CRAFTING A FILM STORY

Dear Writers,

The goal of this packet is to provide you with concepts and exercises that will help you begin crafting a story for film or television. Many of you may already have a story you've been dreaming of writing for years. My own brain is full of them. They're like a gang of demanding kids I drag around with me everywhere, constantly poking me for attention, desperate to be set free in to the world. I cherish them and I've spent a good portion of my life working towards being able to realize them some day.

I am like you: "*an aspiring writer*". I'm not anestablished master screenwriter dispensing wisdom from a mansion in the Palisades. What I *do* have to offer you is that I've spent a lot of time in writing classes at the undergraduate and graduate level. I am in weekly workshops reading other people's scripts, giving notes, etc. I've also written four feature-length screenplays, so I have some experience of what it's like to trying to apply these ideas to a story you want to tell. My hope is to share some of what I've learned from my mentors and also to create a space where you can share your work and receive constructive feedback.

I don't want to create false expectations. I am not a producer and can't help you break in to Hollywood. It is a highly competitive field. Even people you or I would consider "successful" face constant rejection. You can spend years writing a script and developing a pitch, leverage all your contacts to get a meeting, only to have your idea rejected by an executive who's half paying attention to you for five minutes. I'm not going to sugarcoat it: this field is a hard way to make a living. If you're interested in screenwriting as a get-rich-quick scheme, I can assure you there are easier ways to make money. To persist in this type of work you really have to love it.

That's the bad news, but here's the good news. You need connections to find financing and representation, you need equipment and crew to make a film, but no one can stop you from writing. That is a level playing field in the entertainment industry: pen and paper. I can't compete with the top cinematographers without the best cameras, and lenses, but I can write words on paper just as easily the top screenwriters. You also possess something that none of the top Hollywood screenwriters have. You have a unique set of life experiences and a perspective on the world that can form the basis of a story that only you can tell. That is a valuable resource that you can use to get your foot in the door.

More good news: you don't need to sell your stories now or ever to benefit from the act of writing. Writing will challenge your mind, it will teach you about art and about yourself, and you can find meaning and pleasure in artistic expression without commercial success. Especially in the early stages of your practice, my advice is to not get too caught up in the business side of things.

Learn to enjoy the act of writing for writing's sake and if you stay with it and continue to seek outside feedback on your work, and over time you will develop and grow to a point where you have something that's good enough to take out and pitch. If you're too focused on the results right away I think you'll likely lose patience, but if you can develop a habit of writing and find joy in the process that can carry you for the long haul.

I hope this packet provides a spark to help you in your creative work. I am limited to twenty-eight pages on a subject we could talk about for hundreds. I know that access to books may be difficult for some of you, so I am trying to cram as much as I can on to each page. As a result, this packet is very dense. So take your time with it. Don't feel like you have to read it all in one sitting. Take it a section at at time and don't be discouraged if it feels like a lot, because *it is* a lot. Feel free to disregard anything that gets in the way of you putting words down on paper. I wish peace and creative energy for you all and am looking forward to reading your work.

Best,
Matt

CRAFTING A FILM STORY

One reasonable question at this point might be: *"If this is about drawing from my personal experience why do I need to learn from you how to tell my story?"* No one else in the world knows your life the way you do. Your perspective and your experiences are the ingredients that make your work unique. Stories do draw on life experience, but stories and life are not the same thing. Stories are are a form of sharing information, a human activity that draw on life exprience, and we can learn the art of creating stories.

Imagine I approach a parent and ask them to paint a portrait of their child. They might know that child better than anyone on the planet: they know the special way the kid smiles, they know where all the freckles on the face are without even looking. Deep down they feel they know the spirit of that child better than anyone else, but knowing something is not the same as knowing how to paint it.

If that parent has never picked up a paint brush before, what's the result going to look like? It may be meaningful to them and their family, something you pin on the fridge, but if you show the results to a complete stranger they're going to look at the blurry blobs of paint and wonder: *"Is that a child or a deer?"* The deep meaning the parent feels won't translate to others because the artist doesn't know how to use the medium of painting to communicate.

Take that same child and sit them down in front of a highly skilled portrait artist. The artist has spent years learning how to create a moving portrait. They know how to blend paints, how to create depth with shadow. They look at someone's face and pull out a few important details in a way that creates emotion and recognition in the viewer. They may have never met the child and brought no authentic feeling to the painting, but they know how paintings work. We as a neutral audience will probably *receive* more feeling from the portrait artist's work even if it's a professional trick, than the stranger parent's uncrecognizable blobs.

The best-case scenario, however, in my opinion, occurs when artistic skill and human feeling are combined. Imagine the portrait artist has their own child and as they were painting the portrait they were able to infuse their love of their own child in to a painting of someone else's. I bet that portrait will stand out from all three. They are using their life experience and deep human feeling combined with craft, skill, and study of other successful paintings to create a work of art that crystallizes a piece of the human experience for others.

As writers, we are like the painter: working within a specific medium that has it's own techniques we must master in order to successfully communicate our artistic ideas to others. In the broadest sense, yes, you could just write down your direct life experience on paper and call it a screenplay. Here's my next film it's called: "Thursday Morning..."

I woke up a bit later than I intended and that set off some negative thoughts as I was using the bathroom, but then I went to the gym, I saw my physical therapist there and said hi, I went on the elliptical for thirty minutes. I came back and ate some leftover curry for breakfast, used the bathroom, then I bought a coffee. I was still feeling pretty negative, to be honest, but then I went to my office and started working on this thing I'm writing and eventually I started to feel better. I left my office at six.

Now that is a "story" in the sense that it's a series of events. It is based on my lived human experience of the morning I wrote this page. I may have had deep emotions of fear and longing this morning that other people could connect with. The way I've told it, however, has not been shaped or developed in a way that's going to be interesting or meaningful to anyone but me. It is my life experience, but it's not yet what most of us would consider a "story" or at least one we care to watch.

A skilled writer, however, could take thatsame morning and find a way to tell it that would be poetic, interesting, and meaningful to another person. They would know which details to zoom in on and bring to life and which to throw away. They might even make changes to the reality of what happened to bring out the emotional truth of the experience. If it's a story about loneliness, maybe my physical therapist walks right past me when I say "Hi." That's not what happened, he's a very friendly guy, but presenting it to you that way might be a more effective way to recreate a feeling in you the reader that matches the way I felt that morning in the gym.

You need to learn how successful stories do their magic in order to craft your own personal material into a form that will move and and engage an audience. The work we do here is intended to help you begin the process of learning that skill. Your perspective and your life experience are your own. I'm not here to tell you *what* stories to tell, but I can help share some insight in to *how* you tell that story in a film.

WHAT IS A FILM STORY?

Film stories are based on our experience of life, but they are not the same as life. In reality, if the police are trying to solve a mystery they might spend years chasing down leads focused on the wrong suspect and then one day out of nowhere someone walks in with a tip about a suspect they never knew existed and the case is solved. In a *mystery film*, however, a writer will almost always introduce the person who is responsible for the crime earlier in the film, often as someone who seems innocent, and then they will use the investigative efforts of the detectives to reveal that person's guilt later on in the film.

In reality, the first scenario is probably closer to the truth of how most real-life investigations go: chaotic, frustrating, no clear beginning, middle, and end, mountains of meaningless work and dead ends. That doesn't work well in a film, however, because it feels unsatisfying to watch a detective chase down a lead for 80 minutes and then at minute 81 introduce a completely new character and go: *"Case closed!"*. It feels more impactful when the reveal is of a character we knew but presumed innocent: *"It was actually Caretaker Bob the whole time!!! How did we not see it?!"*

What does this tell us? Does it mean we only need to study movies and don't need to know anything about the reality of what we're writing about? No, if you are writing a detective story, having an understanding of that world will make your work more impactful. If you have no understanding of the reality, your film will likely read to as false. What it tells us is that understanding the reality of the world is helpful up to a point, but there are also unique characteristics of film stories that we need to honor in order to be effective. When we write, we take raw material from life and adapt it to the unique requirements of the film story form.

What do I mean by a "film story"? Here is a formula that will be the basis for everything else we talk about:

A **film story** is a ***dramatic narrative*** for a ***visual medium***.

First, let me point out I'm not talking about all films, I am referring here to fictional movies and TV shows not documentary, experimental, reality shows, etc. Even within the world of what we call "movies" there are alternative approaches to crafting stories. What we are covering here is what we might call the "mainstream" or "classical" form. It's not the only way to tell a story, but most commercial films work this way.

This packet has three sections. In the first part, we will work on the first half of the formula and discuss the essential elements of a dramatic narrative. If those terms are unfamiliar to you, that might sound intimidating, so let me put it more simply: we are simply trying to breakdown the common characteristics of "dramatic narratives". If we ask "What are the essential elements of a house?", we might say houses can come in all shapes and sizes, but for us to call it a "house" it should probably have a door, walls, a roof, a place to sleep, a place to cook and eat, and somewhere to relieve yourself. We wouldn't say "marble tiled floors", because that's not a defining characteristic of "house".

Here's another way of thinking about it. If I came up to you with a single sheet of paper that had ten rhyming lines written on it and said "Hey, do you want to read my novel?" you would probably say *"Sure, Matt, but that looks like a poem."* There is no concrete definition of what a poem is that everyone can agree on, but from our experience of other novels and poems, we seem to know the difference. We have a collective set of expectations based on a long history of human creation that comes to define a form. Most film stories follow a form called "dramatic narrative".

In the second part, we will move to the second-half of the formula and talk about what it means to write for a visual medium. We are writing words on paper, so it's easy to forget that the end goal of all this work is to produce a series of images. It's important to keep your mind's eye active as you write and constantly remind yourself that everything you write is something the audience should be able to see and hear.

In the final part of the packet, I will introduce a set of exercises designed to help you get started crafting your own film story. The focus will be on developing a *story* that could eventually be developed in to a *screenplay,* but we will not, in this packet, talk about screenplay formatting. Professional writers usually begin by mapping out the story they want to tell first and then write their screenplay. We will be focusing on the kinds of documents writers create in those early stages of the development process, namely: *loglines, beat sheets,* and *treatments.*

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE

In this section, we are going to unpack the essential elements of "**dramatic narrative**".

NARRATIVE
A spoken or written account of connected events. A story.

DRAMATIC
Relating to drama or the performance or study of drama.
(We don't mean exaggerated or emotional as in "causing drama" or turbulent/exciting as in "a dramatic turn of events.")

DRAMATIC NARRATIVE
A narrative in the dramatic form.

(For example, a joke 'Three guys walk in to a bar...' is a *narrative,* but it's not *dramatic*. All dramas are narratives, but not all narratives are dramatic.

"Drama" is a specific kind of narrative. It can be confusing, because in our culture drama has be come such a universal form that it can be hard to recognize as a specific choice. Some of what I describe might sound obvious. There are, however, other forms of storytelling that have existed in different times and cultures. It can be helpful to study these "obvious" choices to understand how good drama works as we prepare to write our own.

TOOLS NOT RULES

The truth is if you write a screenplay that entertains your reader from beginning to end, no one is going to say: *"But wait, you didn't follow the rules of dramatic narrative! Where's your second act break?"* Many films are successful without following these ideas, however, the majority of films, TV shows, and plays you have seen in your life probably conform to most of these ideas, because they work. You can do it without them, but it is more difficult.

An Analogy: If I want to build a chair, I could go to my backyard and start screwing pieces of wood together without a plan. *"I've seen chairs before. How hard can it be?"* After many failed experiments, I might even come up with something that works. But it would've been alot easier and the results might have been better if I had started by studying a chair someone else built, or reading a book on furniture, or even better yet learning from an experienced carpenter.

They might tell me: *"A chair usually has four legs, the seat should be about this height, the back has a slight angle, we join the wood like this, etc."* They would be sharing their personal experience , but also drawing from a body of knowledge about furniture-making that has been developed by carpenters and passed down over centuries. That doesn't mean I can't try to make an extra-low, three-legged chair with a flat back. But chances are most people aren't going to buy that for their dining room and even an "experimental carpenter" would probably benefit by starting out learning how to make a good old-fashioned chair.

In the end, your only duty is to do what's best for the script and sometimes that means throwing these ideas out the window and trusting your instincts. Many times, however, doing what's best for the script can also mean protecting it from your own ego. You will think: "I can't cut that scene! That's how it really happened!" But deep down you know it's a big, boring detour that is killing the pace of your script. In those situations, it can be helpful to have models of what works in *most* dramatic narratives as a guide to diagnose problems in your work.

EXERCISE - LEARN BY TEACHING

It's a common experience in teaching that you think you know what something is until someone asks you to explain it. When you're forced to come up with your own definition, it challenges you to deepen your own understanding. Imagine you were in my shoes, trying to explain to someone else what a film story is, how would you describe it? Do a little free writing and try to answer the following questions for yourself. Don't worry about being "right", this isn't a test, but do force yourself to come up with full answers as if you were writing a packet like this for someone else.

What is a story?
What is drama?
How are the stories in movies different from the stories in books or plays?
What in your opinion makes a story interesting or worth watching?
Think of your five or ten favorite movies, what characteristics do they have in common?
Why do you think we tell and consume stories?

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: CHARACTER

Dramas are about the actions of characters and they are usually focused on the journey of a single character.

If we were talking about the narrative form know as "epic" we might set out to write about the fate of the Greeks in the Trojan war, but in drama we don't write about "the Greeks" we talk about a specific Greek like Oedipus or Odysseus. You probably already know the dictionary definition of what a "character" is:

A character is a person in a novel, play, or movie.

But not all characters are humans right? There are animal characters, alien characters, teacups that sing, etc. If a random blurry figure walks by in the background while two main characters are having a conversation, is that really a "character" even though they are technically a "person in a movie"? I suggest a different definition:

A character is an individual being in a novel, play, or movie with agency.

Obviously a character must be an *individual being*: they must exist and stand out from the wall, but what is agency? Agency means that whatever this individual being is, they must have the ability to make choices and take actions to pursue what they want. So a coffee machine is not a character, *unless* it's a magic coffee machine that is trying to poison it's owner.

This is a clue for us: it's important that our characters have **motivations.** A coffee machine with the intention to kill is a character, but an out-of-focus human walking by in the background is not, because in the world of the story they're not doing anything we know or care about. What's most important in our definition of "character" then is not that they are human, but that they are beings with desires who take actions to pursue them.

You may have heard an actor, or more likely an actor playing an actor in a movie say: *"What's my motivation?"* Actors are trained to focus on the goals or **objectives** of the characters they play. If they think intimidation will get the character what they want, they might scream, but they're taught to not focus on *"playing angry"*, but instead to use anger as a **tactic** to get what the character wants.

When we say character's have **motivations** we don't mean they are *motivated* in the sense of: *"Man that kid's really going places..."* You can have a motivation to lie on the couch and eat all day. **We all have motivations at every moment, of every day, behind everything we do.** In bad writing, characters have no existence of their own, they do and say things because the writer needs them to. In good writing, everything the characters say and do can be traced back to their motivations.

You might object: *"How is the guy laying on his couch motivated?"* After he woke up, ie. as soon as he was capable of making decisions, he could have just stayed in bed. Lying there doing nothing, however, might have led to uncomfortable feelings about his lack of purpose in life so he got up, walked to the couch, and put on the TV to distract himself. His motivation then was: *"to avoid the feeling of shame"*.

"But sometimes people do things without knowing why." We're not always consciously aware of our motivations, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. We may repress certain thoughts, but they tend to bubble back to the surface as feelings that move us to act. You as the writer need to understand your character even if they don't understand themselves.

"Sometimes I want one thing, but I do the complete opposite." In that case, we might say you have conflicting motivations. You want to quit smoking for your health, but when you stop, the cravings make you irritable so you smoke again. One motivation (I don't want to feel this way right now.) won out over another (I want to stop smoking.) Motivations don't have to lead to actions that "make sense". People do many self-defeating things, that doesn't mean they are unmotivated.

"Sometimes I'm motivated to want things that I have no way of getting." Your character may have motivations that their situation prevents them from acting on, but those motivations probably shape their behavior in other ways. For example, if I'm in love with a woman who's married to my best friend, maybe there's nothing I can do or say that will ever bring us together. But my love for that woman might be the reason I do favors for her or avoid dating other women. Understanding what the character wants is important even if they cant directly act on that motivation.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: CHARACTER

ACTIVE VS PASSIVE

As you can probably guess, the guy who's only motivation is to lie on the couch and watch TV might not be the best character for a story. Your writing teacher would say: *"Your main character is too passive!"*

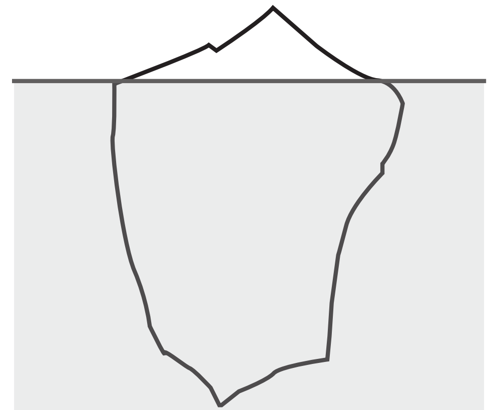
We are told that the characters in a drama should be **actively** pursuing their goals, not **passively** responding to the actions of other people. However, it is very common to begin a story with a **passive** character who resists action, but is forced to become active by an unexpected event. It is so common, in fact, that some books on screenwritng suggest your story *must* include this moment and they have terms for it. First there is a "*call to action*" and then an *"initial refusal of the call".*

"Guy on Couch" is watching TV. A car crashes through his living room window. He springs into action without thinking and saves the driver's life. The EMT's arrive and tell him that what he did was incredible for someone without training and that he should come volunteer. At first he says: *"No, I couldn't, I'm not that type of person, I'm not a hero."* Over the sequence of events that follows, however, our "Guy on Couch" will be challenged with conflicts that turn him into a more active character and by the end of the movie his inital motivation *"to numb the pain of a meaningless life"* has evolved into *"to find purpose in helping other people."*

THE ICEBERG THEORY

Characters don't need to come right out and explain their motivations to the audience, but when you as a writer have a clear vision of what is motivating your characters, the audience will feel those motivations as an organizing force behind the character's actions. We get the sense that we are watching a living, breathing person doing things for specific reasons even if we don't fully understand what those reasons are yet. Like a lot of things in filmmaking, when you do this right the audience doesn't notice it, but when you do it wrong they'll notice right away.

The novelist Ernest Hemingway described this concept as the *"theory of omission"*, which is also referred to as *"the iceberg theory"* based on this quote:



"If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing."

The metaphor is this: if you watch an iceberg move on the ocean, it's not going to get tossed around like a boat. We can tell by watching the small portion above water that it moves with the "dignity" of a mountain. We feel the presence of all the ice underwater we can't see. When you write a good character, there may be 7 things you privately know about them that all add up to the 1 action we actually get to see. The audience doesn't have to know everything you and the character know, but they do need to get the *feeling* that the character has an inner-life that leads to the actions they take.

Imagine you're watching a movie and the psychotic villain has set-up an elaborate plot to kill the hero so they can rule the city. The plan works, they get the hero, and then the writer realizes: *"If he kills the hero now the movie is over..."*

So suddenly the villain undoes the handcuffs and says "Let's fight fair". Sitting in the movie theater you'd probably think "WHAT?! He set up that whole plan to capture him and now he's just gonna let him go?!" You can feel something's wrong. The villain has no real motivation to let the hero go, they are acting on the writer's motivation to keep the story going.

Now imagine the exact same scenario, except this time the writer builds in moments earlier in the script that communicate to the audience: *"What this villain really wants is not to kill the hero, but to prove to himself and everyone else that he's tough, because he's so insecure."* Maybe an underling says "You better bring back-up that hero is pretty scary." and the evil villain explodes in anger and has that underling killed for even suggesting that he couldn't take on the hero single-handedly.

Now when we get to that crucial moment and the villain takes off the handcuffs, we're more likely to go along with it, even if it makes no logical sense, because it feels consistent with everything else we've seen of that character. The writer had that insecurity in mind as they designed all of the villains actions and lines of dialogue up to that point and they developed a believable fatal flaw that destroys the villain in the end.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: CHARACTER

PROTAGONIST

The "Protagonist" is the main character of your story. This is one of the first elements you should identify as you start to create your own film story. It's the person your audience experiences the story through. The protagonist is most often a single character. In my film school, we had a catchphrase that was drilled into our heads: "Who's scene is it?". Meaning that not only does every film have a main character, each scene in a film is usually told from a single character's point-of-view. When we ask "Who is the protagonist?" we're essentially asking: "Who's movie is it?" How does this work in practice? Let's start with a scene:

First you see an eleven-year-old girl slumping low in a chair in the school office, looking around nervously. The secretary calls her. We can't even see the older woman's face over the stacks of folders, just an adult finger pointing down the hall. The girl gulps and walks down to the principal's office. The principal's back is turned like a super villain. She takes her seat. The principal spins around and says: "Now tell me. Who took Mrs. Burke's phone from her desk?" Who's scene is it?

Now imagine we start in the principal's office. His wife is on the phone, screaming about how she keeps hearing rumors that he's fooling around with some Mrs. Burke. He hangs up the phone: "Send her in." The little girl enters as the principal tries to wipe a guilty-as-hell look off his face. He turns around: "Now tell me. Who took Mrs. Burke's phone from her desk?" Who's scene is it?

The scene that follows can have the exact same dialogue in both versions, but in the first version we're clearly in the girl's movie and in the second version we're in the principal's movie. What shifts isn't the events themselves, but the point-of-view through which we experience them. In the first version, we will be focused on the girl's fate, in the second we're more curious about the principal's need to get the phone back and hide his affair.

Not every scene in your film has to involve the protagonist but you can still usually feel that the film as a whole is the story of one character's journey. I imagine that the popular success of this form has something to do with the fact that we all experience life from "the perspective of a single-character", ie. ourselves. It is a natural and familiar way for us to understand the world.

In the past, we might have called our protagonist "the good guy" or "the hero". In fact, beginning in the 1930's there was actually a "Production Code" that dictated that your main character HAD to be a "good guy". Beginning in the 1960's, however, the "Production Code" lost it's power and it's now common to see films that feature "anti-heroes" as their protagonist. In these stories, the audience might not morally approve of the main character's actions, but the story is told in a way that makes the audience empathize with them. We might not approve of what Tony Soprano does, but we understand that from his perspective he's just trying to take care of his family and keep the family business going. Those are motivation's that most people can relate to even if we don't approve of organized crime and murder.

It's also possible to have a dual or multi-protagonist film. In these cases, however there is still usually a unifying motivation that allows the characters to act as a single unit. They might have different personalities and get in to small conflicts with each other, but they are usually united in pursuing the defining goal of the movie: "rob the casino", "protect the village from bandits", etc.

ANTAGONIST

The "antagonist" is the character that stands in the way of the "protagonist" getting what they want. In the past, we might have referred to this character as "the bad guy". In film noir they were called "the heavy", meaning the less handsome actor. As we've already stated, however, modern films can be more morally complex. I think the defining characteristic of the "antagonist" is that their motivation should be in direct opposition to the motivation of the "protagonist".

Sometimes the antagonist isn't a character. We can have an "antagonistic force". In a disaster movie, for example, we might say "the earthquake" is the antagonist which opposes the protagonist's motivation: "to survive". In "Titanic", however, I would say that the true antagonist isn't "the sinking ship" so much as it is the man Kate Winselt was supposed to marry before she met the charming Leonardo DiCaprio. In real-life terms, the ship sinking is a more serious problem than a romantic rival, but what is the motivation that drives Leo's character throughout the film? It's not a survival-at-sea story, it's a love story. He falls in love with a woman and everything that happens after that is about pursuing that woman. In the end he dies for that woman. Who stands in the way? Her evil fiance, not the iceberg.

Very often the antagonist is the more interesting, more memorable character, even though the film is experienced through the protagonist. Who's more interesting Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker? Who's in every Halloween film Michael Myers or Jamie Lee Curtis? Horror franchises are defined by the villain, but we still don't consider them the "protagonist" because we experience the film through the teenagers running away from them.

ANTAGONIST (cont'd)

Antagonists often instigate or set the pace of a story because they create problems for the protagonist. Often in the beginning of the story the protagonist is just minding their own business, in a state of stasis, until the antagonist intrudes on the party and shakes things up. The antagonist challenges the protagonists and forces them to change and grow.

Writer John Barth once said "Everyone is neccessarily the hero of their own story." This is a good note to keep in mind when writing your antagonist and really any character in your story. Your antagonist needs to have a motivation just like your protagonist. They don't have to be likeable, but you as a writer should be able to understand why they do what they do. A believable antagonist is someone who could be the hero of their own story. A poorly written antagonist seemingly has no existence of their own. It's as if they have no goal other than to create problems for the protagonist and move your story forward, like those endless, anonymous "henchmen" in James Bond movies.

That doesn't mean your antagonist can't be evil, but you should try to understand what made them that way. Maybe they think what they're doing is right, even though you and the audience can see it's clearly not. Maybe they're desperate and they try to take something from your protagaonist because they feel like "It's them or me." Maybe they're a person who has been on the receiving end of a lot of abuse throughout their life and they've come to believe "That's just the way the world is." There are many examples in the world of people who did terrible things for reasons they thought were good at the time. Understanding your villain will make them more believable and a believable villain is more frightening than a cartoon character.

EXERCISE - INVENT A CHARACTER

Pick a character from a story you want to write or if you don't have a story in mind just start making up a character from scratch. You don't have to know anything about what the film is going to be, just start making up a character from your imagination. For this exercise, try to avoid writing a character based on yourself.

First write a short bio for that character. This can be stream of consciousness, you don't have to worry about editing it or making it good, just start flowing. Where and were they born? Who were their parents and what did they do for a living? Siblings? What was there early childhood like? What were they like in high school? What did they want to be when they grew up?

How do they define themselves? What ethnic identity or religion was passed down to them and how do they feel about it? What's their sexual orientation?

Move in to their adult life. How far did they go in school? What was their first job? What are the defining moments in their life?

What moments in life stick with them? What are they proud of? What do they feel guilty about? What are the stories they'll be telling over and over for the rest of their lives?

On page 1 of your script where is that person in their life? What's their biggest fear? Biggest need? What keeps them up at night? What do they think about all day?

Try to start filling in all the details about that person's journey from the moment they were born up to the moment where your story might begin. Personally, when I do this I like to keep track of that character's timeline as I go. If you have a fifty-year-old character in a movie that takes place in 2010 then they were in high school in the late-70's. What was happening then that might have made an impact on who they are.

When you've finished your bio try writing a rant in that character's voice. Pick a topic that character cares about or a problem they are facing and write a stream of consciousness page of diallogue in that character's voice. Imagine that character just unloading all their true feelings about something and just let it rip for a while and see what comes out. No edits, keep the pen moving and let the character say whatevery they want to say.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: PLOT

"Most important of all is the structure of the incidents, not of man, but of action and life. For tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of action and life, and life consists in action. Now character determines men's qualities, but its by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions." -Aristotle, "Poetics" (330 BCE)

We've established that dramatic narratives are concerned with the lives of characters, however, if I were to write ten pages describing someone's personality in fine detail it might be very beautiful, but it would not be what we recognize as "dramatic narrative". Drama's also have a "plot". The definition of "plot" might at first seem so obvious it hardly seems worth discussing:

The main events of a play, novel, movie, or similar work, devised and presented by the writer as an interrelated sequence.

In the quote at the top, Aristotle seems to prioritize plot over character, because *"it is by [men's] actions that they are happy or the reverse"*. In other words, your personality may have a "responsible nature", but if you act in an irresponsible way you will suffer the same consequences as a generally irresponsible person regardless of your "true character".

My personal view is that in the best examples of drama plot and character are too inter-connected to be prioritized as separate elements: F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: "Plot is character, character is plot." A well-written chracter is revealed by their actions in the plot. A well-written plot is grounded in character. If your main character is dull and unintersting, but your plot is compelling, we might stick around to see how it ends, but we won't have much emotional attachment to the film. If you have a charming character, but no plot, we may feel empathy but we'll probably pause the movie thirty minutes in and promise ourselves we'll finish it later while we switch over to something else where things actually happen.

AN "INTERRELATED SEQUENCE"

It might sound obvious and unhelpful to say that flim stories are about characters who experience a series of events. Let's try then to expand on our definition of plot. Can we really consider *any* series of events a "plot"? Take this example:

1. Michelle woke up and brushed her teeth.
2. There was a car accident three blocks away.
3. Michelle listened to a voicemail from her boss.

That is a series of events, but it is not what we would typically consider a plot. These events don't have seem to have any meaningful connection with each other, except for the fact that they all have some proximity to Michelle. Notice that even in our minimal, dictionary definition they included the words: *"presented by the writer as an **interrelated** sequence."*

A plot is not just any series of random events, it is a set of events that are presented by the writer as having something to do with each other. This link between the events of a plot is sometimes described as a "through line" or a "spine" and is connected back to the main characters "superobjective", meaning that throughout the story there is a unifying motivation that runs through all the main character's actions. In the example of couch guy who is inspired to become an EMT, we might say his superobjective is "to find purpose." In the first scene, his motivation to watch TV is "to avoid the feeling of shame caused by having no purpose." His moment-to-moment objective will change, but the plot as a whole is organized along the lines of the superobjective.

We also typically expect that the events in a drama are connected by a "cause-and-effect" relationship. The events in Scene 1 trigger the action of Scene 2 and so on, like a line of dominos. Earlier in this packet, I used an example about a hypothetical mystery film where the first eighty minutes are devoted to the detectives efforts to solve a mystery then out of nowhere it's solved by an anonymous tip. The problem with that structure is that the conclusion of the film is not causally related to the events that led up to it. We spent all that time watching the detectives work and it ended up having nothing to do with the ending. That might be true to life and could work in an art film about the futility of life, but it will be unsatisfying to a mainstream audience.

"Cause-and-effect" and "superobjective" are both helpful concepts in constructing a good plot, but don't take them *too* literally. Not every scene in every film has to line up like a neat little domino (although honestly you'd be better off starting out that way then writing scenes with no clear connection). Scenes in a plot can also be *thematically* linked, meaning that Scene 1 did not cause Scene 2, but they both build on a common theme like "loneliness". I could write the three seemingly unrelated scenes about Michelle in such a way that each moment communicates her sense of being alienated from the world around her. Then for the audience they no longer feel "random", because the author is presenting them with intention as an interrelated sequence.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: PLOT

PLOT VS STORY

The words "plot" and "story" are often used interchangeably, but people who write about writing draw a distinction between a narrative's "plot" and it's "story". The "story" is the literal, chronological order of events that a narrative proposes to it's audience. So, for example, in "Kill Bill" an assassin's gang attempts to murder her at her wedding, but she survives. She wakes up from a coma, escapes, goes to Japan to get a powerful Samurai sword, and then tracks down and kills every member of the gang, ending with Bill.

The "plot" is the way in which the writer chooses to tell that story to the audience. The "plot" does not need to include every event that happens in the "story". We can be shown A and then C and infer that B happened in between. The "plot" also doesn't have to be told in chronological order. In Kill Bill, we see the assasination attempt against The Bride, then we jump ahead to her second victim Vernita Green. Then we go back to right after the assasination: the cops enter the bloody scene and discover The Bride's not dead.

Why go straight from the assasination to the second name crossed off the list: Vernita Green? Why not go from The Bride getting shot to The Bride recovering in the hospital? Here's my guess: Imagine if the film was told in chronological order. We see a woman get shot, cops find her, she goes to a hospital, then she escapes and goes to Japan to find a sword. What's missing? It's an action movie and we'd probably be more than halfway through the film before we'd ever seen the main character win a fight! You don't want your audience to be confused, but sometimes not giving them all the information at the top creates more interest. We see The Bride get shot then next thing we know she's healthy, in a sunny California home in an knife fight with a suburban mom. Now we're curious: How did she survive? What's going on?

Early in the process of writing you will be more focused on imagining the world of your story. Once you get to the task of writing, however, your efforts shift more in to crafting a plot that will effectively communicate the story you've developed. Often as writers we are captivated by our initial inspiration, because it's fully alive in our imagination. Then we try to explain it to a friend and we get a blank stare. That doesn't mean you don't have a story. You just don't know how to tell it yet.

Think about a person who's really bad at telling a joke. It doesn't matter how funny the joke was when it was written, when someone stumbles through it, repeating themselves, getting the order wrong, it's unbearable. Comedy is about timing, structure, and delivery as much as it is about the content of the joke.

Once you conceive of your "story", try to stay open-minded about where to start your "plot" and where to end it. Alexander Mackendrick advised: *"Screenplays usually start too early and end too late."* We feel like we have to show the audience a backstory and then we linger around too long after the climax. Pay attention to great films and you'll notice that we often begin with an "information deficit": the action of the story has already begun and we have to catch up on who's who. That's a much more exciting position to put your audience in then having them looking at their watch as your character has breakfast with their kids, commutes to work, has lunch with a colleague....(*"I get it, he's a normal person, what is this movie about!?"*)

On the other end, once your film has reached it's biggest moment why hang around afterwards? The dragon's been slayed, we in the audience know your film will never reach another scene as exciting as what we just saw, so what keeps us there? Older hollywood filmmakers do this to an almost comic degree. Watch some old film noirs: the detective shoots the criminal down and then they cut right to him driving off in to the sunset with the girl. Roll the credits!

Writers need to be prepared to: *"Kill your darlings."* In every project, there will inevitably be ideas you think are incredible, but they just don't work. The quicker you learn to delete and move on, the better off you will be. Often it's the parts that feel most personal to us that are the most self-indulgent and need to be left behind. The golden rule of revision is that if you can remove something without changing the meaning or confusing your audience, the script is probably stronger without it.

Mackendrick also wrote: *"Scripts are not written, they are rewritten and rewritten and rewritten..."* Your first draft is often just a vehicle for generating material you can work with. You might not know what your story is really about until you've tried writing it once. The final product may look completely different. It's like throwing down a big ball of clay on a table that will eventually be a sculpture:. At first you just need to build up a shape that is roughly the size and shape of what you're creating, but it will take many more sessions of chipping away before the sculpture emerges.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: CONFLICT

Most people who write about writing will tell you at some point: *"Conflict is the source of drama."* In this context, however, conflict doesn't always mean a fistfight or a verbal argument. We can be very polite to each other and still be in conflict.

Earlier we defined a character as "*an individual with agency who pursues motivations*". Conflict occurs when two characters or forces in a story have motivations that contradict each other. They don't have to hate each other, what's important is that their intentions and actions are opposed to each other. Another way to think about conflict is as part of the process of cause and effect. When one domino falls into another the falling domino's intention to fall is in conflict with the next domino's intention to remain standing. Conflict creates movement in your story. Characters pursue motivations by taking actions in the world and inevitably they come into conflict with other forces, which leads to new conditions and new actions.

Well written conflicts create *tension*. Imagine two characters in a scene. Character A says to Character B: "*Mrs. B, I'm going to have to ask you to resign.*" Now B says: "*You know what? That's a great idea. I wanted to retire anyway.*" What scene do we have left to watch? They agree. All that's left is to work out the details of Character B's retirement package. Who wants to watch that?

Now imagine the scene again. *"Mrs. B, You need to resign."*, except now B says, *"I can't! My husband is in the hospital. How could you ask me to resign after all I've done for this company. It's not fair!"* Now we have some dramatic tension. The audience has a question: *"Will she or won't she find a way out of it?"* We also have **stakes**: *"What about her husband! She has to find a way out!"*

There's still an issue though. Mrs. B doesn't want to resign, but at this point I don't see how she's going to avoid it. What would make this scene more compelling would be if she had both a conflicting motivation (To keep her job.), something at stake (Her husband.), and also a **tactic** for fighting back. That creates a conflict for the audience that is worth watching.

Imagine the scene again, but now instead of begging Ms B. says. *"Really Mr. A? I suppose I could resign, but if I left who would manage the O' Reilly account."* She flops a folder on the desk and leans back confidently. The boss is like a deer in headlights. Aha! She's one step ahead of him. She saw this coming and pulled up some dirt on the boss, now we have a scene. This creates "dramatic tension" because we have two opponents set up for a match and we don't know how it's going to turn out.

4 TYPES OF CONFLICT

STATIC CONFLICT
A conflict where the principal character involved is unable or unwilling to act.
John's girlfriend leaves him, he is stricken with grief. He cries and beats the walls with regret. He looks out the window and thinks about all the good times they had. There's a conflict, but there's no action.

JUMPING CONFLICT
A conflict where the principal character involved reacts in a manner that is not justified by preceding events.
John, a mild-mannered accountant, gets dumped by text. He decides to a rob bank. We have a conflict that led to an action, but I have not yet laid the groundwork to make John's reaction believable.

RISING CONFLICT
A conflict that naturally escalates as the principal character reacts to new conditions created by preceding conflict.
John's girlfriend leaves him, he gets drunk, goes home with a stranger, she robs him, he misses his car payment, loses his job, his ex-wife takes his kids, and then finally in a moment of despair he decides to rob a bank. Each conflict triggers the next and escalates the story to a climax.

FORESHADOWING CONFLICT
A conflict that is alluded to but delayed. Tension is created in the audience through a ratcheting up of anticipation.
John is preparing to propose to his girlfriend, but we know she's in a cabin with a secret lover. We watch John running all over the city preparing for his romantic moment while we cringe in our seats: "This isn't gonna end well."

I think it's probably obvious that the first two types aren't desirable for a good story. Rising conflict seems to be the obvious choice, but don't underestimate the power of "foreshadowing". Sometimes anticipation is more exciting than the event itself. Here's a famous example from Alfred Hitchcock on the difference between *suprise* and *suspense*:

Two men sit in a room, drinking coffee, chatting about the weather. Suddenly, without warning, an explosion! The audience is surprised, shocked even. You get a momentary jolt.

Now imagine the same two men, drinking coffee, except now at the top of the scene the camera drops down to the floor and reveals a bomb ticking away, unbeknownst to the characters. The conversation continues, but now the audience is on the edge of their seat. One of the characters leans down to tie his shoe. We're thinking: "It's right there! Just look to your left." They don't see it, they sit back up. Now instead of a few seconds of surprise, we can get a five full minutes of tension from the anticipation of the explosion. That's *suspense* not *surprise.*

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: STRUCTURE

To review: dramatic narratives are about characters who act on motivations and come in to conflict with opposing forces. The narrative is made up of a plot: a series of interrelated events. We typically experience those events through the persepective of a single character, known as the protagonist.

The events that make up a plot also have a **structure,** meaning that they are organized in to larger units that fit together in a strategic pattern. A skeleton is a "series of bones", but we can also recognize that the individual bones form larger parts (a left leg, a right arm, a rib cage) and those different larger parts connect to each other to form a whole in an intentional way.

At the simplest structural level we could say: ***all stories have a beginning, middle, and end.*** Once again, that might sound obvious, but you'd be surprised how many people (myself included) start writing the first scene in their movie without giving any thought to the fact that that scene is the ***beginning of your movie***. ***Beginnings*** serve a specific function in a narrative. As we write our individual scenes, we need to be conscious of their place in the film as a whole.

Here's a sports analogy. In American football, every set of downs begins with the same challenge: 1st and 10. You have eleven guys, I have eleven guys, and you have four tries to move this ball ten yards against our will. The way those ten yards are handled by the coach may be very different, however, depending on if it's the 1st play of the game or 1-minute left in the 4th quarter. I've read that the coach of the Patriots, Bill Belichick almost never scores in the first quarter of the superbowl, but still seems to find his way to the top by the end. That to me, is a coach with the mind of an artist. Because of his vast experience, he knows how the four quarters of a football game connect with each other in a unique pattern, and he has a strategy for managing the overall flow of the game to end with the result he wants.

All that said, it's still just the same ten-yards, so it's also possible to get *too* caught up in strategy and lose sight of what you're doing in the moment. You want to think about the movie as a whole, but don't get so caught up in following these structure models that you stop paying attention to the human feeling and truth in your moment-to-moment scenes. Don't be the football coach who is so obsessed with the genius game plan you came up the night before that you don't notice that your left tackle is getting his ass kicked by someone who's just simply bigger and faster than he his.

How do you accomplish this balancing act? I like to think about it as writing in two different modes. Sometimes I'm in "flow mode", I have an idea for a scene and I'm just living in the reality of it as I write. I'm not worrying about if it's second-half of Act II, I'm just trying to imagine what it's like to be that person in that place and I'm writing down what I see happen without thinking about how it helps the story over all.

Then at other times, I will revisit the material that I wrote in "flow mode" with a more "analytical" brain. It's almost like one part of my brain is an indulgent artist and the other part is an editor who works for my producer. The editor comes in and looks at all the interesting ideas the artist came up with and starts picking them apart, cutting them down, moving them around. The editor part of my brain thinks more about structure. In revision, I will start to focus on how each scene fits in the overall shape of the movie. If you start with your inner-critic from the beginning, however, it can be difficult to produce any material.

In the next few pages, we are going to talk about the different parts that make up a screenplay: **scenes form sequences, sequences form acts, and acts form the film as a whole.** We're also going to talk about the most common structural model used in screenwriting: **three-act structure.** It's essentially just an expansion on the idea of **beginning, middle, and end.** The blank page can be intimidating. You thought you had a movie in your head, but now you have 120 pages to fill and you don't know where to start. Having a model like this in mind will give you a skeleton that you can fill in with your own material. I personally find it much easier to begin writing when I have some kind of plan in mind, even if I end up changing it completely.

I caution again though, don't let structure get in the way of writing. If it's not helping, just write your first draft to get something on paper and then revisit the structure later when you have something to look at. This is the secret trick of writer's that the public doesn't always realize. We come up with some random idea on page 90 of the first draft and then in revision we go back and plant seeds earlier in the script that make it appear as if we had an intricate plan from the start. The audience gets to experience the structured final version, but that's not where most writers begin their process.

Getting too carried away with structure can also lead to a kind of writing that feels like Hollywood "paint-by-number". You can tell the script your reading hits all the bullet points they lay out in screenwriting books and film schools, but it feels completely hollow and dead inside, like someone is just serving you back movies they consumed and regurgitated without bringing anything of themselves to the work. So that's my bit of advice. Use structure to your benefit, but don't let it crush your originality and the human spirit you bring to the material.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: STRUCTURE

We've established that your film is a whole, now I want to break down some of the parts. I'm going to borrow some ideas from Robert McKee's screenwriting book: *STORY.* McKee's model is based on the progression of what he calls "story events":

A STORY EVENT creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value.

STORY VALUES are the universal qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative, or negative to positive, from one moment to the next.

A **STORY EVENT** creates meaningful change in the life situation of the character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value and **ACHIEVED THROUGH CONFLICT.**

"Event" means change. If the streets outside your window are dry, but after a nap you see they're wet, you assume an event has taken place, called rain." - Robert McKee

If when you wake up the window is dry, we would say no event has occurred because nothing has changed. We don't wake up and think to ourselves: "It did not rain." because things remaining the same is not an event, *unless* we expected it to rain when we went to sleep. In that case, we have discovered that our expecations of the afternoon are in *conflict* with reality. we now have to *change* our expectations and our plan for the day. This can create a shift in values: I was *"disappointed I couldn't go for a bike ride."* but now the value of *"dissapointment"* has been replaced by "*pleasant surprise that it's a beautiful day.*"

Once gain, this may sound obvious, but many writers, myself included, write large stacks of paper filled with scenes where nothing really changes. We think our script is filled with "events", because people say things and time passes, but for someone reading your script it just feels like an endless witty conversation that's leading nowhere. Notice McKee doesn't just say change in his definition, he twice repeats the phrase "creates *meaningful* change". The film about the guy taking a nap and checking the weather involves change, but it's not very meaningful.

I had an acting teacher once who suggested: "In a well-written play or film script, every scene should be one of the most important events in your character's life. If it doesn't feel that way either you as an actor haven't discovered the importance of the scene or the script isn't very well written." He also put it this way: "I paid $15 and devoted two hours to hearing about the life of someone who doesn't exist, you better show me the good parts!" This doesn't mean every scene has to be a huge melodramatic moment with screaming, crying, and explosions. Think back to some of the most important memories in your life. Some of them may have been exciting, but I bet there were others that were very quiet and simple, maybe it just seemed like an ordinary day at the time, but looking back you see how that small moment ultimately shaped your entire life.

How do we decide what types of events constitute "meaningful change"? McKee suggests that change should be "expressed and experienced in terms of values". When a character experiences a story event it's like they reach a fork in the road. Life is going to change in a meaningful way and the result is going to be either better or worse than what came before.

His theory is that human beings have a wide variety of emotional values, but they all have either a positive or negative charge. They all fall in to the + column or the - column and are bound together in binary pairs (+/-): alive/dead, truth/lie, courage/cowardice, loyalty/betrayal, strength/weakness, excitement/boredom. Often a story focuses on a particular set of values. If our story is about "living an honest life" then the writer will set up scenarios that at first show a character sinking deeper in to the negative consequences of a life filled with lies before redeeming themselves with the cleansing power of the truth.

Actors will often refer to these "values" as "stakes", in the sense of "What is at stake for my character in this scene?" A common technique for an actor when they are exploring a script is to seek to "raise the stakes". The assumption is that in some scenes it may appear on the surface that there's not much drama for them to play, but if the writer included it it must be important. In order to make their performance more engaging, they will try to dig deeper and analyze the script until they come up with a satisfying answer to the question: "What does my character stand to lose in this scene? Why do they care?" If a scene isn't important to our character why should it be important to the audience?

I find this to be a helpful model for revising my screenplays. I'll look at a scene I've already written and ask: "What's the meaningful change here? What value is at stake?" If I can't come up with an answer it's usually a bad scene. Take all this with a grain of salt, however, this is just one person's model, it's not the only way to approach writing a script.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: STRUCTURE

A SCENE is an action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character's life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance. Ideally, every scene is a **STORY EVENT.**

Our first structural bulding block is the **scene.** McKee says scenes occur "in more or less continuous time and space". Most of the time that is how we distinguish scenes from each other. Characters walk into a room, something happens, then we cut to another time or place. That break in continuity tells us in the audience "new scene". It is possible, however, for a scene to stretch across multiple locations or include small time jumps, so I think it helps focus on the second part of McKee's definiton: a unified "story event". If my character walks through three rooms and a signifincant change occurs in the third, I would not consider it three scenes because of the number of doors invovled. The walking through the house leading up the change is dramatically speaking considered to be part of the same story unit.

McKee then goes on to suggest that every scene in your screenplay should hinge on a value and that value should shift significantly from one charge to another "with a degree of perceptible significance". Meaning not only should something change, the change should be significant enough that the audience can track it happening as they watch. If we as writers say to ourselves, "In this scene she realizes she's not in love anymore." but we don't provide any clues to the audience that that happened, than in their experience of your film it didn't happen. That doesn't mean she has to say directly what's on her mind, in fact she probably shouldn't. You as a writer have to come up with an interesting way to signal the audience what is shifting inside her.

In this model, if the value charge at the top of your scene is positive and then at the end it's still positive than your scene needs to be revisd or cut. If the characters start the scene on the positive side of passion/boredom and then they go out and have a beautiful date and end up even more passionately in love than when they started, McKee would say you don't have a scene, they're just coasting along the expected trajectory.

This is one of the places where I personally feel McKee's model can become a bit restrictive. I'm not sure all good scenes can be boiled down so simply to +/- or -/+. Regardless, I think there's an important lesson in his broader point that something meaningful should happen in each scene, that each scene should create change through conflict. Bad scenes with no meaningful changewill inevitably sneak in to your screenplay. I find that they tend to come in two categories:

1. It was a "great idea". These are dangerous. One day you have a flash of inspiration: "Wouldn't it be cool to film a gunfight *on top of a submarine?* I'm a genius." Then you write your screenplay and find there's actualy no place for the "great idea" but the "great idea" is *soooo* great you force it into the script. Get used to letting these go.

Sometimes on a professional sports team, they pay big money to bring in a star, but the team ends up worse off. The star is so talented their ego needs to be fed at all times, the coach is constantly trying to scheme ways to get them the ball, and the whole team chemistry is thrown off. The team becomes oriented towards getting that player statistics, not winning games. "Great ideas" operate like this. We start writing the script to serve the idea, rather than allowing the scenes to serve the script.

2. You wrote the scene so the audience would understand what's going on. This is called ***exposition***. Doing it well is one of the greatest challenges in screenwriting. You can't avoid exposition entirely. The audience does need certain pieces of information to make sense of the on-screen events. However when a scene or even a line of dialogue exists solely for exposition it feels false because it's not organically rooted in the character's motivations. We can feel the hand of writer forcing it on us.

You have heard lines like this in bad films: *"Oh mom, I'm just so torn up by this divorce. Why did he have to cheat on me with my best friend? This custody battle we've been going through for three months is so bad for our two kids."* People don't talk like this.She's overexplaining information that her mother would already know. What is her motivation?

You still have to find a way to explain the situation to the audience, but ideally all exposition should be communicated in scenes and lines of dialogue that also serve a drmatic purpose. Characters should have reasons for speaking other than to share facts with the audience. Imagine that same line I just described except now at the end she says: *"This custody battle is so bad for the kids, I just don't know how I'm going to pay for the lawyer..."* The mom sighs and takes out her checkbook: *"How much do you need?"*

Now the over-the-top performative line can work because the character has a dramatic motivation to say it. Expository scenes should work the same way. They should contain meaningful changes, story events, as well as information.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: STRUCTURE

A SEQUENCE is a series of scenes (generally two to five) that culminates with greater impact than any previous scene.

AN ACT is a series of sequences that peaks in a climactic scene which causes a major reversal of values, more powerful in its impact than any previous sequence or scene.

A STORY is a series of acts that build to a last act climax or story climax which brings about absolute and irreversible change.

A scene is it's own unified dramatic unit hinging on a value, with its own action/reaction. From there we build up into larger units. A series of **scenes** constructs a **sequence**. In the same way we can think of each scene as a single idea, we can also conceive of a sequence as more than just the sum of it's parts. The sequence should have it's own unity. In a series of scenes, Luke Skywalker discovers a message in a droid, goes out in to the desert to find Obi Wan Kenobi, then returns to find his Aunt and Uncle murdered and decides to leave on a journey with Obi Wan. We can think of this collection of scenes as a unified "sequence" called "Leaving Tatooine" that hinges on the value of "staying in the safety of home versus answering the call to adventure".

A feature film script usually has somewhere in the range of 8-12 sequences. This is now considered a dramatic concept, but part of it's origins lie in the fact that back when films were projected from a can of film, the standard length of a 35mm film reel was 1,000 feet, which equals roughly 11 minutes of screentime. The average film length then was roughly 80-90 minutes, so feature films were physically being produced as 8-10 separate smaller films. It naturally became ideal that each of those reels should function as it's own self-contained story unit with it's own beginning, middle, and end.

An **act** is the next step up the chain. Unlike sequences, which are more specific to film, acts are a concept that come to us from classical drama going back centuries. Different structures of dramatic narrative are often categorized by the number of acts they contain: the one-act play, the three-act screenplay, the five-act Shakespearean drama.

So a scene is a self-contained, individual story event. A short series of scenes that together comprise a unified dramatic movement are called sequences. A collection of sequences and scenes that together comprise one of the major unified dramatic movements in a story are called acts. The acts themselves also form a whole, a story. What's the common theme here? Unity.

ON UNITY

If we zoom all the way out we can say the script as a whole is also a thing. (Thanks Matt...) *The Godfather* is not just a collection of scenes, we can also think of the script as a whole as a unified unit. Not exactly breaking news, but in *classical aesthetics* this obversation leads us to an imporant principle: a work of art is a whole greater than the sum of its parts, so every individual piece within a work of art should be related back to the work as a whole. Every line of dialogue, every note, every brush stroke should be there for a reason. We want to see a central organizing idea that's able to contain all the different strands of the work.

Aesthetics is an area of philosophy that studies our subjective perceptions of works of art. It seeks to understand the underlying principles that guide our judgement of what's "good" or "bad". *Classical aesthetics* are what we might consider the more mainstream, historical set of tastes that guide our culture.

I want to point out that there are other cultures who have their own *classical aesthetics.* Japanese Noh theater is *classical* in the sense that it is a unified tradition passed down over many generations, but if I were to make a film based on Noh principles it would probably seem like a modern art film to an American audience (and honestly probably to many people in the Japanese movie audience as well.) Much of what I'm explaining in this packet relates back to the Western classical practice of drama. At this point in the 21st century, however, these ideas are baked in to filmmaking across the world. That's why I'm able to quote Aristotle in a packet about films and it still makes some sense two-thousand plus years later.

In a practical sense, here's the principle I want you to take away from this: you need to have an idea of what your film is about as a whole and then you want to test every scene in your film to make sure that they support that idea. So what do you do if you write an amazing scene with clever dialogue that in the end has nothing to do with the rest of the movie?

An *avant-garde* or *modernist* filmmaker might not care about unity. They may even actively work against it. They might like the fact that they are taking a detour, because life is full of detours that add up to nothing. In *classical aesthetics*, however, the rule says cut it. If the part doesn't serve the whole, you cut the part, because the whole is more important.

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: STRUCTURE

In *Poetics*, Aristotle takes this even further and suggests that a good drama should respect three unities:

ARISTOTLES THREE UNITIES

1. *UNITY OF ACTION*: a tragedy should have one principal action.
2. *UNITY OF TIME*: the action in a tragedy should occur over a period of no more than 24 hours.
3. *UNITY OF PLACE*: a tragedy should exist in a single physical location.

Rule one goes back to the idea of a **superobjective**. Can you sum up the journey of your character as one action? In *Star Wars*, for example, we could say Luke Sykwalker's superobjective was "to become who he truly is: a Jedi." He does many different things along the way: finds Obi Wan, flees Tatooine, rescues a princess, destroys a Death Star, etc. Each one of those actions, however, can be seen as steps in an overarching principal action.

Unity of time, suggests that we try to contain the period of time over which our story takes place as much of possible. Unity of place, says the same thing, but for locations. According to these rules, a story set in one castle over the course of a single night will be more impactful then a story that takes place in three castles over the course of six months.

These rules were intended for ancient Greek festivals, not modern film screenplays, so I am not suggesting you need to strictly follow all of them. In my experience, however, I've rarely come across a first draft of a screenplay that wouldn't end up benefiting by moving in this direction. If something takes place over a month it's usually more exciting and easier to follow when it takes place over a week. If it can all believably happen in a single night even better!

First-time writers rarely come up with screenplays where the story is too simple. Students almost always face the opposite problem: they have too many characters, too many ideas, three different overlapping plots, and it's all just way too long and difficult to follow.

There's an expression: "Bad novels make good films." Adaptations of simple novellas, or trashy pulp novels have historically been much more successful than attempts at adapting great works of literature. Film is a present-tense medium and it requires you to be economic as a writer. A novelist can go on for twenty pages exploring how somone feels about an afternoon, but you have to tell a complete story with a beginning, middle, and end in 120 pages. In screenplay formatting most of the space on those 120 pages is left blank. That doesn't make it any less challenging, in some ways it's more difficult, because you have to be extremely efficient in your choice of events to dramatize. Simple stories told well work best in film.

THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

The most common structure used in screenplays is called "three-act structure". The first act is roughly 20-30 pages, the second act is the largest, roughly 40-60 pages, and then the third act is usually the shortest, roughly 20 pages. Those numbers are averages, don't feel like you can't write a 31-page first act. What's more important then the specific page-length is the ratio of one act to the other. The rule of thumb in screenwriting is that one page equals roughly one-minute of screentime. So in a three-hour film, it's possible your first act could go on for 40-50 pages. If, however, your first act is 50 pages and your second act is 20 pages, that's a good sign your spending way too long getting the story started.

Each act has it's own **arc**, meaning it's own beginning, middle, and end. Each act ends with a **climax**. These are also referred to as the **act breaks** The climax is an act break because it is a story event with such significant implications that it becomes clear to the audience that the character's situation has changed. There is no going back. We've experienced a "break" in the line of action that makes it clear we've crossed a border in to a new part of the story.

1st ACT *Setup*	**2nd ACT** *Complications/Confrontation*	**3rd ACT** *Resolution*

ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: STRUCTURE

THE FIRST ACT

The first act introduces the audience to your protagonist and their world. Often the first act is "the calm before the storm". We see what the character's life was like before the **inciting incident**. The inciting incident is a story event that upsets the balance of their lives, it breaks the stasis. "*I was just your average Joe until one day...*[insert inciting incident here] This doesn't always have to mean the character's life was perfect and then a crisis occurs that threatens that perfection. Sometimes it's just the opposite: *"My life was going nowhere until the day I met...."*

The inciting incident is that it turns a stable situation into a dynamic one. Life goes from being routine to unpredictable. Your protagonist can start the story stabily miserable or stabily happy, the important thing is that it creates change. The inciting incident triggers the chain of events that will carry us through the story and forces the main character to act.

Your character doesn't have to act heroically right away. A common staple of dramatic films is the hero's intial "refusal of the call to action". A gang of bandits shoots up the town and the townsfolk come to the ex-gunfighter and say: "You have to help us!" But he keeps to himself, he doesn't stick his neck out for anybody anymore: "Sorry, I'm retired." The story doesn't end there obviously. He refuses the initial call, but the entrance of the bad guys into his peaceful village upsets the whole stability of his world and inevitably will force him into a situation that shifts him from passive to active.

A common problem in screenplays is that the inciting incident comes too late or doesn't come in any decisive way at all. In many films it's the first scene. *Jaws* opens on page one with a shark attack. We could consider that the inciting incident or we could say that the sheriff's discovery of the body incites the action but even the discovery comes by the third scene.

The first act ends in a **climax** or **act break**. This could easily be confused with the inciting incident and at times they are the same event, but usually they are two separate events. One way to think of it would be that if the inciting incident calls the character to act, the first act break is when the character accepts that call to action and there is no turning back.

In our reluctant cowboy example, the bandits take over the town and the ex-gunslinger refuses to help. That's our inciting incident that upset the stability of the world. Then one day he goes to town for supplies and sees one of the bandits trying to take advantage of the shopkeeper's daughter. He genuinely doesn't want to get involved in the town's problems, but he can't let this happen right in front of him, so he confronts the bandit, they get in to a gunfight, and the hero kills him. Now the bandits are after him and he's involved in the town's troubles whether he likes it or not. Before there was a call to action, but he still had a choice. Now his stable little world is irrevocably changed and he can't go back to being a quiet

THE SECOND ACT

The second act is typically the longest. It presents a series of complications to the protagonist that increasingly raise the stake: rising action. Things get steadily more complicated and more difficult for the protagonist. If your most intense dramatic scene comes at minute forty and then everything gets easier from there by minute sixty we will be checking our phone.

This doesn't mean we have to move in a straight downwards line, with the characters life just getting worse and worse. Often the trajectory for the hero zigs and zags, one minute you think they've won only to discover the plot goes deeper than they ever realized. These switches in direction are called *reversals*. Aristotle wrote that there is no element of drama more powerful than a reversal, but he cautions that a reversal must be *"neccessary and probable"*. This goes back to what we said earlier about a good story being *"surprising but inevitable."*

There's a saying I like: "*You can have a car crash in the beginning of your script, but not at the end.*" Car crashes are realistic, they happen every day. If a character gets in to a car accident in the first act and it sets off the series of events that will follow, we as an audience will buy that. But imagine this, you're watching a romantic movie, the character has gone through all sorts of lengths to win over his lover, everything is going well and then out of nowhere they get hit by a car and the credits roll.

You would feel cheated right? Why? It's too easy! The writer just dropped in a random reversal to make their film seem deep and tragic. Random events like this happen in real-life, but they often don't work in drama because they break the unity of action. We are tracking a character's actions in a particular direction for a long period and we tend to want to see a resolution that comes out of those actions rather than random chance. Perhaps this comes from our real-life desire for control and meaning in life. It can be easier to accept that a bad thing happened to you because of something you did, then a bad thing happening for no reason at all.

THE SECOND ACT (CONTINUED)

Whatever the case, in classical drama we are taught that conflicts should arise from a naturally progressing rising action. Naturally progressing, however, should not mean predictable. If the character is ultimately going to conquer their antagonist, it is more moving for the audience if they survived a challenge that we thought there was no way they could possibly get out of. If your film has a tragic ending, it will probably be more powerful if at some point before that we think everything will work out beautifully.

When Aristotle says that the reversal should be *neccessary and probable*, I think what he means is not that we do see it coming, but that we and/or the character's *should have* seen it coming. Something they did earlier laid the seeds for the misfortune they eventually face. It is *surprising but inevitable*.

Second acts are long and they are usually conceived of as having two major turning-points. The first is the script's **midpoint,** the second is the **second act break**.

The midpoint often offers a kind of false ending. If your script has a reversal from positive to negative then the midpoint is probably that high point where things seem like they're going surprising well. A high or low point, however, is also inevitbaly the point where things start to reverse in the other direction. The winter solstice is the shortest day of the year, but it also marks the beginning of the movement towards longer days and more sunshine. It's always darkest before the dawn...

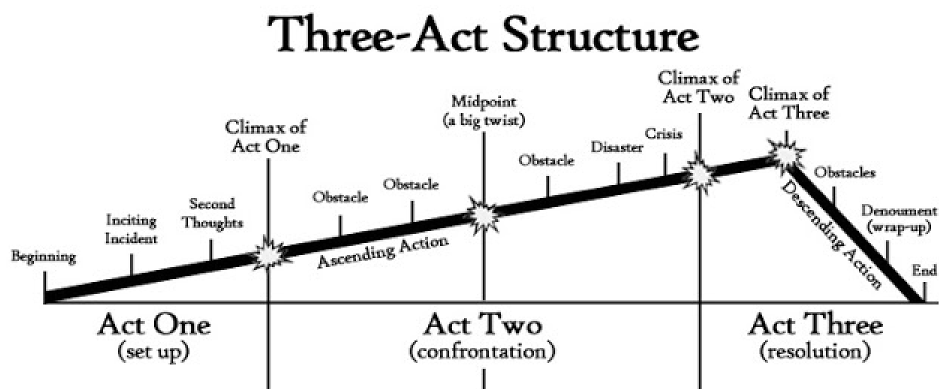
The second-act break is then the completion of that reversal. A major devastating moment where the character is worse off then they've ever been. Just as in the first-act break there should be an irrevocable change in the character's situation. In *Star Wars,* we could say the midpoint is when they free Leia. "This is going to be easy! Everything's going according to plan." The second-act break is when Darth Vader kills Obi Wan Kenobi during their escape. Luke has lost his teacher, what happens next int he movie will be different because for the first time he will have to confront these challenges alone and prove himself a Jedi.

THE THIRD ACT

The third act leads us to a major crisis and then the resolution of the conflict, whether that be positive or negative. Some refer to this as the **obligatory scene**. The meaning of that term points out that the climax has it's roots in the inciting incident. The end is contained in the beginning. If our film begins with a vicious shark attack, then our obligatory scene is the final confrontation with the shark.

The third act is usually the shortest. Often it is one long, continuous sequence of scenes that happen in a single time and location. This third act is about a **confrontation** or **climax** where the central conflict of your story is resolved. The resolution leads to a new stability. Resolution and stability do not have to mean a happy ending. As we said earlier, you can be stabily heartbroken and miserable. The point is that the matter is finished. There is no going back after the climax, the conflict is over whether you won or lost.

After this comes the **denouement**. The tension has subsided, but there are still a few loose ends to tie-up, maybe we get a short glimpse of the character's new situation. At times, the completion of the character's action happens in this stage. They slay the dragon in the climax, but they collect the reward and marry the princess in the denouement.



ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC NARRATIVE: THEME

Theme, in my opinion, is the most elusive of all the elements of drama. Here's our dictionary definition:

A universal idea, lesson, or message explored through a dramatic narrative.

Theme is the point your story proves to the audience about the nature of life as you see it. When you write or watch a film without a strong theme you can tell something is missing. For me it's a feeling of: *"Okay, that was fun, but so what? Why should I care?"* On the other hand ,when you try too hard to write a film about an idea it often comes across as preachy or forced. There's an old Hollywood saying that warns: *"If you want to send a message try Western Union!"*

Theme is not what happens in your film it's what your film is about. *The Wizard of Oz* is about "coming home". If it were only about witches and munchkins it wouldn't have so much emotional power. A good theme expresses a truth about the world that you feel is deeply important. Some writers suggest that your film should essentially serve as a "proof" of your theme.

In *Goodfellas*, Ray Liotta's character becomes enamored with the mafia as a young boy. He does a few favors for the mob and begins to become like the gangsters he looked up to. By the end, however, his greed and indulgence catches up with him and he ends up a wreck. We could say the theme is: *"There's no free lunch. If you take the easy money and good times of a dangerous lifestyle, it will eventually catch up with you and you'll pay for what you took."*

I personally don't believe theme always has to be framed so directly in terms of *"If you do this, then that will happen to you."* I'm not sure all films need to be fables that set out to teach us a lesson. I have noticed, however, that even when you set out to write what feels like pure entertainment like a raunchy comedy, for example, it usually feels hollow and less funny without some kind of point-of-view on the world embedded in it. You need that "So what?" as much as you need a good plot.

A warning: If you set out to write the screenplay and are focused the whole time on your intention: "I'm going to teach people this and that." you almost surely will write a forced story filled with exposition. The audience can tell that you're trying to force a lesson on them and they'll reject it, because your story events don't feel real. They feel like exactly what they are: contrived events with no reality of their own that are only there to prove your point.

This is why I say theme is elusive. You need to have a theme, but if you write towards one it almost never works. It's a very delicate element to get right. Here's what I suggest. When you first begin your screenplay, write down what you think your theme is. It can be a single sentence or a page of notes on a certain belief you have that is motivating you to write your story.

My personal preference is to start by writing a document that's like a mission statement. I explain to myself where the story came from, why I want to write it, and what I think it's about. I don't spend forever on it, it's just for me, but I do find it helpful to keep working on it until I feel like I have a sold intention laid out for myself. I want to clearly state what kind of story I'm writing and why.

However you choose to do it, I suggest once you're done, take that piece of paper, put it away, and don't even think about looking at it again until you've finished a draft of your screenplay. It will be in the back of your mind, but don't try to make everything about the theme. Focus on your plot and your characters. Pretend you have a Hollywood producer breathing down your neck who doesn't care what you have to say, they just want a good story. Build a realistic world and a series of events that challenge your protagonist with conflicts that lead to a change in that character's conditions.

Remember: SHOW DON'T TELL. Don't tell the audience what your theme is. Create a compelling story that will make them discover your theme on their own.

Once you've finished that first draft, now look back at the theme you wrote down. Do you still think that's what your story is about? I think very often we don't really know why we're writing something until we're already deep in to the process of writing it. You may have started off believing one thing when you started writing, but now a year later you're a different person and your beliefs about the world have shifted. Or maybe now that you know your story better you see that the first theme you thought of was on the surface level, but there's something else deeper and more interesting going on underneath.

WRITING FOR A VISUAL MEDIUM

I hope that now we have some foundation for understanding what I mean by a **dramatic narrative**. Remember, however, I said at the beginning that a film story is a dramtic narrative written for a **visual medium.**

A **medium** is the means through which an artist expresses themselves. If I want to express the emotions I have about the loss of a family member I could paint a sad scene of us at the dinner table. I could write a song in a minor key. I could take a photograph of the sad look on someone's face. I could write an essay about my experience of grief. I could make a film where actors play out a scene based on my experience.

Any of these mediums could express the same feeling, but they would do it in different ways. The essay could go into more detail about the complexity of my inner-thoughts. The song could have no words and say nothing about my thoughts, but it might take a more direct route to recreating my emotion in the audience. The pose of the figures in the painting might have to be more suggestive to achieve the same level of emotion that a more subtle look may accomplish in a photograph.

Each medium has it's own unique qualities and as artists we need to learn how best to use our chosen medium. Ideas that work in novels won't always work in films and vice versa. Film is a **visual medium**, based on images, novels are an **oral medium**, based on words. The tricky part of writing a screenplay is that of course we are using words, but ultimately the goal is to convert those words into sounds and images. People don't walk into movie theaters and read screenplays. Therefore as we're writing screenplays we always have to keep in mind how our words will be translated into a sequence of moving images.

Here then are a few examples of what we can and cannot do in a screenplay. As you develop your own film story, try to keep these ideas in mind so that you're developing material that will work on screen and not just on paper.

RULE #1 - FILMS EXIST IN THE PRESENT-TENSE

Screenplays must be written in terms of present-tense actions we can watch someone actively do on screen. Why do I say this must be in the present-tense? Can't we use flashbacks? Of course you can, but a flashback in a film is more like "Going back to a different present." Once you communicate to the audience "This is the past." the actual action we watch is happening in front of us as if we were there. I can't film someone "remembering summer camp". That would just be an image of someone looking out a window. What I can do however is show them looking out a window, play a twinkling sound, and then fade into a scene of a young person who looks just like them at a summer camp.

NOVEL:

Jenny looked out the window and thought about all the crushes she had on boys back in summer camp in 1984. She sighs. Those were the days, she thinks. Or maybe they weren't. She did also remember spending a lot of time crying in the mud.

SCREENPLAY:

```
Jenny looks out the window.

FLASHBACK TRANSITION TO CAMP

A young girl who looks like Jenny runs up to a young boy and hands him flowers.

TRANSITION BACK TO PRESENT

Older Jenny smiles.

TRANSTION BACK TO CAMP
The boy pushes her into the mud. She starts to cry.
```

In the novel, we can use the past-tense to indicate to the reader that what we are talking about something that happened in the past and we can go in the character's memory. In the film, on the other hand it's more like we start in one present and then teleport back to a different present to show what happened in the character's past, because we can't film "remembering".

That may sound more confusing than it really is in practice. All it boils down to is that everything you write in a screenplay should be something that we can film actors actively doing. We want to see movement and action, you need to tell your story through a collection of specific moments in people's lives, not generalized memories or people thinking about doing things.

RULE #2 - FILMS CAN'T GENERALIZE TIME, BUT THEY CAN EXPRESS LARGE ACTIONS IN SMALL DETAILS

When we write screenplays we have to think in terms of moment to moment action. We can't go in to a room and film actors doing things for "a month" or a "year". Films can show the passage of time, but they do so by showing us a sequence of specific details that together add up to a bigger story. You might know this as a "montage".

NOVEL:

Michael spent a long year working on his game. Day in and day out he struggled. Even when he thought all hope was lost and he would never make the team, something pushed him forward. He spent the month of September doing nothing but shooting free throws. By the time tryouts came around in October, he knew he was ready.

If you write something like this in a screenplay, you are essentially asking who ever directs the film to do the writing for you. What does "the month of September" look like? We're not going to sit in the theater and watch a month of free-throws. How do I point a camera at "all hope was lost" or "day in and day out" or "a long year". We need to create a sequence of specific images that taken togeher will give the audience the same impression as the sentences from the novel.

SCREENPLAY:

```
Michael shoots a free throw. AIRBALL.

Michael jogs in the rain. He looks like he might fall down and die. HE VOMITS.

Michael shoots another free throw. It hits the rim.

Michael is at his job as a security guard. He walks the grounds dribbling a
basketball.

Michael shoots another free throw. Swish. Another free throw. Swish. It's automatic.
```

Put some 80's music under this and we're ready to go! This might be a silly example, but here's the general principle. All I did was come up with five specific, present-tense moments in time that when put together as a sequence allow the audience to infer that a long amount of time has passed and Michael has progressed in his game. Notice I said "infer", meaning we can't actually show the audience a month of basketball practice, but I can give them a series of clues that allow them to draw a conclusion about what happened over the course of a few months.

RULE #3 - FILMS CAN'T PHOTOGRAPH THOUGHT

In a novel, an esssay, or a poem, it is common for writers to include long passages on what a character is thinking or feeling. If I try to photograph a person having a thought with a camera what I'll end up with is an im age of someone staring at a wall. The camera can't look through their temples and see what's inside.

You might object: "What about voiceover!" It is true that we could have a character's voice explaining what they're thinking. So this rule is maybe not as absolute as the other two. However every screenwriting teacher I have ever worked with warns against using voiceovers, usually on the first day of class. Here's why;

As we said earlier, we are writing for a **visual medium** and our job as artists is to create in a way that makes the best use of our chosen medium. When we fill a film with voiceovers we're using a **visual medium** as if it's an **oral meidum**. Sound and dialogue are important in films, but they are not generally not as impactful as the images. We want to make full use of our medium and the main channel for communication in our medium is images. When all the important stuff is on the soundtrack we might as well be making a an audiobook.

"SHOW DON'T TELL". What has more impact, when someone tells you "Hey, you can trust me." or when someone is actually there for you in a difficult situation? Talk is cheap and the same is true in drama. A character telling us something is not as impactful as watching how that character behaves and deciding for ourselves how we feel about it.

RULE #3 - FILMS CAN'T PHOTOGRAPH THOUGHT (continued from last page)

NOVEL:

Shante looked across the table at her husband. Everything he did drives her crazy these days. She wondered what happend to the fire they once had and how much longer she could stay with him.

SCREENPLAY:

```
Shante and Jamal sit at the kitchen table.  Jamal is shoveling pasta into his mouth
like a pig at a troth.

Shante isn't eating her food. She's staring at Jamal and he doesn't even notice.

Jamal takes out his phone and starts watching a Youtube clip of professional
wrestling with the sound on.

Shante clears her throat and folds her arms. Again Jamal doesn't notice.

Shante picks up a carrot off her place and begins to rub it along her lips
seductively. It's a test. Jamal just burps and keeps watching his video.

Shante takes her plate to the kitchen.
```

The goal here is that we're trying to come up with a sequence of actions and images that will help the audience understand what your character is thinking without having the character tell them directly. If you insist, however, that the story you want to tell is filled with thoughts and voiceovers I have two suggestions.

Suggestion 1: Write a book, a poem, or an essay. I'm not trying to be funny here, I genuinely mean that. Those are all amazing mediums to work in and if the story you want to tell is all about someone's interior life I think you'll be more successful working in a medium where you have the freedom to explore that inner-life as much as you want.

Suggestion 2: Write the screenplay without voiceover first and then see if adding it back in really makes it better. I'm suggesting this because it will force you to do the work of creating a set of events that work together in a logical sequence to tell your story. You won't get to cheat and explain everything that happens in your voiceover. Then once you have a first draft, you can go back and start playing with voiceover to enrich what you wrote but you won't be using it as a crutch.

One final word on this. Alfred Hitchcock once described a test for evaluating a film story that is quite famous and gets repeated by every professor in every film school in the U.S. at least once a semester. It goes something like this:

In a good film the audience should be able to understand 90% of what's happening with the sound turned off.

There are great films that rely on voiceover. For example, I think Forrest Gump is a well-crafted film and it famously features narration from Tom Hanks throughout. However, I think that if you went back and watched that film on mute you would be able to track it without the dialogue. You would know exactly how Forrest feels about Jenny without you telling him. In a film like that the voiceover doesn't replace the images it enhances them.

One more from Hitchcock, this one is a direct quote:

"In many of the films now being made, there is very little cinema: they are mostly what I call 'photographs of people talking.' When we tell a story in cinema we should resort to dialogue only when it's impossible to do otherwise. I always try to tell a story in the cinematic way, through a succession of shots and bits of film in between."

EXERCISES

SUBMISSIONS

In the following pages I'm going to introduce exercises intended to help you develop a story for a screenplay. You will be working on development documents like **treatments** and **beat sheets** that screenwriters and development executives use in the early stages of the creative proces. Even writers with a finished script often need to develop these documents to submit their work to studios, festivals, an agents.

You can submit up to **10 Pages of Writing** for feedback. I would recommend sending a treatment and/or a beat sheet as long as the combined total is **10 Pages or Less.** You may submit loglines, but I've found that with only a logline it's sometimes difficult to know enough about your idea to give helpful feedback. You can also send screenwriting pages or questions you have about the writing process.

If you would like the work you submit returned to you please indicate that on the **top of the first page of the submission.** ***I cannot guarantee that your work will get back to you or that you will receive a response.*** The copy you receive back may be a scanned and printed photocopy of the original.

I try my best to get every writer at least one response and to return their work when asked, but I work with a network of unpaid volunteers and unfortunately sometimes people don't follow through. It also may take a few months for us to receive, distribute, read, and re-send the letters during which sometimes writers return addresses change. I am trying to improve my process and make our feedback more consistent, but I want to set reasonable expectations.

Send all submissions to: **PO BOX 330, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010**

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Your work will be read by me or one of my volunteers and you will receive a letter in response with their feedback. This is not intended to be read as a note from a teacher grading your test. This is a letter from one of your peers sharing their thoughts on your work.

I had a writing professor in graduate school who compared a writer receiving notes to a doctor diagnosing a patient. The patient comes in and thinks they have some horrible disease they read about on WebMD and demand an experimental drug treatment. The doctor doesn't just go along with what the patient *says* is the problem/solution, but they do *listen to what the symptoms are* and make their own interpretation of what going wrong in the patient's body.

If someone reads your work and says: "*I don't really believe she'd fall in love with him, you should just cut that part.*" It doesn't mean you have to take that note and cut the scene. It does tell you that for that reader the scene wasn't believeable and you need to deal with that even if you don't agree with the solution they're suggesting. Sometimes the answer may just be: "*You can't make everyone happy.*" Even then it helps to know how people will react to your

WHAT IS A LOGLINE?

"Logline" is a film industry term for a short description of a film story. They are similar to the descriptions you might see under a movie title while browsing Netflix or the old TV Guide. Good loglines are simple and concise, yet still contain all the essential DNA of what your story is about just like a seed contains all the information needed to build a tall tree.

The Godfather: *The aging patriarch of an organized crime dynasty transfers control of his clandestine empire to his reluctant son.*

The Shawshank Redemption: *Two imprisoned men bond over a number of years, finding solace and eventual redemption through acts of common decency.*

EXERCISES

WRITING A LOGLINE

Writing a logline is a deceptively challenging task. In my experience, writers will often do anything to avoid it. It's much easier to do research and generate pages of potential scenes than to boil down what your film is in to a few clear sentences. You need to be able to answer this question: "*Oh you're writing a film? Cool, what's it about?"*

If your answer sounds like this you may not have an idea yet: *"There's this guy who was a soldier and he's in Cuba and at one point there's this big fight on a boat and there's hackers involved, they're trying to steal cryptocurrency, at the end he saves the president daughter..."* This hypothetical person has a lot of *ideas* that could be used in a film, but they haven't formed those ideas in to a solid unified whole yet.

If you want to submit your work to festivals, labs, agents, studios etc. you will need to have a logline prepared before anyone ever agrees to read your whole screenplay. If you can't explain your film to a producer in a few sentences, how can they sell your movie to the public? We don't buy tickets to the theaters based on reading the whole script in advance, we see a movie poster, maybe a trailer. There needs to be a clear idea of the film to be marketed.

The big summer movie this year is the sequel to *Top Gun*. If I was trying to go with someone and they asked "*What's it about?"* based on the commercials I've seen I would say: *"Tom Cruise is a disgraced ex-fighter pilot who's kind of a badass and he gets brought back to train some young pilots and then gets in to a real dogfight."* That's just me riffing off a commercial for a movie I've never seen, but it already contains all the elements we need for a story: We have a protagonist with a fatal flaw (legendary fighter pilot who's reckless, uncomfortable with authority) and we have a rising conflict (fish-out-of-water maverick working in the U.S. military, pushes to redeem himself in the institution and then has to prove his value and save the world in a real-life dog fight.)

The first exercise is to **write a logline for a film story you would like to write. 1-3 sentences.** The goal is to make it as simple as possible without leaving anything essential out. I am going to include some samples and formulas for writing a logline to

LOGLINE FORMULA #1

INCITING INCIDENT + **PROTAGONIST** + **ACTION** + **ANTAGONIST**

DJANGO UNCHAINED

Inciting Incident ***Protagonist*** ***Action***
After being rescued by a German bounty hunter, a freed slave sets out to rescue his wife from a brutal
Antagonist
Mississippi plantation owner.

THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS

Inciting Incident ***Protagonist*** ***Action***
When tasked to catch a killer who skins his victims, a young FBI cadet must seek help from an
Antagonist
incarcerated and manipulative killer.

LOGLINE FORMULA #2

PROTAGONIST + **ACTION** + **ANTAGONIST** + **GOAL** + **STAKE**

DIE HARD

Protagonist ***Action*** ***Stake***
NYC Cop John McClane comes to LA to visit his estranged wife, when her entire company is taken
Antagonist ***Goal***
hostage by a terrorist group, John might be the only one who can save them.

AVENGERS

Protagonist ***Action*** ***Antagonist***
A team of superheroes must learn to work together and confront a meddlesome demigod, in order to
Goal ***Stake***
stop him and his alien army from taking over the world and enslaving humanity.

EXERCISES

WRITE AN OUTLINE

In the early stages of the writing process, I find it easier to start by building a skeleton of the work I intend to write. One of the first steps I take is to create an outline of the overall **structure** of the movie. At the very least, you want to identify what your **three-acts** are. Describe the major action of each act in a few sentences. It's good also to identify a few key moments structural moments as well. I'm going to present one model of the three-act structure from Syd Field you can use as a guideline, but any kind of outline of the important moments that makes sense to you is fine.

Syd Field suggests you need to begin by identify ingand describing four key things about your story:

1. The Beginning - What is your character's situation at the beginning? In the example below from *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo lives a simple life in the shire.

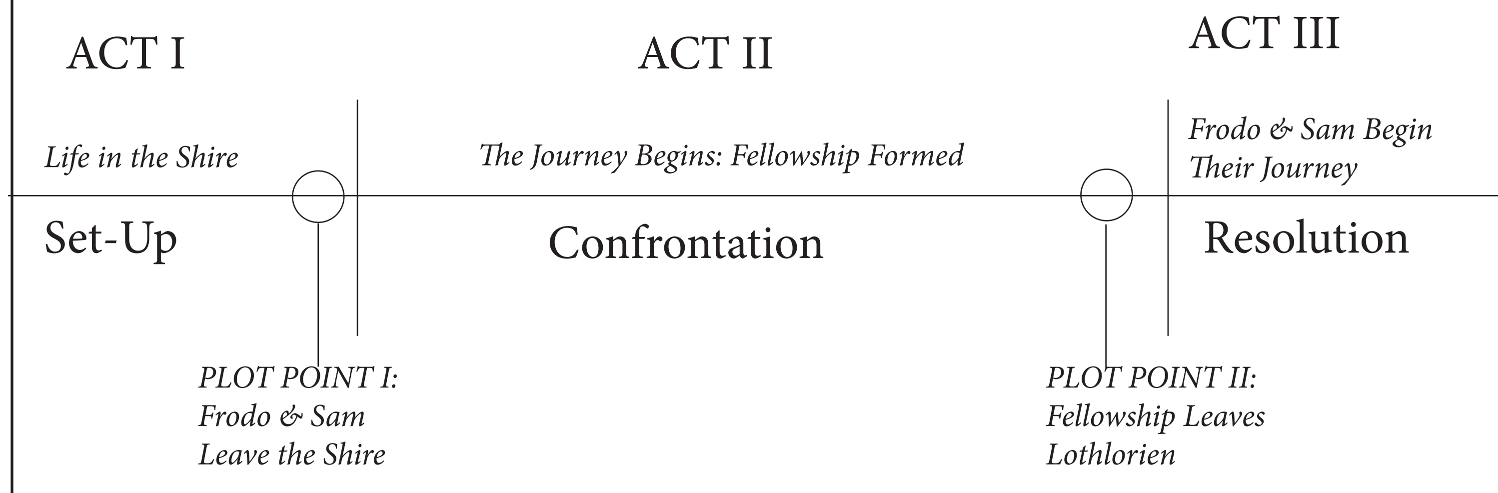
2. **Plot Point #1 -** What event signfies "the end of the beginning"? Your film starts at the beginning, but your "story" takes off here. In the example below, Plot Point #1 is Frodo leaving the shire. This is what we called earlier **"the first-act break".**

3. Plot Point #2 - What event is the "beginning of the end"? In this example, the fellowship leaving Lothlorien to begin their journey begins th resolution of our story. This is the same as your **"second-act break".**

4. **The Ending -** What is your character's situation at the ending, how have they changed? At the end of this story, not only has humble Frodo been called on a journey, he then personally decides to leave the group to avoid corrupting them with the ring. He no longer needs to be called, he chooses.

You can also identify other structural moments we talked about like the **inciting incident** or the **midpoint**. It's good also to create a short-hand description of what each Act is about as below:

Example: *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*



WRITE A BEAT SHEET

Once you have outlined the key moments in the film, you can expand on your outline with a document called a **beat sheet.** A beat sheet is a numbered list of every story event in your movie written in the order of the movie. Sometimes people will write them as a set of index cards and each card represents a new event. For each event you write a short description, just a few simple sentences describing what happens. Every beat doesn't have to equal one scene in the screenplay, it's good to think at this point more in terms of **story events.** So the story beat: "*John breaks into the office and recovers the stolen watch.*" might eventually get writen out as three scenes: *1. A stake out. 2. Breaking in. 3. Escaping with the watch.* but we can recognize that in terms of the drama unfolding those three scenes are part of the same event.

EXERCISES

WRITE A BEAT SHEET

One approach to writing beat sheets is to start by identifying common major beats in the three-act-structure and listing those first and then filling in the blanks around those beats. Blake Snyder, author of "*Save the Cat*" provides this list and suggests you start by identifying these 12 to 15 beats first and then fill out the rest until you have a list of roughly 40 to 60 beats in your film.   These are just suggestions of moments to help you get started.

Opening Image – A visual that represents the major conflict and themes of the story. A snapshot of the protagonist before the adventure begins.

Set-up – Expand on the "before" snapshot. Present the main character's world as it is, and what is missing in their life.

Theme Stated (happens during the Set-up) – What your story is about; the message, the truth. Usually, it is spoken to the main character or in their presence, but they won't undersand it until they go through the coming experiences.

Catalyst / Inciting Incident – The moment where life as your character knows it changes. Something happens that sets change in motion.

Debate / Refusal of the Call– The main character is reluctant to go on the journey before them.

Break Into Two (Choosing Act Two) / Act One Climax – The main character makes a choice and the journey begins. We leave the world of stability in Act One and enter in to the world of rising conflict in Act Two.

B Story – A second plot line is introduced that expands on the theme. In a James Bond movie, for example, this is where you might introduce the fated "love story".

The Promise of the Premise / Fun & Games – The main character chose to go on a journey that was promised to the audience. This is where the promise of that premise is paid off in the forms of clues to find, dragsons to slay, etc.

Midpoint – This is the moment that sets up your reversal. Sometimes it's where "things have never been better" (meaning thigns are about to take a turn for the worse) or it can be the opposite "things have never been worse" (and it's about to turn).

Bad Guys Close In – We begin to see the reversal happening. If things we're good in the midpoint, now the good feelings are starting to fade and we see dark clouds coming in.

All is Lost – The opposite moment from the Midpoint: "awful"/"great". The moment that the main character realizes they've lost everything they gained, or everything they now have has no meaning. The initial goal now looks even more impossible than before. And here, something or someone dies. It can be physical or emotional, but the death of something old makes way for something new to be born.

Dark Night of the Soul – The main character hits bottom, and wallows in hopelessness. The *"Why hast thou forsaken me, Lord?"* moment. Mourning the loss of what has "died" – the dream, the goal, the mentor character, the love of your life, etc. But, you must fall completely before you can pick yourself back up and try again.

Break Into Three (Choosing Act Three) / Act Two Climax – Thanks to a fresh idea, new inspiration, or last-minute Thematic advice from the B Story (usually the love interest), the main character chooses to try again and faces the challenge.

Finale / Obligatory Scene / Act Three Climax – This time around, the main character incorporates the Theme – the nugget of truth that now makes sense to them – into their fight for the goal because they have experience from the A Story and context from the B Story. They face the challenge that has been inevitably waiting for them throughout the film and resolve the film's major conflict for better or worse.

Final Image – opposite of Opening Image, proving visually that a change has occurred within the character and their world.

WRITE A SNOWPLOW

I love this exercise. This is not the kind of thing that you would want to submit for feedback, but it can be very helpful to break the ice and generate some material. It's very simple, but to do it right you have to follow the rules. Here's how it goes.

Start with an idea of what you want to write. Set a timer for 30-60 minutes. Doesn't matter how long, but you need to set a definite time limit on this: "I'm going to write until 4:34 PM."

Get a pen and a few pieces of paper. Start your timer. Now start by describing what happens first. Then describe what happens after that. The only rule is don't stop moving your pen. Don't think just keep writing. It's okay if it's a sloppy, run-on mess:

"It starts with John, he's a cop, I think? Or no, actually he's a marine. And so he's like at his house and he's watching a basketball game and then there's a knock at the door. He goes to answer and bad guys burst in to the room. He fights them but loses and they kidnap his wife. I don't know what happens next. I guess he goes to the police station. They take his statement but it doesnt like theyre going to do anything. He gets mad and flips a desk over so they arrest him. Now he's stuck in a cell while his wife is out there being held hostage. So I guess he has to escape some how..."

The point is not to write a beautiful story. You don't need to have any idea where your going when you start The idea is just to get out of your head and generate a bunch of stuff. 75% of it might be complete garbage but if you come out with a few good ideas now you have a place to begin writing!

I find that the best parts of this exercise actually happen when you get to the point where you have no idea what to write and you just keep going on writing random things. Usually when I start I have a couple of scenes in mind, but eventually I run out of road and my pen keeps moving. At that point the fun begins, because you have no idea what's going to come out.

WRITE A TREATMENT

A "Film Treatment" is a summary of a film story from beginning to end that is written in **prose** *(ie.* like a short story or this paragraph you're currently reading). It is NOT written in screenplay format. A treatment doesn't have to describe every single scene and every line of dialogue in your film. Your reader should, however, be able to come away with a clear idea of what the overall shape of your film will be. They should know who the main characters are, what the central conflict is, and tall he key events that lead up to its resolution.

There are a number of advantages to writing a treatment before beginning a screenplay. First, it gives you a blue-print to follow as you begin your screenplay. Staring at 120 blank pages can be intimidating and having some idea where you're going can help.

Second, you don't need to worry about all the margins! A treatment gets written in plain english, with normal formatting. If you don't have access to screenwriting software it is much easier to write out your story in treatment form than in screenplay format. Especially if you're just getting started, treatment writing may be a more familiar place to begin. You also only need to write four to ten pags instead of ninety to one-hundred twenty.

Even though they're short, treatments are difficult to write, almost more difficult at times, but they force you to do the actual heavy lifting of creating a story. If you jump right into writing the screenplay it's a bit easier to procastinate and avoid the hard parts. You can go on and on describing scenery and writing witty lines of dialogue without ever having to actually build a plot. In a treatment you are focusing solely on the story, you can't hide behind the other stuff. For those who workout, I would say this is like the "Leg Day" of screenwriting. Dialogue is like massive biceps: flashy looking but not very functional.

To write a treatment you just need to take your outline and beat sheet and write it out in full sentences as a complete story. In some paragraphs you can zoom in and describe an important moment or line of dialogue of detail, in other parts you can zoom out and summarize in general what happens across a number of scenes. A good treatment should tell the complete story in simple terms and hit all the major plot points.

On the next page, I am going to present a model for writing a treatment developed by Syd Field. This is just a recommendation to help you get started. It is based on the Syd Field's four-point outline which is described on page 25 of this packet. If you haven't done that exercise yet, I recommend you go back and create an outline first before you attempt to

SYD FIELD'S FOUR PAGE TREATMENT

Syd Field describes two different modes to write in your treatment and suggests switching between these two modes in different parts of the treatment:

MODE 1 - DRAMATIC RECREATION

A visual description of the present-tense action of a scene.

EXAMPLE: Dawn. A car pulls up in front of a house. A man gets out, walks up to the door, and lays down an envelope. He gets back in the car and as he drives away he makes a call: "Go outside."

For certain key moments in your treatment you will want to the reader see the action of a scene, but if you we're to do this for every single scene your treatment would end up a 100-page novella.

MODE 2 - NARRATIVE SYNOPSIS

Summarizing the action in broad, general strokes.

EXAMPLE: After reading what's insde the envelope, John knows what he has to do. That morning when he arrives at the office he goes right up to his bosses desk and resigns. His next stop is the bank, where he withdraws every last cent. After that he goes to his kid's school and picks them up early.

Each one of these moments are probably going to be scenes with dialogue eventually, but at this stage we can just summarize the key events.

THE LAYOUT OF YOUR FOUR-PAGE TREATMENT

In half a page - write a dramatic recreation of the opening scene or sequence.
In half a page - write a narrative synopsis that summarizes the rest of Act I.
In half a page - write a dramatic recreation of Plot Point I.

Then on a separate piece of paper write four obstacles - either external, internal, or some combination of both - that your character confronts during Act II. Then:

In a page - write a narrative synopsis, summarizing the action of Act II by focusing on the four conflicts/obstacles that confront your character.
In half a page - write a dramatic recreation of Plot Point II.
In half a page - write a narrative synopsis of the action in Act III.
In half a page - write a dramatic recreation of the ending scene/sequence of the screenplay.

Submit Work for Feedback to:
PO BOX 330, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010
(Maximum Ten Pages)

****SPECIAL REQUEST: In a future packet, I am interested in doing a case-study where I would break down the structure of one or two films as an example. If you would be interested in this please include in your submission any suggestions you have for existing films that you would be interestead in studying.*

Good Luck With Your Writing!