

SCREEN TALES

A six-session workshop on the art and craft of storytelling for screen



SESSION 2 – STRUCTURE ON SCREEN

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What is a screenplay – and how should it be structured?
Does it need to be structured?

And for that matter – why do we need a screenplay at all?
What is its real purpose?

'The story is told of director Frank Capra, who was asked in an interview to explain precisely how he achieved that special quality known as 'the Capra touch'. At great length he discussed how he had lent 'the touch' to this film and to that one. And nowhere was mentioned Robert Riskin, who had merely written the films.

The day after the interview appeared in the press, there arrived at Capra's office a script sized envelope. Inside was a document very closely resembling a screenplay: a front cover, a back cover, and one hundred and ten pages. But the cover and pages were all blank.

Clipped to the 'script' was a note to Capra from Robert Riskin. It read: 'Dear Frank, put the 'Capra touch' on *this!*'

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

STRUCTURE

'When forced to work within a strict framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost – and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom the work is likely to sprawl.'

T.S. Eliot

'Screenplays are structure. Yes, nifty dialogue helps one hell of a lot; sure, it's nice if you can bring your characters to life. But you can have terrific characters spouting just swell talk to each other and if the structure is unsound, forget it.'

William Goldman
Adventures in the Screen Trade

STRUCTURE – cont'd

'Now a whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not necessarily come after something else. An end is that which naturally follows something else and is not itself followed by anything. A middle is that which follows something else and is itself followed by something. Thus well-constructed plots must conform to the pattern I have been describing.'

Aristotle
Poetics

'Primary amongst these rules is that the three basic parts – beginning, middle and end – are not equal in size. Beginnings, for example, are sometimes shorter than endings and sometimes not. But both beginnings and endings are invariably shorter than middles.'

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

'First, statement of the proposition, called thesis. Then the discovery of a contradiction of this proposition, called antithesis, being the opposite of the original proposition. Now, resolution of this contradiction necessitates correction of the original proposition, and formulation of a third proposition, the synthesis, being the combination of the original proposition and the contradiction to it. These three steps—thesis, antithesis, and synthesis—are the law of all movement.'

Lajos Egri
The Art of Dramatic Writing

What causes a story to happen – what is it that sets things in motion? Let’s take a look at what various theorists have called, the INCITING INCIDENT, CATALYST, or CALL TO ADVENTURE.

THE INCITING INCIDENT – OR CATALYST

‘When an inciting incident occurs, it must be a dynamic, fully developed event – the inciting incident radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist’s life.

The standard for a two-hour feature film is to locate the inciting incident somewhere within the first half-hour. Bring in the inciting incident as soon as possible – but not until the moment is ripe.

The location of the inciting incident is found in the answer to this question: How much does the audience need to know about the protagonist and his world to have a full response?’

Robert McKee
Story

What makes a character start a chain of events which might destroy him or help him to succeed? There is only one answer: necessity. There must be something at stake—something pressingly important.

Lajos Egri
The Art of Dramatic Writing

‘Catalyst – The moment where life as it is changes. It is the telegram, the act of catching your loved-one cheating, allowing a monster onboard the ship, meeting the true love of your life, etc. The “before” world is no more, change is underway.’

Blake Snyder
Save the Cat

‘The hero is presented with a problem, challenge or adventure to undertake. Once presented with a Call to Adventure, she can no longer remain in the comfort of the Ordinary World.’

Christopher Vogler
The Writer’s Journey

ACTIVITY 1 – WHAT HAPPENED?

Using the three examples you have brought with you – detail below the title of the three films – and the INCIDENT or CATALYST, that caused the story to happen.

1. Film title:

Catalyst:

2. Film title:

Catalyst:

3. Film title:

Catalyst:

PLOT

To PLOT means to navigate through the dangerous terrain on story and when confronted by a dozen branching possibilities to choose the correct path. Plot is the writer's choice of events.

Robert McKee
Story

There is no action under the sun which is the origin and the result in one. Everything results from something else; action cannot come of itself.

In a play, each conflict causes the one after it. Each is more intense than the one before. The play moves, propelled by the conflict created by the characters in their desire to reach their goal:

There is no moment in a play which does not grow from the one before it.

Lajos Egri
The Art of Dramatic Writing

The representation of the action is the plot of the tragedy; for the ordered arrangement of the incidents is what I mean by the plot.

For if the presence or absence of something makes no apparent difference, it is no real part of the whole.

There is a big difference between what happens as a result of something else and what merely happens after it.

For the plot should be so ordered that even without seeing it performed anyone merely hearing what is afoot will shudder with fear and pity as a result of what is happening.

Furthermore, it is obvious that the unravelling of the plot should arise from the circumstances of the plot itself, and not be brought about ex machina.

Aristotle
Poetics

BEGINNINGS

Writers are well advised constantly to ask themselves – is this the true beginning? Is the point before there is nothing? What would be lost if I started on page eight? Or eleven? If nothing is would be lost – start there. Conveying some random information does not justify beginning a story before it's proper beginning.

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

ACTIVITY 2 – FINDING THE PLOT

Using one of the three examples you have brought with you – detail below the title of the film – and the key PLOT points that the story turns on.

1. Film title:

Plot points:

PREDICTABILITY – THE OBLIGATORY SCENE

'Witnessing the inciting incident projects an image of the obligatory scene into the audience's imagination. The obligatory scene is an event the audience knows it must see before the story can end.'

Robert McKee
Story

'A desirable predictability in movies compares effectively to the children's game boo! What's more frightening? To walk down a corridor absolutely unaware that someone is going to jump out from behind a door, or knowing somebody is going to do just that?'

Ideally of course, a script's conclusion is foretold in its opening. When the boys learn at the beginning of *STAND BY ME* that there is a body in the woods, and that the bad guys, the older boys, also will be attempting to locate that body, we can accept as given the young boys will find the body and that they will accomplish this feat before their antagonists.'

Richard Walter
Screenwriting

CRISIS AND CLIMAX

'The crisis is the story's obligatory scene. From the inciting incident on, the audience has been anticipating with growing vividness the scene in which the protagonist will be face to face with the most focused, powerful forces of antagonism in his existence. This is the dragon that guards the object of desire.

The location of the crisis is determined by the length of the climactic action. Generally, crisis and climax happen in the last minutes and in the same scene.

This is the obligatory scene. The audience wants to suffer with the protagonist through the pain of this dilemma. We freeze this moment because the rhythm of the last movement depends on it. An emotional momentum has built to this point, but the crisis dams its flow. As the protagonist goes through his decision, the audience leans in, wondering: 'What's he going to do?' Tension builds and builds, then as the protagonist makes a choice of action, that compressed energy explodes into the Climax.

The climax of the last act is your great imaginative leap. Without it, you have no story. Until you have it, your characters wait like suffering patients praying for a cure.

Robert McKee
Story

Crisis: a state of things in which a decisive change one way or the other is impending.

As we see, crisis and climax follow each other, the last one always on a higher plane than the one before.

A man steals: conflict. He is pursued: rising conflict. He is caught: crisis. He is condemned by the court: climax. Transferring him to prison is the conclusion.

Lajos Egri
The Art of Dramatic Writing

ENDINGS

A revered Hollywood axiom warns: ‘Movies are about their last twenty minutes.’ In other words, for a film to have a chance in the world, the last act and its climax must be the most satisfying experience of all.

If you fail to make the poetic leap to a brilliant culminating climax, all previous scenes, characters, dialogue, and description become an elaborate typing exercise.

Looking at your ending, ask: As a result of this climactic action, what value, positively or negatively charged, is brought into the world of my protagonist?

Robert McKee
Story

ACTIVITY 3 – THE END

Using the three examples you have brought with you – detail below the title of the three films – and the CRISIS and CLIMAX that brought the story to its conclusion.

1. Film title:

Crisis:

Climax:

2. Film title:

Crisis:

Climax:

3. Film title:

Crisis:

Climax:

SCENES

‘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.’

Robert McKee
Story

ACTS

‘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 of scene.’

As a symphony unfolds in three, four or more movements, so story is told in movements we call acts – the macro-structure of story. When a story reaches a certain magnitude – the feature film – three acts is the minimum – to serve a profound purpose.

Consider these rhythms: Things were bad, then they were good – end of story. Or things were good, then they were bad – end of story. We feel something’s lacking. The three-act story rhythm was the foundation of story art for centuries before Aristotle noted it.

The first act typically consumes about 25 percent of the telling. The last act wants to be the shortest of all. In the ideal last act, we want to give the audience a sense of acceleration. Last acts are generally twenty minutes or less.’

Robert McKee
Story

Act Two is a long stretch for the writer and audience, up to an hour in an average feature film. You can look at the three-act structure as a dramatic line stretched across two major turning points of tenses, the act breaks. Like a circus tent hanging on its poles, structure is subject to gravity – the waning of the audience’s attention in the time between these peaks of tension.

Robert McKee
Story

COINCIDENCE

'Bring coincidence early to allow time to build meaning out of it. As a rule of thumb do not use coincidence beyond the mid-point of the telling. Rather, put the story more and more into the hands of the characters.

Never use coincidence to turn and ending. This is deax ex machina, the writer's greatest sin.'

Robert McKee
Story