

The Basics of Screenwriting

| Theme | Structure | Character |

Theme

The driving intention behind the story.

Central Themes in Film—Conflict Types:

- ❖ Love Conquers All (Snow White)
- ❖ Man vs. Man (Batman)
- ❖ Man vs. Self (Fight Club)
- ❖ Man vs. Nature (The Day After Tomorrow)
- ❖ Man vs. Society (Schindler's List)
- ❖ Revenge (Memento)
- ❖ The Loss of Innocence (The Breakfast Club)
- ❖ Death as a Part of Life (The Lovely Bones)

Premise

According to Lajos Egri, the premise is the goal, theme, and root idea of a story.

As a writer, you must decide on a premise before you start writing and support that premise throughout.

Examples of Premise:

- ❖ *Great love defies even death. (Romeo & Juliet)*
- ❖ *Greed leads to destruction. (The Wolf of Wall Street)*

Logline

Much like a thesis statement, a logline is a brief description of a film that sets up the main idea of the story.

A logline should include:

- ❖ the protagonist
- ❖ their goal
- ❖ the antagonistic force

Examples:

- ❖ A computer hacker learns from mysterious rebels about the true nature of his reality and his role in the war against its controllers.—The Matrix
- ❖ Lion cub and future king Simba searches for his identity. His eagerness to please others and penchant for testing his boundaries sometimes gets him into trouble.—The Lion King

The Three Act Structure

- ❖ Every screenplay should be divided into three acts:
 - ❖ Act I —> Setup
 - ❖ Act II —> Conflict
 - ❖ Act III —> Resolution

Act I: The Setup

Introduces:

- ❖ the genre
 - ❖ the protagonist and the major characters of the story
 - ❖ the world
 - ❖ the conflict
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Just as in the introductory paragraph of an academic essay, Act I should also have a strong **hook** that grabs the audience's attention.

Inciting incident: an incident that provokes a change in the protagonist's world that can either challenge them or encourage them.

Act I should end with the **first turning (plot) point** of the story. This action completely changes the course of the story, and sets the character on a new journey into Act II —>

Act II: Conflict

- ❖ By this point, the story, characters and conflict should be established. The goal of the writer is to keep the story going without losing their audiences attention.
 - ❖ Subplot: additional storyline that doesn't necessarily have to be connected to the main plot, but connects with the main theme and is relevant in the overall story, or growth of the character.
- ❖ Raise the stakes
- ❖ Midpoint: low point, high point, revelation, overcoming flaws, full commitment
- ❖ Second Turning Point (Plot Point II) once again changes the course of the story and the direction the character is heading, but this time the stakes are much higher (all hope is lost).

Act III: Resolution

- ❖ the final battle (protagonist vs. antagonist)
- ❖ climax (the moment we've been waiting for)
- ❖ resolution (events explained, questions answered, lessons learned, character arc, confrontation resolved)

Example of Character Arc in the Matrix:

After learning that he is the One, Neo uses his new acquired skills to get rid of Agent Smith.

- ❖ Internal Arc: Neo finally believes in himself and accepts his responsibility
- ❖ External Arc: Neo uses the fighting skills that he has developed throughout the film to combat the antagonist

Character

Creating compelling characters with strong motivation is vital to storytelling.

- ❖ likable / relatable / cute
- ❖ flawed
- ❖ outer and inner conflict (all good stories revolve around conflict)
- ❖ constantly moving toward their goal
- ❖ obstacles
- ❖ backstory—psychological depth
- ❖ character arc / change (the journey a character undergoes throughout the the film.)
 - ❖ physical journey vs. inner journey (makes a character grow, learn, change)

Questions for Students

- ❖ What emotion do you want your audience to feel when watching your film?
- ❖ How do you want your audience to feel about your character? How can you make them feel that way? (Protagonist vs. Antagonist) Why do we like this character? Why do we hate this character? — How can you justify the actions of the characters?
- ❖ What are your character's good and bad qualities? How is your character flawed?
- ❖ What does the character want vs. what does the character need? (outer conflict/inner conflict)
- ❖ How far will the character go to get what he/she wants?
- ❖ What's getting in the way of the character? (obstacles)
- ❖ How will the character overcome the obstacles in his/her way?
- ❖ Backstory: What happened in the past that made your character this way? (false belief)
- ❖ What does the character learn along the way?
- ❖ How does the character change?

Disney's Feast

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