

Tent Pole Revision Process - Use Five Scenes to Strengthen Your Manuscript

When it comes time to do a first revision of their book, most writers review by reading chapter by chapter, fixing things as they go. This usually means they are editing on a line or maybe a scene level, but they don't get a feel for the book as a whole. Then they get to the end of the book and read it through, only to discover that there are more problems that need fixing. And worse, these are core issues that cause problems throughout the book.

I've discovered that a way to avoid this problem is to do a first pass edit by working on five main structural scenes to make them as strong as possible. These "tent pole" scenes hold up the rest of the book and once they are solid, you can edit the remaining scenes leading up to and from them. These five scenes are:

1. Hook / Opening Chapter
2. The Inciting Incident
3. Midpoint Moment
4. Dark Moment
5. Finale

If at all possible, I recommend you take a little time away from your manuscript before you start the revision process. Going from drafting to revising doesn't give you the chance to gain perspective on your work. If you can, put the completed manuscript aside, maybe work on a new project, and then go back to the novel with fresh eyes.



Tent Pole Revision Process – Use Five Scenes to Strengthen Your Manuscript

When you're ready to review these scenes, the first thing you need to do is make sure you know your main character's internal and external goal, motivation and conflict (GMC). What do they want, why do they want it and what's in their way? You should also have a good handle on their wound (what hurt them before the book started) and the lie they tell themselves based on that wound.

An example of this might be that their parents divorced when they were young (wound) leading them to believe that if they didn't do the right thing, people wouldn't like them (lie). They could have an external goal (what they want) around starting a new business and an internal goal (what they need) about self-acceptance.

Ready to dive into the five scenes? Let's go!



I. Hook/Opening Chapter

Look at the scene where we meet your main POV character (if you have more than one – hang on, I'll address this at the end). This is the opportunity to grab your reader (and, eventually, an agent and editor).

Questions to ask yourself as you review this scene are:

- Have you clearly introduced your main character?
- Have you shown or hinted at what the character wants and needs? (Goals) What are they yearning for – even if they don't consciously know this yet?
- Have you shown or hinted at the journey this character is going to take? What question, problem, or scenario is drawing the reader in?
- Have you given your reader a reason to care about this character? Why will they root for her/him?
- What is true about them that we can see, but that they might not know or believe yet (EX: they're strong, smart, creative, loving, lovable, etc.)
- Can the reader tell what the focus of the story will be? This is usually your theme or point.
- Now that you've finished your book – is this the right place to start?
- Is all of this really on the page?

I ask that last question (and will repeat it) because as authors we suffer from "Burden of Knowledge." We know what we want to show the reader because it's in our heads – but that doesn't always mean it's there on the page. This is your time to check that.

The most questions are on this chapter. Why? Because the opening is your chance to make the strongest first impression possible. This is what will make the reader decide whether or not to continue so it has a lot riding on it.

Once this scene feels strong (it may still not be done, but that's for future passes), it's time to move on and find the next Tent Pole scene.



2. The Inciting Incident – 10-20% into the book.

This can be later in epic fantasy, probably earlier in romance (frequently the Meet Cute)

This scene will be where things “get going” for your main character. They have a goal, but the wound/lie has probably been keeping them from acting on it. The Inciting Incident is the moment that puts them in motion.

Questions to ask yourself as you review this scene are:

- What is kicking your character into action? What has changed since the opening and how are they feeling about that change?
- What is at stake for them in this scene? (Hint: There's always something at stake. It doesn't have to be big.)
- Where is their wound/lie impacting their reaction and decision?
- How is this scene impacting their internal and external goal? The inciting incident is usually the first step toward these.
- What action are they taking? Character agency is very important for a compelling arc.
- Is all of this on the page?

A note about the Inciting Incident – this is usually something that forces them into motion (reactive) rather than something they choose (proactive). As a bonus, look for the active choice they make a few scenes later. A good example of this is in the movie *Legally Blonde*. The inciting incident is when Warner breaks up with Elle. The active choice she makes soon after is to get into and join him at Harvard.



3. Midpoint Moment – About 50% into the book

Your POV character is going for their goal, but things aren't going the way they'd hoped. They've made a mistake, or they've been holding themselves back. In *Legally Blonde*, the Midpoint Moment, sometimes called the Mirror Moment, happens to Elle at the party when she shows up in the bunny outfit and confronts Warner. She realizes that what she's been doing isn't working. It's time for a change.

- What part of their GMC is being affected by this scene?
- Where is their wound and lie coming up?
- How is what they fear to be true about them impacting this scene?
- What do they "see" about themselves?
- What's at stake for them in this scene?
- What do they decide to change from here on? How are they changed (internally and externally) by what happens in this scene? Make sure they have agency, that they are being proactive, not only reactive.
- Is all of this on the page?

Your Main Character will experience either a false victory (Luke rescues Leia in *Star Wars*) or a false defeat (*Legally Blonde*). Either way, things change from here on. If we've had a false victory... things are going to get harder. If a false defeat, the main character is going to start climbing up.



4. Dark Moment – About 80% into the book

Everything is awful. There's no hope of the character getting what they wanted. Making our characters grow and change, frequently means making them miserable and at this point in the book, our main character believes all they've worked for is lost. For Elle Woods this happens when her professor hits on her and she realizes she's no better off than she was at the beginning. Of course, a scene later someone reminds her of who she **really** is and she goes forward full steam ahead relying on the truth and strength that has been inside her all along (and which we saw in the opening).

- What mistake did they make or what mistakes lead up to this scene?
- Does it feel both impossible and believable?
- How has the wound/lie come back to haunt them? What meaning are they making of what is happening? What are they believing about themselves again? (I'm not worthy, not loveable, not smart enough...)
- How are they hurting?
- What do they feel as though they've lost?
- How is their biggest fear coming into play here? What do they believe is now true because of this?
- Is all of this on the page?

The good news is that soon after this they will realize what they've learned, lean on that, and move forward (unless you're writing tragedy, in which case their fatal flaw wins). This is their big chance (and yours) to show the reader how much they have grown through the book.



5. Finale

The goal is achieved; the conflict overcome. (Insert a cheer). This is the big ending where you need to wrap up everything you've put in the book. Elle not only wins in court, but she's gained confidence in herself to see that Warner isn't the right man for her. We see her graduate with all the sparkle she had at the beginning combined with a new strength and belief.

- Have the internal and external goal been reached? Has the character gotten both what they wanted and what they needed? If the goal changed, is it clear why?
- How is the wound healed?
- Is how the character feels as well as how they've grown and changed clear?
- How is the fear overcome? (Or can we see how they will they deal with it when it rears its head again?)
- Are all the subplots tied up?
- Is all of this on the page? (Are you tired of me asking that yet?)

A caveat - I know I told you you'd be able to do this in five scenes, but if you are writing a dual (pr more) POV novel, such as a romance or fantasy, then you may want to go through this exercise one more time and find the five scenes for your other POV character. This will help you be certain that both characters have a strong narrative arc and change and grow throughout the course of the book.



Moving On

Once you feel that these five scenes are strong, it's time for the next round of revisions. (Yes, I know... it's a long process). Go back and look at the scenes leading from and up to the ones you've worked on. For example, once you know how you want to open your book and the inciting incident, you will have a better feel for what the scenes linking those two moments need to include. Then continue – how will the character get from the inciting incident to the midpoint? What needs to happen? What do they need to experience?

So... how did that feel? What jumped out at you as a challenge or a problem in your book? Is the main character's arc of change clear? Are they making decisions, dealing with consequences and stumbling as they learn and grow?

And do you need any support? If any questions came up for you as you were doing this or there is anything you'd like some clarity on, I encourage you to schedule a free call with me at <https://bit.ly/WWR-Discovery>. When we talk, my goal will be to give you support and direction on the next steps you can take to strengthen your novel.

The revision process is a different challenge from writing the book, but with the right tools – and patience – you can craft your novel into a story that will keep readers turning pages!

Find out more about me and how I help writers at:

www.ronagofstein.com

or get in touch at

writewithrona@gmail.com

You can also follow me on

Facebook & Instagram: WriteWithRona

