How to Generate Narrative Momentum in Screenplays
A DOWNHILL STRUGGLE...

There’s a great quote from F. Hauser and R. Reich that states: ‘In all the best material, the outcome is inevitable and inherent in the opening moment and every moment inbetween.’

Think how fated Daniel Plainview’s rise to power and fall into corruption feels throughout THERE WILL BE BLOOD or how unavoidable Travis Bickle’s descent into violence is in TAXI DRIVER or, more broadly, how irrevocable the protagonist’s downfall feels in any theatrical tragedy.

‘Narrative momentum’ itself refers to the flow or drive of a story as well as the investment of an audience in that progression, and the above highlights something key.

To use the well-tortured metaphor of story-as-journey, for any journey to have real impetus, we need a clear point ‘B’ to run at from our point ‘A’. We need the story to continually ‘point forwards’ to an inevitable (but, crucially, not predictable) final moment.

Building narrative momentum is, therefore, about drawing the straightest possible line between two narrative points, using cause and effect, action and consequence, to create the sense that the story is moving inexorably towards a fitting, unavoidable conclusion.
A boulder rolling down a hill.

There are two broad stages to this process:

1) To structure the narrative in a way that implies some specific goal or conclusion, be it finding the killer, resolving or failing to resolve the marital conflict, losing or keeping the empire etc. This gives us a loosely sketched ‘B’ point towards which to foster momentum in the first place.

2) Avoiding anything extraneous in getting to that point B, anything that slows the process without contributing new conflict or momentum of its own.

The easiest way of breaking this down is via a kind of ‘concentric circles’ approach, starting with the base style itself, then moving outward to the story’s opening, then the moment to moment, the scene to scene, and ultimately the overall story structure.

**STYLE**

Cohesion is foundational to narrative momentum. A story that too often pulls focus to elements or details that don’t serve a clear narrative purpose is a drag racer with an open parachute.

This is something that applies even at the very basic level of description.

To illustrate, there’s a common criticism levelled at literary analysis that’s summarised with the phrase ‘Sometimes the curtains are just blue’.

This refers to a tendency on the part of a reader or critic to ascribe deeper meaning to some small detail when in truth there isn’t any.
The curtains are just blue.

Of course, screenwriters are often bombarded with the idea that they need to keep their description brief and to-the-point, and this does feed into momentum.

Cleaner, more concise description allows for a smoother read which in turn helps generate a clear sense of pace and progression.

But it goes further than that.

If we are to build that sense of mounting dramatic momentum, it’s important that every detail to which we draw attention is iterating (or occasionally reiterating) something that moves either the story, or our understanding of it, forward.

Simply put: if the curtains are just blue in a screenplay, there shouldn’t be any curtains in the first place.

For an example that takes this idea to the nth degree, it’s worth looking at Walter Hill and David Giler’s incredibly concise script for ALIEN.
Take the first page:

FADE IN

SOMETIMES IN THE FUTURE:

INT. ENGINE ROOM
Empty, cavernous.

INT. ENGINE CUBICLE
Circular, jammed with instruments.
          All of them idle.
          Console chairs for two.
          Empty.

INT. OILY CORRIDOR - "C" LEVEL
Long, dark.
Empty.
Turbos throbbing.
No other movement.

INT. CORRIDOR - "A" LEVEL
Long, empty.

INT. INFIRMARY - "A" LEVEL
Distressed ivory walls.
            All instrumentation at rest.

INT. CORRIDOR TO BRIDGE - "A" LEVEL
Black, empty.

INT. BRIDGE
Vacant.
            Two space helmets resting on chairs.
            Electrical hum.
            Lights on the helmets begin to signal one another.

There are very few wasted words here, and what words there are all have a clear job:

• The first shot of the engine room hints at the overall size of the ship.
• The cubicle itself suggests this thing is manned. The fact that there are two chairs illustrates we’re dealing with
multiple crew. The fact those chairs are empty, the instruments idle, draws attention to their odd absence.

- The shot in the corridor adds to the growing Mary Celeste feel, while the fact that the turbos are operational reveals that, despite its emptiness, this ship is moving, functional.
- The following shots of the corridors and infirmary reiterate and expand on the emptiness of the environment, i.e. this place is huge; there should be people; there aren’t.
- And, finally, we reach our first point of dramatic change as the ship seems to ‘wake up’ via the lights on the helmets.

So, how does this generate narrative momentum?

For that we have to look to the film’s inciting incident, which follows almost instantly: the crew of the Nostromo are awakened from their stasis early, before they’ve made it home, because the ship has intercepted a distress signal.

This answers three questions posed by the first page.

Why does the ship seem empty? The crew is in stasis.

Why is the ship moving? It’s taking them home.

Why is it waking itself/them up? A distress signal.

Note that the laser focus of the description ensures there isn’t a single line on that first page that isn’t geared towards posing those questions in the first place.

Everything points forward.

As such, we generate narrative momentum right out the gate.

So, returning to our blue curtains, if they’re the same blue as the carpet and our protagonist’s slippers because they’re obsessive, or blue because it was their dead father’s favourite colour, or blue because they’re trying to subtly annoy their spouse, then
that detail will contribute to narrative momentum by having a forward implication, or, to put it another way, something to ‘pay off’.

Of course, stylistic decisions like this impress momentum on a reader rather than a viewer, so the other key thing to note about the above excerpt is this: we enter the story at a moment of change - as the dormant ship and crew wake up – which brings us to…

“IN MEDIAS RES”

A story’s opening is obviously the pivotal moment when it comes to generating momentum, given it marks the first opportunity to push that figurative boulder down that figurative hill.

Coined by ancient Roman poet Horace in his Ars Poetica, ‘in medias res’ is a useful dramatic principle to employ in doing so. It translates to ‘in the midst of things’, and is often interpreted as referring to narratives that open with a sequence or event from later in the story before cutting back.

But this is a little reductive.

Narratives that cast aside drawn out set-up and dive straight into the meat of the story fit the bill just as well.

To build momentum, we start during action.

It’s easy to interpret ‘action’ here as literal, i.e. the shooting, running, forward rolls, star jumps kind of action, and there’s no doubt opening a story in that way does carry weight.

Think THE DARK KNIGHT, for example, in which we open with a bank robbery leading into the reveal of the primary
antagonist, or *KILL BILL*, which opens with the fight between Beatrix Kiddo and Vernita Green.

These scenes work as effective narrative hooks because they completely eschew context.

So, aside from the action itself proving engaging, there’s dramatic investment via that initial confusion - ‘What’s happening here? Why is it happening? Who are these people?’ The answers to these are all the more enticing given we’re thrown straight in.

Obviously, these are a superhero film and an action film respectively. They’re generically justified in opening in this way. But the principle applies more broadly too.

Perhaps a cleaner way of defining ‘in medias res’ in this sense is, rather than ‘opening with action’, ‘bypassing exposition’ or ‘losing the preamble’.

It’s worth looking at a few examples across the spectrum, and noting a repeating structure in narratives that open in this way, which goes as follows:
1) We drop the audience into the midst of an unusual or tense or conflict-laden or creepy situation without context.
2) There’s a point of change that either reframes our understanding of that situation or alters its course.
3) The sequence culminates in a reveal/event that has prospective ramifications for the story.

To apply it to the ALIEN opening outlined above, we get:

  1) The situation: an eerily empty ship.
  2) The point of change: the ship wakes up, wakes the crew up.
  3) The reveal/event: there’s a distress signal coming from a nearby planet.

This formula may unfold over one minute or ten, but regardless it’s a really solid way of building early narrative momentum, and we can see it in play across some pretty varied narrative examples:

On the ‘action’ end, we have THE DARK KNIGHT as above:

  1) The situation: a bank robbery is already underway when we join the story (though we don’t yet know who’s behind it). The heist functions like a well-oiled machine, with each goon given a specific task in a chain.
  2) The point of change: we realise that each goon has been instructed to kill the one before once they’ve completed their part of the job.
  3) The reveal/event: the final goon is revealed as the Joker, and the stolen money as being the mob’s. The initial thrust of the plot is in place.

INGLORIOUS BASTERDS, a dialogue heavy opening with a dramatic, active conclusion:
1) The situation: Nazi soldiers arrive at LaPadite’s little farm. Landa wants to ask him some questions.

2) The point of change: the camera reveals the Jewish family hiding beneath the floorboards to the audience, drastically reframing the situation.

3) The reveal/event: the Nazi soldiers kill the family, but we reveal that one of them, Shoshanna, escapes.

THE THING, for an example in horror:

1) The situation: a Norwegian helicopter is chasing a dog across barren arctic wastes.

2) The point of change: the helicopter lands and one of the crew accidentally destroys it. The sole survivor pursues the dog towards an American research station.

3) The reveal/event: the Norwegian shouts frantically at the Americans, waving his gun. One of them shoots him. The dog runs inside.

EX MACHINA, an incredibly quick-fire example of this at work:

1) The situation: Caleb wins a competition.

2) The point of change: he’s taken by helicopter to a vast, isolated estate.
3) The reveal/event: he meets Nathan, who reveals that Caleb will be carrying out a Turin test on an advanced AI.

**GOODFELLAS**, for an example in which we really do start with a moment from later in the story:

1) The situation: Henry, Tommy, and Jimmy are driving somewhere late at night.
2) The point of change: They hear something, wonder if it’s a flat tyre, pull over.
3) The reveal/event: we discover there’s a guy in the trunk, a guy who’s clearly not as dead as they thought.

For the reason this formula proves so effective in creating early momentum, we simply need to look at what each stage is accomplishing, which boils down to…

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Although the execution of that same opening structure is clearly varied in the above examples, what stands out is the similarity in its *function*.
The first step poses questions:

Why is the ship empty and moving?
Who’s robbing this bank and why?
Why is Landa quizzing LaPadite?
Why are the Norwegians chasing a dog?
What did Caleb win?
Where are these three men in suits going in the middle of the night?

The second step adds to or intensifies that intrigue:

Why is the ship waking up?
Why are the robbers killing one another?
Will Landa discover the family under the floor?
How come the Norwegian survivor is so desperate to kill the dog that he’s willing to shout and wave a gun at the Americans?
What is Caleb’s prize given he’s helicoptering over an estate?
What is the noise in the back of the car?

The third step answers those questions but, crucially, poses another, bigger one:

The crew were in stasis while en route home, and a distress signal woke them, but what will they find when they follow it?
The Joker’s stealing the mob’s money and killing his crew to leave no trace, but why?
Shoshanna has escaped, but where will she go? Will Landa capture her?
For those who speak Norwegian, the crazed man outright tells the Americans that the dog is not a dog, but even for those that don’t, his panic gets that across, but what is it, and why is he terrified of it?

Caleb won a week with Nathan, who wants him to test an AI, but what AI? And what will the test conclude?

The noise in the trunk was a person, someone they were clearly on their way to ‘get rid of’, but who is he and why did they (try to) kill him?

So, what we get is a mystery in microcosm. The narrative presents a series of dramatic questions, generating intrigue that it resolves within minutes while in turn posing a bigger question, generating bigger intrigue.

We create narrative momentum via a kind of instant gratification.

We’ve just seen questions posed and answered, and we’re now in a place to expect the same of these new questions – like that initial intrigue, this too will resolve down the line in the same satisfactory way that the opening just did, an expectation that
encourages investment on the part of the audience and as such momentum for the broader story.

It’s like giving a child a sweet and promising the whole bag later on.

This is why certain types of narrative opening are so maligned. Think of the clichéd-to-the-point-of-parody ‘alarm clock’ opening, in which we begin with our protagonist groaning as they wake up to a 6am beeping, reaching their arm across and fumbling to make it stop, perhaps before playing through a ‘day in the life’ of our protagonist.

This generates no momentum because it invites no questions. We’re not driven to wonder why they’re in bed or why they’re getting up early because those things have easily assumable answers (sleep and work respectively), while the day in the life is flattened, reined in by the fact that it’s the answer to a question we were never driven to ask.

It plays like pure exposition, set-up.

Though the above series of openings do, of course, involve exposition, the reason they generate such clear momentum is because they delay it, make us ask for it first.

The very first moment of EX MACHINA has Caleb winning a week with the CEO of the company at which he works, to learn about his latest project.

But that’s not what we see:

• We see him win something.
• We see him in a helicopter, presumably headed to that something.
• We see him enter an isolated, expensive house, meet a guy we don’t know – Nathan.
• And then Nathan outlines the true nature of the prize.

The set-up is turned into the answer to a question the audience was already asking.

Now imagine we frontload that exposition, and open with Caleb receiving an email that says ‘Congratulations, you’ve won a week with Nathan Bateman, CEO of Bluebook, at his multi-million-dollar estate, where he’s working on an all-new AI project!’

Now where’s the narrative momentum during the subsequent helicopter ride?

Sure, the narrative is technically moving forward. Maybe there’s even a hint of intrigue in the idea of meeting Nathan.

But it doesn’t feel like it’s progressing or gaining traction because what we’re currently seeing is information we already have, albeit actively unfolding.
To put it another way, in this version of the scene the narrative is pointing backwards to the information in the email (Caleb is going to stay with Nathan) rather than forwards to the answer to the question ‘Where is Caleb going?’

As such, the momentum of the opening slows to a crawl.

In all of the examples above, we see the same thing: they plant the question before the exposition. They make the audience ask for it.

INGLORIOUS BASTERDS doesn’t open with Landa stating he’s looking for the Dreyfus family the second he steps out of the car; it opens by making us question his true intentions.

THE DARK KNIGHT doesn’t open with the Joker walking into a bank, cackling about taking the mob’s money; it opens by making us question who’s robbing the place at all.

THE THING doesn’t open with an eponymously infected dog tearing through Norwegians; it opens by making us wonder what on Earth that dog is.

Exposition alone can’t generate momentum, but withholding it can.

This is the real dramatic benefit of ‘in medias res’. It’s a means by which we can avoid clear context and as such foster a desire in the audience to discover what that context might be.

Of course, the difficulty of applying this across the board is that certain types of narrative undoubtedly lend themselves to opening with a tense or unusual or unexplained situation more than others.
But this doesn’t preclude us from employing it in more reined in, grounded, character-focused narratives in some form or other.

For a solid example, look to **THE SOCIAL NETWORK**, which still somewhat follows that three-step formula:

1) The situation: we’re dropped into the middle of a quick-fire discussion between Mark and Erica about Final Clubs.
2) The point of change: Mark offends Erica by denigrating her education.
3) The reveal/event: Erica breaks up with Mark, fostering the bitterness that in turn feeds into many of his actions across the film (and, notably, the very final shot).

Obviously, this isn’t a carbon copy of the more genre-steeped examples above. The questions it poses are broader and have **lower stakes**:

What is the underlying tension of the relationship? (Mark’s arrogance and abrasive social style)

What will the outcome of this argument be? (A break up)

And moving forward, how will Mark respond to this? (Facemash).
Nonetheless, a lot of the same principles apply here. For one, we jump in without context. There’s no front-loaded exposition.

Note how late in the day it’s actually confirmed that the two are in a relationship (pretty much the point at which that rapidly stops being the case) or how the question ‘Why does Mark want so badly to get into a Final Club?’ is subtly answered by his response to Erica leaving – he’s desperate for approval (something we see multiple times throughout the narrative).

Though it’s executed differently, the key point remains the same – everything points forward, and when it comes to opening a narrative with momentum, that’s precisely what we need.

**IN LATE, OUT EARLY**

To ensure we maintain that momentum, we can apply a relatively similar principle from scene to scene across any screenplay.

As William Goldman puts it:

“I never enter scenes until the last possible moment… and as soon as it’s done I get the hell out of there.”

Practically speaking, to effectively get into a scene ‘at the last possible moment’ is to enter it at the latest point at which the audience can still comfortably infer what we skip (that is, of course, assuming we want them to know what we’ve skipped).

So, for example, let’s say our protagonist is going to a party, and that at that party, they’re going to meet their love interest for the first time.
Let’s say that the core of our narrative momentum ahead of this point has been their crushing loneliness, their desire to find someone and the pressing question ‘will they?’

How late can we join them at the party?

For the answer, we look at what’s specifically relevant to the forward thrust of the narrative.

We’re not going to accomplish much by showing their arrival, the hello’s and how-are-you’s and so on, so that can go.

We probably want to iterate or reiterate their loneliness, which we could feasibly do by highlighting that they go alone, that they struggle to hold a conversation with the first few guests they talk to, that they retreat to the sidelines.

But we could just as easily and twice as efficiently establish that by cutting right ahead to mid-way through or even late in the party, with our protagonist already propping up a wall, alone.

The audience can easily infer the lead in – that they haven’t exactly been the life and soul – and after a few moments of that awkwardness, we initiate the exchange that forms the core of the scene.

What we can’t really do, however, is cut midway into the exchange between protagonist and love interest.

We lose the ability to emphasise the importance of the meeting, to highlight the love interest as a ray of sunshine in what would otherwise have been a depressingly solitary evening, and we risk undermining our previous character work by making the protagonist look immediately sociable at the point we enter the scene.
Arriving *too* late therefore hampers our momentum just as drastically as arriving early, because it risks tanking the foundation of that momentum.

It’s very much like opening ‘*in medias res*’ as outlined above – we want to arrive at or near the point of change.

In this particular, slightly faceless example, the point of change is the meeting between protagonist and love interest, a meeting that heralds a shift from loneliness to… whatever conflict the subsequent relationship between the two will bring.

So, we want to enter as close to that as possible *while* maintaining the ability to illustrate both the change itself *and* its narrative significance.

Enter the scene too early and we end up spending too much time iterating and reiterating our protagonist’s isolation and awkwardness. The narrative stagnates.

Enter too late and, as above, we skip over the crucial change itself and diminish the sense of transition, of progression.

To maintain narrative momentum, we want to arrive on the **cusp of the point of change**.

Like a dormant ship, an unannounced Nazi or an unexplained bank robbery, doing so facilitates the question-and-answer that keeps that boulder rolling.

So, what about leaving early?

Well there’s a useful quote from John Truby that helps here:

> “The scene should… funnel down to a single point, with the most important word or line of dialogue stated last.”

We leave once we reach ‘the point’ of the scene.
Returning to our ever-more-tortured example, the point of our scene is the protagonist’s realisation that this person, this meeting, marks the exact change in their life they’ve been waiting for since (or maybe even before) the narrative began.

So, the best way to maintain our momentum is to leave the scene at the precise moment that point hits home, perhaps when the love interest reveals something specific about themselves that mirrors the experience of our protagonist.

For a perfect (and more specific) example of this principle in play, take the famous ‘asparagus’ dinner scene from **AMERICAN BEAUTY**:

INT. BURNHAM HOUSE - DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Lester sits at the table in sloppy clothes, eating his dinner voraciously and drinking beer from a bottle. Across from him, Carolyn picks at her food, watching him with contempt. EASY-LISTENING MUSIC plays on the STEREO.

We HEAR the back door SLAM, then Jane enters and quickly takes her seat at the table.

JANE
Sorry I’m late.

CAROLYN
(overly cheerful)
No, no, that’s quite all right, dear. Your father and I were just discussing his day at work.
(to Lester)
Why don't you tell our daughter about it, honey?

Jane stares at both her parents, apprehensive. Lester looks at Carolyn darkly, then flashes a "you-asked-for-it" grin.

LESTER
Janie, today I quit my job. And then I told my boss to fuck himself, and then I blackmailed him for almost sixty thousand dollars. Pass the asparagus.

CAROLYN
Your father seems to think this kind of behavior is something to be proud of.

LESTER
And your mother seems to prefer I go through life like a fucking prisoner while she keeps my dick in a mason jar under the sink.

(ashen)
How dare you speak to me that way in front of her? And I marvel that you can be so contemptuous of me, on the same day that you lose your job!

LESTER
Lose it? I didn't lose it. It's not like, "Oops, where'd my job go?" I quit. Someone pass me the asparagus.

CAROLYN
Oh! Oh! And I want to thank you for putting me under the added pressure of being the sole breadwinner now--

LESTER
I already have a job.

CAROLYN
(not stopping)
No, no, don't give a second thought as to who's going to pay the mortgage. We'll just leave it all up to Carolyn. You mean, you're going to take care of everything now, Carolyn? Yes. I don't mind. I really don't. You mean, everything? You don't mind having the sole responsibility, your husband feels he can just quit his job--

LESTER
(overlapping)
Will someone pass me the fucking asparagus?

JANE
(rises)
Okay, I'm not going to be a part of this--

LESTER
(means it)
Sit down.

Jane does so, surprised and intimidated by the power in his voice. Lester gets up, crosses to the other side of the table to get a PLATE OF ASPARAGUS, then sits again as he serves himself.

LESTER (cont'd)
I'm sick and tired of being treated like I don't exist. You two do whatever you want to do whenever you want to do it and I don't complain. All I want is the same courtesy--

CAROLYN
(overlapping)
Oh, you don't complain? Oh, excuse me. Excuse me. I must be psychotic then, if you don't complain. What is this?! Am I locked away in a padded cell somewhere, hallucinating? That's the only explanation I can think of--

Lester hurls the plate of asparagus against the wall with such force it SHATTERS, frightening Carolyn and Jane.

LESTER

(casual)
Don't interrupt me, honey.

He goes back to eating his meal, as if nothing unusual has happened. Carolyn sits in her chair, shivering with rage. Jane just stares at the plate in front of her.

LESTER (cont'd)
Oh, and another thing. From now on, we're going to alternate our dinner music. Because frankly, and I don't think I'm alone here, I'm really tired of this Lawrence Welk shit.

So, the ‘point’ of the scene is that Lester, a man typically downtrodden by those around him, has decided to take control of his life.

Note how late we enter. Carolyn’s first line reveals that we’re joining them after they’ve already discussed Lester leaving his job.

This generates momentum in two ways.

First, we join the scene already in a situation of heightened tension – we don’t need to take a dramatic ‘run up’ here; we’re already in full, family argument swing.

So, as above, we’re entering right on the cusp of the point of change, right as Lester is about to, for once, stand his ground.
Like our ‘love interest’ example, this facilitates a brief reiteration of the pre-existing momentum (which is based on Lester’s complete dissatisfaction set against his seeming inability to stand up and do something about it, the dramatic question at hand being ‘will he?’) via Carolyn demanding that Lester explain himself to Janie.

Just like entering at a point that allows us to highlight our protagonist’s loneliness before it changes, this gives us the opportunity to highlight Lester’s lack of control right before he takes it back.

We see it in that description, the dark look Lester gives Carolyn suggesting he resents her request but is about to act on it, before the mood shifts and he does as she asks but on his terms.

Again, we enter right on the cusp of change.

Second, we avoid ‘pointing backwards’.

An exchange in which Lester outlines what happened to him today (something the audience has already seen in previous scenes), would cover old ground and hamper our sense of narrative progression, particularly given Carolyn forces him to confess to Janie soon after.
By entering after Lester and Carolyn have already had the bulk of the discussion, with the explanations and initial reactions left for the audience to infer, we’re able to make the scene itself about something new, specifically each parent trying to win over Janie, and more importantly Lester taking control.

The scene then perfectly adheres to Truby’s notion of ‘[funnelling] down to a single point’.

The scene stops dead on Lester’s final line, a line in which he makes a definitive statement about changing the music from now on, which pays off an earlier scene in which Carolyn makes a point of cementing her choice of music to a less-than-thrilled Janie.

So, the scene’s core point is Lester taking control, and it ends bang on the line in which he categorically does.

Note that we aren’t shown the immediate fallout. Neither Carolyn nor Janie is shown to respond.

We simply cut to the next scene (in this case Carolyn going upstairs to talk to Janie).

This is a really effective way of generating momentum because it refuses to let conflict dissipate.

Were we to play out the argument to its conclusion, to the point at which the meal ends and the family leaves the table, the effect of the scene’s peak dramatic moment – Lester throwing the asparagus and taking control – has diminished.

Cutting *at* that peak allows us to surf the wave - the intense conflict of the previous scene is still ‘active’, and the narrative carries that existing momentum into the next scene.
If we let that conflict dissipate we’re essentially forced to reset when we enter the next scene, to regenerate conflict, which takes time and slows momentum.

It’s worth briefly examining this principle in terms of…

**CAUSE AND CONSEQUENCE**

To return to that very first point – to generate and maintain momentum, we’re trying to draw the cleanest possible line between two narrative points.

In that light, the purpose of any individual scene on that line is to keep the pencil moving, a process that, narratively speaking, comprises change, conflict, cause and consequence.

So:

- The scene itself is the consequence of a prior cause.
- That cause instigates a change…
- which in turn fosters conflict (the bulk of the scene itself).
- And then we’re back to cause again, as the scene feeds into the broader narrative.

To continue with the AMERICAN BEAUTY example:

- the cause is Lester leaving his job a scene before
- the change is his newly empowered decision to take control
- the conflict is Carolyn’s aversion to his actions
- and the consequences echo throughout the narrative as Carolyn finds another lover, Janie starts to realise she might be better off without her parents, and Lester ill-advisedly considers pursuing Angela.
A scene that builds momentum is a scene that takes an often pre-existing dramatic element (though there are exceptions, e.g. the very first scene or an inciting incident that introduces an entirely new element into the story), then spits it back out transformed.

And, crucially, **it needs to do both.**

If the argument between Lester and Carolyn were to resolve within the scene, with them seeing somewhat eye to eye by its close, we’d kill our momentum dead. There’s not enough to spit out. The scene no longer ‘points forwards’.

![Image of a scene from a film](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Equally, to capitalise on that momentum in the first place, we want to avoid any dead air, any beats that aren’t contributing to that conveyor belt.

Once a scene has achieved its purpose, sticking around will only diminish its effect.

Of course, this isn’t to say that momentum requires rushing. A scene can take it’s time in accomplishing those goals in the first place, so this doesn’t preclude slower, more tempered moments or more drawn out scenes, it simply informs the *structure* of a scene.
As such, perhaps the more explanatory way of phrasing ‘get in late, get out early’ is this:

**Avoid entering too long before change and avoid leaving too long after the point.**

**INEVITABILITY**

This brings us to the overall narrative itself – generating momentum across an entire story, and the idea laid out by Hauser and Reich that, in an effective narrative, the conclusion is inherent in its fundamental set-up.

This is the overarching key to narrative momentum; the grand, sweeping, thematic measure that ensures it holds throughout.

As was briefly mentioned above, a crucial distinction to make right out the gate is this: inevitability and predictability are completely separate.

Unless we’re dealing with a fractured narrative or, say, classic tragedy, the likelihood is we don’t want the audience to know where we’re headed.

What we do want, however, is for the conclusion to promise something specific ahead of time, to pose the answer to a defined question or suggest a culmination of a clear arc even before we get to it; for the end to be in the beginning.

What makes an ending enticing is what it promises. The more it promises, the more the audience’s desire to reach it and as such the greater the momentum.

If all we’re waiting for is a general ‘what happens next?’, the story invites less investment and generates less momentum than
one in which we’re waiting to reach something more clearly defined.

As such, some genres have inherent momentum.

In a whodunit, for example, the audience knows precisely what question the conclusion seeks to answer. From the moment the death occurs (point A), the nature of the ending, though not its specific content, forms a sense of trajectory in the audience’s mind towards a clear point B.

It therefore has that sense of inevitability that’s so conducive to momentum in the first place.

But that’s the simplest example. We can’t simply rely on genre convention to create a sense of narrative purpose. Most of the time, we have to create it.

In this sense, inevitability in a narrative context involves not an overtly foreseeable sequence of events (predictability) but making it clear what the culmination of those events specifically seeks to resolve as early as possible.

We need to know the point of the ending before we get to the ending.

A great way of accomplishing this is via the relationship between character and story.

To build that sense of momentum, of progression towards an unavoidable conclusion, one needs to be specifically tailored to the other. The course of events in the narrative must not only be the reason behind the arc that the character or characters undergo, they must be specifically and solely engineered to challenge the characters’ most fundamental traits or beliefs.
It needs to feel like only this specific story could bring about this change.

That way, *everything* - character, conflict and plot - ends up pointing in the same direction. It allows us to sketch a kind of loose dramatic ‘B’ point in the audience’s minds ahead of time to strengthen the illusion of gathering speed.

It’s easiest to illustrate with a couple of case studies.

**SE7EN**

There is, of course, some momentum generated here by virtue of the search for a killer, by the structure afforded by a series of themed killings.

But how do we maintain overarching momentum when the killer up and hands himself in two thirds into the film?

To highlight the inevitability at work in this narrative, we have to identify the fundamental difference between Detective Somerset and Detective Mills.
Obviously, the former is older, more experienced, methodical, realistic while the latter is young, naïve, reckless and idealistic, and those contrasting traits do foster a lot of their conflict.

But there’s a more important difference, at least narratively: their opinion of people.

Somerset believes people are fundamentally apathetic, and that their apathy makes them amoral. People aren’t evil, but act in superficially evil ways because it’s easier to do so than the alternative, so fighting against crime is essentially futile.

Mills believes people are fundamentally good and worthy, that those who act immorally or commit crimes are outliers, crazies, disturbed, and that fighting against them is a noble and worthwhile cause.

It’s something highlighted multiple times via the way the two interact:

- Somerset’s desire to be taken off the case when he realises the killings are going to go on and on,
- Mills’ determination to take it over, his brash decision making when it comes to making progress on the case.
- The bar scene, in which they actually outline their opposing positions explicitly.

In fact, this core difference between the two characters is implicit right from the start as they investigate that first ‘gluttony’ crime scene, via Somerset’s surprise that Mills fought to be reassigned to this city (Mills’ reply? ‘Though I could do some good’), a place he sees as beyond saving, and via their varying approaches to investigating the scene itself.
If we then look to the broader story, the case of John Doe, we find that it’s perfectly tailored to challenge this precise system of beliefs.

Doe himself is the third point of the triangle, and, once we meet him, he comes to exemplify a third perspective on the exact same issue.

He believes that people are fundamentally sinful, so much so that they’ve grown accustomed to their own evil, and the only way to fix it is to send a clear, violent message that their behaviour is punishable.

So how does this build momentum?

Well, going back to Hauser and Reich, the end is right there in the beginning.

We establish conflicting viewpoints, and quickly begin a series of events that specifically and drastically challenges them, and as such cleverly sow the seeds for a conclusion in which the tension between those viewpoints is going to come to a head.

And it does. Doe’s final trick seemingly proves Mills’ perspective wrong by turning him into a violent criminal, proving good or bad doesn’t matter – anyone can kill in the right circumstances –
while Somerset is forced to try and passionately appeal to a perspective he’s never held by trying to mine Mills’ sense of morality to convince him not to pull the trigger.

Once he has, Somerset decides to stay, going back on the one certainty he’s had all film.

So, the two detectives essentially swap perspectives, and the third perspective is, well, dead.

Bearing in mind this is the culmination of a conflict that exists before they’ve even figured out there’s a serial killer in the first place, the end very much is in the beginning.

It may seem obvious, but compare this to, say, the exact same narrative, but with a different character arc.

Let’s say the defining conflict of Somerset and Mills’ relationship is their perspective on family, with the former, weary officer trying to convince the latter that sinking his time and passion too deeply into the job will damage what’s really important.

We could feasibly make this conflict an engaging one, with Mills slowly growing to understand the words of his wiser partner, to notice how much Tracy is struggling with the move, and
deciding that maybe he should what’s best for his family rather than falling deeper down the homicide rabbit hole, only for the script’s ultimate conclusion to cruelly strip that away from him.

But it hugely slows the momentum of the overall story because the conclusion no longer clearly promises the culmination of that arc ahead of time.

There’s nothing about Somerset, Mills and Doe headed into the desert for Doe’s final act that inherently implies a resolution to Mills’ crisis of priority. It’s a character arc that would likely resolve alongside the main story rather than as an inseparable consequence of it.

We’d have to change Doe to a character that specifically challenges our protagonists’ views on family to give it any momentum.

Again, it goes back to ‘drawing the straightest possible line’.

We need the separate elements of the story to point in the same direction. If these elements are working at cross purposes, it becomes much more difficult to build that sense of forward progression.

**Cohesion** is key to momentum.

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**THE GODFATHER**

Michael Corleone’s arc is a good example of the same idea.

The very first time we meet him is at his sister’s wedding. He’s back from the army with his new girlfriend, Kay.

Their first significant conversation is about Michael’s family, specifically a story about how Don Corleone managed to get singer Johnny Fontaine out of his music contract.
The final line of the scene is: ‘That’s my family, Kay. It’s not me.’

This is the first significant thing we learn about Michael’s character, and it is the belief that is consistently and specifically challenged by the events of the narrative.

His father is attacked, forcing him into helping the family, then to act on behalf of the family, then to lead the family.

The final shot of the film represents a crystal clear inversion of that first interaction between him and Kay.

Back at the start, they’re sitting together, outside of Don Corleone’s ‘quarters’, separate from the broader family as Michael makes clear that he and they are nothing like.

At the end, Michael’s inside and Kay outside as the door to his office is closed.

It’s the inverse of his line at the start.

It’s not just his family, it’s him.

Again, the end is in the beginning.
If that first conversation were to reveal the hardships Michael went through as a marine we wouldn’t get the same effect, the clear ‘A’ and ‘B’.

It’s about framing the narrative in such a way that certain events are granted inherent dramatic drive.

In the example of SE7EN above, the scene with Doe, Somerset and Mills in the car doesn’t generate momentum simply by virtue of the base story elements (i.e. where are they going? What is Doe’s plan?) but from the fact that we know that whatever is waiting will resolve the conflict of perspectives between the three of them.

Same with THE GODFATHER.

When Don Corleone is shot and the family turns to revenge, we’re not just thinking ‘What’s going to happen? Will he survive?’, we know that whatever is waiting will force Michael to reconcile his view of his family with their current crisis and that the conclusion will, in some form, tear that view apart.
The narrative is given something specific to aim at without revealing the actual course of events.

If we allow the audience to infer the purpose of the conclusion ahead of time in this way, by laying it out early on, that narrative pull is far stronger.

**BELIEFS AND INCITING INCIDENTS**

The simplest way of achieving the above is to ensure that whatever event kicks off the plot is clearly linked to the character’s core perspective in some way.

Simply setting up a protagonist’s ordinary, humdrum, 9-to-5 life before turning it upside down with the inciting explosion or phone call or in-laws arriving or murder or job loss or microtape or list of sleeper agents doesn’t provide that clear sense of direction in and of itself.

Using the inciting incident to reveal the type of resolution towards which the narrative is going to roll by posing it as a direct challenge to the fundamental core of the protagonist, however, can really help us do so.
So, to list some simple examples of varying genres, including the above…

**SE7EN**

2) The incident: they find themselves on the tail of a killer whose actions reveal a third perspective.

**CHILDREN OF MEN**

1) The core perspective: Theo is a pessimist who believes any attempt to salvage humanity is futile.
2) The incident: He’s tasked with escorting the first pregnant girl in years to The Human Project, whose goal is to save humanity.

**STRANGER THAN FICTION**

1) The core perspective: Harold Crick is a man obsessed routine, who takes comfort in doing the same thing every day.
2) The incident: He discovers he’s the main character in a story, a medium that specifically relies on breaking routine to create drama.

**THE GODFATHER**

1) The core perspective: Michael views himself as different, more honourable than his criminal family.
2) The incident: his father is shot, forcing him to help his family through the crisis and take revenge.
Of course, this isn’t *essential* to narrative momentum, it just provides a way in which an event can be framed in relation to a character in order to generate it.

**THE STAGES OF NARRATIVE MOMENTUM**

The simple steps to generating narrative momentum are these:

1) Keep description simple and focused. Avoid detail without narrative purpose.
2) Don’t drag out the opening. Enter the narrative in full swing. Withholding context a little encourages investment.
3) Structure scenes around the ‘point of change’. Get to it and from it as cleanly as possible.
4) Construct a sense of where the narrative is headed right out the gate. Don’t reveal the course of events, but give the story clear direction by tying it to a predestined character transformation.
THE END

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