

# One Scene, 42 Takes and 2 Hours in a Bathroom Stall

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Scene 63. INT. BATHROOM. NIGHT.

## Multimedia

Video

[Scene 63 \(Vimeo; Warning: Explicit Language Contained\)](#)

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*Frances and Sophie inside a stall together.*

**FRANCES:** I was lying. I don't love Patch.

**SOPHIE:** I do love him.

**FRANCES:** Since when? When did this happen?

**SOPHIE:** It's been happening.

**FRANCES:** That's [expletive] [expletive]. Sophie, COME ON!

**SOPHIE:** No, you're [expletive]. And you're making me feel really bad right now.

**FRANCES:** I want to love him if you love him, but you don't love him.

**SOPHIE:** I DO.

**FRANCES:** (*tearing up*) Sophie! I [expletive] held your head when you cried. I bought special milk for you. I know where you hide your pills. Do not treat me like a three-hour-brunch friend.

**SOPHIE:** I'm not talking to you while you're like this.

*She turns away. Frances hits the wall close to Sophie's head. It's violent and kind of scary.*

In the film “Frances Ha,” Scene 63 is 28 seconds long. We did 42 takes in total, two hours of shooting in a bathroom with no breaks or pauses other than for direction and blocking. In 50 days of shooting, we averaged around 35 takes per scene. Most independent films shoot in 25 days with, at most, 10 takes per scene.

A take, in this case, refers to the entirety of the above printed text, acted from beginning to end. Meaning that Mickey Sumner, playing Sophie, and I, playing Frances, said those words and performed those actions 42 times in a row. The scene had to play “in one,” a take in its entirety, with no edits. The take is the scene. Noah Baumbach, the director and my co-writer, was going to have to pick only one of those 42 takes for the final film.

To write this essay, I went back to the editing room and watched all 42 takes. I also read the script supervisor's notes, which include Noah's opinions of each performance. Using the footage, the notes and my memory of the day of shooting, I created the following take journal.

**Take 1 (2:04 p.m.):** The first one. Not great, but not bad. The first go-round always has an adrenaline to it that is thrilling and unwieldy. There is a pride in simply getting through it, saying everything pretty well correctly and not melting into the ground with embarrassment for all the *acting* that we are doing.

**Take 2 (2:08 p.m.):** Because the first take went fairly well, I immediately become cocky and start overplaying it. I'm acting *too drunk*. It's whiny and high-pitched, and for some reason I'm leaning over the sink in a way that makes me look like a hunchback.

**Take 3 (2:13 p.m.):** Now I swing too far in the other direction and pitch my voice a lot lower. It sounds fake, as if I'm trying to sound important. Frances' rhythms are more fleet and funny. I touch Mickey too much, it's too aggressive. She flinches, and she's right to, because what I'm doing is weird.

**Take 4 (2:16 p.m.):** I know I'm doing the scene badly, but I can't figure out how to do it well. Usually by Take 4 something has settled, but not this time. I do a weird line reading just to change it up. That surprises me midperformance, and then I mess up my next line — I say "three-hour-*lunch* friend" instead of "three-hour-*brunch* friend." I apologize immediately after Noah calls, "Cut!" Little words count.

**Take 5 (2:20 p.m.):** Still hunched over. Less angry, more sad. I'm probably just sad for myself, which is a terrible trap for an actor to fall into. I can tell that Noah is not thrilled with what we're getting. He hasn't said anything yet — no "Good take" or "Mark that one" to let me know that I'm on the right track.

**Take 6 (2:22 p.m.):** Slow. REALLY slow. I try to straighten up! Well done! The crazy-anger is all gone, which is good, but it doesn't have any energy. By the end of the scene, I'm back to hunching.

**Take 7 (2:24 p.m.):** For some reason I totally lose my lines. I trip over my tongue. I get very angry with myself and slam the wall next to Mickey's head too hard at the end of the scene. She lets out a gasp - — I'm frightening her.

**Take 8 (2:27 p.m.):** Because I am playing the scene angrier, Mickey is fighting back harder. A very strong "I DO" from her. I

hit the wall quite violently. Mickey starts crying.

**Take 9 (2:30 p.m.):** I am upsetting Mickey too much — it's hard for her (or for anyone in that position) to come down from so much emotion and reset and do the scene again. Now she looks upset throughout the entire scene, not just at the end. Sophie is stronger than this, more justifiably angry with Frances than frightened by her. I'm not doing my job as a scene partner.

**Take 10 (2:32 p.m.):** We start, but then I immediately stop the scene. "Sorry, sorry for this," I say. I hate breaking a take. But I have a question. Writing a script does not necessarily mean you understand it as an actor. Noah and I talk about Frances' sincerity. Me: "When I say, 'Since when,' am I serious about that?" Noah: "Yes, but it's not like you really want to know." Me: "Right, right, let's go again."

**Take 11 (2:36 p.m.):** Calmer energy. Too calm. It's death for the scene. It's clearer though, less drunk. At the end, I get a "Want to run it again right away?" from Noah. Nothing else, just "Run it again." This angers me. I want praise. We do another one right away while the camera is rolling. It's better, less forced. He was right.

**Take 12 (2:38 p.m.):** Now I'm underacting deliberately. But it feels more specific. I'm building it from the inside out, trying to wait for it instead of flinging myself in one direction or another.

**Take 13 (2:41 p.m.):** I start and stop. It's a dud.

**Take 14 (2:44 p.m.):** It's beginning to take shape. The rhythm is kicking in. Mickey is a rock, hitting it perfectly every single time. Acting against someone who has the showier moment is always difficult, but she's nailing it.

**Take 15 (2:47 p.m.):** I'm still leaning over — why am I doing that? I laugh through the scene, which seems like an interesting choice, but as soon as the take is over, Noah says, "I think that

you're fed up with her already, so don't laugh." I nod and say, "O.K., right, it's not funny." I am taking in his direction now. Acting is not simply performing but being in a state of pliable awareness, like hot metal — all possibility and softness in something that is inherently strong.

**Take 16 (2:50 p.m.):** This is the first take for which there are any script notes. It reads simply, "Good." This means that after the take, Noah leaned over to the script supervisor and said, "That was a good one." First genuinely good take, and we're almost an hour into it.

**Take 17 (2:52 p.m.):** Another "Good" in the script notes. We're on a roll! When a scene starts working, it feels as if every choice you make is the right one. It's getting into a zone where each take can be wildly different, but it all feels true. Frances is the right mix of drunk, angry and self-righteous, while Sophie is simultaneously over Frances' antics and infuriated by them.

**Take 18 (2:55 p.m.):** The notes read, "Blocking changed." Thank God! After 18 takes, I finally stop leaning over in a death hunch. We've changed my action so that I'm turning off the water and drying off my hands as we start. The scene is instantly better.

**Take 19 (2:58 p.m.):** The acting is good, but there are weird sounds of doors opening somewhere in the club outside, which messes up the audio.

**Take 20 (3:02 p.m.):** I'm making a meal out of drying my hands with the paper towel. I am drying them too vigorously, enjoying having a prop far too much. It has become a crutch.

**Take 21 (3:05 p.m.):** I'm not paying enough attention to Mickey, which is a bad choice. The only way to make a scene work is with the other actor, and the minute I start thinking about myself more than them, I am sunk.

**Take 22 (3:09 p.m.):** Another “Good” in the script notes. My performance is finally clean and focused, and Mickey is great as always.

**Take 23 (3:12 p.m.):** Because I’m washing my hands every single time at the top of the scene, my fingers have started to pucker. But it’s a good action, so I keep washing.

**Take 24 (3:15 p.m.):** I overarticulate some of the words. I emphasize the “me” too much in the way I say “Don’t treat *me* like a three-hour-brunch friend.” It makes it sound as if there is someone we’ve just been interacting with who *is* the three-hour-brunch friend.

**Take 25 (3:17 p.m.):** The take is pretty good, but as soon as Noah calls, “Cut,” Mickey says, “I was waiting for it, sorry.” Meaning she braced for my wall hit before I did it. It is difficult to keep the surprise of the moment alive.

**Take 26 (3:20 p.m.):** It’s a good one, but when it ends, I don’t hear anything positive. I react and say with a slightly hard voice, “Was that a good one?” Noah says, “Let’s try another.” I close my eyes and try to focus on the next one.

**Take 27 (3:21 p.m.):** Script notes read, “Good.” Victory! I didn’t get derailed by my wanting and not getting praise.

**Take 28 (3:24 p.m.):** Another good one for Mickey and me, but the hit at the end is kind of strange. It doesn’t quite land right, making the moment seem awkward and airless.

**Take 29 (3:26 p.m.):** It all works. The characters are there, not the actors struggling. After we finish it, Mickey cries, which is not quite the scripted reaction, but it she resets easily.

**Take 30 (3:29 p.m.):** I start the scene and then stop myself. Noah says, “That was good, though, a good beginning.” I am angry at myself. I start over. I totally flub the lines but stumble

through it. Sometimes when I do a great take or have a great moment, I scare myself back into mediocrity. As if it's too frightening to actually find something that works, because I lose myself inside the moment and my conscious mind wants to pull me back into something more familiar but more banal. I see this happen to other actors all the time, too. Fully swimming in a character and a scene can be terrifying.

**Take 31 (3:31 p.m.):** Script notes read, "Good." I've calmed down, I'm not as freaked out. Back into being in control but also out of control enough to make it interesting.

**Take 32. (3:34 p.m.):** We start, and it's going fairly well, but the camera "rolls out," and they have to change the memory card.

**Take 33 (3:37 p.m.):** Another "Good." It is good: I'm there for Mickey, and she's there for me.

**Take 34 (3:40 p.m.):** Inverted a word here. I say, "I bought you special milk," instead of "I bought special milk for you." It is a small thing, but it messed with the pace of the line.

**Take 35 (3:42 p.m.):** This take is pretty good, but I'm getting tired, I can tell.

**Take 36 (3:45 p.m.):** Mickey says, "I do," really strong and angrily. She is a workhorse, indefatigable. It feels as if we might have gotten the scene already. We unconsciously start to wind down.

**Take 37 (3:47 p.m.):** Noah stops us in the middle of the take; I don't know why exactly. We do it again. Because this happens a lot, a stop and a start over, the take count doesn't reflect how many times we actually do it. Often we do it more times than recorded.

**Take 38 (3:49 p.m.):** There is a way-too-long pause in the middle. I apologize right away at the end of the take. "I'm sorry,

I'm sorry everyone." I am suddenly reminded of our crew. The cinematographer, the focus puller and the sound woman who have all been cramped in this bathroom with us. Actors are allowed to screw up much more than anyone else on a set.

**Take 39 (3:53 p.m.):** Script notes read, "Good." The trajectory of filming a scene: at the beginning, it's all emotion; in the middle, it's all ideas; then for a brief moment between the middle and the end, it's quite good; but at the very end, the actors get annoyed, because we believe that we've already delivered, and why are we still doing this?

**Take 40 (3:55 p.m.):** Script notes: "Very good." Despite ourselves it has become better. I look to Noah like, Are we done? He says, "Let's try another." I sigh. I want it to be over.

**Take 41 (3:57 p.m.):** After the end of this take, Noah says, "Good, I think we've got it." Me: "Really?" Noah: "Yes." Me: "I mean, are you sure?" Noah: "Yes." Me: "Mickey, do you want to . . . maybe let's just do one more?" Mickey nods. Noah: "O.K., one more time." Even though a second earlier, all I wanted was to be free of this scene, now I cannot let it go. I have to try one more time.

**Take 42 (4:01 p.m.):** Script notes read, "Best take." Always good to end on a high note. Noah: "That was *great*." I look nervous still. Me: "Do you really think we have it?"

In the final cut of the film, Noah used Take 29.



A version of this article appears in print on May 12, 2013, on page MM54 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: 'I Know I'm Doing the Scene Badly, But I Can't Figure Out How to Do It Well'.

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