul, which emphasizes the importance of having this section meticulously planned on your beat sheet.

With the bad guys taking the upper hand, your hero's journey just got a lot tougher.

Beat 11. All is lost (p. 75)

This beat sits in opposition to your midpoint. If your main character had gained something at that point, this is the moment they realize they've lost it. If they still have something, they realize it has no meaning. It's a moment where something, or someone, dies.

It's a critical juncture often referred to as the "dark night of the soul." The sense of loss must be palpable, the stakes personal and the defeat seemingly absolute to provide the necessary contrast for the upcoming turnaround. This moment is when the protagonist's goal appears furthest out of reach, making it a pivotal beat in the sheet that underscores the magnitude of the protagonist's journey and sets up the emotional payoff that will come with the eventual resurgence. This is where the writer must ensure that the protagonist, and by extension the audience, feels the full weight of the narrative's lowest point before beginning the ascent towards resolution. It is an exercise in tension and an essential component of a compelling beat sheet that shapes the narrative arc toward its climax.

In cheerier news, this physical or emotional death opens up a space for something new to come to life. But while you know it's a false defeat, it's important that the character doesn't know it yet – they need to remain in this loss for this beat.

Beat 12. Dark night of the soul (pp. 75-85)

Sometimes things have to fall apart before they can be put back together. That's exactly what happens for your protagonist at this point in your screenplay.

As everything crumbles around them, your main character hits rock bottom and mourns what they've lost, whether it's a dream, goal, mentor, lover, or something else.

Beat 13. Break into three (p. 85)

With the help of a fresh idea, new discovery, or some timely advice from the B story (usually the love story), your main character pulls themselves together and decides to try again.

With this new surge of energy, your protagonist is refreshed and ready to achieve their goal. If they've been thinking selfishly up to this point, they're now more concerned with the greater good.

Beat 13 signifies a synthesis of the character's journey, where the lessons learned from both the A and B stories are integrated, giving the protagonist the insight they need to push forward. This beat is where the internal transformation is catalyzed, and the protagonist, now equipped with new wisdom, recommits to their goal with a clearer understanding of what's at stake. It's crucial to the beat

sheet that this moment feels earned, a direct result of the protagonist's experiences and the relationships they've built or tested throughout the story.

Beat 14. Finale (pp. 85-110)

As your main character incorporates the original theme of the A story with the context from the B story, things start to come together. Even if your character hasn't had a big win yet – or is headed towards a loss – there'll be a sense that their renewed hope is beginning to pay off.

This moment often serves as the synthesis of the character's journey, where the internal and external conflicts meet and resolve, providing a satisfying culmination to the narrative threads that have been woven throughout the story.

This beat is also when your audience and main character will both become aware of the moral of your story. Your job as the screenwriter is to make sure that there's a lesson for everyone, and that it's clear and meaningful.

Beat 15. Final image (p. 110)

In simple terms, your final image should be the opposite of your opening image. It's a visual representation of the change that's happened within your main character over the course of the story.

As it's the final image in your screenplay, it's important to think hard about what lesson you want the audience to take away, and how you want to complete your character's journey. It should leave a lasting impression, encapsulating not just the end of your character's arc but also the emotional resonance of the story's theme.

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