WRITING A FILM TREATMENT

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS COURSE

Welcome to "Writing a Film Treatment". I'm excited to be working with you. The goal of this course is to prepare you to develop an original idea for a film script. In this first mailing, we will study foundational storytelling concepts and then use those ideas to generate "loglines" for potential scripts. In the second mailing, we will build on these ideas and offer exercises that will help you prepare an original treatment.

WHAT *NOT* TO EXPECT IN THIS COURSE

Before we start, I want to set a few ground rules to make sure no one goes into this course with expectations that I will dissapoint.

First, unfortunately, we cannot produce your film script. I can't even produce my own feature scripts at this stage in my career. I'm just a working artist who wants to share what I've learned with you. It's a very difficult industry to break into. The good news, however, is that paper is cheap and good scripts are hard to find. If you want to a direct a movie you need millions of dollars to make your vision happen. As a writer, you have all the technology that you need to compete with the highest-paid screenwriters in hollywood: pen and paper. The catch is that writing a great script is a very difficult thing to do. "Talent" and "inspiration" are not enough. It takes patience and persistence. You have to learn to be unsentimental about your ideas, to write and re-write your script until you find the perfect form for your story.

Second rule: do not send us the only copy of something irreplaceable. Only mail us the material we ask for as part of the exercises. To make this program work we have to manage mailings from hundreds of people and it's a daunting challenge to keep track of everything.

WHAT'S A LOGLINE?

"Logline" is a film industry term for a short description of a film story. They're similar to the descriptions you might see underneath a movie title while browsing Netflix or the TV Guide. Capturing the essence of a story in a few lines is a difficult challenge and it's also a good test of whether the idea will work as a screenplay. Of course, there will be elements of a 120 page screenplay that aren't expressed in the logline, but when a writer can't express their idea in a few lines it's usually a sign that the concept for the script hasn't yet been crystallized into a unified whole. A seed is not a tree, but it contains all the potential for a tree that could stand for a hundred years. In the same way, a good logline contains all the essential elements from which a story can grow.

WHY WRITE A TREATMENT?

A *treatment* is a short document written in prose (ie. like this paragraph) that explains to the reader all the key elements of a proposed film. Treatments are often used as industry documents to sell a film or find funding. A screenwriter might write a treatment for a script they're imagining in order to get a studio to buy the rights and pay them to write it. Director's bidding on a commercial or music video project will also often write a treatment to express on paper their vision of how they'd shoot it.

A treatment can also be a helpful creative tool for the writer. It acts like a blueprint for the screenplay. Imagine trying to build a house without a blueprint. You might get away with building the living room, but after you got the walls up you would realize you didn't leave enough room for the kitchen. By starting with a treatment, you're able to work out the story of a screenplay as a whole without getting too caught up in things like dialogue or action. Those things are important too, but they are the "icing on the cake". Without a good story at the core, people won't watch long enough to hear all your witty lines. Starting a 120-page screenplay on a blank page with no idea where you're going can be intimidating! You'll feel a lot more confident embarking on a long-term project with a roadmap in hand.

WRITING A FILM TREATMENT

"TOOLS NOT RULES":

In this first section of the course, we are going to focus on concepts that will help prepare you for writing a ***dramatic narrative*** for a ***visual medium***.

Some books and teachers will introduce these ideas to you as "rules" for writing, but I feel that description creates the wrong impression. I prefer to think of these ideas as "tools" or "guiding principles" rather than "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! Where's your second act break? Who's your antagonist?" Many films are successful without strictly following these ideas, however, the overwhelming 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 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 a 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 and also drawing from knowledge of furniture-making that has been developed by carpenter's 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 no one's going to want to sit in it. Even if I am absolutely determined to make an "experimental chair", I would probably be better off making a standard one first in order to learn the techniques and then branching out on my own into "experimental carpentry".

Think about these ideas as concepts that are here to help you in the difficult task of writing a good film script. Even if you read every screenwriting book and follow every piece of advice, writing is still a challenge. These tips will hopefully guide you on your way, but it's up to you to tell your story. Your unique life experiences and your intuition as an artist are the raw material that will make your script compelling. These techniques are just here to help you shape that raw material.

In the end, your only duty is to do what's best for the script. Sometimes that means throwing these "rules" out the window and trusting your instincts. Sometimes, however, doing what's best for the script can also mean protecting it from your own ego. You'll think: "I can't cut that scene! My dialogue is so good and that's how it really happened!" But deep down you know it's a big, boring detour that's killing the pace. In those situations, it can be helpful to have these tools to check yourself. A good screenwriter is crafting a story for the audience to experience, not for their own amusement. I hate to admit it, because I'm the rebellious type, but alot of this traditional Hollywood stuff they teach you in film school just works....

DRAMATIC

By "dramatic", we don't mean exaggerated or emotional as in "causing drama". Dramatic in this sense, means that we're writing in the tradition of "drama". As we will see, there are a defined set of characteristics and techniques that are common to dramatic writing going all the way back to the Ancient Greeks.

NARRATIVE

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

DRAMATIC NARRATIVE

A narrative that conforms to the essential characteristics of the dramatic tradition. 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. We'll be exploring what makes a narrative "dramatic" in the coming pages.

VISUAL MEDIUM

I specify here that we are writing for a "visual medium", because it's a crucial consideration when writing for film. A novel can be a "dramatic narrative", but it is an "oral medium", based on words without accompanying images. As film writers, we need to tell our stories in a way that utilizes the unique qualities of our "visual medium".

So, for example, a car chase scene works great in a "visual medium" like film, but might not be as engaging or easy to follow for the reader of a book. On the other hand, many great books explore a character's inner thoughts in-depth, but in a film that's usually not done, because a thought can't be photographed. We'd end up watching an image of a character sitting in a chair, doing nothing. It's possible with voiceover, of course, but then we're only using the audio track to tell our story.

#1 RULE FOR FILM: SHOW DON'T TELL!

CHARACTER

You probably already know what a "character" is: *A person in a novel, play, or movie.* But not all characters are humans right? There are animal characters, alien characters. In the *Beauty and the Beast,* a teacup and a kettle become characters. What about extras? 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 would suggest an alternative definition that might sound overly technical, but I think will help us get at what's important about characters: *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 in the story and be distinguishable from the rest of existence. But what do I mean by an *individual being with agency?* Agency simply means that whatever this individual is, be it a human, a dog, or a teacup, they have the ability to make choices and take actions to pursue a desired result. So a coffee machine is not a character, *unless* I write a story about a magic coffee machine that is trying to kill it's owner. On the other hand, an extra, from our point of view as a member of the audience is really no different than furniture. Sure, we assume that they're a human and they're walking somewhere for a reason, but in the context of the story it would really make no difference if they were just a lifelike robot that does nothing but walk past windows all day.

What's more important in our definition of "character" then, is not that they are human, but that they are beings with desires who take action to pursue them. This is a clue for us: it's important that our characters have "*motivations*".

MOTIVATION

You may have heard an actor, or an actor playing an actor say: "What's my motivation?" Actors are trained to focus on the goals of the characters they play, rather than to just project an emotion for effect. If they think anger or intimidation will get the character what they want, they might scream until their veins pop, but they're taught to not focus on "playing angry", but instead to go after what the character wants.

When we say character's have *motivations* we don't mean that they are neccessarily *motivated* in the sense of: "Man that kid's really motivated, he's going places..." You can have a motivation to sit on the couch and eat junk food all day. The important thing to realize, however, is that ***we all have motivations every moment of every day, in everything we do***. To write a character well, it's important to be aware of their motivations.

You might object: "How is the guy laying on his couch motivated?" Well, he woke up and got out of bed in the morning, walked to the couch, and put on the TV, because he wanted to avoid the feeling of boredom or maybe because if he didn't get out of bed and distract himself he would start to feel shame. Those are both motivations.

Another potential objection: "But I don't always know why I did something?" We're not always consciously aware of our motivations, but something triggered our action, it didn't just happen out of nowhere. Your character might be confused about what they want or why they act the way they act, but you as the writer should understand them. Sometimes we repress our emotions or avoid certain thoughts, but they can still cause us to take actions.

Another objection: "Sometimes I want one thing, but then I do the complete opposite." In that case, we might say you have conflicting motivations. For example, 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 against another (I want to stop smoking.) Motivations don't have to make sense or be good for you, they also don't have to stay the same all the time.

Another objection: "Sometimes I'm motivated to want things that I have no way of getting." Your characters don't have to be some superhuman James Bond who can get whatever they want at any time. 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 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.

CHARACTER

As you can probably guess, the guy who's only motivation is to get out of bed and then lie back down on the couch to watch TV might not be the best character for a story. If this character was the center of your story, your writing teacher would likely say: "This character is too passive!"

However, often characters begin a story as *passive* and then an event triggers them to be more *active* in pursuing their motivation. So in the case of our "TV Guy" maybe his motivation for lying around all day is that he is afraid of rejection and he's ashamed of himself. Then a car crashes through his living room window and he springs into action and saves the life of one of the passengers.

The sequence of events that follows might teach our formerly passive TV guy that he actually does have something to offer the world after all. By the end of your story, he's confronting that same motivation that formerly led him to do nothing, "*avoid shame*", in a different way: by getting a job he's proud of as an EMT.

Characters don't always need to come right out and say what their motivations are to the audience, but when you as a writer have a clear vision of what's motivating your characters, the audience will feel those motivations by watching what your character does. As an audience member, we may not fully understand why a character does what they does, but when the writer does we feel like we're watching a real living, breathing person. Like a lot of things in filmmaking, when you do this right the audience doesn't notice it, but when you don't do it they'll notice right away.

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 at the last-minute the writer thinks "Wait, if he kills the hero the movie is over, I gotta fix this." So suddenly the villain goes and undoes the handcuffs so they can "fight fair".

Sitting in the movie theater you might 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 motivation to let the hero go, why wouldn't they just kill them like they planned?

Now imagine the exact same scenario, except this time the writer adds in moments earlier in the script that communicate to you: "*What this villain really wants is not to kill the hero, but to prove to himself that he's tougher than the hero, because he's insecure.*"

Maybe an underling says "You better bring back-up that hero is pretty tough." and the evil villain explodes in anger and has that underling killed for even suggesting that he couldn't take on the hero by himself.

Now when we get to the crucial moment and the villain takes off the handcuffs, we'll go along with it, even if it makes no logical sense, because we understand the villain's motivation. It was clear throughout the film that the villain's deep insecurity was their fatal flaw and that's what destroys them in the end.

THE ICEBERG THEORY

Ernest Hemingway was a novelist in the first-half of the 20th century. Before his success as a writer, Hemingway worked as a journalist and is famous for adapting the minimalistic "just the facts" style of newspaper writing to the novel. He was not a screenwriter per se, but since his style was focused on present-tense action without much context or interpretation, it translates well to film. Hemingway popularized a theory of writing and character known as "the iceberg theory" or "the theory of omission":

"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 ice-berg 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." - Hemingway

The idea is essentially that you don't have to tell the audience everything, but omitting a detail about your character is quite different from simply not knowing it. If a character holds a deep, dark secret, for example, you may hold it from the audience until the end of the film, but because *you* know it, it will inform every action and every piece of dialogue you write for that character. The audience will begin to sense "There's something more to this character." even if they can't put their finger on what it is yet.

CHARACTER

PROTAGONIST

The "Protagonist" is the main-character of your story. The protagonist is usually a single character. Some film's have a "plural protagonist" meaning that more than one charcter serve as the protagonist, but in those films the protagonists are bound together by unified motivation. Imagine a film like "Ocean's Eleven" or "The Seven Samurai". Those films go out of their way to make the main characters look, speak, and act in unique ways, but the whole team has the same motivation (to rob a casino, to save the village, etc.).

In the film school I attended, 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. If we expand on the phrase, 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 eight-year-old girl sitting in a chair in the school office, looking around nervously. The secretary calls to her. We can't see the old woman's face, just an adult finger pointing down the hall: "Ms. Rodriguez, the principal will see you now." The little girl gulps and walks down the hall to the principal's office. She can barely see over the desk. She takes her seat. The principal says: "Now tell me. Who put the spider in Mrs. Burke's desk?" What follows is an "interrogation scene". Who's scene is it?

Now imagine the exact same interrogation scene, except this time 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 says: "I can't talk about this right now, I have to do my job." and hangs up the phone. He presses a button on his desk, "Send her in." The little girl enters, all we can see is her eyes peeking over his desk. He says "Now tell me. Who put the spider in Mrs. Burke's desk?" Who's scene is it?

The "interrogation scene" can have the exact same dialogue and the same outcome in both versions, but in the first version we're clearly in the little girl's movie and in the second version we're in the principal's movie. What shifts isn't the events themselves, but rather the point-of-view through which we as an audience experience those events.

In a typical film, not every scene has to involve the main character, but you can still usually feel that the film as a whole is the story of one character's journey. In the past we might have called this character "the good guy" or "the hero". In fact, beginning in the 1930's there was actually a "Production Code" in Hollywood that dictated that your main character HAD to be the good guy. However beginning in the 1960's the "Production Code" lost it's power and now it's common to see films that feature "anti-heroes" as their protagonist. Think Tony Soprano or Scarface or Dexter. 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.

This is one of the first elements you should identify as you start to create your own film stories. Who is my protagonist? Even though our lives can take unexpected turns, we experience them as a continuous path because we are always ourselves. We're able to make some sense of what happens to us, because we've been there for every step in our own journey. When we're watching a movie it helps our brain to understand and feel what's happening when we can latch on to and identify with a single character throughout the story.

Our protagaonist doesn't have to be a perfect person, in fact a perfect person would be a terrible main character! Even Superman has to have Kryptonite to make his story interesting. That said, in order for the audience to identify with our main character we have to make them understand why they do they what they do and it doesn't hurt if their likeable in some way. Take Tony Soprano, for example. We might not approve of what he does, but we understand that from his perspective he's just trying to take care of his family and keep his father's business going. Those are motivation's that most people can relate to even if we don't approve of the way he pursues those motivations.

CHARACTER

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 gangster films and film noir they were often referred to as "the heavy", meaning the less handsome actor. In modern films, however, it's not always so simple. Rather than focusing on morality or likeability, the defining characteristic of the "antagonist" is that their motivation is opposed to the motivation of the "protagonist".

Sometimes the antagonist isn't a single character. We can refer instead to an "antagonistic force". In a disaster movie, for example, we might say "the earthquake" is the antagonist and the main character's goal is to "survive the earthquake". In "Titanic", however, I would say that the true antagonist isn't "the sinking ship" so much as it is Billy Zane's character, ie. the man Kate Winselt was supposed to marry before she met the charming Leonardo DiCaprio.

The ship sinking is a more serious problem for the main character in real-life terms, but in the context of the story what is the motivation that drives Leo's character throughout the film? He falls in love with a woman and everything that happens after that is about finding and rescuing that woman. In the end he dies for that woman. Who stands in the way of that goal? Her fiance, not the iceberg.

Even though we refer to the protagonist as the "main character" of the film, antagonists are just as important to a good script. Very often the antagonist is the more interesting, memorable character, even though the audience is identifying with the hero. For example, who's more interesting Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker? Who's on the poster of Jaws the Sheriff or the shark? In all the great horror franchises who's the character that shows up again and again in each film? It's Michael Myers that defines Halloween, not Jamie Lee Curtis. We still don't consider him the "protagonist", however, because the audience experiences the story from the perspective of the scared teenagers.

Antagonists also 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. A good antagonist is a good match for the protagonist and vice versa. It's like promoting a boxing match. No one wants to watch the reigning heavyweight champ pound on a nobody. We want to see a contender who might dethrone the champion. We don't want to know the outcome before the fight begins.

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 like Barth says 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 bad action movies. Who are those guys?

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 to you and the audience it's clearly not. Maybe they're desperate and they try to take something from your protagaonsit because they feel like "It's me or them." 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.

CHARACTER

EXERCISE #1

On a separate piece of paper, start by writing a list of ten films that you know well or have seen recently. Write the list down the left side of the paper and leave a few lines of space after each film. Once you have your list, go back, and see if you can identify for each film who the protagonist is and who the antagonist is. If you can't remember a character name, it's fine to just write down a description or an actor name, as long as you know who you're referring to. Now go back and see if you can write what each character's central motivation was in as few words as possible.

FILM	PROTAGONIST	ANTAGONIST
"Star Wars IV: A New Hope"	Luke Skywalker *Motivation: To discover his true identity and fulfill his destiny.*	Darth Vader *Motivation: To bring his son to the Dark Side of the force and thereby destroy the Jedi.*
"The Dark Knight"	Bruce Wayne *Motivation: To protect others from the pain he experienced as a child.*	Joker *Motivation: To destroy the man who protects the city from experiencing the chaos he has lived with throughout his life.*

Sometimes the motivation will be obvious and very literal. Jamie Lee Curtis in Halloween wants to survive. The sheriff in Jaws wants to kill the shark and protect his community.

In other cases, you may notice that the character has several motivations that evolve throughout the film. In those cases, try to take a step back and interpret the journey they take over the entire film as a whole. In the first Star Wars, for example, Luke Skywalker starts out looking for Obi Wan Kenobi, then he's trying to save Leia, and then at the end he's trying to destroy the Death Star. All of those are motivations, but what's the motivation that ties his whole journey together?

I would argue, that Luke is trying to discover who he really is and become the man he was destined to be. From the beginning of the film, even before he knows anything about Darth Vader or the force, you get the feeling that he wants to be somewhere else, he knows there's more out there for him than his simple desert life as a vapor farmer. As soon as he gets an opportunity for adventure, he jumps at it, at great risk to himself and his family.

The challenge of the film is can he rise to the occassion? What kind of man will he become? Is he a Jedi or just a farmer? Can he resist the "dark side of the force"? Notice that at the end of the film, he doesn't just destroy the Death Star. What's important is that in the end, he lets go of the technology and learns to trust "the force" when he fires the missile. The writer knew his destiny was "to become a Jedi" and if the mission went as planned and he just used the auto-aiming system he would have destroyed the Death Star, but he wouldn't have fulfilled his true quest which was becoming a Jedi.

CHARACTER

EXERCISE #2

Learning story structure and focusing on motivations is a helpful tool, but when we reduce anything as complex as dramatic writing to a simple model, there's always a danger that we lose track of our original intention: to tell a compelling story that expresses our unique viewpoint on the world. To me, certain films and screenplays reek of "film school". I can tell the writer and the studio execs are very contented with themselves that they followed every rule in the screenplay book, but the story falls flat because it has nothing to do with human experience.

In this exercise, let's forget story structure for a moment and just practice dreaming up a flesh-and-blood human being who might make good character for a screenplay. The only rule is don't create a character based on yourself. There's nothing wrong with writing autobiographical stories, almost every film writer and director does at some point in their career. Chances are, however, you already know yourself pretty well and don't need my help figuring out your own personal details. Take this exercise as an opportunity to try dreaming up someone completely new.

Take a new sheet of paper and answer all these questions. Don't overthink it. If the questions inspire other ideas feel free to sketch out other qualities of this character as you go.

1. If this character meets someone new and they ask "Where are you from?", what would they say? Is that where they grew up, where they live currently or both?

2. What do they do to make a living? Is it what they'd like to do or do they have another dream?

3. How old are they? How would they describe the phase of life they are currently in? (ie. one person at 32 might say "I'm a young adult still finding herself." another at the same age might say "I'm a mother beginning her family and leaving childhood behind.")

4. What is their gender? What is their sexual orientation? Are they married, single, in a relationship?

5. How does the character identify themselves? Spiritually, racially, ethnically, culturally, politically, etc. What do those identities mean to the character? (ie. "I'm an Irish-Catholic but I don't go to church.")

6. What does this character want most in their life right now? What do they really need? Are those two things related or opposed to each other?

7. What's a secret dream of this character that they don't tell other people about?

8. Would they want to be famous? If so, in what way?

9. If they could change anything about themself, what it would it be?

10. Out of everyone in their life, who's death would hurt them the most?

11. Of all the bad things they've done in their life, what's the one thing they feel most guilty about? Of all the good things, what are they most proud of?

12. If a younger person whom they cared about asked them: "What's the most important piece of life advice I should know?" What would they say?

CHARACTER

13. What was their childhood like and how do they feel about it? If they could change one thing about the way they were raised or the conditions of their childhood what would it be?

14. If they had to pick a character from a movie, TV show, or book they felt was most like them what would they say?

15. Imagine someone in this person's life who cares about them. What does that person think your character needs most?

16. What are they grateful for in their life?

17. What quality of their personality or looks do friends and acquaintances notice and identify them with the most? (ie. "Are you talking about tall Gary or shy Gary?")

18. What's the most difficult challenge in their life that they have managed to overcome?

19. What's the biggest challenge facing them they don't know how to overcome?

20. If they had an unlimited amount of money, where would they live and what would they be doing?

21. Do they consider themselves a spiritual person? Do they believe in anything that they don't have direct experience of? (ie. angels, ghosts, aliens, etc.)

22. Do they believe in destiny? Or the idea that thoughts, prayers, or intentions can affect their lives?

23. If they could have been born in a different time and place, what would it be?

24. Do they believe in forgiveness? Are somethings forgivable and other's aren't?

25. What quality in people bothers them the most?

26. If they had the opportunity to write an op-ed that would be read in newspapers and on websites across the world what would they write about? Would they write about anything or would they have nothing to say? Would they sign with their real name or make it anonymous?

When you're finished with this list, take a step back and ask yourself what kind of film would this character be the hero of? Or maybe the villain of?

See if you can generate an idea for a story based on this character. One way to approach this might be to focus on what the characters weaknesses or flaws are and then think of situations that would challenge them to grow. If you feel like they'd make a good antagonist, reverse that idea: What kind of person would this antagonist be the perfect challenger for?

What's the best thing that could ever happen to them and how might it prove to in fact be the worst thing for them? What 's the worst thing that could ever happen to them and how might it prove to be exactly what they need?

One famous writing teacher says that all you need to create a story is: "A person, a place, and a problem." By now you should have a person, see if you can come up with a place and a problem for them.

PLOT & STORY

For some writers, character is everything. That's where they begin the work and everything else comes out of character. For other artists and theorists, plot is more essential to the functioning of drama. Aristotle, one of the earliest and most influential commentators on drama believed the events of a play, ie. "the plot" were far more important than the design of the characters. In roughly 330 BCE he wrote in his *Poetics:*

"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."

Personally, I belive plot and character should be viewed as an inter-connected process, rather than separate elements. F. Scott Fitzgerald said "Plot is character, character is plot." A good character is revealed by their actions. A good plot is based in character, it's as if you couldn't imagine that movie's events happening to anyone else. Without a strong character, the audience won't become emotionally attached to your film, however, without a good plot they won't watch it for very long, no matter how charming the character is.

PLOT vs STORY

The words "plot" and "story" are often used interchangeably, but among theorists of film a distinction is drawn 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 in a coma. She escapes, regains her strength, and then goes to Japan to get a powerful Samurai sword from the most powerful blacksmith in the world. She 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. So for example, in "Kill Bill" when The Bride first gets out of the hospital she can barely walk. She makes her way to a truck and starts working on regaining feeling in her toe, saying to herself over and over: "Wiggle your big toe." In the next scene, we see her fully healthy. We don't have to watch her go toe by toe, then to the fingers, and so on. We in the audience are able to fill in the gaps. The filmmaker chooses to show us certain events in a certain order while omitting others and then we as an audience are able to construct the "story" in our minds.

We don't need to be showm every thing that happens. We can be shown A and then C and infer that B happened in between, however, a good writer knows how to choose which events to show in what order to create a smooth ride for the audience. Imagine, for example, in Kill Bill if we just saw The Bride crawling along the floor, unable to walk, and then the filmmaker cuts ahead and she's fine. We might say "Wait, what happened, she's fine now?"

Tarantino shows us the "Wiggle the big toe." moment so that we can get a feeling for the painful process she's about to go through and how difficult it will be. Then when he jumps ahead we are able to imagine all she must have gone through to get healthy and it feels more satisfying.

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. Then we see her waking up in the hospital, she recovers, she goes to Japan and gets the sword, and the film ends as she kills her first victim, O-Ren Ishii.

PLOT & STORY

Tarantino is known for non-linear storytelling, but I don't think he does it just to be "different". He is crafting the plot to create an experience for the audience. Why go straight from the assasination to the fight with her second-victim, Vernita Green? Only Q.T. knows for sure, but here's my guess: Imagine if the film was told in chronological order. We'd see a woman get shot, then the cops come in, then she goes to a hospital, then she escapes and goes 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 fight!

You don't want your audience to be confused, but sometimes not giving them all the information at once can create more interest. We see this women get shot then next thing we know she's healthy, she's shows up at a pretty suburban house, and she gets into an incredible knife fight with another trained assassin. Now we're curious: How did she survive? How did she get from the wedding to this? What's her plan? Tarantino puts us in the position of asking these questions first and then proceeds to answer them. Done the other way we might've gotten bored: "Okay, I get it she lived, she wants revenge, when is this movie going to start?!"

Think about that friend 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. That same joke in the hands of someone who has an instinct for humor and timing could be hilarious.

Early in the process of writing you will probably 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 that 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 the blank stare of boredom or total confusion. That doesn't mean you don't have a story. You just haven't figured out how to tell it yet.

Once you conceive of your "story", be open-minded about where to start your "plot" and where to end it. Alexander Mackendrick, a great writer-director and teacher of film 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 after the climax. Pay attention to great films and you'll begin to 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, calls their mother, 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 you're film has reached it's biggest moment why hang around afterwards? The dragon's been slayed, I in the audience know your film will never reach another scene as exciting as what I just saw, so what keeps me there? Old 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 hit 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. If you could tell your story without a certain scene, character, or subplot, it'll usually be stronger without them.

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 chipping away before the sculpture emerges.

CONFLICT

Most people who write about writing will tell you "Conflict is the source of drama." But what does that mean? Conflict in the context of storytelling doesn't always mean a fistfight. It doesn't even neccessarily have to include a verbal argument. You and I can be very polite to each other and still be in conflict.

Remember when 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 just that their intentions and actions are opposed to each other. Another way to conceive of conflict is simply as the process of cause and effect. When one domino falls into the other the falling domino's intention to fall is in conflict with the next domino's intention to remain standing.

As Lajos Egri points out in *The Art of Dramatic Writing,* what we call wind is actually the "mass contraction and expansion of the ocean of air which surrounds us. Cold and heat create this movement called wind." These conflicting forcers are what creates the movement of air we feel around us. Conflict creates that same movement in your story. Characters pursue motivations by taking actions in the world and inevitably they come into conflict with other forces, which lead to new conditions and further actions.

Well written conflicts create *tension*. Imagine two charcters 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 they could do now is 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 department. It's not fair!"* Now we have some dramatic tension. The audience has a question: "What will happen next? Will she resign or will she find a way out of it?"

There's still an issue with it though. She doesn't want to resign, but at this point I don't see how she's going to avoid it. Wanting to keep her job is more interesting than agreeing to leave, but if there's nothing she can actually do about it but beg, we don't have much of a scene. What would make this more compelling would be if she didn't only have a conflicting motivation (To keep her job.), but she also had a *tactic* for fighting back.

Imagine the scene again, but now instead of begging she 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's eyes bulge out of his head and he starts to stammer. 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 now we have two opponents set up for a match and we don't know how it's going to turn out.

Most dramatic narratives are powered by a single defining conflict. In great writing, all of the smaller conflicts that make up the individual scenes relate back to the major conflict. One grows out of the next and they seem to naturally escalate towards the climax of the major conflict on their own. They're like a long row of carefully placed dominos. Each step is it's own conflict but it's also part of a whole and by the end it seems as if the first scenes we saw somehow had to lead us here to the end.

There's a famous phrase for this: "A good plot is suprising but inevitable." It's surprising. When we watch the opening scene we don't what the ending will be. As the action builds there are twists and turns, the character is taken places we don't expect. Yet by the end when we look back on the film as a whole the series of events now seems inevitable. *That* character put in *that* situation, it couldn't have led anywhere else.

CONFLICT

4 TYPES OF CONFLICT

Lajos Egri identifies four potential types of conflict:

STATIC CONFLICT

A conflict where the principal character involved is unable or unwilling to act.

Ex. 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 and the things he should have said. There's a problem, but there's no action.

JUMPING CONFLICT

A conflict where the principal character involved reacts in a manner that is not sufficiently justified by preceding events and characterization.

Ex. John, a mild-mannered accountant, gets a call from his girlfriend ending her relationship. He decides to rob bank. There is a conceivable chain of events that might lead from break-up to bank robbery, but there's a few steps missing here.

RISING CONFLICT

A conflict that naturally escalates as the principal character reacts to new conditions created by each preceding conflict.

Ex. John's girlfriend leaves him, he goes out to get drunk and meets a woman who's suspiciously eager at the bar, they go home together, he passes out, she robs him. He goes to the DMV the next day, disheveled, feeling like it's the worst day of his life. He gets sent from desk to desk, goes to fill out a form and his pen leaks all over his shirt. He starts kicking the wall like a lunatic and a woman who's equally a mess starts laughing at him. At first he's offended, but then she confesses she just peed herself and he starts laughing manically with her. We have a "meet-cute", begin wacky romantic comedy.....

FORESHADOWING CONFLICT

A conflict that is alluded to but delayed. Tension is created in the audience through a ratcheting up of anticipation.

Ex. John is about to propose to his girlfriend, but they have a huge fight at the restaurant, he keeps the ring in his pocket. She calls him the next morning and says: "I need some space to think, I'm going to get away this weekend to my parent's place up north." John starts engineering a huge romantic surprise, he's going to show up at the land with an orchestra, he's running around making everything perfect. Meanwhile we see that his girlfriend is actually with a secret lover. We see John driving up in a car stuffed with roses and musicians. We see his girlfriend having sex all over the cabin. Oh god, this is going to be bad...

I think it's probably obvious that the first two types aren't desirable for a good story. Rising conflict has obvious benefits. But don't underestimate the power of "foreshadowing". Sometimes anticipation is more exciting than the event itself. Here's 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*.

CONFLICT

EXERCISE #3

On a separate piece of paper, make a new list, this time of 5 films that you know well or have seen recently. If possible, try not to repeat films from the last exercise. Separate the paper into three columns: Film Title, Conflict, Resolution.

In the first column write down the titles of the five films, leaving space between them. In the second column, try to write in one or two sentences on what the core conflict that drives the film is. Then in the next column write how that conflict resolves itself. Does the hero lose? Do they win? Do they lose literally, but win emotionally?

Two notes to keep in mind. First, the main conflict that drives a film is usually related to the antagonist, but it's not always as simple as good guy beats bad guy. The antagonist may stand in the way of resolving the core conflict or serve as the chief representative of the forces opposing your protagonist, but the conflict itself is often bigger than the antagonist. Second, the resolution should be related to the conflict, but stories don't always resolve themselves in the way the character's might expect.

In *Rocky,* for example it would be fair to say that the core conflict of the film is that Rocky Balboa gets a chance to prove himself to the world in a fight with the heavyweight champion. Apollo Creed is his antagonist. At the end of the film, Rocky loses the fight, but if we were to say "the resolution of Rocky is that he loses" we'd be taking things a bit too literally and missing the point. Rocky's conscious intention throughout the film was to win the fight, but in the end I think his real motivation isn't to win, it's to earn love and respect, to find a place for himself in the world.

By the end of the fight, he has earned the respect of his superior opponent who originally didn't consider him a threat. He has earned the respect of the promoters, the announcers, the crowd. He has fallen in love with a woman who is there by his side. If we assess the resolution of this conflict on a deeper level, I think thit's its fair to say that the resolution of this conflict was a positive for Rocky even if he technically lost what he thought he was after.

EXERCISE #4

Pick one of the five films you were working with in the previous exercise. Ideally it should be one you've seen recently or are very familiar with. Think through the film from start to finish and list as many of the smaller individual conflicts the character must meet along their journey in order to resolve the major conflict of the film. When you've finished your list go back and study the list as a whole. Is there a structure or evolution that connects those conflicts in a series? Do they start off relatively simple and grow increasingly more difficult to solve? Are their thematic resonances that make the smaller conflicts seem connected to the larger conflict?

Some times the smaller conflicts are related to the major conflict in a direct and literal way. In the Bruce Lee film "Game of Death, the main character is a retired martial artist. A gang kidnaps his sister and tells him that if he wants her back he needs to retrieve something from the top of a five-level pagoda where each level is guarded by a different martial artist. There are five increasingly difficult conflicts he must face before he can resolve the major conflict.

Other times the smaller conflicts aren't all directly related to the major conflict in obvious ways, but they're almost like small dress rehearsals for the big conflict where the character will be tested and challenged in unique ways that compare and contrast with the primary conflict. In *American Beauty* the central conflict is incited by Lester's mid-life crisis: he becomes infatuated with his teenage daughter's best friend Angela and begins to see her as the answer to his emptiness. The climax of the film will turn on the tension leading up to a "will they or wont they" moment between Lester and Angela, but a lot of other things happen in the film before that. For example, Lester begins buying pot from his next-door neighbor's son. The father, a tough masculine military-man, becomes convinced Lester is in a sexual relationship with his son, he goes to confront him, but then ends up trying to make-out with him because he is himself a closeted homosexual. These events don't directly contribute to Lester's main conflict, but they are related to Lester's conflict because his neighbor is revealing his own inner crisis of identity and feelings of imprisonment.

STRUCTURE

CONFLICT AS A CHANGE OF "STORY VALUES"

Robert McKee is a contemporary "writer who writes about writing." His book *Story* is considered by many to be one of the essential books on screenwriting for students. I agree that it's an excellent book and would recommend it to all of you, but at times I find him to be reductive. By reductive, I mean that he seems to insist on boiling down the complexities of creative writing down to definitive, structural models.

He is a highly respected and successful teacher, however, so I do believe his models are helpful to the process and founded in deep experience and study. I just add this word of caution because he is so convincing a writer it is easy to get drawn in completely to his way of thinking. It's comforting finding a "theory" that seems to explain the path to good art and then you end up driving yourself crazy trying to make your script fit his charts and graphs.

All that said, let's take a look at some of his core principles:

STRUCTURE is a selection of events from the characters' life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express as a specific view of life.

This is an expansion on the concepts of "Story" and "Plot" we've already discussed. We have a character. There is a lifetime's worth of potential events they could have experienced. More than a lifetime's really because for any given character we can imagine a range of outcomes from different situations. Your imagination of a characters "Story" can be boundless, you can imagine a full biography from the day they were born until the day the day they die. But your film can't be eighty years long. Your plot will have to select certain events and omit others to tell that character's story.

Structure then is the strategic sequencing of those events that you choose to show. We are not only selecting events we are also placing them in a certain order in relation to each other. And why are we doing this? McKee identifies two goals: arouse emotions in the audience and express as a specific view of life. Let's reflect briefly on how simple, but all encompassing that statement is. What do we want out of writing our screenplay? We want to entertain people, give them a thrill, make them fall in love with our characters, make them feel their pain, etc. That's all covered under "arouse specific emotions". We may also feel that we have something to say about the world, a unique perspective, or a story that should be told. In my personal experience, I think the best writers are concerned with both, they care for the audience but they also have something to say.

Clarifying those intentions also clarifies why we need structure. If your goal is to just to entertain yourself or kill time then you can write however you want and there's really nothing wrong with that. But if you're interested in your work affecting people either by arousing emotions or communicating a perspective than you have to concern yourself with how your work is being received by other people. You have to imagine someone who doesn't know you, doesn't share your experiences, sitting at the TV, they come across your film. Will it affect them? Will it draw them in? Will they understand what you're trying to say? Structure in large part is concerned with these questions, it utilizes principles that help make our work accessible, entertaining, and impactful for the audience.

The "science" of story structure is largely inductive, meaning it is based on studying a large number of unique examples and then drawing general principles from them. No one prove to you with a logical argument that dramatic stories work best in three or five act structures. What they can do, however, is show you how Shakespeare did it, and how all the other great playwrights and screenwriters have done it for hundreds of years. Writers like McKee study successful past works and derive these principles from them.

STRUCTURE

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.**

McKee writes: *"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.*

This sounds obvious, but consider some of the implications. If you took that nap and when you woke the window is still dry, no event has occurred. We don't wake and say to ourselves: "It did not rain.", *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 perhaps our plan for the day. This can create a shift in values: I was "disappointed I couldn't go for my bike ride." but now the value dissapointment has been replaced by "pleasant surprise that it's a beautiful day."

Again, all this sounds obvious, but many writers, myself included, have written large stacks of scenes where nothing changes. We say our script is filled with events, because people say things and time passes, but for someone reading the script they're not able to track the events taking place, it just feels like endless, witty conversation. 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 to us: "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 own life. Some may have been dramatic, but I bet there were some others that were pretty quiet at the time, maybe in the moment it just seemed like an ordinary day, but looking back you see how significant they really were to you and how they ultimately shaped your life.

How do we decide what types of events constitute "meaningful change"? McKee suggests that change should be "expressed and experienced in terms of value". 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 of either + or - and they are bound together in a set of binary pairs: alive/dead (+/-), truth/lie, courage/cowardice, loyalty/betrayal, strength/weakness, excitement/boredom.

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 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 there 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 gain in this scene? What do they stand to lose? Why do they care?" As writers, we should also be aware of what's at stake for our characters. If a scene isn't important to our character why should it be important to the audience?

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.**

Let's breakdown this definition of a scene.

First, let's define what a "scene" is. Notice McKee says "in more or less continuous time and space". Most of the time that's 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". However, sometimes scenes can stretch across multiple locations or include small time jumps, so I think it helps to also imagine scenes as a unified "story event".

For example, imagine a guy waking up in bed bright and early. He moves through his morning routine with precision and energy, he goes for a jog, makes a protein shake, packs his suitcase and checks everything twice. He is mister perfect. He gets on a train, meditates in his seat, enters his office and smiles gracefully to the receptionist and then SLAM! An AC Repairman working in the ceiling drops a large wrench and it hits mister perfect between the eyes, he screams and spills coffee all over his shirt, there's blood pouring out of his forehead, he completely loses his cool and starts screaming at everyone revealing the less "perfect" person inside.

The events I just described could span across two or three hours of "real-time", but I would argue that we would experience them in the film as a single scene. You wouldn't say: there was the scene where he woke up, the scene where he brushed his teeth, the scene where he made a smoothie, etc, because those little jumps in time don't represent any significant changes. We would probably refer to this instead as "The scene where Mr. Perfect gets ready for work and then gets hit in the head." What value was at stake? We could say tidy/disheveled, friendly/hateful, there could be several values at work here. In this case, what unites these events as a scene is not time or place but that they all turn on the same value. They belong to the same story event.

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 the change happening as they watch. If we say in our head, "In this scene she realizes she's not in love with him anymore." but we don't provide any clues to the audience 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 that she can signal what's going on inside her without having to spell it out so obviously that the other character would know.

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 shouldn't be in your screenplay, or at least it should be revised. If the characters start the scene on the positive side of passion/boredom and then they have a beautiful date and end the scene still passionately in love we don't have a true story event.

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. I've often found myself returning to these principles as tools when I'm revising my screenplays. I'll get to a scene and say: "This feels off, what's wrong with it?" Then I ask: "Where's the conflict?" "What's at stake?" "What meaningful change is occuring in this character's life?"

STRUCTURE

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred the problem with the scene lies in one of those questions. When I re-write the scene to include a tangible conflict that the audience can track and perceive a meaningful result to, suddenly the scene comes alive. So why did I write that bad scene in the first place? I think it's usually one of two reasons.

1. It was a "great idea". These are dangerous. One day you have a flash of inspiration: "Wouldn't it be cool to shoot a scene here? And then character will do this? Wow, that will look great. This is a great idea, I'm a genius." Then you write your screenplay and find there's no place for the "great idea" but the "great idea" is *soooo* great you can't do without it so you force it into the script. Get used to letting these go. The problem with these kind of "great ideas" is that they aren't organically rooted in your character or the structure of your plot.

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 very talented, but they're 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 get so attached to them we start writing the script to support them rather than focusing on the script as a whole.

2. You wrote the scene so the audience would understand what's going on. It's there to deliver information. This is called ***exposition***. Doing it well is one of the greatest challenges in screenwriting. It's not as if you can 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 sticks out and creates dead weight in your drama.

Have you ever heard lines like this in a bad movie: *"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 is so bad for the kids."* People don't talk like this, overexplaining information that the person they're talking to would already know. What is her motivation for saying this to her mom? Her motivation is explaining the situation to the audience and that reads as false.

You still have to find a way to explain the situation to the audience, but ideally all exposition should be communicated in scenes that also stand on their own as story events. Lines of exposition should be motivated as well, the characters should have reasons for speaking other than to share facts. 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? And you are gonna pay this back too, this ain't a gift."* Now the over-the-top performative line can work because the character is trying to elicit sympathy and get some money out of her mother.

What about an expository scene? Say for example, it's crucial to your murder mystery that your hero knows two people were together the night one of them was murdered. You invent a scene where your main character returns something they borrowed from the future murder victim. They glance inside the apartment and notice someone in the kitchen. It does the job of setting up a clue that will be meaningful later in the script, so what's wrong?

The problem is that if it weren't for your need to set-up this clue, you never would have written a scene in this movie about someone returning a set of tupperware and making small-talk at the door. How do we revise? Maybe the main character has a crush on the future murder victim and they were planning on using this "returning tupperware" moment as an excuse to come over on a night when they "just happen to have an extra ticket to..." The character was sure they'd be alone tonight and had it all planned perfectly, but there's someone in the kitchen, the plan is foiled. We in the audience are tracking the character's motivation and we perceive the shift from positive expectation to negative disappointment. At this point we have no idea a murder will occur, but we're given a love story to keep us occupied as you set-up your murder mystery clues in the background.

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.

In this classical structure, each scene is itself a unified whole hinging on a value, with its own action/reaction. Then we build up. A series of scenes constructs a "Sequence", which again is made up of parts, but it is also a unified whole. 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.

A feature film script usually has somewhere in the range of 8-12 sequences. Although this is now considered a dramatic concept, 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 very literally 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.

An act is the next step up the chain in story units and the largest self-contained unit within what is considered a complete play or film. Unlike sequences, acts are a concept that comes 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. What's the common theme here? Unity.

ON UNITY

Before we continue on to talk about act structures, I think this is a good place to take a step back and consider this concept of unity. One thing we should acknowledge is that filmmaking in large part is still conducted as a "classical" art form as opposed to a "modernist" or "post-modernist" one. These terms refer to different periods in the history of art and literature, but they also denote a particular way of thinking about art.

Who is to say what makes art "good" or "bad"? In philosophy, debates over what qualities are superior in different art forms fall under the category of *aesthetics*. An *aesthetic* is a set of principles underlying and guiding the work of a particular artist or artistic movement. So, for example, what sounds "good" to rap artists and fans is going to be very different from what is considered "good" to fans of classical music. They are both, however, to some degree bound by guiding rules and principles within their own *aesthetic.*

Great artists often challenge the dominant aesthetic and force it to evolve, but they still must work within and against it because the audience comes to their work with pre-conceived notions of what to expect. As Immanuel Kant said, "Genius gives rule to art." Meaning true artistic geniuses challenge old rules and create new ones. They bring you something you didn't even know you wanted, but after their work is established and accepted others will begin to follow their example.

STRUCTURE

Classical aesthetics have different features in different art forms, but they also tend to have certain qualities in common. For instance, classical art tends to have a more reverent attitude towards past work, it looks back on a long tradition and sees great examples to emulate. *Modernist art* tends to be more focused on the future, on challenging the past and creating new rules based on new principles.

Perhaps for this reason, classical art forms tend to be more popularly accepted than other forms. The "Mona Lisa" was painted hundreds of years ago, but it still gets more visitors and admiration then the works of Picasso. You might think, "Well, classical music isn't that popular anymore.", but I would argue that if you set it up against experimental and atonal chamber music most people would choose Mozart over John Cage. Popular music is also mostly based in classical forms and concepts even if on it's surface it seems to re-invent itself: verse-chorus-verse, etc.

Films, I think even more so than music and definitely more than fine art, are in large part made to adhere to a classical structure. There are exceptions of course, but modernist films are less frequent, have smaller budgets and smaller audiences. Why is film so conservative? My guess is because it costs so much money to make! It's easy to experiment on a piece of canvas in your garage, but try convincing a bank to lend you $30 million so you can "meditate on the form of your loneliness."

Unity is also a central principle in most classical art forms. This aesthetic concept is that every piece of a work of art should be related to the whole. Every line of dialogue, every note, every brush stroke should be there for a reason. There should be a central organizing idea that contains all the disparate parts of the work.

As we've seen, a unified motivation and conflict for your protagaonist is stressed as a central core of any story, but Aristotle urged us to continue 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.

These rules were designed for ancient Greek tragedies, not modern film screenplays, so I am not suggesting you need to strictly follow these rules. However, in my experience most first drafts of screenplays 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!

Rarely do students and first-time writers come up with screenplays where the story is too simple. It's almost always the opposite problem: too many characters, too many ideas, three different overlapping plots, and it's all just way too long and difficult to follow. Often the best feature films come from novellas or short stories rather than full-length novel. I think most novels would be better adapted as an entire season of a television show.

There's an expression: "Bad novels make good films." It's true that in the history of film, adaptations of very simple, somewhat trashy novels have often been much more successful than attempts at adapting grand works of literature that meditate on a characters inner thoughts and stretch out across generations. Film is a present-tense medium and it requires you to be economic as a writer. A novelist can go on for hundreds of pages, but you have to tell a complete story in 120 and most of the space on the page is left blank. That doesn't make it any less challenging, in some ways it's more difficult because you have to be so precise and efficient in your choice of events. Simple stories told well work best in film.

STRUCTURE

THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

The most common structure used in screenplays is called "three-act structure". The third act is commonly the shortest, roughly 20 pages, then the first act, roughly 20-30 pages, and then you have the big second act: roughly 40-60 pages. Each act has it's own arc, it's own beginning, middle, and end. Each act also ends with a climax. Sometimes 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 is clear to the audience that the character's situation has changed and we are on to a new part of the story.

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

THE FIRST ACT

The first act introduces the audience to your world and your protagonist. 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 in McKee's definition: "radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life." I was just your average guy 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.... Other times it's somewhere in between.

What's more significant about the inciting incident is that it turns a stable situation into a dynamic one, one that is unpredictable and capable of change. Your protagaonist can start off stabily miserable or stabily content, but the inciting incident forces them into change. They must begin to act and their situation changes. The inciting incident triggers the chain of events that will carry us through the story.

Your character doesn't always 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 of course. Even though he refuses the initial call, the entrance of the bad guys into his peaceful village upsets the whole stability of his world and events will inevitably escalate in a way that forces your hero into action.

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 with a shark attack. We could consider that the inciting incident, or we could also say that the sheriff's discovery of the body incites the action but even that comes by the third scene.

Your inciting incident doesn't have to come in the first five minutes. In some screenplays the action must be set-up before the inciting incident can occur. *The Godfather* goes on for quite a while before the assassination attempt sets off the central action of the film. That action would likely not have been as significant if we didn't first get to know "The Godfather" as untouchable and Michael as "the good son" who wasn't supposed to get involved. A delayed inciting incident presents a challenge, however, you need to keep your audience interested while you set things up, but your story hasn't really started yet. In these cases, writers often create a first act that has it's own mini-story or set piece which carries us through the initial exposition. In *The Godfather* we have the big wedding scene which leads to a request for help, which leads to a horse's severed head being delivered to a producer. This mini-story has it's own set of conflicts, it has a little beginning, middle, and end, and it keeps us satisfied while the ground is set for the bigger story of Michael succeeding his father.

STRUCTURE

The first act ends in a first act climax or 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 the inciting incident calls the character to act, the first act break is when the character accepts that call to action and there's no turning back. In our reluctant cowboy example, the bandits take over the town and the ex-gunslinger refuses to help. Then one day he goes in to town for some supplies and he sees one of the bandit's trying to take advantage of the young daughter of the shopkeeper. He doesn't want to get involved, 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 he's involved in the town's troubles whether he likes it or not. Before there was a choice, now his world is stable world is irrevocably changed and he can't go back to being a quiet farmer.

THE SECOND ACT

The second act is typically the longest. It presents a series of complications to the protagonist that increasingly raise the stakes. This is called rising action. The general principle is that things get steadily more complicated and more difficult for the protagonist. If your most dramatic scene comes at minute forty and it's all downhill from there by minute sixty we will be checking our phone and looking at the door.

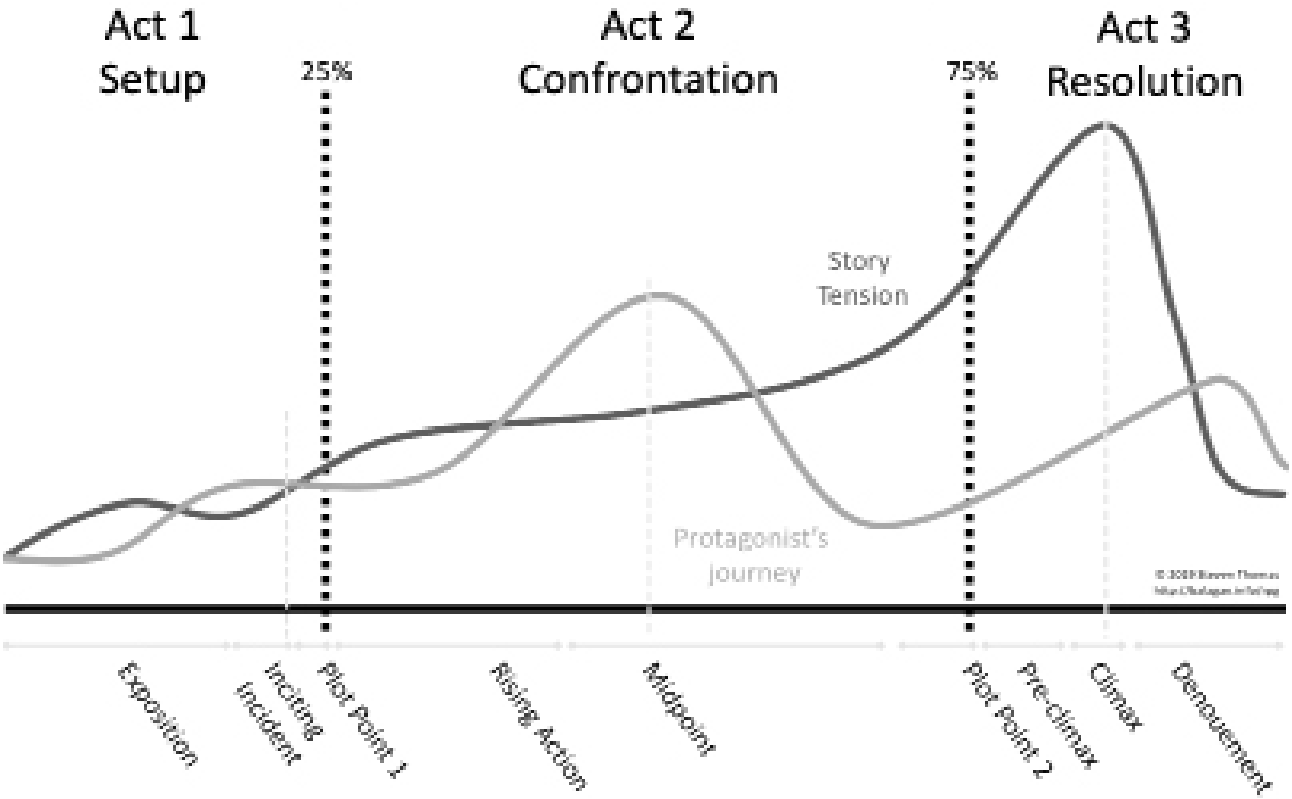
This doesn't mean things have to move in a straight line getting worse and worse. Often the trajectory for the hero zigs and zags, one minute you think they've won only to discover the plot goes deeper than they ever realized. These switches in direction are called *reversals.* Aristotle wrote that there 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's going well and then out of nowhere they get hit by a car and the credits roll. You would feel cheated right? It's too easy, the writer just dropped in a random tragedy to make their film seem deep. Random events like this, though realistic, often don't work in drama because they break the unity of action. We're 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.

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's more satisfying if they survived a challenge we thought there was no way 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 for your character as opposed to your film being a steady march towards tragedy.

Because second acts are so long 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 we can imagine ths midpoint as the high point where things seem like they're going well. A high-point, however, is also the point where things start reversing in the other direction. 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. Like 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 is different because he has to confront these challenges alone.

STRUCTURE



There are many diagrams like this that "chart" out three-act structure. I would be weary of taking any of them too literally, but I like this one because it distinguishes between fluctuations in the fate of the protagonist and the tension of the drama. The positive or negative charge of how we perceive the protagonist's situation can fluctuate back and forth as the story goes on. The tension however, should more or less be steadily increasing throughout until the climax of the film in the third act. For example, it's great to have a big twist at your midpoint, but you wouldn't want your midpoint to be more dramatically significant then the climax of the film.

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.

As I said earlier, the third act is usually the shortest. Often it is one long, continuous sequence of scenes that happen in a single time and location. We can still break it up into three parts. First, we have the *crisis*, in the above diagram it is referred to as the *pre-climax.* This is the situation created by the second-act break and perhaps further complicated in the opening of the third-act. The *crisis* is the situation that forces the protagonist in to the final confrontation with the antagonist.

That final confrontation is the next stage, the *climax* is where the 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 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 in the denoument.

STRUCTURE

EXERCISE #5

Think of a film you like in a genre you would potentially like to write in. First just try to break it down in to three-acts. Where are the act breaks between 1st and 2nd, 2nd and 3rd? Try to sum up the action of each act in to a single sentence. Once you've broken the story up, go back and see if you can identify the major turning points. What is the inciting incident? Is there a midpoint before the second-act break? What is the crisis that leads to the resolution?

Now you have in front of you the skeleton of a successful film script. Try to write a logline in a few sentences that uses that structure as a model for creating your own story. Don't worry about being unoriginal, all writers study other people's work. A common practice for musicians learning to write is to learn a song, rewrite the lyrics, then go back and play with the chords until they have an original song. You will put your own spin on it, but it can be helpful when you're just getting started to have a model to work with.

I'd recommend you break up the paragraph you write into something like this:

1st ACT: 1-2 Sentences. **2nd ACT:** 2-4 Sentences. **3rd ACT:** 1-2 Sentences.

EXERCISE #6

Take an existing story you're familiar with and try to rewrite it so that it occurs in as compressed a time and space as possible. So if the story you're working with happens over a year, try to imagine a believable way it could happen in in a month. If your story takes place across a city in a month, see if you can come up with a way to tell a similar story in a single house over a single night.

You may have to make significant changes to the details of the events to make it work, but try to see if you can still hold on to the central conflict of the story your writing. If this exercise inspires an original story, feel free to branch off as much as you like. The book *Fifty Shades of Grey*, began as *Twilight* fan fiction before it took on a life its own and became an international best-seller and a Hollywood film. Most of Shakespeare's plays were based on other plays or familiar historical situations.

EXERCISE #7

This exercise relies on a technique similar to what the Surrealist's called "automatic writing". Don't overthink it. Try to just write the first things that come to mind. If you have a cellmate interested in writing, this can be even more interesting when done amongst a few people. Fold and tear a piece of paper into fifteen separate pieces. On the back of each piece of paper your going to write it's CATEGORY and on the front your going to come up with one potential item in that category. There are three categories, you will make five cards for each. Here's a set of examples, but I encourage you to invent your own.

CHARACTERS	PROBLEM	RESOLUTION
A shady plumber.	Sister is kidnapped.	Doesn't get want, but gets what they need.
A naive college student.	In love with someone dangerous.	Conquers challenge, but at a terrible price.
A cruel boss.	Falsely accused.	Becomes who they were really meant to be.
The class clown.	Hired for a job with untold danger.	Gets what they want, but is ruined by it.
A cowardly soldier.	Loses everything unexpectedly.	Discovers they had what they wanted already.

Now, shuffle the deck and pull out one card frome each category at random. Figure out a story that combines the three elements you drew. If it doesn't make sense at first, don't draw more cards. Find a way to make that journey possible. Don't worry about it being good or bad, just practice coming up with a complete story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

THEME

Theme is the most elusive of all the elements of drama. When you write or watch a film without one, you can tell something is missing. It's a feeling of: "Okay, so what?" But when you try to write a film with a theme it often comes across as preachy or forced. There's an old Hollywood phrase: "If you want to send a message try Western Union!"

Theme is also sometimes called premise. Robert McKee calls it the controlling idea. It's 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. Your theme is a statement about the world and your film proves the truth of your theme.

McKee frames it in terms of the change of values we discussed earlier:

> **A CONTROLLING IDEA** may be expressed in a single-sentence describing how and why life undergoes change from one condition of the existence at the beginning to another at the end.

This framework sets up your theme to be structured as a reflection of the change your character undergoes in your film, or vice versa. 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 this, then that." However, I've noticed even when your out to write what feels like a light, pure entertainment like a raunchy comedy, for example, it feels hollow without some kind of point-of-view. You need that "So what?" as much as you need a good plot.

A warning though. If you set out to write the screenplay with the 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 what you're trying to do and they'll reject it, because your story events don't feel real, they feel like exactly what they are: contrived events 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 never works. It's a very delicate element to get right. Here's what I suggest. When your 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.

Then take that piece of paper, put it away, and don't look at it again until you've finished a draft of your screenplay. Keep it in the back of your mind, but don't try to make everything about that theme. Focus on your story and your characters. Build a realistic world and events that challenge your protagonist and lead to a change in conditions.

When 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, but there's something else going on underneath.

Then you can use that better developed theme as a tool for revising your screenplay. You can comb through your script and apply it like a test. "Does this subplot resonate with my theme? Or is it a distraction?"

LOGLINES

If you've made it to this point, I congratulate you. We just went through a lot of information in a very tight space. I have several books on my desk that are three-hundred pages plus and cover roughly the same material. It may be a lot to handle right now, but I hope it is inspiring to you and not intimidating. If it is intimidating at the moment, feel free to shake all this off and just write.

Sometimes with this all this theory you just need to study it, take in the ideas, and then forget about it for a while. Just let your imagination flow free and eventually you'll start to see the ideas manifesting naturally. You'll write a scene and then afterwards a lightbulb goes off: "I think that's my inciting incident!" No writer goes into their script having all the answers. We revise and revise so that eventually it looks like we had this intricate plot in our heads the whole time, but really we were constantly experimenting, going back and changing things a few different ways until we found something that worked.

THE ASSIGNMENT

The earlier exercises in this packet are for your own benefit, you don't need to send them back to us. Here's what we would like you to work on and send back to us for notes:

1-3 Loglines for an original feature film you would potentially like to begin writing a treatment for in the next portion of the course.

As I wrote earlier, a logline is a short description of the overall idea for a film. It's at most a short paragraph, 2-5 sentences. If you can make it one-sentence that's even better. It's not a full story, but it contains the essential elements for creating one. At the very least, it tells us who our protagonist is and what major conflict they will face.

Another way to approach it might be three-act structure. A sentence or two for each act.

In the closing pages here I am including a few formulas for creating loglines that come with examples. Any of these formulas can work, try different ones out to see what works best for your story. We're looking forward to seeing what you come up with. Good luck! Send your loglines to: **PO BOX 330, Cliffside Park, NJ 07010**

MACKENDRICK'S "ONCE UPON A TIME"

This is excerpted from a chapter in Alexander Mackendrick's book *On Filmmaking*. I highly recommend it, it's one of the best textbooks I've ever read on the subject. Here Mackendrick proposes that the classic fairy tale form: "Onec upon a time..." contains all the neccessary elements for a film story. This could be a good logline structure to follow.

"Once upon a time..."
The genre (eg. Western, spy thriller, historical epic, ghost story.) The place and time period, the closed world of the story, the social and/or ideological values in the subject, the conventions belonging to the often imaginary setting.

"there lived a..."
The protagonist. The central figure of teh story, the character through whose eyes we see the events. Sometimes, but not neccessarily, the hero. Implied in the choice of the protagonist is often the point of view the dramatist wants us to take.

"who..."
The action of the protagonist. We use the word action in the sense of what the character want and does, the will or purpose of the character.

LOGLINES

"but..."

The obstacle, whatever or whoever stands in opposition to the action, the goals of the protagonist. This is often personified in the role of the antagonist (villain). In contemporary drama it is a character (or group of figures) who represent opposition to the goals of the protagonist. Note that if there is to be dramatic tension, a passive or weak protagonist is apt to call for a strong antagonist.

"so one day it happened"

The inciting incident. This is the moment at which the action starts. In nineteenth-century plays it was common that the dramatic tension didn't really start to grip until somewhere near the end of the first act, and all that went before was exposition (establishing the back story). But in tightly knit contemporary story structues it is often preferable to begin the story which some dramatic event and only then retrace its origins throuh exposition, since exposition is more dramatic as soon as there is something at stake.

"so then, as a result of which..."

Narrative progression. Most stories that have a strong plot are built on the tension of cause-and-effect. Each incident is like a domino that topples forwards to collide with the next in a sequence that holds the audience in the grip of anticipation. The patttern is likely to be that each scene presents a small crisis that, as it is resolved, produces a new uncertainty (defined in the classic phrase 'anticipation mingled with uncertainty' almost a definition of drama.)

"But meanwhile"

Simultaneous development: subplot. The tumbling domino can set off a second trail of collisions. Some complication.

"so that unbenkownst to"

Dramatic irony, a common and indeed almost essential ingredients in a strong story structure. (We know something the protagonist doesn't that will usually lead them to take an action they think will help, but we know will hurt.)

"until the time came that"

A confrontation scene. There may be several such scenes throughout a suspenseful story. Dramatic structure is often a graph of rising and falling tensions. The progressive high points are the crises, separated by relaxations of tension. Early scenes, after the hook of the premise, are generally less suspenseful than later ones. Note that a story can quickly become monotonous if tension is constant. During relaxation in tension the basic suspense is still present - latent but present. The return to the central plot inevitably gains an addditional impact because of temporary respite.

"when suddenly to the surprise of.."

A reversal, an unexpected shift in relationships. Likely to require dramatic irony.

"so it turned out that"

The resolution, the denoument, literally the unknoting of all the tensions in the story.

"and for ever after..."

Closure, the sense of having come full circle. It need not, be a happy ending, but should provide some satisfaction. Classically, the end may be surprising, though in retrospect, it is recognized to be inevitable.

LOGLINES

These two formulas and accompanying examples come from studiobinder.com

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
Antagonist
brutal 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.

NAPOLEON DYNAMITE

Protagonist *Action* *Inciting Incident*
A listless and alienated teenager, decides to help his new friend win a class election in their
Antagonist
small western high school, while he must deal with his bizarre family life back home.

LOGLINE FORMULA #2

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

SPEED

Protagonist *Action* *Goal*
A fresh-faced police officer has to keep a bus running above 50MPH to avoid an explosion
Antagonist *Stake*
rigged by a terrorist that would cost the lives of everyone aboard.

AVENGERS

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

DIE HARD

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