STRUCTURE: The Eight Sequences

What’s a Sequence?
A sequence is a self-contained portion of the entire story, usually about 10 to 15 minutes (pages) in length. It has its own tension (not the main tension, but is related in some way) and it has its own beginning, middle, and end.

1. Length
Sequences are small and self-contained enough that they can be kept in mind all at one time, unlike the entire feature. They can be shaped and honed independent of each other.

Example: Sequence 3 of Despicable Me (2010)
After Gru (Steve Carell) signs the official adoption papers at the end of Act One, he must now live with the orphans Margo, Edith, and Agnes, at least until he can use them as cookie sellers to get in Vector’s (Jason Segel) lair. Sequence 3 is the first of many self-contained portions of the larger story and its pretty simple: what’s like for three orphans to live in Gru’s house—a dangerous, mysterious place. Gru’s rules are clear: no crying, no talking, no annoying noises, no touching anything. But kids are kids and after Edith gets stuck inside a coffin with spikes, Gru realizes that he can’t afford to leave the girls alone, but he doesn’t expect them to discover the trap door/elevator into Gru’s underground hideout, where he now has to explain his minions and Dr. Nefario (Russell Brand). Understanding what needs to be accomplished in a smaller portion of the larger overall story makes it easier to write and shape sequences independent of each other.

2. Character
A sequence usually “belongs” to one particular character (not necessarily always the central protagonist) and relates to that character’s want. Many parallel aspects of an overall story are kept alive simultaneously and will appear in sequences where the overall tension and main objective is about something else entirely.

Even though Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) may be the most memorable character of the franchise, Sparrow is only a supporting character within the first installment. The main protagonists are Elizabeth Swann (Keira Knightley) and Will Turner (Orlando Bloom), yet sequence 5 of the first film is devoted almost entirely to the undead captain Barbossa (Geoffrey Rush). Jack ends up on Barbossa’s Black Pearl, and Barbossa learns Jack knows where to find Turner. After chasing down Turner, the two ships go into battle, but the in the end, Barbossa wins, capturing Turner, Elizabeth, Jack, and Jack’s crew.

3. Tension
A clearly defined tension is what directs the sequence to take shape. The audience has a vested interest, hoping and fearing, about the character moving toward an event in the near future.
Example: Sequence 6 of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)
When the wizard commends Dorothy (Judy Garland) and her friends to return to the Emerald City with the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West, an immediately tension is clearly defined. We hope that they are successful, yet fear that they will fail. And sequence 6 delivers both those fears and hopes. When Dorothy is taken captive by the Witch’s flying monkeys in the haunted forest, her friends are left broken and battered, and we fear that they won’t be able to save her. Rising action increases when the Witch threatens to kill Dorothy when the hourglass runs out, but the team eventually infiltrates the Witch’s castle, where they rescue Dorothy. Our hopes are dashed, however, when they end up meeting the Witch face-to-face, surrounded by her guards. All seems lost when the Witch lights Scarecrow on fire, but when Dorothy tries to put him out, the water splashes on the Witch, melting her. In the end, our hopes are victorious, but it was the tension throughout that engages the audience, giving the sequence its shape.

4. Framework:
The organization of a sequence is no different than three act structure: a beginning (set up), a middle (obstacles, and an end (resolution). The only difference is that the sequence is just a smaller unit of the larger feature length story.

a. In the *beginning*, the primary want or desire must be established. It may be just one of a handful of objectives that must be accomplished to reach the protagonist’s main large-scale objective.

b. The *middle* part pits the character against obstacles, and we see the ramifications of those obstacles before the character either fails or succeeds.

c. In the end the character reaches his/her objective and either fails or succeeds. This doesn’t bring everything to an absolute resolution; instead, it leads the character deeper into trouble, which pushes him/her further into the story, and a new sequence (with new tension) begins.

Example: Sequence 2 of *Raiders of the Lost Arc* (1981)

a. The Beginning (Set-Up)
Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) has a very clear goal: recover the Ark of the Covenant before the Nazis do; however, he first needs the headpiece of the Staff of Ra.
Obtaining this headpiece is the objective for the second sequence as everything Indy does is motivated to acquiring the piece.

b. The Middle (Obstacles)
Indy flies to Nepal to confront Abner Ravenwood, the last known possessor of the headpiece, only to discover that Abner is dead. Marion (Karen Allen), Abner’s daughter and Indy’s ex-girlfriend, is unwilling to help Indy locate the medallion, mostly because she is still bitter about their breakup. This obstacle is then followed by the arrival of the sadistic Nazi agent Toht and his henchmen, whom also seeks the medallion. Bullets are fired, men die, and Marion’s bar is burnt to the ground.
c. The End (Resolution)
   In the aftermath, Indy and Marion escape with the headpiece, but Marion’s bar is destroyed, and she declares she is Indy’s new partner. Possession of the headpiece of the Staff of Ra not only becomes a tangible object that locks Indy into the future quest for the arc, but now he’s also locked-in to a relationship with his past lover, Marion.

**The Eight Sequences: Overview**

The eight sequences are smaller self-contained parts within the three-act structure that proceed predictably in virtually every film. Just as each act is centered around the protagonist’s objective and main tension, each sequence represents smaller steps along the road to that objective. Most of the sequences line up with one of the five major plot points; however, there are two sequences in the second act (seq. 3 and seq. 5) that do not conclude on a major plot point, and some genres (e.g. action, sci-fi) will have an additional introductory sequence.

**Genre Specifics**

There are some genres that don’t strictly adhere to eight sequences. For example, action and sci-fi typically include an “intro” sequence in Act One. This sequence shows the end of the last adventure of the protagonist. It’s the final sequence and resolution of a different movie. And when it comes to three hour epics, the second act often has an extra sequence before or after the midpoint. However, these are exceptions to the general Eight Sequence Outline standard.

**Sequences in Three Acts**

Generally speaking there are two (sometimes three) sequences in Act One, four (sometimes five) sequences in Act Two, and two sequences in Act Three.

**Act One**

Act One is made up of two distinct sequences, structured around the two major plot points of Act One: the inciting incident and the lock-in. Sequence one introduces the protagonist and his/her world, and sequence two concludes with the main character being locked-in to a the predicament that will propel him/her into the second act.

**Act I**

**Sequence 1:** Introduce Main Character/Status Quo

Plot Point #1: Inciting Incident/Point of Attack

**Sequence 2:** Set Predicament/Establish Main Tension

Plot Point #2: The Lock-In

**Act Two**

Act Two has four sequences, two up through the midpoint, and two between the midpoint and the end of the second act. These sequences are all centered through the main tension of the protagonist’s ultimate objective, and built around obstacles, ramifications, and rising action.


Act II
Sequence 3: First Obstacle/Raise the Stakes
Sequence 4: Higher Obstacle/Rising Action
   Plot Point #3: First Culmination
Sequence 5: New Obstacle/Sub-Plot
Sequence 6: Highest Obstacle/Ramifications
   Plot Point #4: Main Culmination

Act Three
Act three includes two sequences. The seventh sequence is sparked by the main culmination, which propels the protagonist into a different tension and new objective. The eighth sequence begins after the third act twist, moves to the obligatory scene and towards the final resolution.

Act III
Sequence 7: New Objective/New Tension
   Plot Point #5: Third Act Twist
Sequence 8: Obligatory Scene/Resolution

The Eight Sequence Outline
The sequence outline is not an absolute formula or perfect recipe to building a feature script as there always different ways to mix the dough. It is, however, a great foundation to work from.

Sequence 1 – Status Quo & Inciting Incident
The first sequence establishes the central character, his/her life, and the status quo as well as the world of the story and the rules within that particular world. It usually ends with the inciting incident (sometimes referred to as the point of attack), but this plot point can sometimes appear earlier in the first few minutes of the film. It also usually follows the dramatic premise; however, at the dramatic premise and inciting incident will be one in the same.

Sequence 2 – Predicament & Lock-In
The second sequence sets up the predicament that will be central to the story, with first intimations of possible obstacles. The sequence ends when the main character is locked-Into the predicament, propelling him/her into a new direction to obtain his/her goal, which establishes the main second act tension.

Sequence 3 – First Obstacle & Raising the Stakes
The third sequence is where central character faces his/her first obstacle, and the beginning of the elimination of the alternatives begins, often a time where exposition is left over from Act One is brought out. Since our character is locked into the situation and can’t walk away or return to his/her status quo, the stakes are higher - there is a lot more to lose.

Sequence 4 – Rising Action & First Culmination
The fourth sequence has a higher obstacle, and the principle of rising action is brought in, which builds to the third major plot point: the first culmination (or midpoint). This plot point is usually parallels the end resolution of the film. If the story is a tragedy and our hero dies, then the first culmination (or midpoint) should be a low point for our character. If, however, our hero wins in the end of the film, then sequence four should end with him/her winning in some way.

Sequence 5 – New Obstacle & Sub-Plot
The fifth sequence is where second act drag can set in if a strong sub-plot hasn’t been developed to take the ball for a while. We still want new obstacles and rising action with ramifications, but we’re not ready for the main culmination just yet.

Sequence 6 – Highest Obstacle & Main Culmination
The sixth sequence is the build-up to the main culmination - back to the protagonist’s objective with a vengeance. The highest obstacle, the last alternative, the highest or lowest moment, and the end of our main tension come at this point. But we get the first inklings of the new tension that will carry us through the third act.

Sequence 7 – New Tension & Third Act Twist
After the main culmination, the protagonist now has a new objective, and the seventh sequence is the establishment of this new third act tension. Simpler, faster in nearly all ways, with rapid, short scenes and no real elaborate set-ups. The third act twist (and final major plot point) usually concludes the sequence.

Sequence 8 – Obligatory Scene & Resolution
The eighth sequence is hell-bent toward the resolution, but before it can be reached, the audience has a very specific expectation: the obligatory scene. This is the scene they have been waiting for, often pitting the protagonist against the antagonist in a final showdown. After this climatic moment, it’s just a matter of tying up the loose ends and establishing the new status quo.
Eight Sequence Feature Outline Assignment

3 Pages Maximum

GENRE:

LOGLINE: 25-35 words. (Title of your script) is about (describe your character) who wants (identify goal, desire, objective) and is facing (identify obstacles).

THEME: one word or phrase

ACT I

Sequence 1:
Introduce Main Character/Status Quo

**Plot Point #1: Inciting Incident/Point of Attack**

Sequence 2:
Set Predicament/Establish Main Tension

**Plot Point #2: The Lock-In**

ACT II

Sequence 3:
First Obstacle/Raise the Stakes

Sequence 4:
Higher Obstacle/Rising Action

**Plot Point #3: First Culmination**

Sequence 5:
New Obstacle/Sub-Plot

Sequence 6:
Highest Obstacle/Ramifications

**Plot Point #4: Main Culmination**

ACT III

Sequence 7:
New Objective/New Tension

**Plot Point #5: Third Act Twist**

Sequence 8:
Obligatory Scene/Resolution