



## Case Study: Using the Story Grid to edit my scene

This is the opening scene of a story I started in high school and revised recently. It is definitely not perfect yet!

### First Draft

Izzy pointed across the railing of the ship, "Him."

Her mother had always said that an English port is a shock to the senses, most violent when seeing one from the deck of boat. *Et oui*, she was more than correct. The sounds of the port were diverse in their origin yet all too similar in their volume. The chickens squawked equally to the horse's braying, the beggar's crying and the merchant's calling. The scents were worse, particularly to someone who did not enjoy fish, as Izzy was.

All of this racket, especially once the number of people had been taken into consideration, should have made their job very difficult. But it wasn't.

The "him" in question stood not with the passengers or the merchants but on the dock, a mere twenty feet from Izzy and Genie, admiring their vessel.

"It is as if he is asking us to choose him," Genie said in a whisper. They were well hidden and quite certain no one on shore was able to see them, although they could see everything, but they couldn't be too careful. It wouldn't do to flub it all now.

### Comments

The first line in the original might actually be a bit more engaging than the second draft. But, it doesn't make sense in the first draft. The focus should be on the ship, not the port itself (they're actually too far out from port to be able to see anything described)

Gripping the dagger creates more immediate tension than "choosing him." The second also better establishes the characters: the rich man, the girls who are good friends, while still hinting of the 'job to be done.'

### Second Draft

Tails and top hats have no business on a dock, and neither do those who wear them. Yet a man dressed in both stared out at the vessel with four masts as if he had nowhere else to be. The docks were a maze of decaying wood with boats crammed in every bit of space. There were grander ships on these docks, ships that would be much better suited to the kind of business deals with which the man was certainly acquainted. Somehow, though, he focused on the creaky ship that took shelter in the most distant corner. Its emerald green sails, though limp against the deck, must have drawn his attention. Of course, that's why they were there.

Izzy gripped her silver dagger and polished it on her shirt. Crouched behind a barrel of fish, she watched the man survey the ship as if it was his for the taking. She glanced across the dock to Genie, under her own cover a few feet away. A look passed between them, the kind of infuriating look perfected by those who'd been in each other's company far too long. Izzy winked back.



"I doubt he realizes what he is looking at," Izzy said, "We took down the jolie rouge."

A scream sounded from the portside square in front of them. Izzy and Genie looked at each other and grinned. "So, he's the one, is he?" Genie said after a moment, "Will Wolfe approve?"

Izzy got a spark in her eyes, "what-Genie, are you scared of the Big Bad Wolfe? Lost your nerve all of a sudden?"

"If anyone were to lose their nerve, it'd be you," Genie shot back, "Where's Henri?"

"He's below deck with Maiden and you know it." Izzy leaned back against the mast, "if I were as bad a mother as you seem to think I am..."

"I have never once said that you are a bad mother." Genie took her eyes off of the mark to make eye contact with Izzy, "I know as well as you that a good mother isn't the same as being a good person."

Pointing out that Genie had just called her a bad person would lead to a full-blown fight and probably a severe scolding from Wolfe so Izzy agreed with her and moved the conversation back to the subject at hand, "is he the one, then?"

Genie peeked around the corner of the sail, "He has a gold watch on a chain, his hair is neat, and his clothes look new. I'd say he is rich."

'Jolie rouge' is a French word for pirate ship (or flag or something). I'm telling the audience they're pirates right away, rather than keeping the reader in suspense.

Too many characters mentioned too soon.

In the second draft, I didn't give away the motherhood info until much later. I'm dealing my cards too early – losing intrigue and suspense.

**We're a few hundred words in and haven't reached the inciting incident of the scene yet.**



"Who wears a tie to come down to the docks? Of course he's wealthy." Izzy stuck her nose up in the air with mock snobbery, "I couldn't say much for his intelligence, of course but the wealthy types always educate their children."

"At least, I'm sure he can read and write."

"Yes Genie but so can I. I think Wolfe is looking for more substantial intelligence than that."

Genie stuck her tongue out. She couldn't read.

The young man was now strolling past their ship to look at the much-smaller schooner beside them. A gust of salty spray came up from the sea and he sputtered in it. He was too preoccupied with examining the boats to notice the wave of screams that had started up in the square.

Paston was pushing through the heavy crowd, sword drawn and three boxes of provisions in his hands. A lady buying fish fainted as he pushed her out of the way. When he reached the dock, his path was open. Paston ran to their ship, boarded, dropped the boxes and raced into the crowd again.

He passed Halogen John who was the second in the steady stream of crew members who would be hauling stolen goods onto their ship for the next quarter of an hour.

In the second draft, I give this description in one, opening paragraph.

Too much backstory, too early.

Besides being less believable, this confuses the focus of the scene. We still haven't had an inciting incident. Izzy and Genie expect all of this.

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Let's talk about stories: those we write, those  
we read, those we live!

Genie's attention had never wandered from the man they were supposed to be watching. Her attention span had always been longer, even when they were little. "He looks strong, doesn't he? And, Izzy!" She grabbed Izzy's forearm and pointed, "he is patting a bulge in his pocket so he must have money on him. That's four out of four requirements, isn't it?"

Izzy hopped to her feet, "Let's do it."

"Wait," Genie scrambled up behind her, "we must wait and let the boys do it. If we lose him, Izzy, so help me I will chop off your hair in your sleep."

Izzy threw her head back and laughed. She scampered over the lines that littered the deck and around the hatches, "Come on Genie, we mustn't let the boys have all the fun."

As she boarded the gang plank, she turned to the only person on deck; a bushy-haired, bespectacled boy with an abundance of freckles. "Hey Flipper," she called, "We're going to fetch our hostage. Be useful and make the lines around the pins while we're gone, the ropes are in chaos at the moment."

Without waiting for a reply, she scooped up the cords that held the boxes together and whisked Genie off the boat.

The man they'd been watching was at the end of the dock and had his back to them to boot. It was really too easy.

We've lost  
focus from  
the man and  
have to  
refocus. Not  
great.

Cringiest line  
ever?

Again, our  
focus is  
divided by  
her going  
back onto  
the boat.

Is this the  
inciting  
incident? I  
don't know.

Bye-bye any  
and all  
suspense.



Before she could take a step, the first mate, Owen Harvey, darted in front of Izzy with more cartons of goods. "Be quick, girls," he said, panting, "There is some trouble in the square and Wolfe insists we need to set sail in ten minutes." He raced onto the ship with his boxes, clearly too distracted to consider where they were going. Wolfe's rules stated that girls weren't supposed to leave the ship in an attack and Owen usually enforced these parameters. She let him go, like she would want to remind him of the rules.

Izzy walked evenly towards their target. "Genie," she said in a voice no more audible than the wind, "the saloon." Genie nodded. They walked towards the man's back until they were only an armspan away. Izzy wrapped her cord around the nearest bollard and swung herself down to the water. Holding on tight, only her toes skimmed the water and her head was hidden from the man's view.

"Hello there," Genie was saying in her sultry voice, "what brings a handsome man such as you to our dreary little town?"

The script had never changed though the man was always different. Genie would be drooping an arm over him, an inviting smile on her face. Only today, she'd had better work her magic quickly.

"I'd rather not say."

In the second draft, the inciting incident of the scene occurs around 200 words in. It is a casual inciting incident.

Original: Is the trouble in the square the inciting incident? We keep shifting focus from the man.

Note: in the 2<sup>nd</sup> draft, we're not yet sure \*what\* Izzy is doing.

Or is this the inciting incident?

With a single movement, Izzy slid the dagger into the scabbard on her shorts and strode down the dock towards the man in the top hat.

"Nice ship," Izzy called, walking. She had to shout to be heard over the gusting wind.

The man started and looked over his shoulder. When their eyes met, his expression relaxed. "Sure is."

"Yours?" Izzy asked.

"I plan to make it mine." He reached over and caressed the ship's wooden railing. He was younger than his top hat-clad silhouette would suggest: fresh faced, eager, curious about the world, and confident he could buy anything he wanted in it. He was, in every way, the perfect mark.

Izzy inched closer to him, still smiling. She had to keep his attention. "You from these parts?"

"Indeed, yes." The man meandered across the length of the ship, one hand on its rail. "My father owns these docks. I've never seen this ship here before, though."

"Surely you don't remember every ship you've ever seen?"

The man paused, leaned back to see the crow's nest. "I would remember this one." He sighed, then looked back at her. His eyes widened, and Izzy glanced down to make sure her dagger was still hidden beneath her flowing shirt. It was.



Izzy pulled herself back onto the dock, readied the cord and pulled the scarf off of her braided auburn hair.

The man took a step back from Genie, "are you a quean?"

Genie shot a panicked look over the man's shoulder. That was not a typical response. What was this man-a priest?

"No," Genie said rather too forcefully but she relaxed into her next words, "just a lonely girl looking for a little bit of company. And my, you are the handsomest man I've ever laid my eyes on."

The man immediately reacts suspiciously. We get straight to conflict with little tension build-up.

Here we mention Wolfe, this could serve as a progressive complication : Izzy is doing this to please someone and she had better get it right

There's tension here. We know something William doesn't; Izzy's intentions aren't genuine

Some other part of her must have finally caught his attention. She doubted it was curiosity over her red hair. Whether he was taken in by the inch of her stomach peeking out from under her shirt or the linen that clung to her small waist in just the right places, this was all the better. Of all the ways to distract a man in these parts, dangling a beautiful woman in front of him was perhaps the most effective. If only they could pull this off, Wolfe would be so pleased.

"I'm Izzy," she said.

"William Brisset the Second." He still studied her. "I haven't had the pleasure of seeing you before either. Are you new to town?"

Izzy shrugged. "You could say that." She turned back to the ship. The gang plank was a few feet away. She backed up towards it, slow step after slow step.

"Are you here on holiday? Visiting family or friends?" He matched her movements. People like him would follow her as a donkey trailing a carrot to preserve a polite conversation distance.

"I'm on a holiday of sorts," Izzy answered, "with my family...of sorts."

"You sure are mysterious, Miss Izzy."

"Just Izzy." she said. "And you sure do ask a lot of questions."



Let's talk about stories: those we write, those we read, those we live!

The same backstory given in the original, but it serves as better ammunition, creating more tension.

From Izzy's position, she could see Genie crouched behind the barrel. Genie winked. *Go on*, the look said, *don't let the boys have all the fun*. It was the same wink she'd given as a girl running ploys in saloons. *Go on*, Izzy, go all in, Genie would urge. They'd perfected their routine back then and won big. But it had been years since they'd played the game and Izzy worried they were rusty.

Izzy sidled over so she was the only thing in William's vision. "I like a man who has some curiosity."

He chuckled. "I thought curiosity killed the cat."

"That may be true," Izzy said, "but a cat has nine lives."

William looked at her like he was a little boy and she was a long-awaited present.

So, Izzy held out her hand. "Come on," she said, "let's go see your ship."

Perhaps William had a sense of adventure. Perhaps he was enticed by the sparkle in Izzy's eyes. Or, perhaps, the combination of a beautiful girl inviting him onto a beautiful ship was too much to resist. Either way, in a moment of head-shaking stupidity, he took her hand.



Progressive  
complication  
-> William  
isn't going  
along with  
the plan  
anymore

They raced together towards the ship like rebellious teenagers. When they reached the gang plank, William spun her around. For a moment, it was as if she was just a girl, spinning in the sun with a handsome boy she liked. When the world stopped spinning, Izzy remembered the truth. Her smile didn't falter, and she didn't pull her hand from William's grasp. She knew who she was, after all.

"What do you think?" she said as they stepped onto the gangplank; the long strip of wood that connected the ship to the dock like a bridge. "Will this do?"

William dropped her hand. "It could be quite good. Quite good."

"Well come on, then," Izzy said, beckoning him up towards the ship proper, "let's explore, shall we?"

He hesitated. "Perhaps we should wait for the owner."

"They could be ages." Izzy's chest tightened.

"My father owns these docks," William said. The child in his eyes was gone and all that was left was the adult. The propriety. Damn. Izzy'd almost been starting to like him. William continued, "I shouldn't be seen trespassing on a client's vessel."

"If your father owns all this, it's not trespassing, is it?"

"Indeed, it is." He stepped backwards, towards the dock.



Izzy tiptoed towards them, pretending to gag. There was a reason Genie played the quean part. She was blond and so curvy that her height-or lack thereof- was never a factor. In saloons, she would flirt with their mark, give a kiss and take her money. Then Izzy would drop a drink on the man's head and they would both disappear before he knew what had happened. But it had been years since they'd played the game and Izzy worried they were rusty.

You're very beautiful," the man said, "but not -" Izzy pounced, pulling his arms behind his back, tossing a cord to Genie. By the time the man had realized what hit him and was struggling, Izzy had his hands tied behind his back and Genie had his knees bound with the cord. Izzy's scarf went around his eyes. He was strong and he struggled against them.

Izzy is getting desperate here, tension increasing.

The tension is gone. They have him. The gig is up in 300 words

Here's the turning point! It's an action turning point, leading to William's crisis (the viewpoint character does not have to have the crisis in a scene)

Izzy took hold of his hand and tugged him towards her. She dropped her voice, "I'm only in town for the day and this boat here is bound to have a dark little corner for doing-" she raised her eyebrows "-damnable deeds."

William flinched, pulling out of her grasp, his hands up above his head. His expression was pained. "What are you? A prostitute?"

"No!" Izzy tried to look appalled at the suggestion. "I want to have fun, is all. I've never been on a boat like this."

"How sad for you." He took another step away from her.

"Please," she said, "just come on board for a minute."

Maybe she was too insistent, too pleading for a girl supposed to be on a carefree adventure because William shook his head. "I'm leaving."

When he turned around, Genie stood at the bottom of the gangplank, knife outstretched.

There was a wickedly mischievous glint in her eye, but her posture was all-business. "I wouldn't be so sure of that."

William spun back to Izzy. She drew her dagger and it gleamed in the sunlight, inches from his throat.

"Hands on your head, Mr. Brisset," Izzy said.



"What-" he sputtered. "Hold on a minute. Put the knives down!"

Izzy would be a fool to try to bring him back to the boat by herself and Genie wouldn't be any help at all. She looked over her shoulder to see all of the crew returning to or already on the ship, the sails were making their way to the sky. Zounds.

"HALOGEN JOHN! QUICK SWITCH!" she yelled at the last two people in the line of crew boarding the ship, "COME HERE AND HELP RIGHT NOW!"

While she was distracted, the man flailed and Izzy nearly lost hold of him. His shirt was so slippery it was surely made of silk and impossible to grasp. Genie was struggling to keep a grip on his ankles but she wasn't very strong to begin with. The man continually stepped on their feet. Halogen John and Quick Switch were running towards them. Then the man bit her arm. Izzy swore and stupidly let go of his arms. He kicked Genie out of the way and took a few running steps. Izzy was not letting him go. She lunged and grabbed his hair, pulling the dark brown collection of it as hard as she could. Genie ran to his front and jumped onto his foot, making him scream.

Popping out of the water is a bit weird – needs some finessing.

There's never any danger here or potential for the plan to go wrong. Also, many more characters are introduced.

Sort of a progressive complication ?

The crisis point here is still a bit murky, but William's decision is basically to comply or not to comply. He chooses not to fight and follows their orders.

Two men popped out of the water where they'd been lying in wait in the shadow of the gang plank. They blocked William from fleeing into the sea. Izzy felt Quick Switch and Halogen John had come up behind her, intimidating with their usual burning red faces and toothy grins. Owen Harvey, the largest and most tattooed man they had, and Flipper, small, ginger, and bespectacled, took up ranks behind Genie. Seeing this, William closed his eyes briefly.

Genie and her dagger stepped onto the gangplank, the tip pointed at William's heart. "You heard her, Brisset, hands on your head. If you run, we'll catch you. If you scream, we'll kill you."

He complied. His hands were shaking. "I don't know what you think you're doing, but if it's money you want-"

"Don't you worry," Izzy said in a soothing voice usually reserved for rocking a baby to sleep. "We're already getting your money."

"You," Genie said, "you are just a lucky bonus prize."

While William stared at Genie, Izzy lunged forward and grasped his arm. His muscles were rigid. Genie took hold of his other side. "Come on board, Mr. Brisset."

"No." William's eyes moved back and forth, taking in his captors. "I don't understand."



The man was cussing his mouth off and momentarily distracted by the pain. Izzy reached down with her free hand and pinched his wrist hard and long. "Now you yankee listen to me. There is a crew of thirty people on my ship that will hurry over and restrain you the moment I ask. My friend and I have been observing you for the past half hour and have deemed you the perfect hostage, so you will be sailing away with us whether you fight us or not. I suggest not. Our captain is a strict ruler and I advise not giving him reason to dislike you."

"What do you want with me, you stupid jades?" the man yelled, starting to struggle again. Izzy kept a firm grip on him but Genie's fists had clenched and she stood up and slapped him.

At that moment, Halogen John appeared next to Izzy and grabbed the man's arms with much more force than she would have been able to muster. Once they had a firm hold on the man and had stuffed a bandana in his mouth, Quick Switch, so nicknamed because of his proficiency with a sword and the frequency with which he used it, grinned. "I didn't know we was goin' fishin' today, Iz. Good catch, I think."

The group walked briskly towards the ship. Halogen John and Quick Switch holding the hostage and Izzy and Genie on either side of them.

"We're kidnapping you, you idiot," Izzy said, "but if you do as we tell you no harm will come to you."

William still stared at them blankly. Or rather, stared at their daggers.

"On the deck," Genie ordered. She tugged him forwards, "let's go."

This dialogue  
doesn't  
seem too  
bad to me  
but perhaps  
too much  
detail given,  
too much  
info given  
away

Fairly  
uninterestin  
g action  
that's not  
moving the  
plot or  
creating  
tension



"What is Wolfe gonna do wi' him?" Halogen John said. He was about as rough and uncivilized as Quick Switch and had a permanently red face that matched his flaming temper.

"Not the faintest idea," Izzy said.

Genie grumbled, "Oh, of course you're fine with not knowing Izzy, but after four years you'd think Wolfe would tell us what his dirty work is before he forces us to do it."

Halogen John's voice rose an octave, "Oh, is the prissy princess mad?"

"How unusual." Quick Switch mocked. Genie scowled and they laughed until they reached the gangplank. Izzy told them to cork it.

Everyone was on deck, some loading boxes into the cargo hold, many hoisting the sail. Wolfe stood on the roof of his quarters, his blasted whistle in his dirty paw. "John, raise the flag! Switch, go find Flipper and clean up whatever mess he's made! Izzy, put the prisoner in the steering house! Genie, help her!" He blew into the whistle three times, his hairy face and bald head turning red from the effort, "Let fly the dock lines! Pull up the fenders! Why in God's name hasn't someone brought in the gangplank?" Another blast of the whistle as Izzy pushed the prisoner into the steering house. Wolfe shouted, "Augie, push us off from the-Owen Harvey what in the hell has gotten into your sails?"

Soooo much  
happening in  
this scene.  
Can you  
keep track of  
it? I can't.

This whole  
section was  
moved into  
later scenes.

This is the  
inciting  
incident of  
the global  
story.

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we read, those we live!

At that, Izzy slammed the door of the steering house. She and Genie climbed onto the roof to get a better view.

Owen was the second best sailor on the ship but at that moment with one foot on the pin railing, one foot on the dock and the boat already drifting away with the wind, he was the most foolish man in the universe. "Owen!" Genie yelled. Everyone on deck stopped working. Everyone stood in silence and watched as he pushed off from the ship, landing on the dock on his stomach. He got to his feet and started running, not towards the boat he had sailed on for a dozen years but away from it, into the crowd of people who were wondering who had robbed them of their provisions. No one moved.

Somehow the ship managed to get itself off the dock. They were sailing away from their crimes at high speed. Izzy could only stare at the crowd into which Owen had run. This was treachery and by all rights, they should sail back to the dock, find their first mate and treat him as a traitor. Yet they had just committed robbery and kidnapping and going back could mean a life sentence in prison for all of the crew. Halogen John began to swear, Quick Switch was in danger of stabbing someone, Picardy the Third began to rave about the nobility and tradition of their chosen profession, a passionate monologue no one but him had ever believed. Wolfe stared down at them as if they were the traitors.

No  
connection  
between  
William's  
kidnapping  
and this  
event. We  
don't have  
enough  
context to  
understand  
the  
significance  
of this.

This is a  
random

action; not  
building on  
what came  
before.

I love this  
description,  
but I feel like  
there's too  
much here  
for an  
opening  
scene. It  
really is two  
scenes in  
one.  
#killyourdarli  
ngs



Then a thunder of falling wood came from below them. The door to the Steering House fell to the ground and snapped into shards of splintery wood. The hostage emerged with the vein on his neck pulsing. He pulled the cords off him, dropped them to the ground and ripped off Izzy's scarf revealing wild eyes. He took in the sights before him and Izzy did too; emerald green sails from three masts flapping in the wind, twenty-something people in various garments that seemed more like shifts than clothing, and a red flag flying above them all complete with two skulls-and-crossbones and one hourglass. He swore profusely, "all of you are dirty rotten, lunatic savages!"

Izzy jumped off the roof and landed in front of the stranger, auburn hair swinging and honey-colored eyes sparkling. "Actually," she said, leaning back on the railing behind her, "we're dirty rotten pirates."

Beginning of  
the climax.  
We see the  
truth of  
William's  
character  
and Izzy's:  
William  
fights, Izzy is  
unfazed by  
the  
kidnapping.

Resolution:  
the  
necessary  
follow-up to  
the  
preceding  
action. We  
understand  
for 100%  
sure why  
what  
happened  
just  
happened.  
(Note, the  
fact that  
they were  
pirates is  
more  
ambiguous  
in the 2<sup>nd</sup>  
draft as well)

He finally boarded the ship.

When they landed on deck, Augie and Halogen John shoved William to the ground. He tried to fight, but it was fruitless. They pounced on him with ropes and manacles. The physicality of it seemed to shock William into defense. He yelled and cursed, his limbs flailing. He was so loud, he rose Picardy the Third from his nap. Izzy stayed back, letting the boys get on with it.

Soon, William was shackled to the mast, hands behind his back. The vein on his neck pulsed and his eyes were wild. He swore profusely. "All of you are dirty, rotten, lunatic savages!"

Izzy leaned back on the ship's railing, red hair swinging and eyes sparkling. "Actually," she said, "we're dirty rotten pirates."