

Build Your Plot Backwards

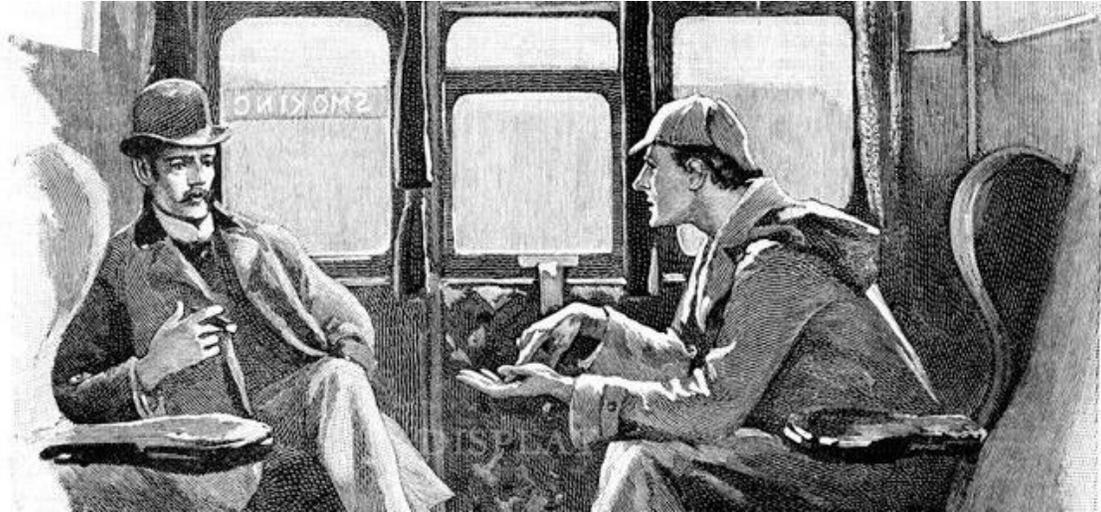
by Jeff Kitchen

Jeff Kitchen has trained scriptwriters since 1989, with former students nominated for multiple Oscars and Emmys. He has trained development executives at all of the Hollywood studios and they consistently say he teaches the most advanced story development tools in the industry.

A dramatic plot should have good cause and effect, such that the first step causes the second, which causes the third, and so on. This keeps the story moving forward and helps create consistently compelling Dramatic Action without dead spots that can lose the audience. Tight cause and effect is also a good mechanism for separating that which is Necessary to make the story work dramatically from that which is Unnecessary and only derails its forward action. But how do you create tight cause and effect? A great way to do it is by working backwards from the ending, building from each effect back to its cause, thereby constructing an unbroken chain of events.

Sherlock Holmes on Using Deductive Logic

Here Sherlock Holmes explains it to Watson: "In solving a problem of this sort, the grand thing is to be able to reason backwards. That is a very useful accomplishment, and a very easy one, but people do not practice it much. In the every-day affairs of life it is more useful to reason forwards, and so the other comes to be neglected. There are fifty who can reason synthetically for one who can reason analytically... Most people, if you describe a train of events to them, will tell you what the result would be... There are few people, however, who, if you told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result. This power is what I mean when I talk of reasoning backwards, or analytically."



Reverse Cause and Effect is a tool that you use once you've got the basics of your story sketched out. You state the ending and then reason backwards through the major building blocks of the plot, linking together only those parts of your story that are connected by cause and effect, and setting the rest aside. In this way you assemble the spine of your story in its most stripped-down version with nothing immaterial, irrelevant, or inconsequential. When you read it from the beginning, A causes B which causes C and so on.

Professionals Construct Scripts, Amateurs Write Them

The work of the amateur scriptwriter is characterized by the Unnecessary. Dialog and description are often overdone, scenes are overwritten, acts are bloated, and so on. You may have scenes that are unnecessary, sometimes a sequence, and perhaps even an entire act is unnecessary. Here is legendary Broadway script doctor, William Thompson Price writing about plays in 1908, but the principle is the same: *"What is Necessary and what is Unnecessary applies to every part and particle of a play. Your whole play may be Unnecessary, for that matter."* That's harsh. But it certainly bears thinking about. How would you like to get that as a script note? Your script is *unnecessary*. The sad fact is generally acknowledged that 90-95% of all scripts written are fatally flawed and rejected. Studio readers say don't kid yourself—it's 98%—and they've read stacks of unnecessary scripts.

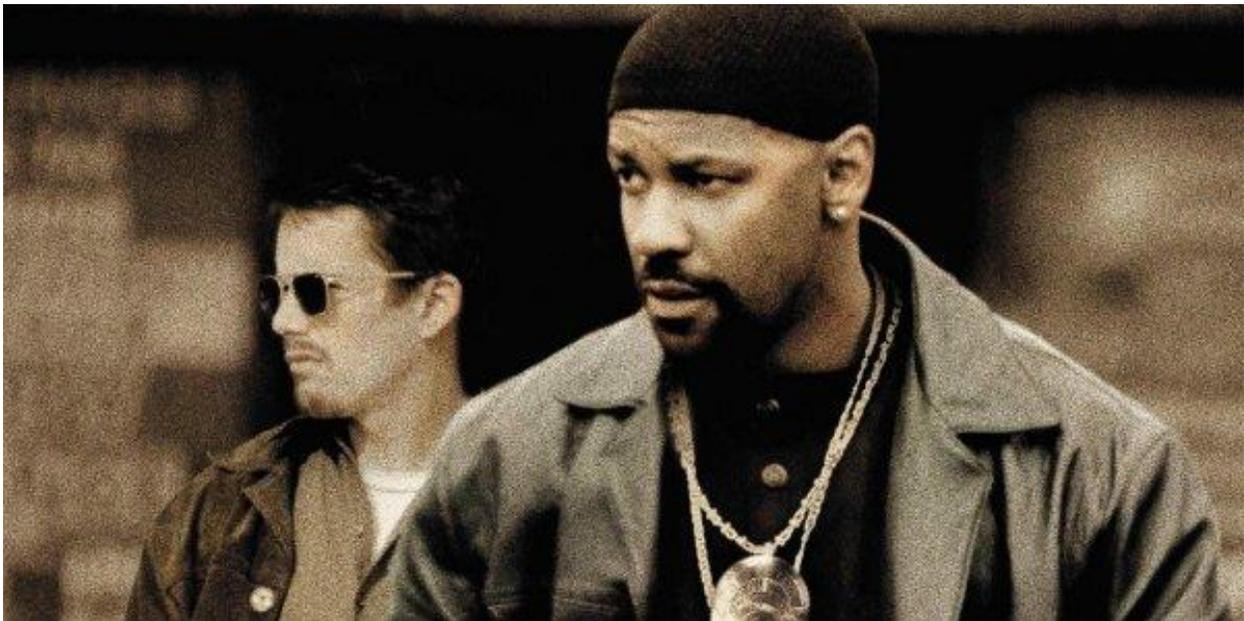
Like an omnivorous invasive species, the Unnecessary is ready to invade every square inch of your script. It can cripple the broad strokes of your plot, bury the essentials of an act, crowd out the forward flow of a sequence, and overwhelm a scene. Like strapping a backpack onto a butterfly or a book to a kite, you can cripple a dramatic plot with the Unnecessary. It's a delicate implement designed to tell a story through actors and to grip an audience. I've taught this tool to development executives at all the major Hollywood studios and they vigorously agree that the Unnecessary kills scripts. They're shoveling out from under it day and night, like a blizzard that never ends. A showrunner for a top network TV show told me that she has to unbury and decipher overwritten scripts that she's given, only to discover that the kernel of the idea hidden under it all is no good either.

Storytelling Skills and Craft as a Dramatist

You've got to be a great storyteller and know a good idea when you see one, and you need solid craft as a dramatist and know how to construct a plot. What makes a story work is the Necessary—its essential elements. You've also got to fight like a demon to keep out the tidal wave of Unnecessary crap that's dying to surge in and swamp the delicate mechanism of your dramatic structure. Price, writing in 1912 said, *"The play is made up of details, and if we did not have some method that enabled us to manage the details, we would be overwhelmed with them."*



Scriptwriting demands total economy because a script is an extremely stripped-down literary form. Creating a tight sequence of cause and effect is a great way to get at the essence of a story. Here's Price: *"The only way anything is procured in a drama is by going about the construction of it properly. Get the outline or structure first."* You do it by working backwards from a story's ending, building from each effect back to its cause, creating a linkage as you work your way back to the story's beginning. It's part plot construction because you're assembling what you've invented, and it's part story development because if there's a gap in the cause and effect, then you invent what's missing, filling in more of the story.



Your first question is: *What is the object of the script?* The object of a plot is a simple, clear statement of where you want the story to end up—the point on the horizon that you're navigating toward.

Training Day's Story Structure

In the movie *Training Day*, the object of the script [****SPOILER ALERT****] is that Jake (Ethan Hawke) defeats Alonzo (Denzel Washington) and emerges as a powerful new man.

The next question is: *What is the final effect that demonstrates this object on-screen with real actors?* The final effect in *Training Day* is that Alonzo gets executed by the Russians

and Jake goes home. Next we want to know: *What is the immediate cause of the final effect?* Or more specifically, what is the immediate cause of Alonzo being executed? It's that Jake takes Alonzo's \$1 million for evidence, so he can't pay off the Russians.

Now we ask: *What's the cause of Jake taking the money?* Jake defeats Alonzo in the fight with some help from locals in the neighborhood. We're reasoning backwards from an effect to its direct cause. The cause of Alonzo's defeat is that he smashes his car after Jake drops onto it, and that stuns Alonzo. Jake dropped onto the car because Alonzo beat him up and was getting away. And that's caused by Alonzo flipping out and attacking when Jake tries to arrest him.

In each instance we ask "What is the cause of that effect?" and not "What happens before it?" This is the distinction that makes the tool work. Any number of things can happen *before* an effect, but only one thing actually *causes* it. Say your partner embezzles a bunch of money and frames you to take the fall, so you're going to kill him. What happens before you kill him might be that you pick up your dry cleaning, drop your kids off at soccer, and buy some poison—but the *cause* of you killing your partner is that he ripped you off and set you up. Chaining backwards from an effect to its cause helps separate the Necessary from the Unnecessary.

Aristotle Recommends Working from the General to the Specific

It's easy to get caught up in your story and it's difficult to be objective about it. Reverse Cause and Effect strips your plot down to its basics in the same way that radically pruning a tree exposes its trunk and major branches. Many screenwriters have a beautifully written scene in a script that does not work, which is like having an ornately furnished room in a house that's falling down. You've got oak trim, gold leaf, and carved marble, but the house is caving in. If you don't get the overall structure right, then the details do not matter.

Aristotle echoes this when he says that in constructing a plot, the writer "*should first sketch its general outline, and then fill in the episodes and amplify in detail.*" He's talking about building from the general to the specific.



Let's see reverse cause and effect for the overall story of *Training Day*, just the broad strokes with no detail.

Object: Jake defeats Alonzo, completes his training, and emerges as a powerful new man.

Final Effect: Alonzo gets executed by the Russians and Jake goes home.

Immediate Cause: Jake takes Alonzo's million dollars as evidence.

Cause: Jake defeats Alonzo in the fight with some help from locals in the neighborhood.

Cause: Jake drops onto Alonzo's car, and Alonzo gets stunned smashing the car around trying to shake Jake off.

Cause: Alonzo beats the living daylight out of Jake and tries to leave.

Cause: Jake tries to arrest Alonzo and a gunfight erupts.

Cause: Jake goes to Alonzo's girlfriend's home to take Alonzo down.



Though the chain of events continues back to the beginning of the movie, this short section illustrates what reverse cause and effect looks like. Played forward, it's a tight sequence of events:

The Plot Mechanics of *Training Day*

Jake tries to arrest Alonzo and seize the money; which causes Alonzo to beat the living daylight out of him and try to leave to pay the Russians; which causes Jake to drop onto Alonzo's car in a desperate attempt to stop him; which causes Alonzo to get stunned when he smashes his car around trying to knock Jake off; which causes Jake to punch Alonzo out and be able to grab the money; which causes the locals to see that the loathsome Alonzo is weakened; which causes them to help Jake; which causes Jake to be able to defeat Alonzo; which causes Jake to be able to leave with the money as evidence that Alonzo robbed and murdered Roger; which causes Alonzo to be executed by the Russians when he shows up without the money; which causes Jake to be able to go home free, his training completed—now a powerful, honest cop.

Do you see how tight and compelling that is? Adding anything extra would be tossing a monkey wrench into a finely-tuned machine. The ability to create the spine of your developing story is a key part of transitioning from story creation to plot construction.

Not only are you linking the major building blocks of your story together by cause and effect, but you're solving holes in your story. When you find an effect that has no immediate cause in the story's progression, then you've found a hole in its logic. And

when you think through the possibilities and invent a cause, then you're stitching the story together a little more, similar to how broken bone knits itself back together.

In this way you gradually weave your story together as you build it. This tool represents an elegant solution to a number of complex problems and challenges faced by dramatists for centuries. Structural unity is such a problem, how to structurally unify the story so that it's one main action, with all its components working together in concert. A simple example is a nuclear submarine. There are many parts in it but every single thing in there is crucial to that machine. It's all one thing, elegantly engineered and constructed. There's one thing—the submarine, and that's all.

Rigorously Excluding the Unnecessary

So as we build a script, we create unity by admitting only that which is Necessary into the plot, and we exclude that which is Unnecessary in the same way that scientists rigorously exclude dust in the process of manufacturing silicon computer chips. Here's another quote by Price: *"Playwriting is made up of compromises, and as in all compromises, the less important things must yield to the more important. The action and the human emotions come first. This protects us from writing too much.... We want just enough, and not an ounce more."*

LET'S SEE REVERSE CAUSE AND EFFECT IN ACTION AS WE BUILD A REAL STORY

Say we're developing a script about a dad who's trying to make amends to his daughter because they've grown apart. Let's say we're in the third act. He kidnaps the umpire who blew a crucial call in his daughter's championship little league baseball game, then forces the ump to admit he was wrong and apologize to the whole team. As part of the reverse cause and effect of the overall story, we would have the following brief section:

Final Effect: The umpire sincerely apologizes to the whole team.

Cause: The umpire realizes how bad his call was and how much the loss devastated the kids.

Cause: The dad forces the umpire to watch a video of the game.

Cause: The dad kidnaps the umpire.

Cause: The umpire blows the call badly and is a total jerk about it. The team loses the championship, and the kids are shattered.



Remember that we're looking at just one small section of the entire story, sketched in broad strokes. Reverse cause and effect is both a plot construction and story development tool, so we'll develop the story further as we construct it. It now becomes necessary to figure out a bit more detail for how things happen.

Gradually Figure Out the Story's Details as they Become Necessary

How and where does the dad snatch the umpire? How crazy is the dad? How does he keep the umpire from pressing charges? How does he get through to the umpire in order to make him really understand what he did? We want to keep it simple and develop the particulars gradually as they become necessary.



So with those questions and others in mind, let's go look at the chain of cause and effect we just did and go back through it again, working backwards from the ending, thinking it through in a bit more detail and weaving in some specifics. And not only are we expanding upon the story, but we're linking it together with cause and effect, incorporating only that which is Necessary.

Cause: The umpire apologizes genuinely to the kids and they accept it.

Cause: The umpire finally realizes just how bad his call really was.

Cause: The dad shows him video of the play and his bad call, shot from different angles.

Cause: The dad ties the umpire to a chair and makes him watch the game video repeatedly.

Cause: The dad kidnaps the umpire from his job as a crossing guard.

Cause: The kids are devastated, and the dad realizes that he can maybe make his daughter feel better.

Cause: The umpire sticks to his call, being quite cruel to the kids in the process, and they lose the championship game.

Cause: The umpire makes a really lousy call which will cost the kids the big game. Their coach protests vehemently.

Systematically Developing Detail as it's Needed

See how we expanded it a bit more? Working backward through what we already have, we layer in a bit more detail, inventing as we go, fleshing out some of the story's particulars. And now we'll go back through it again, expanding on the detail a little more by thinking it through even further.



REVERSE CAUSE AND EFFECT FOR A SEQUENCE IN THE SCRIPT

Object: The dad gets the umpire to apologize whole-heartedly to the kids, genuinely impressing his daughter.

Final Effect: The kids accept his apology, and it means a lot to them. The umpire even offers to coach them next year and they're ecstatic.

Immediate Cause: The umpire apologizes sincerely, saying he wasn't paying attention and that he acted like a total jerk to them.

Cause: The dad says the umpire must apologize to the kids, that he owes them at least that.

Cause: The umpire finally understands that he broke all those kids' hearts.

Cause: The umpire sees on video that his call was completely wrong and that he acted horribly.

Cause: The dad makes the umpire watch the video of the game over and over again.

Cause: The dad takes the umpire to a basement room and ties him to a chair.

Cause: The dad kidnaps the umpire from his job as a crossing guard.

Cause: The dad stalks the umpire to figure out the best way to execute his plan.

Cause: The dad hatches a plan, realizing he has a golden opportunity to make his daughter feel better and earn some brownie points with her.

Cause: His daughter is especially devastated by the loss because the team's beloved coach is retiring.

Cause: The team is stunned and heartbroken by the loss, and by the callousness of the umpire.

Cause: The umpire will not reverse his decision and is really cruel to the kids. The championship is lost.

Cause: The team's coach protests the call and really fights for it.

Cause: The umpire makes an incredibly bad call at the end of the game, which costs the team the championship, right when they were pulling it out of the fire.

So this is one sequence in the script. There are two-to-five scenes in a sequence and two-to-five sequences in an act. If you read that from the bottom up, you have a tight progression of the action for that sequence.



The next step is to divide this sequence into scenes. On the page below I feel my way around, trying to find the natural breaks in the sequence.



BREAKING THE SEQUENCE DOWN INTO SCENES

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So this sequence consists of four scenes:

1. The end of the ball game and its aftermath.
2. Dad getting the idea, stalking the umpire, and snatching him.
3. Making the umpire watch the game over and over on video.
4. The umpire apologizing and becoming the team's new coach.

Let's do reverse cause and effect for Scene 3, the Video-Watching Scene. So we take that section and go through it again, working backwards and thinking it through in a bit more detail, inventing and layering as we go, but still rigorously separating the Necessary from the Unnecessary. The three causes below are a copy from the section above, and now we're going to think our way through them and expand on them.

Cause: The dad says the umpire must apologize to the kids, that he owes them at least that.

Cause: The umpire finally understands that he broke all those kids' hearts.

Cause: The umpire sees on video that his call was completely wrong and that he acted horribly.

Cause: The dad makes the umpire watch the video of the game over and over again.



So now we start at the end and work our way back through it yet again, now developing a bit more detail, which is now final detail. We're still rigorously separating the Necessary from the Unnecessary, so this scene moves well with nothing unnecessary to bog it down.

THE BASEMENT SCENE

Object: The umpire finally gets it and wants to apologize.

Final Effect: The umpire cries, feeling awful for the kids, and says he used to love baseball more than anything when he was young.

Immediate Cause: The dad runs video of the kids crying after the game. It was their last chance to win the big one for their coach who is retiring. They had it in their hands—they *had* it! They don't even hate the ump—they're just stunned and heartbroken.

Cause: The umpire feels horrible, seeing that yes, he is an appallingly bad umpire and was really hurtful to the kids. He says he had gotten so sick of kids because of his crappy job as a crossing guard, but he sees now that they're all wonderful.

Cause: The dad shows a view of the umpire's bad call from yet another angle and zooms in, revealing that the umpire was actually checking his cell phone at the critical moment.

Cause: The umpire gets furious, saying he just checked his watch, that it was nothing.

Cause: One camera shows the umpire looking at something for a moment at the crucial point when the contested play happens.

Cause: The dad has done an obsessively meticulous editing job, complete with slo-mo replays, close-ups, voiceover, and captions. He says he has a fantastic editing program and lots of time at night because he can't sleep, saying he can get a little manic. "A *little?*" snaps the ump.

Cause: The dad had filmed the game with multiple cameras on tripods. Plus he got video from other parents. He makes the umpire watch it over and over again, and in spite of his rage, the umpire is amazed at all the footage.

Cause: The dad tells the umpire that he has to watch the video of the game he ruined. He says if the umpire makes any trouble, he'll tell his wife that he saw him cheating on her when he was stalking the umpire while planning this.

Cause: The dad has the umpire tied to a chair in front of a big plasma TV. The ump is raging mad, shrieking that he hates baseball and that he's going to have him sent to jail. Or shot. Or both.

NOW YOU WRITE THE SCENE

So here's the clincher. Take the structure we just built here and write the actual scene yourself with Final Draft or whatever you use. Start at the bottom of the cause and effect and work your way up. Set the scene by describing that basement room as you see it in your mind's eye. Then write the dialog that we've paraphrased. Do you see how you've got a really tight roadmap to work from? The structure is very solid.

And yet there's plenty of room to improvise as you layer in the final details. It's like being a jazz musician where you know we'll be playing A, B#, D, but you improvise around that. That's the beauty of having such a tight structure from which we've rigorously excluded the Unnecessary—we now have room to play so that the scene can breathe and come to life.

Improvise as You Flesh Out the Structure

Here's Price talking about this: *"The drama economizes in order to be lavish."* We don't want a mere robotic execution of this structure. We want the scene to live and breathe. Have fun with it. Write it five different ways. Use this structure as a launch pad. It's like weaving live plants into a garden trellis. You've structure and you've got life, all woven together into an effective drama.



Visit the [script.kitchen YouTube Channel](#) to view my free one-hour class on Reverse Cause and Effect, divided into seven segments. In it, I build an original story from a one-sentence idea as you watch. It will considerably deepen and substantiate your skills with the tool and its underlying principles.

It is said that scripts are more constructed than written and you can see how true that is. We built the sequence in this script layer by layer and then added the final detail, the description and dialog, almost like a coat of paint. Almost all the hard work has been done and the dialog is play. Here's Price: *"A drama is practically complete before words are added to it."*

Building the Framework of a Story

Look at how a skyscraper gets built. First, they put up the steel framework, the girders and the beams. The shape of the building is determined. Then it becomes necessary to put up the floors and the walls. Then you put in the wiring and plumbing. Then you put in the doors and window and the sheetrock. That's its underlying structure. The last step is to paint the walls and put up the trim and electric cover plates, all the final detail.

You do it gradually and systematically. The underlying principle in using this process to develop and structure scripts is that you take most of the energy that goes into rewrites and put it into engineering the script properly before you write it.

If you want, email me a PDF of your scene at jeff@script.kitchen and I'll post all the different versions at some point.

"A full understanding of Cause and Effect will do more to facilitate methodical dramatic work than anything else."

WILLIAM THOMPSON PRICE

I hope you can see how getting caught up in too much detail prematurely can be counterproductive and can gum up your creative process. Reverse Cause and Effect frees you from the profusion of unnecessary detail so you can travel light and stay flexible as you develop and structure a story.

It's much easier to make adjustments, whether minor or major, if you're not encumbered by too much detail. It's a genuine luxury to be able to scrap your third act by merely

throwing out a page or two of outline, rather than chucking weeks' worth of fully developed scenes that just won't work no matter how you tweak them.

Remember that at first, you're just scouting ahead and laying trail markers, not carrying the whole wagon train on your back. If the broad framework of your story doesn't work, then the details of the story don't matter.

HERE'S THE PROCESS IN A NUTSHELL

To use this tool: Take the story you've created (you can't use this process until you've roughed out a plot), lay out what you've got on cards, and then knit together a tight chain of events by working backwards. Now you've got the spine of your plot, with a good forward flow.

Now divide the overall story into acts and do reverse cause and effect for the first act. Ask "What's the object of the act?" and "What's the final effect that demonstrates that object onscreen with real actors?" Then, "What's the immediate cause of that effect?" and so on as you build backwards to the beginning of the act. As you work backwards through this section again, think it through in a little more detail and weave that into the structure you've already got.

Engineer Your Script Properly Before You Write It

Do this for the rest of the acts, then divide each act into sequences, and work through reverse cause and effect for each of these, gradually fleshing out the detail as you go. This is a lot of work, but so is twenty-five rewrites, and having a well-thought-out outline will give you a much more solid working draft. Engineer your script properly before you write it.

Finally, take each sequence and divide it into scenes. Work through reverse cause and effect for the first scene, gradually layering in the final detail, but still rigorously excluding the Unnecessary, and then write the scene. Then structure the next scene and write that.

Work your way through all the scenes in this way and you'll end up with a complete working draft of the script. Each scene is tight and is part of a tight sequence, and each sequence is part of an act which is tight, and which is part of the overall story, which itself is tight. Your script moves continually from cause directly to effect and helps keep the audience's expectations rolling along.

Tricks of the Trade

There are two important skills in doing this process. The first is to make the critical distinction between what merely happens before an event and what actually causes it. Imagine that you have to go to the store to get some milk and think about all the little things you do before you actually drive away, many of them entirely unrelated to the fact that running out of milk caused you to go to the store.



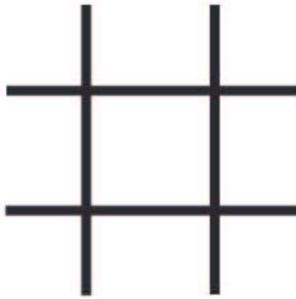
The other skill is working from the general to the specific. At first, it's necessary to make the overall framework of the story work. It's just the broad strokes with plenty of room for adjustment as you go forward. Then you layer in just a bit more detail. One of the tricks with this tool is to get the feel for how much is just a bit more. Only as much as is needed.

Gradually Adding Detail to Story's Structure

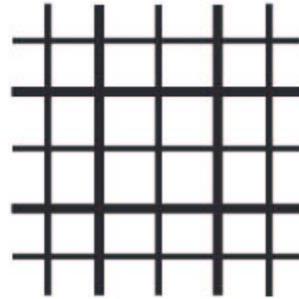
Remember, you're making up the story, inventing it, not merely organizing something that already exists. So you're gradually and systematically creating more and more detail as it becomes necessary. I invented the particulars of exactly how the dad forced the umpire to see that he was checking his phone when the critical play happened.

At first I had no idea of how the dad would do it. I had to figure it out, but I did it gradually, content to feel my way through creating the dad's interaction with the umpire. In this way I was freed from the profusion of unnecessary detail.

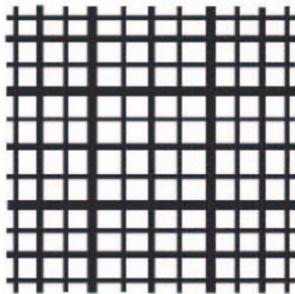
A



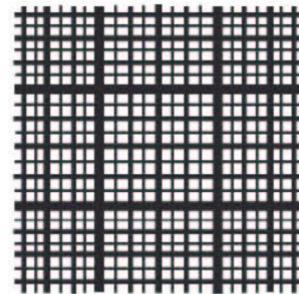
B



C



D



In the diagram above you can see that section A is just the broad strokes. Then in section B, a bit more is woven in. In C there's just a bit more detail, but now it's getting dense, and then in section D, a bit more is laid in and that's final detail—a tight weave. It's a way to systematically develop the details of your story as you construct it, approaching it gradually so you have excellent control of your story as you build it up organically.

"To tell or write a story is easy; to construct and write a drama is difficult."

WILLIAM THOMPSON PRICE

A List of Benefits for Scriptwriters

Here are some of the benefits and specifics of using Reverse Cause and Effect.

- Use the power of logic to systematically build a tight, coherent, and powerful outline.
- Separate the Necessary from the Unnecessary in every single part of your script.
- Give your plot a crisp forward flow that keeps your audience on the edge of their seats.
- State the Objective of your script in crystal-clear terms and move everything toward it.
- Make the crucial distinction between the writer's objective and the protagonist's objective.
- Gradually filling in detail as it's needed frees you from the profusion of unnecessary detail.
- Make sure that your overall plot works before developing your acts, sequences, or scenes.
- Turn mere narrative into coherent, compelling, continuous Dramatic Action.
- Never feel trapped by a jumble of story possibilities because this tool helps you work through it in an orderly fashion.
- Find a clear logical path through your story material and toss out extraneous dead weight.
- Cure the "episodic" script, a mere succession of unconnected plot points that don't create effective Dramatic Action (a state of action that you put the audience in because they're compelled to find out what happens next, how it all turns out).
- Be able to step back and evaluate your material objectively at any point in your writing process.
- Make this process a habit and you'll never be paralyzed by the plot construction process again.

How to Write Movie Scripts, TV Scripts, and Stage Plays

If you'd like to learn more, I offer both a three-month and a two-year training program in my seven tools. My two-year apprenticeship program, *Scriptwriting Mastery*, will train you deeply in the techniques and principles of dramatic writing. Interestingly, Reverse Cause and Effect is just a part one of these tools called *Sequence, Proposition, Plot*. This three-step process is consistently called the most advanced development tool in the industry by Hollywood development executives. Reverse Cause and Effect is the first part of this three-step process—*Sequence*. It's the sequence of cause and effect, and you now know how essential this is in helping to dramatize a story.

In *Scriptwriting Mastery* we train by constantly building multiple screenplays, TV scripts, and stage plays in a rigorous and demanding apprenticeship program. You'll emerge a seasoned, versatile dramatist who can make scripts work in any genre. The program is available at <http://script.kitchen>. You can join our monthly Subscription Service at <https://script.kitchen/subscription-program/>. My students have been nominated for multiple Oscars and Emmys, and a number of them are successful writers, showrunners, producers, and directors.

I hope to see you in the program.

"It may be that you have solved that drat mystery."

David Mamet – Writer/Director

"Jeff Kitchen is a brilliant dramatist and writer. He's been teaching and guiding screenwriters for many years. His ability to analyze story and structure is profound."

Ted Melfi - Writer/Director - *Hidden Figures* (nominated for Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay Oscars)

"I've worked with Jeff one-on-one for many of my projects. His tools and insights push me to explore the material in a deeper way—and find the dramatic core of the situation."

Jessica Sharzer - Writer/Producer - *American Horror Story, Nerve* (nominated for three Primetime Emmys for *American Horror Story*)