Escalation Sequences

Persuasion & Influence · Tier 3 · Component 4 — instructor overview

Grades: 11–12 **Time:** ~50 min (flexible) **Format:** whole-class reading, then individual or pairs

How extreme outcomes are reached without any single extreme decision. This component teaches students to see the *sequence* — gradual commitment, the shifting baseline, and the sunk-cost ratchet — that carries people, and whole groups, somewhere they'd have refused to go directly.

WHAT STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO DO

- Explain how a chain of individually-reasonable steps can end somewhere unreasonable.
- Describe the shifting baseline (normalization) and the sunk-cost ratchet.
- Map an escalation sequence and locate its earliest, cheapest exit.
- Apply the test: *would I have agreed to the destination from the start?*

WHY IT MATTERS

Escalation is how radicalization, financial ruin, abusive dynamics, and mission creep all actually happen — not by one dramatic choice, but by a hundred small ones, each normalized by the last. Students old enough to join movements, invest money, and enter serious relationships need to recognize a sequence while they're still early in it.

The running example — **the Ledger**, an online investing community that ratchets members from curiosity to catastrophic risk — models normalization and sunk cost without moralizing.

PACING

SEGMENT	TIME	WHAT HAPPENS
Reading	12 min	Read the Student pages; the Ledger example.
Map the ratchet	12–15 min	Activity Part A in pairs.
Find the exits	12 min	Activity Parts B–C.
Debrief	10 min	Discussion prompts (Instructor p. 4).

MATERIALS

The 4 Student pages per student or pair. Optional: a documented case of gradual escalation to trace together.

Escalation Sequences

The mechanism in depth — part 1 of 2

Escalation reaches an extreme through a chain of steps, each small enough to accept given the one before it. Two forces do the work: **normalization** (each step resets what counts as normal) and **sunk cost** (each step raises the price of turning back). The running example is **the Ledger**, an online investing community that walks members from "just watching" to betting their savings on the riskiest possible plays.

THE SHIFTING BASELINE

Human judgment is relative: we evaluate each new step against the previous one, not against where we started, and the reference point keeps moving. What was unthinkable at step one is merely "the next step" by step five, because step four already reset the baseline. No alarm ever fires, because no single move is large. In the Ledger, a newcomer first just reads. Then paper-trades. Then puts in "money you can afford to lose." Then a little more, because everyone else is. Then options, then leverage. Each rung is only slightly beyond the last — and the last is now normal — so the newcomer who would have laughed at "bet your rent on leveraged options" arrives there without ever making that decision.

THE RATCHET

Once time, money, reputation, or identity is invested, quitting feels like conceding the whole climb was wasted (sunk-cost commitment, sunk cost fallacy). Loss aversion sharpens it: we'll accept a worse forward bet to avoid locking in a loss (loss aversion). So the sequence ratchets one way only. Down fifty percent, a Ledger member doesn't leave — they "average down," because leaving means admitting the loss is real. The sunk cost that should be irrelevant becomes the reason to escalate.

Escalation Sequences

The mechanism in depth — part 2 of 2

WHY NO ONE SEES IT FROM INSIDE

The insidious feature of escalation is that at every point, the person is behaving reasonably *by their current baseline*. Asked to justify any single step, they can — it was only a little more than the last one. The distortion isn't in any step; it's in the accumulated drift the steps produce, which is invisible unless you compare the destination to the starting point rather than to the previous rung. The Ledger's culture reinforces this: doubt is "weak hands," escalation is "conviction," and the group identity rewards each step deeper. Social proof and identity leverage from earlier tiers are doing structural work here, keeping the ratchet turning.

THE DEFENSE

Two moves. First, **judge the destination, not the step**: ask not "is this next step reasonable given the last one?" but "would I have agreed to *this outcome* from the start?" That single comparison defeats the shifting baseline by refusing to let the reference point move. Second, **name the exits**: every sequence has an earliest, cheapest point to step off, and the cost of leaving only grows. The time to look for the exit is early, precisely when the sunk cost is smallest and the pull to continue is weakest.

ONE LINE TO CARRY

Would I have agreed to the destination from the start? What's already spent is gone regardless; the only real question is where the next step leads — and the cheapest exit is always the earliest one.

Escalation Sequences

Discussion guide — modular; assemble to fit your period

These blocks are timed so you can build a lesson from them: a single period, or a full unit day. Run the activity with an opener before and a debrief after — pick what fits.

TIME BUDGET — MIX AND MATCH

BLOCK	TIME	USE
Opener (before)	5–8 min	Pick one, below.
Activity	20–25 min	The student pages.
Debrief (after)	~5 min each	Pick 1–4 prompts.
Close	3 min	The takeaway.

Single period: opener + activity + one debrief + close. **Full lesson:** opener + activity + two or three debriefs + an extension.

BEFORE — THE OPENER (PICK ONE · 5–8 MIN)

FORMAT: think-pair-share or a quick hands-up. GOAL: surface what students already notice and pose the question. END RESULT: every student has committed to a prediction or named a real example you can return to in the debrief.

- **Predict.** Ask: how does someone end up somewhere they'd have refused at the start? Take a few answers; revisit after the shifting baseline.
- **From their world.** Ask for one gradual escalation they've seen (a group, an app, a spending pattern); keep two to map.

THE ACTIVITY (BUDGET 20–25 MIN)

CONCRETE GOAL — STUDENTS CAN: map an escalation sequence, name the shifting-baseline and sunk-cost forces, and locate the earliest exit.

AFTER — THE DEBRIEF (PICK 1–4 · ~5 MIN EACH)

FORMAT: whole-class; call on the examples students generated in the opener and activity. END RESULT: students can state the takeaway in their own words and back it with one concrete example from their own life or the activity.

- How can a series of reasonable steps end somewhere unreasonable?
- What is the shifting baseline, and why does it keep the alarm from firing?
- Why does sunk cost make a sequence ratchet only one way?
- Take one sequence from the board: where's the destination, and the cheapest exit?

CLOSE (3 MIN)

Have a few students state the takeaway in their own words: **Would I have agreed to the destination from the start? Step off at the earliest exit.**

Escalation Sequences

Leading the discussion — pacing, redirects, and warm-ups

The previous page is the plan; this page is for running it. Budget the period from the total below, and keep the redirect moves handy — most discussions falter in one of these four ways.

DOES IT FIT THE PERIOD?

ONE PERIOD (~45–50 MIN): opener 6 + activity 20–25 + one debrief 5 + close 3 = **34–39 min**. BLOCK (~90 MIN): add two more debriefs and a differentiation extension from the facilitation page.

WHEN DISCUSSION STALLS OR DERAILS

IF…	MOVE
Silence, or “I don't know”	Shrink the question: “Just name the first thing you noticed.” Give 30 seconds of silent think-time, then call on a pair, not an individual.
One or two voices dominate	“Let's hear from someone who hasn't gone yet.” Run it as think-pair-share first, so every student has an answer ready to offer.
It turns personal or heated	Move the trial from the person to the message: “What in the text makes you say that?” Keep the claim on trial, never the classmate.
Answers stay on the surface	Push for evidence: “Where exactly — quote the line.” Then “What would change your mind?” to surface the reasoning underneath.

WARM-UP BANK (SWAP IN FOR ANY OPENER)

Interchangeable with the opener on the previous page. Vary them across a unit so the hook stays fresh.

- **Two-minute hunt.** Find one real example of today's move on your phone right now; keep the best one for the debrief.
- **Steelman it.** What's the most honest reason someone would use this technique? Persuasion isn't always dishonest — name the legitimate version first.
- **Rate and defend.** Put one message on the board; everyone rates it 1–5 for how persuasive, then defends the spread of answers.
- **Odd one out.** Three short examples, one isn't the move — which, and how can you tell?

Escalation Sequences

Facilitation, anticipated moves & answer key

ANTICIPATED STUDENT RESPONSES & MISCONCEPTIONS

- **"Each step was reasonable, so the whole thing was fine."** The core trap — reasonable-by-the-last-step is exactly how drift hides. Anchor judgments to the starting point, not the previous rung.
- **"So never commit to anything."** No — commitment is fine. The skill is watching the baseline and judging the destination, not avoiding all sequences.
- **Sunk cost as a reason.** Students defend continuing because they've "already put in so much." Name that feeling as the ratchet itself; separate it from forward value.
- **Only seeing dramatic cases.** Escalation is usually mundane (subscriptions, group chats, spending). Use small examples so students see it in their own lives, not just extremism.

DIFFERENTIATION & EXTENSIONS

Support: pre-draw the ladder; students label forces and the shifting baseline. **Stretch:** students map a documented real case (a scam, a subscription trap, a radicalization account) and mark exit points; or write about a personal escalation and its cheapest exit. **Cross-curricular:** sunk cost in economics; radicalization/mission creep in history and civics.

ANSWER KEY — ACTIVITY

ITEM	SAMPLE RESPONSE
A1 "just try the free version"	*Foot in the door; baseline: you're now a user.*
A2 "everyone here shares a bit more"	*Normalization; new baseline resets what's normal.*
A3 "you're basically one of us now"	*Identity lock-in reinforcing the climb.*
A4 "you've put in months — can't walk away"	*Sunk cost; the ratchet.*
B (earliest exit)	*Step 1 — before investment accrues; later exits cost more.*

Escalation Sequences

How small steps reach extreme places

Someone joins the Ledger, an online investing community, just to watch. Six months later they've put their savings into leveraged bets so risky that the person they were in month one would have called it insane. And here's the thing: they never made an insane decision. They made a hundred small, reasonable-feeling ones, each only slightly past the last — until "bet your rent on options" had quietly become normal. That's escalation, and it's how almost every extreme outcome actually happens.

Almost no one agrees to an extreme directly. They agree to a small step, then another, then another — each reasonable given the one before — until they're somewhere they'd have refused at the start. Two forces run the machine.

THE SHIFTING BASELINE

You judge each move against the *last* one, not against where you began — and the reference point keeps sliding. Step four makes step five feel small, even though step five would have been unthinkable at step one. In the Ledger: first you just read. Then you paper-trade. Then "money you can afford to lose." Then a bit more, since everyone else is. Then options, then leverage. Every rung is only slightly beyond the one before, and the one before is now normal. The alarm never rings, because no single step is big enough to trip it.

THE RATCHET

Once you've put in time, money, or identity, quitting feels like admitting it was all wasted — so you keep going to justify it. And because losing what you've sunk in hurts more than the risk ahead scares you, the sequence only turns one way: forward. Down 50%, a Ledger member doesn't leave — they "average down," buying more, because leaving would make the loss real. The money they've already lost — which shouldn't affect the next decision at all — becomes the reason to escalate.

Escalation Sequences

Why it's invisible from inside — and how to step off

WHY NO ONE SEES IT WHILE IT'S HAPPENING

The cruel part is that at every single point, you're being reasonable *by your current baseline*. Ask someone in the Ledger to defend any one step and they can — it was only a little more than the last. The distortion isn't in any step; it's in the total drift, and you can only see that by comparing where you ended up to where you *started*, not to the step before. The community makes this even harder: doubt gets called "weak hands," escalation gets called "conviction," and belonging rewards you for going deeper. Social proof and identity — the moves from earlier — are quietly keeping the ratchet turning.

THE DEFENSE

Two moves beat it. First, **judge the destination, not the step.** Don't ask "is this next step okay given the last one?" Ask "would I have agreed to *this ending* back at the start?" That question refuses to let the baseline move, which is the whole trick. Second, **find the exits.** Every sequence has an earliest, cheapest point to step off, and it only gets more expensive from there. The time to look for the door is early — when you've sunk in the least and the pull to continue is weakest.

THE ONE LINE

Would I have agreed to the destination from the start? What's already spent is gone either way. Stop measuring the climb behind you and look only at where the next step leads — and remember the cheapest exit is always the earliest one.

Escalation Sequences

Name: ___________________________________ *Date:* ______________

The defense: Would I agree to the *destination* from the start? · Step off at the cheapest (earliest) exit.

PART A — MAP THE RATCHET

Next to each step, name the force (normalization / sunk cost / identity) and what the new "normal" becomes.

STEP	FORCE · NEW BASELINE
1. "Just try the free version — no commitment."	
2. "Everyone here shares a bit more than that."	
3. "You're basically one of us now."	
4. "You've put in months — you can't walk away now."	

PART B — FIND THE EXITS

Circle the **earliest, cheapest** point to step off. Why is stepping off later so much harder?

____

____

PART C — WOULD YOU HAVE AGREED?

Describe a real gradual escalation you've seen — a group, an app, a spending pattern, a rivalry, an online community. Write step one and the eventual destination. Would step one's version of you have agreed to the destination?

PART D — THE STEP-ONE QUESTION

Write one question you could ask yourself at the *start* of any sequence to keep the baseline from shifting on you.