

A Crash Course in Screenwriting

by

David Griffith



**SCOTTISH
SCREEN**

Scottish Screen
249 West George Street
Glasgow
G2 4QE
0141 302 1700
info@scottishscreen.com
www.scottishscreen.com

Note: these screenwriting guidelines for 16-21 year olds were written by David Griffith in 2004 for Scottish Screen's **First Writes** competition, to provide more detailed information for some of the older entrants. However, the guidelines should prove valuable for all young and new writers, and Scottish Screen's delighted to present them here.

The **First Writes** team

A Crash Course in Screenwriting

Aristotle? Who?

Cinema and the movies have only been around for just over 100 years, which leads some people to think that screenwriting is something you can't really teach. Something that you're either good at or you are not. However, though cinema is a relatively young art form, drama has been around for at least 3,000 years, since the time of the Ancient Greeks. So it should come as little surprise that most of our ideas about what makes a good screenplay date back to Ancient Athens and the work of the philosopher, Aristotle, who wrote *The Poetics* in approximately 350 BC.

Aristotle did not write *The Poetics* as a "How To Write a Play" guide, but rather as an analysis of the effect that good drama should have on an audience. Almost all of the principles developed by Aristotle are relevant to successful plays, teleplays and movies today, and can be seen in productions as diverse as *Shrek*, *Braveheart*, *Memento* or *Bridget Jones' Diary*.

Naturally, society has changed since the days of the Ancient Greeks and screen drama has become the dominant form of story-telling in our culture. As a result, new specific genres have developed like *Horror*, *Science Fiction*, *Domestic Dramas* and *Thrillers* that do not always seem to match Aristotle's view of the proper pleasure to be derived from drama. Most significantly, we have also developed a greater taste for comedy than Aristotle perhaps anticipated, as well as an interest in more troubled heroes (like *Macbeth*, Aileen Carol Wuornos from *Monster* or Travis Bickle from *Taxi Driver*), who do not at first glance appear to fit Aristotle's analysis of the classic hero.

That said, our knowledge of the particular power of the cinematic screen narrative has also been advanced considerably in the last century. Firstly through Hollywood's studio writing system and more recently through the work of screenwriting teachers from both sides of the Atlantic, including: Edward Mabley, Syd Field, Lew Hunter, Robert McKee, Michael Hauge, Chris Vogler and Phil Parker (full details of their works can be found in the bibliography to this guide).

Naturally these writers have different opinions about what are the most important elements of a screenplay, some are more proscriptive than others about the principles of screenwriting, and others believe that the best movies are made by selectively *breaking the rules*. However, to *break a rule* in an interesting way, you first need to understand the principles. So in this short guide I will try to simplify and demystify some of these principles to help you turn your original idea into a successful screenplay that could be made into a drama or comedy from any genre, be that an action movie, romance, horror or personal drama. Whatever the genre, the principles remain largely the same. Obviously this short guide cannot cover everything, but I hope I will give you a clear overview of the basic principles.

David Griffith
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Introduction: how to use this guide

An audience enjoys a film because they are continually asking questions about what the pictures they are seeing mean. As a screenwriter it is your job to create a sequence of images, shots and scenes that generates a particular intellectual and emotional response in the audience. This response is not arbitrary, nor a matter of luck, but one of careful plotting and planning – however brilliant the original idea.

This *Crash Course in Screenwriting* is an expansion of some screenwriting guidelines I produced for 11-16 year-olds for the First Writes short film scheme operated by Scottish Screen. It seeks to be a practical handbook and has therefore been staged to lead you chapter by chapter through the process of creating a theatrical screenplay. At the end of each chapter there is a suggested exercise for developing your screenplay, and adding successively to your screenwriting skills. Each new exercise which directly relates to your screen idea should make you reconsider what you produced in the previous exercises. To get the most out of this guide, check through the earlier stages as you progress and make refinements to your story plan as you go along.

Screenplays never burst out of the writer's head fully-formed, but need to be carefully crafted to achieve the desired result. Screenwriting is therefore an ongoing process of writing and rewriting, writing and rewriting - sometimes for many years. Nothing about your screenplay is ever set in stone until the camera rolls!

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Getting Started

The most important thing to remember when you set out to write a screenplay is that you are writing a story for the screen and not a novel or a short story. You must therefore write only what the cameraman can film or the soundman can record. So try to think of a series of events that will be interesting to watch – as well as to listen to. This does not mean the story needs to be set somewhere strange or beautiful, it just means that you should try to think how the story can be told with pictures and sounds, as well as dialogue (what your characters say). For instance if a man likes a woman, you don't have to have him say, "I love you." Most of the time a single look will be enough. For example you might write:

Alex laughs at Angela's joke. She catches his eye. He looks away slightly embarrassed. Then glances back at her again.

So before you start your screenplay why not pull out your favourite video or DVD, turn down the sound and see how much of the story is told through the pictures. Then as an exercise try describing what happens in each shot in a simple sentence. For example, if you were transcribing the moment from 'Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring' where Gandalf falls from the bridge, you might write:

INT. HALLS OF MOIRIA - THE BRIDGE OF KAZADOOM.

Gandalf turns to face the Balrog.

GANDALF
You cannot pass.

The Balrog roars. Gandalf stands his ground.

FRODO
Gandalf!

GANDALF (CONT.)
I am a servant of the sacred fire.
Wielder of the flame of Arnor...

The whip crashes down on Gandalf's sword Glamdring.

GANDALF (CONT.)
Go back to the shadow.

The Balrog roars again.

GANDALF (CONT.)
You shall not pass!

Gandalf slams down the base of his staff into the centre of the bridge. The Balrog steps forward and the bridge collapses

under his weight. He falls down into the bottomless pit.

Gandalf turns to walk away - too soon! The Balrog's whip snakes up from below and whips Gandalf's legs from under him. Gandalf loses his footing and falls. He catches the edge of the bridge. He struggles to hold himself up under the weight of the giant Balrog.

The Fellowship turn back to watch in horror.

FRODO

Gandalf!

GANDALF

(a look of dread)

Run you fools...

Gandalf releases his grip and is dragged down into the pit. Frodo is horrified.

FRODO

Nooo!

Please note, this is not an excerpt from the award winning screenplay but merely my rough transcript of the scene for the purposes of illustration.

📌 **HOT TIP:** If you don't have a video or DVD at home to transcribe from, you could also study comics to see how they tell a visual story. Filmmakers often draw storyboards before they start filming to check the story works and plan their camera movements. These storyboards look a little like comic strips. (Click [here](#) to view an example) You can find other examples of storyboards in many film books. You can also find screenplays for feature films in bookshops and libraries, or request inspection details for scripts held in Scottish Screen's Shiach Library from info@scottishscreen.com.

EXERCISE: As a screenwriter you do not just write the location of each scene and then fill it with dialogue. It is your job to suggest how the characters should act within the scene and how a scene can be filmed to best effect. This isn't done through clumsy camera directions but by careful description. Transcribing from the screen is a great way of learning to understand how screenwriters put together a series of images and actions to create meaning in a movie. So don't choose a flat dialogue scene from a TV soap, but an emotionally charged and highly visual scene or sequence from one of your favourite films. You'll be surprised how much you learn.

What does a screenwriter do?

Unlike a novel, a screenplay is not a finished work of literature, but the blue-print onto which other creative people can graft their creativity. The screenwriter has one of the most creative jobs in the whole process of filmmaking – though they do not decide the final look of the movie.

Just as a good architectural blueprint (or drawing) contains the information a builder needs to build a house; the screenplay must contain the information that the producer, director, actors, production manager, director of photography, production designer, sound recordist, costume designer, make-up person and the team of typically 40+ people will need to organize a production and shoot even a low-budget feature film or TV programme.

Part of this means writing a screenplay in a special layout with the story divided into: (click [here](#) to see an example)

SCENE HEADINGS – which show where the action takes place and at what time eg:

INT. THE HALLS OF MOIRA. NIGHT.

OR:

EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS. DAY.

ACTION – short sentences describing what the camera is pointing at and what the actors should be doing in frame, eg:

He jumps from the tailgate of the truck. His feet SLAP down on the tarmac.

(Note: distinctive sounds are always capitalised to assist the sound recordist and sound designer.)

CHARACTER NAMES – that tell the production manager which actors need to be available for each scene and tell the director and actors what they need to do.

DIALOGUE – that tells the actors the words they will need to learn and speak.

PARENTHETICALS – adverbs that tell the actors how they should say their lines. These should only be used when the way the actor says something goes against their normal way of speaking or the emotion of the situation; they are saying something with a particular emphasis; or there is no other way of writing it. For example:

FRODO
(screws up his courage)
I will take the Ring to Mordor!

REACTION SHOTS – that tell the other actors how they should react to what other characters do or say. For example, GANDALF beams with delight. Please note,

reaction shots are as important as dialogue and are often left out by new writers.
TRANSITIONS – words that tell the director when to cut from one scene to the next to move the story forward, (e.g. CUT TO: ; CROSSFADE TO: ; FADE OUT)

This sounds like a lot to master, but fortunately much of this is instinctive and can be learned from watching movies and reading good screenplays (a wide selection of which can be found in the Shiach Library at Scottish Screen and from various Websites around the world). The really important part of what you do as a screenwriter is to tell a story that will have people sitting on the edge of their seats wondering what will happen next.

① **HOT TIP:** During the course of making a movie, the filmmaking team will take a number of important decisions (e.g. casting, production design, shooting and editing) that can radically change the look and feel of a finished film. Your job as a screenwriter, therefore, is to make your story as focused and as clear as possible, so that it will survive the film-making process with as much of your original vision intact as possible. This means concentrating on what the story is really about – and what the purpose of each scene is – more than what people are wearing or what they say.

EXERCISE: Instead of thinking simply about a particular screenplay idea, try making a list of subject areas and themes you are interested in exploring (e.g. social justice, sexual politics, the nature of desire, mysteries, diving) and why (e.g. you hated having to listen to arguments between your parents at night, or you loved trying to work out what the world would have looked like to people at different points in history). An ability to focus on a set of ideas and themes will make you better able to explain your ideas to other collaborators in the film-writing process and to accept criticisms. Screenwriting is always a collaborative process and you will have to take on board other people's ideas and the commercial imperatives of the project. It will also help you to explain to others where your passion lies and what is critical to the project and what is not. If you want to be an 'auteur' with total control, try writing a story or novel instead.

What makes a good screenstory?

Movies are not that different from comic books. They are a series of visually interesting images of characters acting (and to a lesser extent speaking), which are then cut together in an editing room to create a visual narrative that will make sense to an audience.

Because screenplays need to be filmed they need to be about people doing things. The audience need to be clear about what a character (particularly the lead character) wants and what s/he will have to do to get it. Indeed, at a basic level almost all good movie stories work like this:

- 1 a lead character discovers s/he wants something
- 2 s/he gets into trouble trying to get what s/he wants
- 3 s/he now has to get out of trouble to get what s/he wants
- 4 and at the end of the story, win or lose, the character usually realises that they now want something else instead...
- 5 ...or need to change their attitude to other people in order to get what they want.

Don't believe me? Try these for size:

Braveheart (Written by Randal Wallace): - William Wallace is a farmer who wants to settle down and enjoy a peaceful life, then the local English lord murders his wife, and Wallace goes looking for revenge, starts a war of independence and realises that he is prepared to die horribly to keep the dream of freedom alive.

Billy Elliot (Written by Lee Hall): – Billy Elliot is a painfully shy boy from a troubled working class family who is sent to boxing classes to toughen him up. Here he finds that he is more interested in dancing than boxing and is invited by the teacher to train with the ballet class instead. When his brother and father find out they go ballistic and demand he stop. But Billy discovers he has dancing in the blood and cannot stop. He must therefore change instead. He overcomes his shyness to first win over his father and brother and then the snobbish panel at The Royal Ballet School in order to become a professional ballet dancer.

Intolerable Cruelty (Written by Robert Ramsey, Matthew Stone, John Romano, Joel and Ethan Coen): - Miles Massey is a hot-shot Los Angeles divorce lawyer who has become famous for his ironclad prenuptial agreement, 'the Massey pre-nup'. However, success has made Miles arrogant and he takes on increasingly difficult cases to prove just how good he is. While defending a wealthy property developer, he becomes fascinated with the developer's stunning, gold-digger wife Marilyn Rexroth – whom he defeats in court in spectacular and humiliating fashion. Not used to losing, Marilyn sets out to con Miles into thinking she has come into a fortune, and seduces him into marriage without the protection of 'the Massey pre-nup'. Only then does she reveal she is actually broke and sues him for divorce. Realising he will not only lose his money but also his reputation, Miles plots to have Marilyn murdered – only then to realise that she is his true soul mate in life.

① **HOT TIP:** While books spend a lot of time describing what people are thinking, and plays often have a lot of talking (because everything usually happens on one stage), movies are about people doing things. TV is half way between plays and movies: often less talky than plays, but with not as much action as films (we'll talk more about the differences between Film and TV later in the guide).

EXERCISE: Pick your three favourite movies and try analysing them in this fashion. An ability to see how other films are constructed at their most basic level can really help you to shape your ideas into a serviceable screen idea. It can also be quite a relief to find out just how simple many stories are at their core. This paragraph version of a story is called a synopsis and is one of the basic deliverables that every screenwriter must submit to the producer together with their log-line and screenplay. Leaving someone else to write your synopsis is not only lazy and arrogant, but more importantly sends out the message that you may not be entirely sure what your screenplay is really about.

Inspiration

It may come as a surprise to learn that most movies and almost 60% of TV dramas are adaptations of existing stories whether they come from novels, short stories, comic books, old TV shows, newspaper articles, real people's life stories or other TV programmes. This might seem odd at first until you remember that the film and TV world is an industry that needs to maximise audiences and minimise risk. And the bottom line is that it's easier for the marketing and PR department to sell an adaptation to the public than an original screen idea from an unknown screenwriter.

Unfortunately, most young screenwriters do not have the money to buy or option an existing work (i.e. make a down payment to buy later), and it would be risky to start adapting a story unless you own the rights, or the fictional work is clearly out of copyright (e.g. the story is two hundred years old – an author's copyright currently expires under EC law 70 years after the end of the calendar year of the author's death). But even here copyright law can be confusing since another adaptor, e.g. the Disney Corporation might claim their previous adaptation has in effect created a new work that is protected by a new copyright. Likewise if you want to write a story based on a newspaper article or someone's true story you can also end up in litigation if you do not own the 'Life Rights' to the person's story. As a beginner, it is therefore usually most practical to come up with an idea of your own.

So where do these ideas come from? The answer of course is anywhere and everywhere. Here are a few examples:

- **A title** – might suggest a whole story, e.g. *Kill Bill*
- **A brilliantly original character**, e.g. Alan Partridge
- **Historical events**, e.g. *Braveheart*
- **Dreams or daydreams** – e.g. What if the biggest sex symbol in the world walked into your life and wanted you? – *Notting Hill*
- A **"What if..."** story set in the future, e.g. "What if the real world was just an illusion and we were really all hooked up to some giant computer that's using us to make electricity." – *The Matrix*
- **A great twist**, e.g. *Sixth Sense*
- **An interesting theme**, e.g. How much do you really know about who your parents are? - *Big Fish*
- **An unusual character** – e.g. *Billy Elliot*
- **An unusual character in an unusual place** – e.g. *Crocodile Dundee* in New York
- **A saying** - Mark Twain is supposed to have said that at the age of fourteen he thought his father a complete idiot – but by the age of twenty-one was amazed at how much his dad had learned in those seven years.
- **An impossible situation** – e.g. *Phoneboth*
- **A specific place** – e.g. *Cold Mountain*
- **Take a familiar story and put it in a new setting** – e.g. It's a prison drama set in a Catholic reform home for immoral young women - *The Magdalene Sisters*
- **You like a particular genre** – e.g. you like monster movies and try to think up a new monster. You can't so what do you write? *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* or *Van Helsing*

① **HOT TIP:** Ideas can come from anywhere, they are the vital spark that starts the writing process. One of the best ways of deciding whether you've got a good idea for a movie is to ask yourself one simple question: "If someone else had written this story, would I get on a bus, go down to the cinema and pay to watch it?" If you think the answer is yes, you could be on to a winner. If the answer is no, then keep on thinking. Movie stories tend to be big stories, about life changing events for the characters involved. But be warned: coming up with a great idea is only the first part of the process, and your ability to turn a great idea into a fantastic screenplay is what will ultimately decide whether your idea will have any chance of success. Every producer comes across dozens of great ideas every year, but only a few great screenplays.

EXERCISE: As an exercise flip open the Yellow Pages or some other business directory at a random point and try to think of the most interesting or challenging thing that could happen to a person you imagine working at that business. After you have done that think of a specific location (e.g. a shopping mall, a petrol station, a clothes shop, or a castle) and come up with the most interesting story you can think of that could be based in and around this specific building. Now do the same with a common household object and imagine how this could provide the starting point for a gripping story. It may sound simplistic, but sometimes a specific detail can provide a more focused source of inspiration onto which to graft the particular themes that interest you.

Log-lines for some well known movies

You should be able to write down the basic idea for your movie in one or two sentences, showing who the lead character is, what they want, what they are forced to do, and what happens. These statements are called log-lines and are a bit like TV listings.

Some producers also refer to log-lines as premises, and screenwriters are expected to write these for use in documents that help raise finance for the shoot and later are used to sell the movie to the public. Here are some familiar examples. If you haven't seen these films before, try to rent them, because we will use these films as our main examples throughout this guide:

Braveheart (Written by Randal Wallace) – William Wallace wants a peaceful life as a farmer but after his wife is murdered he unites the divided Scottish people to overthrow English rule.

Cold Mountain (Screenplay by Anthony Minghella) – Two lovers are separated by the American Civil War. After Inman is wounded he tries to get back to Ada in Cold Mountain, where he must save her from Teague the murderous leader of the Home Guard.

Lord of The Rings (1-3) (Screenplays by Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, Stephen Sinclair [only *The Two Towers*], Peter Jackson) – After Frodo Baggins inherits a Golden Ring, he is shocked to discover it is the most dangerous and evil weapon in Middle Earth and that he must go on an epic quest to Mordor to throw it into the Crack of Doom and save the world.

The Matrix (Written by Andy and Larry Wachowski) – A rebellious computer hacker Neo hunts down the mysterious Morpheus who reveals that Neo is a slave living inside a computer dream. Morpheus rescues Neo who joins forces with the rebels to defeat the machines that have enslaved humanity.

Notting Hill (Written by Richard Curtis) – William Thacker is a regular bookshop owner whose life changes forever when a famous film star walks into his shop. But love in the public eye is not easy, and William must prove his love is strong enough if he is to win Anna's heart.

Sixth Sense (Written by M. Night Shyamalan) – A depressed child psychologist tries to help a boy who is tormented by ghosts only to find out that he's a ghost himself.

Big Fish (Screenplay by John August) – William Bloom has always been embarrassed by his father's tall stories, but as his father lies dying he starts to learn that there was more truth to the stories than he thought and that life without stories is meaningless.

Billy Elliot (Written by Lee Hall) – A talented young boy is torn between trying to please his angry brother and depressed father and fulfilling what they see as his 'embarrassing' wish to become a ballet dancer.

If you'd like more examples visit 'The Internet Movie Database' at www.imdb.com where all the movies are accompanied by a log line.

① HOT TIP: There is of course no 'right way' to write a log-line but they usually include the following elements.

- 1 The name of the lead character
- 2 The setting of the movie
- 3 An idea of what they want
- 4 What or who tries to stop them
- 5 What challenge they will have to complete to try and get what they want, and
- 6 Whether they are changed by their experiences or not.

Log-lines sometimes mention the name of the second most important character, usually the opponent, unless it's a love story like *Cold Mountain* when you would typically mention both the lover and the external opponent.

EXERCISE: Using this basic formula, write down the log-lines for the most recent five movies you have seen. Then go to The Internet Movie Database and see how other people have described the same movie. Did they do a better job? Or did you? If they did, try the exercise again with five different movies.

Drama and Comedy

Aristotle divided drama into two basic camps: tragedy and comedy. Normally, when people think about tragedy they think of noble people suffering terribly and then ultimately dying (or suffering a fate worse than death). However, this bleak idea of tragedy was only one form of what Aristotle meant by tragedy, since he believed that the best tragedies were the ones in which the hero saved himself in the nick of time.

However, tragedy in English has now become synonymous with a bleak ending, and we therefore usually refer to three main types of film dramas Tragedy, Drama and Comedy, whose plots can be summarised simply as follows:

Tragedy - The tragic character fails in spite of his best efforts.

Drama - The dramatic character succeeds due to his best efforts.

Comedy - And the comic character succeeds in spite of his best efforts.

Almost all comedies by their nature have happy endings, where the lead character often gets what they want and what they need as well. Most dramas have positive endings where the characters learn something important about their life and change, whether they get what they wanted or not. And even tragedies like *Braveheart* usually have a silver lining. So even though the lead character may die a horrible death like William Wallace, his or her tragic sacrifice becomes an example to others who then succeed where he failed.

Some people regard tragedy and drama as innately superior to comedy, probably because tragedy and drama are superficially more serious in terms of their themes. However, the best movies in all three groupings are about characters who undergo genuine personal growth as a result of their trials.

Entertainment in Tragedy, Drama and Comedy

Just as important as whether the endings are upbeat or not, is the question of where the audience derives its interest in the story and how they are entertained or entrapped.

In tragedy and drama much of the enjoyment comes from sympathizing with the undeserved suffering of the lead character who is *better than us* in some way. This does not mean that they have to be better than us in all ways, but rather that they have certain qualities or attributes that we admire (e.g. a stubborn boxer: *Rocky*; a heroic warrior: *Macbeth*; a good-hearted hobbit: *Lord of the Rings*). Because we like and admire these characters, we fear for them and anticipate all the terrible things that might happen to them (e.g. in *The Matrix* we fear for Neo when we learn he is going to go back and fight the unbeatable agents having just been told he is not 'the one'). The sympathetic fear the audience feels is the basic meaning of suspense (or dramatic irony as it is also known), which will be discussed at greater length in a subsequent chapter.

In comedy, however, the audience gains enjoyment from watching characters with an obvious comic flaw (i.e. people who we can feel superior to), get themselves into a comic predicament, so that we can then anticipate the humour which will come from watching them extract themselves from it. As Oliver Hardy the pompous comic from

the 1920s would put it: “Another fine mess you’ve gotten me into!”, when it was always quite clear to the viewer that he is as responsible for the mess, if not more so, than Stan Laurel.

Whichever way you look at it, writing drama or comedy is about creating anticipation in the audience and then delivering either fear for the characters or laughter at their expense. In both forms we are interested in how the character will get out of their difficulties, it’s just that in comedy we seldom feel that the danger they face is quite as critical or life threatening.

① **HOT TIP:** You can usually tell whether a story will have a positive ending for the character or not by what happens half way through. If the character looks close to getting what they want mid-way through the story the ending will usually be positive. Likewise, if they look to be failing at the mid-point, the chances are that they will come close to achieving their goal towards the end, before failing at the climactic moment. The reason stories have these big ups and downs is to give the movie depth and make the audience feel they have been on a long and worthwhile emotional journey. Movies of unmitigated success or relentless failure may suit some people’s tastes, but they rarely satisfy the wider audience who find them emotionally flat.

EXERCISE: Pick one movie with a positive ending, another with a down ending, and a comedy. Now try to analyse what it is that makes you engage with each lead character. How much engagement comes from the character’s idiosyncrasies, how much from their ‘nobility’ and how much from their predicament? Are you looking forward to seeing them suffer in any way? Or do you fear for them?

Genre and plot

Most of us are familiar with the word genre, but it can be a difficult thing to define. Some people think it means a specific setting that makes us think of specific themes (e.g. a Western), some that it's a plot construction (e.g. a mystery thriller), while others see it as a way to sell a film to the audience (e.g. a screwball comedy). But almost all would agree that at its most basic level, the word genre defines a set of expectations in the audience's mind about what they are about to see. That's why if you suggest a film is going to be of a specific genre and you suddenly write in scenes from another genre, the audience can often be disappointed. For instance you wouldn't have a zombie turning up in a love story, unless it was an anarchistic comedy like *Shaun of the Dead*.

There are numerous genres that we are all familiar with. Genres make audiences expect certain things from a film, sometimes regarding plot, sometimes regarding the setting, the type of characters or the technology. Here are a few examples:

Genres that create specific character and plot expectations:

Horror - whose aim is to make you fear so much for the lead character that you become terrified yourself. These can be divided into a number of sub-genres with different audience expectations, including:

- Gothic – stories about family curses, mysterious and haunted places, like *The Wicker Man*
- Ghost stories – e.g. *The Sixth Sense*
- Occult / Supernatural - battle between good and evil, God and the Devil – e.g. *The Exorcist*
- Slasher – films where numerous characters are killed one after another, e.g. *Scream*
- Chiller – nasty tales with a cruel twist like *Seven* or *The Silence of the Lambs*
- Monster movies – natural, sci-fi or supernatural e.g. *Jaws*, *Alien* and *Dracula* (some critics would argue that the monster is the defining element of all horror)
- Disaster movies – where the enemy is an overpowering force of nature e.g. *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Armageddon*

Thrillers – where the audience feels strongly for the lead character and wants to know how they will overcome their life threatening problems and escape disaster. Thrillers have numerous sub-genres, including:

- Action - like *Braveheart*, *Gladiator* or *Face Off*
- Adventure – like *The Count of Monte Cristo*
- War Movies – like *Troy* or *Saving Private Ryan*
- Political thriller – *The Day of the Jackal*
- Conspiracy thriller (often constructed like horror films) – JFK
- Spy thrillers – like *James Bond*
- Chase thriller - *Bourne Identity*, *Manhunter*
- Detective thriller - *Starsky and Hutch*, *LA Confidential*
- Courtroom drama – *A Few Good Men*,
- Crime and gangster thrillers – *The Godfather*, *The General*

- Revenge thriller – *Kill Bill, The Fugitive*
- Prison thriller – like the *Shawshank Redemption, The Magdalene Sisters*
- Whodunit – e.g. *Murder on the Orient Express*

Love stories – stories about how people overcome their differences against the odds and fall in love - or not, as the case may be. These story types include:

- Romantic comedy – you can make comedies in any genre but romantic comedies are one of the most popular – and successful e.g. *Notting Hill, Bridget Jones' Diary*
- Doomed love – e.g. *Romeo and Juliet, Casablanca*
- Epic love – e.g. *Gone with the Wind*
- Odd couple – e.g. *Kate and Leopold, Harold And Maud*
- Love triangle – *The English Patient*
- Matchmaker – *Emma and Amelie*
- Brief encounter – *Brief Encounter*
- Second time around - *Mrs Doubtfire, The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*
- Unrequited love – e.g. Peter and Juliet's story in *Love Actually*

Drama – stories about 'real' people confronting real and familiar life problems.

- Sports Movies – e.g. *When Saturday Comes, Chariots of Fire*
- Rites of Passage – e.g. *American Pie, Big Fish*
- Family dramas – e.g. *Billy Elliot, American Beauty*
- Redemption tales – e.g. *Jerry Maguire, Trainspotting*
- Triumph of the Spirit – e.g. *My Left Foot*

Mythical – stories where the way the story is told is defined by its similarity to a well known myth or folktale.

- The Wanderer - *Mary Poppins, High Plains Drifter, Dead Poets Society*
- Cinderella - *Pretty Woman, Maid in Manhattan*
- The Saviour – *ET, The Matrix, Dune, The Passion of the Christ*
- Theseus and the Minotaur - *Cube, James Bond, Mission Impossible*
- Sleeping Beauty - *Anastasia*
- The Odyssey - *Falling Down, Oh Brother where Art Thou, Cold Mountain*
- Changing places – *The Prince and the Pauper, Big, Freak Friday, Trading Places*
- The Quest – *The Last Samurai, The Lord of the Rings*

Arthouse films - where the audience expects that the filmmakers will not follow the normal rules of constructing a story. When this is done well it can be very good, but often the films fail because a big part of the pleasure of watching a film is anticipating what will happen, but being surprised by the detail of how the story unfolds.

Biographical – where the character of the person is partially known and the audience wants to find out about their secrets. Here the filmmakers need to bend the normal rules of drama to accommodate more of the facts, e.g. *A Beautiful Mind, Gandhi, The Hours, Ali*

① HOT TIP: Most movies have more than one story or even genre inside them. For instance in *Lord of the Rings* the main story is about Frodo taking the ring to Mordor, while the second story is about how Aragorn overcomes his self-doubt to become King. Likewise in *Big Fish* the son is the lead character in the story about his father's death, and his father is the main opponent. But in the father's magical life story, the father is the lead character and death is the opponent. And the father's story has another story inside it which is about the love affair between the father and the mother. These secondary stories are called subplots and usually concern the relationships between the lead character and the secondary characters. Often the plots come from different genres or sub genres, the most common of which is the romantic subplot, e.g. Neo's relationship to Trinity in the *Matrix*, or William Wallace's romance with the French princess in *Braveheart*. As a rule of thumb you can have a romantic or dramatic subplot in almost any film, but you cannot have a horror or thriller subplot in a romance or drama (unless it's a comedy), otherwise people are either misled about what might happen or become more interested in the subplot than the main plot.

EXERCISE: pull out your favourite five DVDs once more and try to work out how many stories each contains. Then try to work out the genre of each of those stories and how their themes interconnect (if at all). Very often you will find that while the main plot relates to what the lead character wants, the main subplot relates to what they need. This explains the popularity of the romantic subplot, e.g. "S/he wanted to rule the world, but what s/he really needed was the love of a good man/woman." But don't stop at two and see which other subplots you can find, and work out which ones relate to the want of the lead character and which to his/her needs.

Other approaches to genre

In addition to looking at genre as something that creates specific audience expectations regarding character and plot, we can also look at genre from two other main perspectives.

Genre settings that suggest specific sets of themes:

- Science Fiction – where the screenwriter creates a new world with its own technology and social problems based upon what society may be like in the future, e.g. *Star Wars*, *Minority Report*, *The Truman Show*
- Fantasy – where the screenwriter creates a different world with its rules and magical creatures that explores the inner spirit and emotional life of the characters, e.g. *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*
- Westerns (including Gunfighter films, Cowboy & Indian films and Spaghetti Westerns) – where the screenwriter creates a semi-mythical world where one can explore themes like shame, honour and the passing of a simpler age (or not)
- Historical – including Sword and Sandals films like *Gladiator* and *Troy*, Knights and Castles, Costume Drama
- Superhero – a highly structured hybrid genre between action and rites of passage that explores simultaneously themes of survival and vigilantism, rites of passage and sexual identity.

Genres that relate to the look and style of the movie:

- Musicals – e.g. *Chicago* or *Moulin Rouge* where the musical numbers add emotional power to an otherwise thin narrative.
- Theatrical films – filmed stage plays like *Dogville* or Craig Pearce's masterful adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* where the power of the acting performances provide the main focus of the film.
- Animation – while you could make animated movies in any genre, animation tends to be used for stories involving magic or other hyperbolic action, special effects or plot devices that are not found in regular filmmaking. Because animators are free from the constraints of conventional filmmaking, audiences expect them to push back the boundaries of visual effects and aesthetic style.

Comedy and genre

You can make a comedy based on any genre, but the basic rule is that whereas in a tragedy drama the enjoyment derives from fearing for a likeable character and wondering what will happen, in a comedy it comes from enjoying the character's mistakes and discomfort, and the funny situations their behaviour gets them into.

For a fascinating discussion of the importance of genre and its relationship to character and themes, read Phil Parker's book '*The Art and Science of Screenwriting*'.

① HOT TIP: You frequently hear filmmakers and critics talk about ‘transcending the genre’. This means that you take a familiar set of genre expectations and you spin the tale a slightly different way, without confusing the audience too much! Good examples of this include: *Memento* an investigative thriller where the investigator has no long term memory, which means the audience increasingly knows more than he does. *A Clockwork Orange* that transcends the gang movie genre to provide surreal insights into the nature of crime and punishment. And *Donny Darko* which infuses the teen movie with supernatural elements to create a philosophical teen movie about coming to understand life and death. The most famous example of all was probably *Psycho* (screenplay by *Joseph Stefano*), which started as a crime thriller and then turned into a psychological horror movie, changing lead characters in mid-stream.

EXERCISE: Pick out ten of your favourite films of all time and try to classify them according to their genre and any sub-genres in each story. This will not only help you understand different genres but may also give you a better idea of what type of stories you are interested in.

Characters

The key to all good stories is to populate them with fascinating and engaging characters. But how do you decide what makes a fascinating and engaging character?

As we've said almost all popular stories are based around a lead character who at the start of the story thinks that s/he wants or needs one thing, but by the end of the story discovers that something else is more important to them, or that they must change their attitude in order to succeed.

But it's clear that characters do not operate alone – otherwise it wouldn't be a drama.

You therefore need to think not only about who your lead character is (and why they are the perfect character to be in your story), but also the other characters. To help you think about your cast of characters try grouping them in the following way.

LEAD CHARACTER – the person your story is about and who changes the most during the story.

OPPONENT OR ENEMY – this is the person or force of nature (in a disaster movie) who will provide the main opposition to your lead character. In love stories the main opponent is always the lover (though there may be a secondary opponent).

FRIEND(S) – the lead character will often have one or two key friends in a movie but s/he will come into conflict with them too, just like in real life, e.g. In *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* Frodo comes into conflict with Sam over the Ring.

ADVISOR OR MENTOR – Movies often feature an advisor who is a special friend who helps the lead character change, or become all they can be, e.g. Billy's dance teacher in *Billy Elliot* or Morpheus in *The Matrix*.

SECONDARY OPPONENTS – the opponent too has helpers but you should always be clear who the main opponent is and make sure the final conflict is between the main opponent and the lead character, e.g. In *Jaws* the main opponent is a shark, but the shark is helped by the greedy Mayor who refuses to close the beaches.

TRAITOR – often the lead character has a friend who betrays them at a crucial point in the story, e.g. Robert the Bruce betrays William Wallace in *Braveheart*.

UNEXPECTED ALLY – sometimes the lead character finds an unexpected ally, e.g. again in *Braveheart*, Robert the Bruce is shamed by William Wallace's martyrdom and avenges his death at Bannockburn.

Let's use *The Matrix* as an example:

LEAD CHARACTER – Neo

OPPONENT OR ENEMY – Agent Smith

FRIEND(S) – Trinity (and to a lesser extent Tank, Dozer, Apoc, etc.)

ADVISOR OR MENTOR – Morpheus helps Neo, and so does the Oracle

SECONDARY OPPONENTS – the other Agents and the machines.

TRAITOR – Cypher who wants to go back to the Matrix because he hates the food

UNEXPECTED ALLY – There's no one in *The Matrix* who does that.

In the course of the screenplay or movie, your lead character should come into conflict with *all* these people not just the opponents. In *The Matrix*, as well as fighting Agent Smith, Neo has arguments with Morpheus and the Oracle about whether he is “the one”, Trinity about his plan to rescue Morpheus, Cypher about what is important in life, and even Tank about what the slop they eat tastes like.

❶ HOT TIP: The seminal Russian Structuralist scholar Vladimir Propp had a profound influence not only on Russian Formalism but also on Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and through him Christopher Vogler, author of the very popular *The Writer's Journey*. From his exhaustive study of Russian Folktales, Propp proposed that all characters performed an archetypal function:

- The Hero – the lead character seeks something (In the fairytale spoof *Shrek II*, Shrek wants to please Fiona by winning over her parents)
- The Villain – blocks or actively opposes the lead character's quest (the Fairy Godmother tries to sow discord)
- The Donor – gives the lead character a magical object (in *Shrek II*, the 'Happy Ever After Potion' is stolen from the Fairy Godmother)
- The Dispatcher – who sends the hero on his/her quest via a message (Shrek and Fiona are invited to Far, Far Away by a messenger)
- The False Hero – who disrupts the hero's success by making false claims (Charming pretends to be Shrek in human form)
- The Helper – who aids the hero (Puss in Boots, Donkey, the Three Little Pigs and the Gingerbread Man all help Shrek)
- The Princess – acts as the reward for the hero and the object of the villain's plots (Princess Fiona tries to escape Charming)
- Her Father – who acts to reward the hero for his effort (The King gives his blessing)

For more information on his fascinating theories on action as a function of narrative in folktales and quest stories read Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* published in 1928.

EXERCISE: Try to analyse the functions of the different characters in one of your favourite movies and see how many significant characters there are (don't count the ones who appear in only one or two scenes). You'll probably be surprised at how few there really are. For fun why not also take a quest story like *Star Wars* and try examining the character functions using Vladimir Propp's system.

On a narrative level, Propp also proposed that all folk stories have a similar structure, which he believed was repeated through a number of sequences (or 'moves') through to complete narratives.

- The lead character enjoys an initial state of harmony (In *Shrek II*, Shrek is happily married)
- The lead character discovers they lack something (Shrek discovers he has not received the parents blessing)
- The lead character goes on a quest (They go to Far, Far Away Land to meet

- the parents)
- The lead character meets helpers/opponents (Shrek meets hostile father, Fairy Godmother and Puss in Boots)
 - The lead character is set tests by the opponents (Shrek must show he can change for Princess Fiona, but becoming human is not as easy or uncomplicated as it looks)
 - The lead character receives a reward, or discovers a new lack (Shrek and Fiona's love is accepted by the King and Queen)

Now try analyzing *Star Wars* or *The Matrix* using this system.

Your lead character

One of the main reasons some movies succeed both artistically and commercially is because they have compelling characters who have to carry out difficult or – even better – nearly impossible tasks. Likewise, one of the most common reasons why movies fail to satisfy audiences is that the screenwriter is not clear who the lead character is.

The reason audiences need to know who is the lead character is because when we watch a movie, we enter the story world through a specific character's eyes. We gain pleasure from getting to know our lead character and what problems they face. We feel sorry for them when they get into trouble and we become keenly interested in working out how they can escape their predicament. The greater the danger is to them, be it physical or mental, the more fearful we become on their behalf, and the more we hope for a satisfying end to their troubles. If we do not know who the lead character is, we do not know who we are supposed to invest with our sympathy and our compassion, so we do not engage properly with the action on screen.

The story is constructed around what the lead character does and what their story means. As soon as you show other characters, you make the audience want to understand more about who they are and what they are doing. This is all very well if they are as interesting as the lead character, or they are cooking up some plot to defeat the lead character, but if they are less interesting than the lead character the audience doesn't understand why they are being taken away from the story they were enjoying most.

Even in *ensemble* movies (e.g. *Love Actually*) that have lots of characters, the screenwriter still gives the highest priority (and the most screen time) to the most interesting character, the second priority to the second most interesting character, and so on. When you are dreaming up your story you therefore need to work out who your lead character is and how much you are going to follow their story and who else you are going to show and why.

So why is it difficult to work out who your lead character is?

Sometimes it isn't. Sometimes you know exactly who the story is about and then you have to simply work out what actions will test them most. But often stories are not based on a specific character like *Braveheart*, or you come up with the idea and concept for a movie before you think up all the characters. In these situations you have to work out who is ideally suited to tell the story.

Take *The Sixth Sense* for instance. The screenwriter M. Night Shyamalan might have first come up with the idea to write a story about Cole Sear a timid boy who discovered he could speak to ghosts. Not a bad idea. However, as he developed the story he might then have realised that the best way to tell the story was not through the boy but from the perspective of a ghost who didn't realise he was a ghost. At that point he decided to make Malcolm Crowe the lead character and a blockbuster was born.

So how do you work out who your lead character is?

Here are a few rules of thumb:

- 1 The lead character usually has a clear idea of what they want and little idea of what they really need, e.g. *Intolerable Cruelty*, where Miles Massey clearly wants Marilyn Rexroth, but doesn't realise that first he needs to learn how to love.
- 2 The lead character has a clear opponent who opposes their wishes and tries to stop them getting what they want, e.g. *Billy Elliot*, is opposed by his socially conservative father.
- 3 The lead character is the one with the most difficult task, e.g. *The Lord of the Rings* where a tiny little hobbit is given the task of destroying an evil so great that it even has Gandalf trembling down to his boots.
- 4 The lead character in a movie is usually the person who changes the most from the start to the finish – e.g. *Big Fish*, in the beginning the son cannot stand his dying father telling stories, but when he investigates his father's 'lies' he gains unexpected insights into the meaning of life.
- 5 Lead characters are usually the most likeable characters, but if they are not likeable the screenwriter must take time to show why they act like they do, e.g. *Intolerable Cruelty* where Miles Massey is too proud to lose.
- 6 Something bad often happens to the lead character in the first 20 pages that causes them to suffer more than they deserved. e.g. *Cold Mountain* the two lovers are parted by war after just one kiss.
- 7 The lead character often goes on a journey or quest to another world. e.g. *The Matrix*, where Neo must travel to a new world to fulfil his destiny.

① HOT TIP: In a love story, the lovers are usually given nearly the same amount of screen time. But even here one of the characters is usually given more screen time and more problems to deal with. In *Cold Mountain*, the lead character is Ada not Inman, despite the fact that he goes off to war. It is she who starts and ends the movie, it is she who changes the most, and it is she who summons Inman to return and rescue her. That said, Inman is the lead character in his Odysseus-like quest to return from war to Ada.

Describing characters

Some screenwriting books provide long lists of suggestions of the things to think about when describing your characters. These cover everything from:

- 1 What they look like: their age, sex, appearance, mannerisms, dress sense, etc.
- 2 What they are really like: their IQ, whether they are sociable, what they like and dislike, how they see themselves, how others see them, their beliefs and points of view etc.
- 3 What their social situation is: what their family is like, who they hang out with, what time and place they are living in, what has happened to them so far in life.

Clearly, being able to describe your characters in detail is vital at a later stage in the screenwriting process; however, in the beginning, the most important thing to determine is whether your characters are right for your story.

As a screenwriter you are a bit like a fickle god who first creates characters they like only then to devise the most difficult tests for them to make them change and grow. If you start with a perfect character, there is nowhere for you to go, so a screenwriter must always ask:

- 1 Who is my lead character?
- 2 What do they want? What do they need to learn about the world or themselves?
- 3 What is the worst possible thing that can happen to this particular character and how will this adversity make them change? Or, if it is a tragedy, realise too late what they *should* have done to change.

Try writing down why you think that your lead character will be tested to the extreme by the story you have devised. If you can't think of anything that would challenge them more, then the chances are that you are off to a good start. Back to our examples:

Braveheart – Who is the lead character? William Wallace is a peace-loving farmer who wants to settle down and have a family. What's the worse thing that can happen to him? The English murder his wife.

Cold Mountain – Who is the lead character? Ada a refined girl from the big city. What's the worse thing that can happen to her? Her boyfriend goes off to war, her father dies and she has to become a farmer.

Lord of The Rings (1-3) – Who is the lead character? Frodo Baggins is a pipe-smoking 'Halfling' who lives quietly in the shadow of his adventurous Uncle Bilbo. What's the worse thing that can happen to him? He must undertake a quest of his own, more dangerous than anything Bilbo attempted, and destroy the One Ring.

Notting Hill – Who is the lead character? William Thacker is a shy bookstore owner. What's the worst thing that can happen to him? He falls in love with a sex-goddess film-star.

① HOT TIP: From a dramatic point of view a character's weaknesses are as important as his or her strengths in defining who they are, how the conflict will unfold and how they will change. If you are describing a character, the audience will assume some of their qualities but not others. For instance a 'brave soldier' is expected, but a 'cowardly soldier' is not. Equally, there is no point in writing a 'self-centred politician' – they all are, it's part of the job description (in the movies at least). But if you describe one as "the most ruthless politician ever to clump his wooden leg across the flagstones of Westminster" the audience might be a little more interested. The audience will also suspect that his incredible dishonesty will get him into the mother of all messes and that somehow he will be changed by his experiences. Using one of our examples, in 'Intolerable Cruelty' Miles Massey starts as a 'hot-shot, divorce lawyer' and ends up as a 'loving husband'. His character weakness indicates the way he needs to change.

EXERCISE: Check carefully to ensure that your lead character is the person most challenged by the task you set them. Put another way, check that the task you set the character will test them to the limit. Think about what your character wants and what s/he needs, and think of a task or predicament that will drive a wedge between these two things. For instance in *Intolerable Cruelty*, Miles Massey sees Marilyn and thinks he wants a risk-free relationship with a beautiful woman where he is in the driving seat, but he needs to overcome his fear of divorce to find true unconditional love. Marilyn Rexroth's sting drives a wedge between this Want and Need, but he discovers his true capacity for love just in time to avert disaster – and so does she.

From character to plot

Some screenwriting gurus will tell you that the main thing you need to know about your character is what they want. But equally important is the question of what they are going to have to do to get what they want.

Sometimes it is easy to see the difference. For instance in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo wants to destroy the ring, but Gandalf tells him the only place it can be destroyed is in Mount Doom. So what does he have to do? He has to travel to the other side of Middle Earth to Mordor and drop it in the volcano. This is his quest (or challenge) and it's summed up perfectly by Sam at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* when he says words to the effect of, "Mordor, the one place we don't want to be is the one place we've got to get to."

Sometimes what a character wants and what they have to do to get it may appear to be the same (e.g. in a sports movie where a character wants to be world champion). But even in these types of movie there is a very important difference between the two questions. For instance, in *Billy Elliot* (which could be described as *Rocky* in ballet shoes), Billy decides he wants to go to ballet lessons. This is what he wants. But what is he going to have to do to get it? He must overcome his shyness and his fear about what other people think in order to succeed.

In both of the above examples, the writers and screenwriters have put huge barriers in the way of their heroes. If a character's challenge was easy there would be no story. Take *Notting Hill* for instance: imagine if Anna walked into William Thacker's life and everything went swimmingly - no press scrum outside the house the next day, no mad friend dancing in his Y-fronts, no filmstar ex-boyfriend, no misunderstandings - and no movie!

The whole enjoyment of watching any type of movie is watching a sympathetic lead character getting themselves into big trouble, trying to extract themselves only to be pulled in deeper, before they find a surprising, entertaining and believable way to finally resolve their difficulties.

So before you commit to any character or story line, analyse your story idea and try to answer as many questions about your character to check they are the perfect person for your plot: Ask:

- Who is s/he?
- What problems does s/he already face in his or her life?
- What does s/he want?
- What will s/he be forced to do to get what s/he wants?
- What is his/her moral weakness or character flaw?
- What does s/he fear most?
- Who is his/her main opponent?
- How does the opponent attack his/her weakness?
- How does the lead character confront his/her greatest fear?
- What will s/he learn during the story?
- How does what s/he learns resolve the conflict between what s/he wants, what s/he needs to learn and what s/he has had to do to get it?
- How does the story end?

If you have a very clear idea of what forces drive your lead character you will be well on your way to create what Screenwriters and Producers call a 'Character-driven' story.

① **HOT TIP:** Suspense is one of the most misunderstood dramatic terms. It usually refers to those tense moments in horror movies and thrillers, when a character walks down a long corridor not knowing which room the chainsaw wielding maniac will jump out of.

However, Aristotle defined suspense as much more than an immediate visual trick: he believed that suspense is created when the drama makes an audience feel a powerful sense of pity for the hero's undeserved suffering, because only then can the audience truly sympathise (and identify) with the hero, and fear for what might happen to him next. As soon as audiences know more than the characters in the movie (usually because they are also privy to the actions of opponents or lovers that the characters themselves are not), they can feel pity and fear (or even terror) for what is about to happen to that character, and experience extreme tension about whether the character will recognise what is going on in time to prevent a tragedy. This is the real meaning of dramatic suspense and is also known by the term dramatic (or comic) irony.

EXERCISE: Try writing your story as a single paragraph showing the emotional journey that your character will go on as they overcome their weaknesses and fears. Write down who the lead character is, what the situation is, what s/he wants, what s/he does, what problems s/he encounters and how s/he has to change by the end. Then try doing it for the other characters: when you have a clear idea about what motivates them, you will see where each of them will come into conflict with your lead character.

Opponents

With the exception of art videos and ensemble dramas, which we will discuss in the next section, almost all screen stories are about a lead character who comes into conflict with other people or forces who try to stop them getting what they want.

Just as it is sometimes difficult to identify who the lead character is, so it can also be difficult to identify the main opponent. You may ask why this is so important. Well, if you don't know who or what is opposing the lead character it is difficult to structure your story in a way that will be emotionally and intellectually satisfying for an audience.

You may say that you have seen lots of good movies, where the lead character comes into conflict with a succession of different opponents – which is quite true. However, the best movies always have a clear focus on who the more interesting and dangerous opponents are, and the screenwriter takes the lead character toward them step by fateful step to increase the audience's tension and suspense. So look at your story carefully to see who actively opposes your lead character's ambition and then strengthen them as much as possible – even to the point where they seem unbeatable. The reason you need to do this is that the stronger your opponents are, the more satisfying it will be when the lead character finally wins through (or, conversely, the more tragic it will be if they finally fail).

In most thrillers, action and adventure movies there is one clear opponent who directly attacks the lead character's weaknesses, forces them to question whether they really want what they say they want, and forces them to confront the possibility of change and/or defeat. Take *Braveheart* for example, which starts with William Wallace fighting the English. Here the screenwriter serves up a succession of different minor opponents: the local English nobleman, then the King's gay son, then the arrogant Nobles, before revealing that the real enemy is Longshanks himself, Edward I, the King of England and master political manipulator who even turns Robert the Bruce against Wallace. Now this works fine because the villains are getting steadily more powerful and therefore the stakes are increasing, but more importantly they are all connected within the same power structure. The same is true of *The Matrix* which starts with Neo in opposition to several agents, but soon reveals that the most powerful of these is Agent Smith.

One of the big drawbacks of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* is that Sauron is just a big eye and is therefore something of a charisma free zone compared to his henchman Saruman who was the main villain in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*. That's why the screenwriters spend so much time dealing with the madness of Denethor, the King of the Ringwraiths and Gollum, because without them the story would be a little flat. Indeed, if the book hadn't been so popular already, I'd venture that the filmmakers would have given Sauron a bit more of a physical presence for us to focus our hatred on.

There are certain types of movie – for instance romances – where there is no clear opponent and therefore some people think there is no real opposition. So who are the opponents here and how do the filmmakers focus our attention on the difficulty of overcoming their enemies?

If you think about opposition in terms of the Want and Need of the Lead Character everything becomes clear:

A lover wants love on their own terms. The best person to oppose them is therefore the lover because they also want love on their terms. The narrative of a love story is therefore almost always concerned with the lovers' need to learn to give their love unconditionally. This is true whether the story ends with a union as in *Notting Hill*, or ends tragically as in *Cold Mountain* or *Casablanca*. In love stories the opponent is never defeated; instead they are persuaded themselves of the emotional need to give rather than to demand.

Here are a few other pointers relating to genres where there seems to be no clear opponent:

Investigative stories – In investigative stories (whether they be detective stories, horror movies or science documentaries) the main opponent is almost always the mystery and the true opponent is only fully unmasked at the end of the story. That's why the screenwriters always lay out a trail of red herrings and minor opponents along the way, to keep the audience interested until the unmasking can take place.

Disaster movies - In disaster movies, the main opposition comes from the disaster itself, whether it be a volcano, a meteor, a twister, a tidal wave or an iceberg. Because these disasters are forces of nature who by definition lack a personality, the screenwriters again throw in secondary opponents to delay the final confrontation and rack up the suspense. Usually this is some authority figure who is too concerned about making money to see the disaster unfold or is determined to cover up some previous crime e.g. *Outbreak*.

Personal dramas - In personal dramas, the main opponent is usually a member of the family (e.g. the father in *Billy Elliot*), a friend or business partner who lives in the same world as the lead character, but has a different view of how life should be lived. Take *Big Fish*, for instance, where the main opponent is the father who never tells the truth, but finally convinces his son that sometimes fiction contains more emotional truth than fact.

❶ **HOT TIP:** Aristotle believed that the best types of opponents were those who were close to the lead character in some way. He believed that if one villain did something horrible to another there was nothing pitiable about that except the suffering itself. Similarly, there is nothing pitiable if one person does something bad to another person they don't know, except the action itself. He believed that only when a personal relationship is established between lead characters and opponents (e.g. friend against friend, son against father, etc) is there real meaningful drama. You may say what about the Lord of the Rings, Sauron doesn't really know Frodo. This is true which is why much of the three movies revolve around the various betrayals within the allies rather than any direct confrontation with Sauron. Thus in *The Fellowship of the Ring* Saruman betrays Gandalf and Boromir betrays the Fellowship. In *The Two Towers* Gandalf and Aragorn try to repair the damage done by Theoden to his family while under the control of Wormtongue, while Frodo and Sam struggle with their treacherous helper Gollum and the potential betrayal of

Faramir. And in *The Return of the King*, Gandalf tries to deal with the betrayal of Denethor, while Gollum sows the seeds of distrust between Frodo and Sam. Where there is no kinship between the lead character and the other principal characters it must be established early on, by placing them in a similar predicament or giving them similar desires (e.g. Frodo and Sauron share a growing desire to make the ring their own; or a serial killer in a slasher movie develops a desire to kill the lead character's girlfriend). That's why in clichéd action movies there's usually a moment near the end when the opponent says something like: "You're really just like me. We should join forces and together we could rule the world." This kinship, real or cultivated, is what makes the story 'personal'.

EXERCISE: Study the nature of the relationships between your characters and see whether there are ways that you can draw them closer and intensify the conflict between them. This doesn't necessarily have to be something that happens within the narrative of the story (e.g. Frankenstein creates his monster), but is often something that happened off-screen in the backstory (i.e. everything that happened in the past between your characters). To create kinship between the lead character and the opponent create some past connection that has since been broken, or a smouldering conflict that was never properly resolved and is now waiting to burst into flames once more, unbeknownst to the lead character, e.g. *Cape Fear*.

Secondary characters and Subplots

A common weakness in new screenwriters' work is to try to solve plot problems (the "What happens next?" issues) by introducing new characters, rather than finding ways to make the core cast of characters drive the story forward. When this is pointed out by a producer or a script editor, it's a big temptation for the screenwriter to defend the work and say, it's okay it's an ensemble piece. Unfortunately it rarely is a true ensemble piece and more often than not it is an unfocused screenplay with too many characters and subplots.

A feature length screenplay usually has between five and seven core characters who interact with each other – and no more. There may be a few secondary characters or henchmen, but they should only be given the minimum number of lines. In a few cases like *The Lord of the Rings* there are more than seven lead characters, but here they are grouped together to support a lead character in each group. Thus there is the lead group led by Frodo, a secondary group led by Aragorn, with Gandalf acting more as a free agent.

The lead character's (or group's) interactions with the main opponent (or opposing force) is called the Main Plot, while the lead character's interactions with other characters are called Subplots (e.g. the romantic subplot typical of most blockbusters). In some genres, like romantic comedies or adventure movies, the secondary characters may also have secondary subplots with each other, for instance the Romantic Subplot between Spike and Honey in Richard Curtis' *Notting Hill*; the Romantic Subplot between Ruby and Georgia in *Cold Mountain*; or the 'suicide-squad' subplot involving Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli in *The Two Towers*. There are seldom secondary subplots in thrillers, where the screenwriters need to focus as much attention as possible on the lead character to create the necessary mystery, tension and suspense.

So be careful how many characters you create, because each new character means a new subplot. To determine the nature and purpose of each subplot ask yourself the following questions about each interaction:

- What type of subplot is it (e.g. romantic, buddy comedy, thriller)?
- Who is the lead character in the subplot? *NB. Often this will be the lead character from the main plot but not always. e.g. in a romance a former lover may still harbour desires for the lead character or the new object of their love which makes them the lead character in that subplot.*
- What problems does s/he already face in his or her life?
- What does s/he want?
- What will s/he be forced to do to get what s/he wants?
- What is their moral weakness or character flaw?
- What does s/he fear most?
- Who is the opponent or opposing force in this subplot?
- How does the opponent or opposing force attack his or her weakness?
- How does the lead character confront his or her greatest fear?
- What will s/he learn during the story?
- How does what s/he learns resolve the conflict between what s/he wants, what s/he needs to learn and what s/he has had to do to get it?

- How does the subplot end?

You must then order your main plot, sub-plots and secondary plots in order of importance to make sure you don't give them an inappropriate weight in the final screenplay.

If you get the weighting wrong between the main plot and the subplots – or even confuse which is the main plot and which is the subplot – you may diffuse your narrative's emotional power and this can make the screenplay less satisfying to read. A good example of this is the prison-break movie, *The Magdalene Sisters* where the opening suggests that Margaret is going to be the lead character, but as the story develops we realise that Bernadette has the more difficult struggle to escape. The resulting film is still powerful, but not quite as emotionally engaging as it would have been if the audience had been more sympathetic to Bernadette's horrific predicament from the start. If you disagree, compare this to another prison movie, Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption*. Here the screenwriter also tells the stories of several prisoners, but always gives the highest priority to Andy Dufresne's story. As a result, the audience is gripped by terrible suspense for most of the movie. So much so that we feel like we are actually there with him as he escapes from Shawshank in that fantastic final sequence.

① **HOT TIP:** When you are writing a screenplay always consider what you will allow the audience to see and from whose perspective. When the camera flits around showing scenes with lots of secondary characters (with no lead character present), the focus of the narrative quickly becomes confused and the audience becomes emotionally detached from the movie. This detachment may be intentional, in order to give the audience an omniscient and ironic distance to their characters (e.g. in the introduction to Julian Fellowes' screenplay for *Gosford Park*) – but often it is just a mistake. So make sure you know who you are pointing your imaginary camera at and why! The decisions you make here in creating a POV (point of view) system will have an enormous influence on the look of a finished film. As a rule of thumb, the more you restrict yourself to showing scenes with your lead character, the more sympathy you create for your lead character and the more mystery and dramatic tension you can build around their predicament. When you decide to show a scene with an opponent plotting against the lead character, or a helper finding out some crucial information, you create suspense or comic anticipation for the lead character (as long as the audience already knows who this is).

EXERCISE: Map out all the subplots in your movie idea as described above and place them in order of importance. Having this to hand will help you enormously as you start to plot your story outline and try to work out what needs to happen within each scene and sequence. Also work out which characters and subplots you will actively follow through the narrative (your POV system) and which will be dealt at the same time as the main plot (e.g. in a buddy movie like *Lethal Weapon*, the subplot between the two detectives unfolds as they solve the mystery and there are comparatively few scenes that give Murtaugh the POV independent from the lead character Riggs).

True Ensemble movies

Ensemble pieces should not be confused with movies with a complex set of subplots. Ensemble movies are a collection of separate stories, where no substantial connection exists between the different plots.

In fact, the defining element of ensemble movies is that, while the characters may be superficially interconnected by the time or setting, they are primarily connected by their themes not their plots. Thus *Love Actually*, *Magnolia* and *This Year's Love* are ensemble pieces, whereas *Notting Hill*, *The Magdalene Sisters* or *Gosford Park* are not (despite the fact that they have numerous secondary subplots).

Hang on a second - I hear you say - what about *Love Actually*?: most of the characters had some connection to each other. This is true; however, their connections were only casual and not causal, which means that none of the stories intersected on more than a superficial level, whether it was at the school, or in the airport at the end.

The strength of ensemble pieces is that they allow you to explore a thematic area like *How do men fall in love?* (*Love Actually*) or *How can stunted souls find deliverance?* (*Magnolia*) from a number of different perspectives. Each character's story illuminates a slightly different aspect of the theme to build up a larger picture than any single story might have done. Thus in *Love Actually*, we see a man trying to get over betrayal so he can fall in love again, a grieving boy who is experiencing love for the first time, an overworked politician who has never found the courage to fall in love, a disenchanted family man who is toying with the idea of an affair with his secretary, a best-man who falls in love with the bride at his best friend's wedding, and so on.

The downside of ensemble pieces is that the frequent shifts of Point Of View from one story to the next can reduce the emotional impact and engagement the audience feels with any one story. That's because it's incredibly difficult to make each story as interesting as the next. As a result, the audience often finds itself thinking: "I wish I was watching that other story instead of this one." Usually the filmmaker gets around this by giving each story a distinct sub-theme or giving screen priority to some stories over others. To make sure that *Love Actually* ends on a very positive note, Richard Curtis gave the final climactic scene in *Love Actually* to the betrayed writer Jamie Bennett who overcomes his bitterness about his previous relationship and declares his love openly for the Portuguese maid/waitress Aurelia in classic Mills & Boon style. The final feel-good aftermath scene at the airport is the final icing on this big sugary Christmas cake.

❶ HOT TIP: In true Ensemble stories each character has a different individual opponent, though they may be all in a similar thematic predicament. If the lead characters in your ensemble piece have the same opponent or opposing force (as in a disaster movie), it is unlikely to be a true ensemble story but rather a complex linear story with several subplots and secondary subplots that need to be carefully prioritised around the emotional journey of the lead character. If you are still having

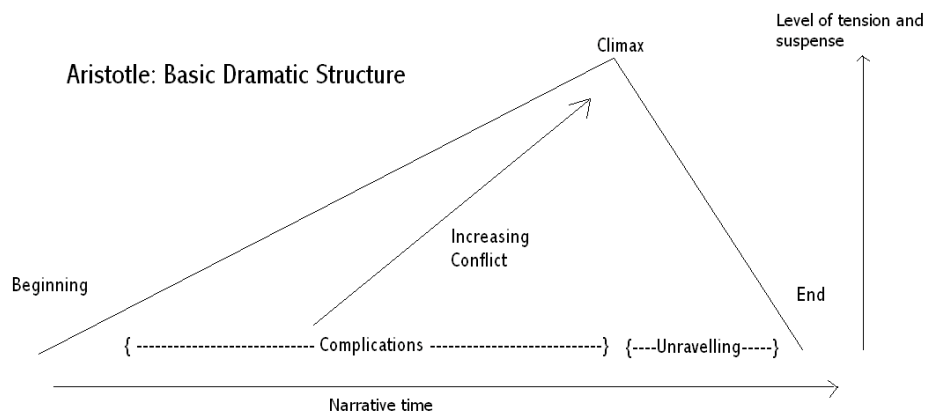
difficulty working out who is your lead character, just remember that the bigger the emotional journey the character goes on, the better choice they will be for lead character status.

EXERCISE: Try to list as many ensemble films as you can and then check that they really are what they appear to be. When you examine movies closely, you find that there are actually far fewer true ensemble movies than you might think. The TV soap is the true home of ensemble story telling, for while the characters lives intersect some of the time their longer term story arcs are distinct.

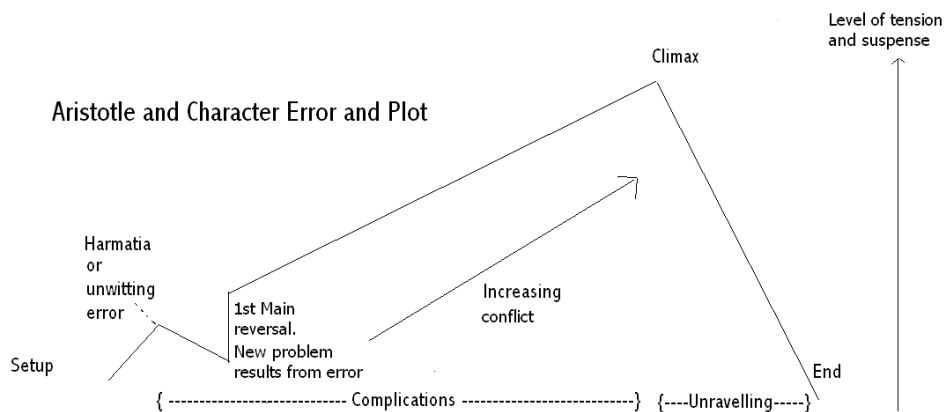
Beginning, middle and end

In his treatise *Poetics* Aristotle provided the first analysis of drama and was also the first to suggest ways in which Poets and Dramatists might best structure their stories. He believed that, at its most basic level, every good story has not only a Beginning, Middle and End, but also involves two main plot phases: COMPLICATION and UNRAVELLING.

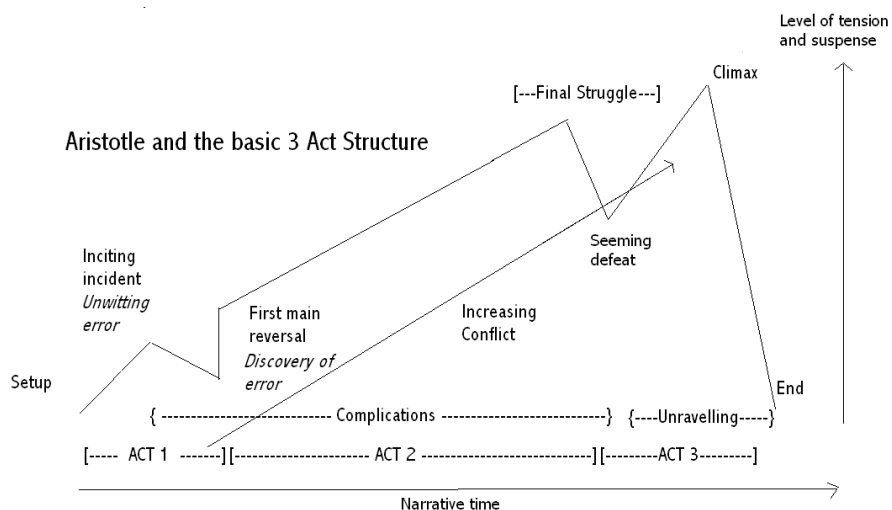
From the moment you start introducing your characters and giving them desires and ambitions, you put them into conflict with the people around them. The natural arc of any situation is for it to become more complicated, until the conflict reaches a climax and the situation is resolved.



When you add in the character elements discussed in the previous two pages, the structure diagram can be modified as follows:

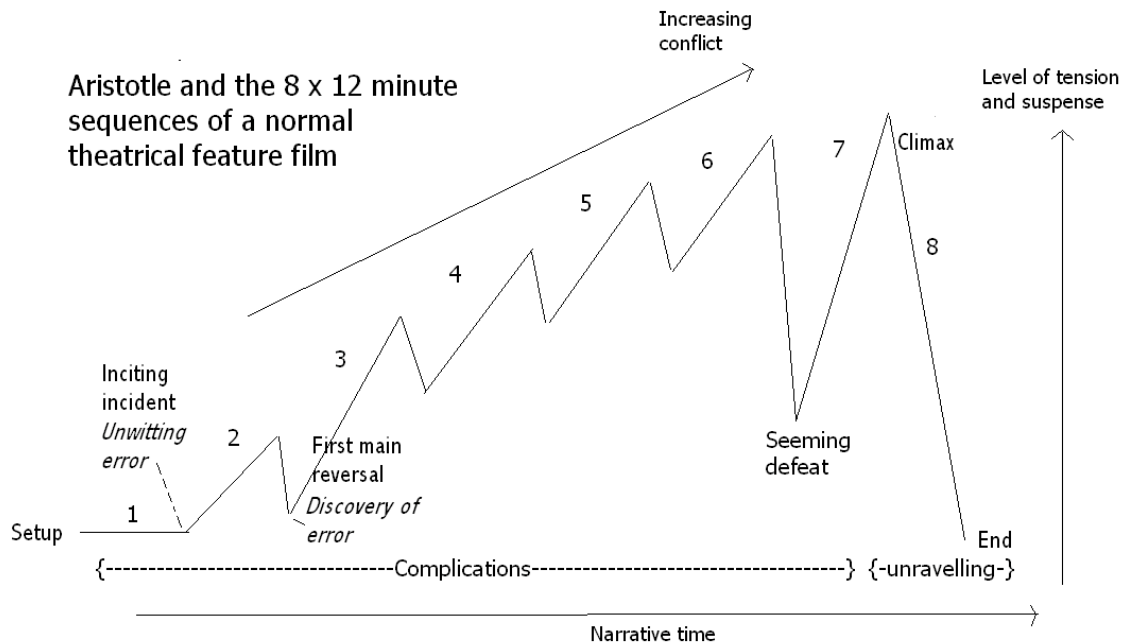


Today most Hollywood screenwriting gurus from Syd Field and Michael Hauge, to Robert McKee and Lew Hunter, suggest that a theatrical screenplay also has a beginning middle and end, which roughly corresponds to a 3-Act structure.



Alfred Hitchcock famously noted that "The length of the film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder." By physiological consensus, movies are therefore expected to last around two hours and contain approximately 8 sequences of approximately 12 minutes in length. If we factor in these sequences of progress and setbacks into this structure diagram it might look more like this (though the

underlying principle of increasing conflict leading to climax and resolution is the same):



Such diagrams will not write your screenplay for you, though they may help you to plan your story structure.

① HOT TIP: There are a number of highly respected screenwriting gurus like John Truby, Christopher Vogler or Phil Parker who believe that holding rigidly to a 3-Act structure where certain events must happen at certain places damages your creativity. This is because what is really important are the moments of recognition and reversal, where the story twists and turns emotionally, not the exact time at which they occur. But even here there is a general consensus that there are still three main phases to any story:

- **BEGINNING: SETTING-UP THE PREDICAMENT.** What does your lead character want? What do they need? What do they have to do to get what they want?
- **MIDDLE: CONFLICT - ACTIONS and REACTIONS.** The lead character struggles to get what they want and usually fails at the end of this middle section; however, through failure they begin to understand their true needs.
- **END: FINAL STRUGGLE, RESOLUTION & AFTERMATH.** The emotional ending where the lead character discovers what they really need, whether they get what they wanted or not.

EXERCISE: Try to map out your story along the lines of the final diagram. Now rather than attaching numbers to each sequence, write a short sentence about what the lead character is trying to do in that sequence. This exercise will help you develop the spine of your story.

Set-Up, Conflict, Resolution

Screen stories are all about questions and answers - questions and answers. At the story level you must ask:

- What is my story really about?
- What do I want to say?
- What is the story's big hook?
- What makes it cinematic (or televisual)?
- Why is it way better than anything else I've seen?
- Would I pay to see it?

At the character level you must ask:

Complication:

Setup

- Who is my lead character?
- What do they want?
- How can I show what they want?
- What do they need to learn about the world or themselves in order to get what they want?
- How can I demonstrate visually what they need?

Increasing Conflict

- Who opposes them?
- How do they attack the lead character and expose their weaknesses?
- Why is the lead character resistant to change, reluctant to confront their weakness?
- How does the level of conflict increase?
- What makes the conflict personal?
- Does the conflict become obsessive and force even friends to start deserting the lead character? (if not it should!)
- How is the lead character finally forced to confront their weakness and contemplate internal change?

Unravelling:

Resolution

- Why does the lead character come back for one last attempt to defeat their opponent?
- Do they still want what they did at the beginning, or are they beginning to understand that they will never win unless they change their goal or their attitude to life?
- What moral choices that they have to make in the final struggle will finally externalise their inner struggle between what they want and what they need?
- How does the lead character close the divide between what they want and what they need in the climax and resolution of the movie?

The more you write the more you realise that before you write a word of dialogue, it

is important to interrogate your story to check whether it can be all it can be. Ask as many questions as you can about your story before you start and the chances are you will have a better map of your own ideas from which to build an engaging dramatic story.

It is very important to note that Television drama does not always follow exactly the same structural principles of a feature film. Because most TV drama has at least two-parts, the story structure needs to be adapted to suit the needs of commercials, breaks for the news, and more significantly the week long gaps between broadcasts. In a two-parter the narrative may be staggered into two parts, where the first part is a near tragedy with a cliffhanger ending and the second has a more conventional positive outcome. If you are writing a drama serial or a long-running series, the lead character(s) will typically undergo far less change in an individual episode than the lead character in a feature film and the level of internal conflict is often less intense. For more details on the differences see the section entitled Writing for Film and TV or read Phil Parker's *The Art and Science of Screenwriting*.

❶ **HOT TIP:** In successful movies that have a positive outcome like *Intolerable Cruelty*, the lead character often seems to make stuttering progress towards getting what they want up to the mid point. In successful movies with negative outcomes like *Cold Mountain* the lead character's situation gets steadily worse during the first half of the movie. They then improve before turning again and heading to tragedy (in *Cold Mountain*, Inman's untimely death). The reasoning behind this is simple: as an audience we want to be taken on an emotional roller coaster and there are only two basic patterns to this: 'up-down-up' or 'down-up-down'. Of course over the course of your 8 or so movie sequences, you may have many smaller ups and downs along the way, but the overriding emotional arc of the story will still be 'up-down-up' or 'down-up-down'.

EXERCISE: To help you plan your story, try breaking the idea down into these elements to check that you are on track and to see if it prompts any new or better ideas..

1) Introduce your lead character and setting

- a) Who is s/he and where is s/he?
- b) What is his or her life like?
- c) Who is with him/her?

2) What does s/he want? - The lead character finds out or reveals that s/he wants something, or discovers s/he has a problem that must be solved.

3) What does s/he need to learn? – The character needs to learn something to make them a better human being. This is usually similar to what they want, but crucially different from it. (e.g. In *Intolerable Cruelty* Miles Massey wants to capture Marilyn Rexroth's heart but he needs to work out that a marriage is more than just a legal contract).

4) Initial actions - The character then sets out to solve his/her problem or get what s/he wants. Because they don't understand that what they want is not what they need, the lead character finds that instead of getting what they want they are in a world of trouble. (e.g. Because Miles Massey doesn't understand the difference between love and marriage, Marilyn Rexroth sets out to con him into marriage, to bankrupt and humiliate him)

- 5) **First Major setback** - Unfortunately your lead character also needs to learn something about life and because of this they are about to find themselves in more trouble than they have ever encountered.
- 6) **Actions & Set-backs** - Because s/he is not aware of what it is s/he *really* needs, s/he will usually go about getting what s/he wants the wrong way. This will bring him/her into conflict with other people (both enemies and friends) who don't like what s/he is doing - or the way s/he is going about it. The result is a series of actions and setbacks throughout the middle of the story.
- 7) **Increasing Conflict** - the arguments and fights become increasingly heated towards the end of the middle section. Now here's the cool bit:
- a) If the story has a positive outcome, the conflict will reach a head and it will look like the lead character has been defeated (e.g. in *Intolerable Cruelty*, Miles Massey marries Marylin only for her then to turn round and sue him for everything he has got)
 - b) If the story has a negative outcome, the conflict will intensify until it looks like the hero is close to victory (e.g. in *Braveheart* it looks like Wallace will defeat the English once and for all but then he is betrayed by the nobles including Robert the Bruce)
- 8) **Final Struggle** - The lead character summons his/her strength for a final attempt to achieve his/her goal.
- 9) **Endings** - Whether the lead character succeeds or fails, s/he discovers from what's happened that what they thought they wanted in the beginning was only part of the truth, and there is more to life than they thought.

Structural examples

Let's see how this works in greater detail using three examples. That great British rites of passage movie, *Billy Elliot*, the seminal Sci-Fi movie *The Matrix*, and the epic romance *Cold Mountain*.

Billy Elliot

1. Introduce your lead character and setting

- Who is s/he and where is s/he? *Billy is a shy boy growing up in a Northern English Town.*
- What is his or her life like? *Not good. Billy's mother died recently and a strike is looming.*
- Who is with him/her? *His Brother, his father and dotty grandmother.*

2. **What does s/he want?** - The lead character finds out or reveals that s/he wants something, or discovers s/he has a problem that must be solved. *Billy is forced to go to boxing classes by his dad, but becomes more interested in ballet.*

3. **What does s/he need to learn?** – The character needs to learn something to make them a better human being. This is usually similar to what they want, but crucially different from it. *Billy needs to get over his shyness, his quietness and insecurity.*

4. **Initial actions** - The character then sets out to solve his/her problem or get what s/he wants. Because they don't understand that what they want is not what they need, the lead character finds that instead of getting what they want they are in a world of trouble.

Billy doesn't tell his father he is going to Ballet instead of boxing.

5. **First Major setback** - Unfortunately your lead character also needs to learn something about life and because of this they are about to find themselves in more trouble than they have ever encountered. *Billy's father finds out and is furious. He forbids his son to attend classes.*

6. **Actions & Set-backs** - Because s/he is not aware of what it is s/he really needs, s/he will usually go about getting what s/he wants the wrong way. This will bring him/her into conflict with other people (both enemies and friends) who don't like what s/he is doing - or the way s/he is going about it. The result is a series of actions and setbacks throughout the middle of the story. *Billy finds he has a friend and supporter in his teacher Mrs Wilkinson who stands up for Billy because he won't stand up for himself. Billy carries on training and after a slow start improves markedly. So much so that Mrs Wilkinson comes up with the idea that he should try out for the Royal Ballet School.*

7. **Increasing Conflict** - the arguments and fights become increasingly heated towards the end of the middle section. Now here's the cool bit:

- If the story has a positive outcome, the conflict will reach a head and it will look like the lead character has been defeated. *Billy's father is furious when he finds out. The strike is going badly and he forbids Billy to carry on dancing. But now Billy is hooked and he can't stop. Family relations get steadily worse until it seems Billy has been defeated.*
- If the story has a negative outcome, the conflict will intensify until

it looks like the hero is close to victory. *Not applicable.*

8. **Final Struggle** - The lead character summons his/her strength for a final attempt to achieve his/her goal. *Billy dances for his dad in the community hall and his father is shamed by his talent. They go to London for an audition. As an added twist, the screenwriter makes it appear that Billy will be disbarred for punching the rich kid, but at the last possible moment Billy overcomes his shyness and convinces the panel that he was born to dance.*

9. **Endings** - Whether the lead character succeeds or fails, s/he discovers from what's happened that what they thought they wanted in the beginning was only part of the truth, and there is more to life than they thought. *Billy has overcome his shyness and learned to stand up for himself. In the final scene he dances on to stage, no longer an ugly duckling but transformed into a proud swan.*

The Matrix

1. Introduce your lead character and setting

- Who is s/he and where is s/he? *Neo is a handsome computer hacker obsessed with finding a mysterious computer terrorist known as Morpheus.*
- What is his or her life like? *By day Neo's name is Mr Anderson and he has a boring office job.*
- Who is with him/her? *The anonymous hordes of the big city.*

2. **What does s/he want?** - The lead character finds out or reveals that s/he wants something, or discovers s/he has a problem that must be solved. *Neo receives a message to follow the white rabbit. He meets Trinity who says she will take him to Morpheus.*

3. **What does s/he need to learn?** – The character needs to learn something to make them a better human being. This is usually similar to what they want, but crucially different from it. *Neo needs to find emotional meaning to his life.*

4. **Initial actions** - The character then sets out to solve his/her problem or get what s/he wants. Because they don't understand that what they want is not what they need, the lead character finds that instead of getting what they want they are in a world of trouble. *Neo is contacted by Morpheus but he doesn't trust him enough. Neo is captured and bugged by Agent Smith. Neo meets with Morpheus after being debugged.*

5. **First Major setback** - Unfortunately your lead character also needs to learn something about life and because of this they are about to find themselves in more trouble than they have ever encountered. *Neo takes the red pill (red is the colour of passion in this story) and discovers that everything he thought he knew about the world was an illusion.*

6. **Actions & Set-backs** - Because s/he is not aware of what it is s/he really needs, s/he will usually go about getting what s/he wants the wrong way. This will bring him/her into conflict with other people (both enemies and friends) who don't like what s/he is doing - or the way s/he is going about it. The result is a series of actions and setbacks throughout the middle of the story. *Neo explores the new world and develops lots of cool new skills. But finds out that Morpheus and some of the crew think he is the new Messiah who will fight and destroy the Agents inside the Matrix.*

7. **Increasing Conflict** - the arguments and fights become increasingly heated towards the end of the middle section. Now here's the cool bit:

- If the story has a positive outcome, the conflict will reach a head and it will look like the lead character has been defeated. *Morpheus takes Neo to see the Oracle who tells him he is not 'The One'. Then they discover that Cypher has betrayed them and most of the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar are murdered.*
- If the story has a negative outcome, the conflict will intensify until it looks like the hero is close to victory. *Not applicable.*

8. **Final Struggle** - The lead character summons his/her strength for a final attempt to achieve his/her goal. *Neo deduces that the Agents would never expect them to mount a rescue attempt and they go back to fight the agents. It goes well but then in a major twist Neo is shot and killed in the Matrix.*

9. **Endings** - Whether the lead character succeeds or fails, s/he discovers from what's happened that what they thought they wanted in the beginning was only part of the truth, and there is more to life than they thought. *Trinity talks to Neo's dead body and like the Messiah he is, Neo rises from the dead to fulfil his destiny and liberate humanity from the machines.*

Cold Mountain

1. Introduce your lead character and setting

- Who is s/he and where is s/he? *Ada has just moved to Cold Mountain from the big city.*
 - What is his or her life like? *It is sedate compared to the excitement of the big city.*
 - Who is with him/her? *Her father and friends through the church.*
- **What does s/he want?** - The lead character finds out or reveals that s/he wants something, or discovers s/he has a problem that must be solved. *Ada is told that a farmer named Inman fancies her. She wants to find out how much he likes her.*
2. **What does s/he need to learn?** – The character needs to learn something to make them a better human being. This is usually similar to what they want, but crucially different from it. *Ada needs to learn to give love as well as receive it.*
3. **Initial actions** - The character then sets out to solve his/her problem or get what s/he wants. Because they don't understand that what they want is not what they need, the lead character finds that instead of getting what they want they are in a world of trouble. *Ada flirts with Inman and makes him fall for her, but she hasn't paid enough attention to what Inman wants and has buried her head in the sand about the forthcoming war.*
4. **First Major setback** - Unfortunately your lead character also needs to learn something about life and because of this they are about to find themselves in more trouble than they have ever encountered. *War breaks out and Inman signs up for the army. They share one passionate kiss and then Inman is gone. The care of Cold Mountain and its women is to be left to the Local Militia.*
5. **Actions & Set-backs** - Because s/he is not aware of what it is s/he really needs, s/he will usually go about getting what s/he wants the wrong way. This will bring him/her into conflict with other people (both enemies and friends) who don't like what s/he is doing - or the way s/he is going about it. The result

is a series of actions and setbacks throughout the middle of the story. *Ada tries to live just as she has always done, but when her father dies she realises she is effectively little more than a doll - with no practical skills for the life she is now leading. It does not look like things can get worse and Ada writes to Inman begging him to come home. But then Ruby arrives and things start to look up.*

6. **Increasing Conflict** - the arguments and fights become increasingly heated towards the end of the middle section. Now here's the cool bit:

- If the story has a positive outcome, the conflict will reach a head and it will look like the lead character has been defeated. *Not applicable.*
- If the story has a negative outcome, the conflict will intensify until it looks like the hero is close to victory. *The war goes badly for the South. Inman starts his journey home as conditions become worse at home. Teague covets both the farm and Ada and is determined to prove to her that he is not a man to be trifled with. He murders the neighbours and tries to murder the musicians. But Ada and Ruby fight back and save Ruby's father.*

7. **Final Struggle** - The lead character summons his/her strength for a final attempt to achieve his/her goal. *Inman returns to find that Ada has become a strong independent woman. They consummate their love, only to be ambushed the next day by Teague and his men. They defeat the Home Guard in a gun battle, but Inman is killed.*

8. **Endings** - Whether the lead character succeeds or fails, s/he discovers from what's happened that what they thought they wanted in the beginning was only part of the truth, and there is more to life than they thought. *Ada does not get what she wanted because Inman is dead; however, she got what she needed and has become an independent woman capable of love for her child and friends.*

① HOT TIP: It is vital that you know what your lead character wants and also what they need to do to change for the better. However, "What s/he wants?" and "What s/he needs?" cannot be plucked arbitrarily from the air; they must be closely connected. For instance, *Derek wants to emigrate to America, but he really needs to emigrate to France*, would not really allow you to create a meaningful plot. But, *Derek wants to emigrate to America, but first he needs to settle unfinished business with his tyrannical French mother* would. That's because the second example suggests that the lead character's desire to emigrate to America is based on moral cowardice, and until he faces up to his opponent he will never escape. It is this gap between 'What a character thinks s/he wants' and 'What a character needs' that provides the external manifestation of their inner character weakness. When you externalise your lead character's weakness through this conflict between want and need, you can also strengthen your opponent to exploit the weakness to the full, because they are in the position to block an external want. When you create an opponent who sets your lead character almost impossible tasks that block their desire, the lead character is forced to face their inner weaknesses and contemplate change. This is the basis of all meaningful dramatic conflict.

EXERCISE: Once you have broken down your story into the steps outlined above,

put the piece of paper or file aside – and without referring to it – write out your entire feature film in three paragraphs (Beginning, Middle and End). Do not write in any unnecessary detail, just stick resolutely to the limit of one page of A4 in Courier 12 point. This will force you to concentrate on what the story means to the lead character and should only mention the really key life changing events that occur. This one page Outline should contain the entire story and is a much better guide than a treatment as to whether you have a real grip on what the story is about. A word of caution, if you can't make it fit one page, you can always cheat and change the font. However, the main person you will be cheating is yourself, since this will allow you to kid yourself that your story is in better shape than it probably is. So to quote from a myth about the much maligned Robert the Bruce, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again."

Action

Action doesn't just mean fights and chase sequences; it means those filmable actions that the lead character has to carry out in order to get what s/he wants. It also means the actions that his or her opponents take to stop him/her getting what s/he wants, and what the lead character does in response. To explain why thinking about movies in this way is so important, we need to go back to Aristotle and his analysis of how drama affects an audience.

Writing about Tragedy (or Drama as we now call it), Aristotle said that an audience derives pleasure from drama in the following ways:

- 1 A lead character is chosen because they have a number of qualities that make him or her seem in some specific way admirable or intriguing to the audience
- 2 This lead character makes an unwitting error which has consequences beyond what s/he expected
- 3 As a result s/he is placed in a very difficult predicament.
- 4 Because we like (or are interested in) the lead character, we will pity his or her undeserved suffering
- 5 We will also anticipate the dangers ahead and feel terror for his or her predicament
- 6 It is this combination of fear and pity that creates tension and suspense
- 7 You can also increase suspense, and consequently audience pleasure, by building in surprise twists which further complicate the lead character's predicament (which we will discuss in the next section).

This helps explain how suspense can be created even when the audience knows the outcome to a story. For instance, when you watch *Braveheart* for the fifth time, chances are you still feel intense compassion and fear for William Wallace's plight even though you know what will happen to him. This also helps explain why stories about less likeable, less admirable or less interesting characters have to rely more on mystery and dramatic tension than *suspense* (also known as dramatic or comic irony) to keep the audience engaged, and though you may remember mystery thrillers or horror stories as superb pieces of cinema, you don't always want to watch them again and again.

Another word for suspense is dramatic or comic irony. This means that because the audience knows more about what is going to happen than the lead character, they are able to identify and sympathise with their situation and either fear for what will happen to them in a drama, or keenly anticipate the comic situations to come in a comedy. This combination of knowledge and anticipation greatly enhances the audience's enjoyment, and also enables them to gain greater understanding of the theme than a story that relies more on mystery and dramatic tension (which are explained in more detail in the next section).

For dramatic suspense to work it is vital that we admire the lead character in some way so we will sympathise with their predicament. Aristotle believed that the lead character needed to be better than most of the audience in some way (even if that simply meant they were a noble or lord), but he lived in different times and didn't

anticipate the changes in society that brought about plays like *Macbeth*, or the power that a camera would have to interest the viewer not only in stories about everyday men and women (*My Name is Joe*), but also stories about uber-criminals and mass murderers (*The Godfather, Monster*).

① HOT TIP: The level to which we identify with a lead character depends not only on likeability and the degree to which the camera follows the lead character, but also on genre. As a rule of thumb, if the story is an action movie, horror film, detective story or other type of mystery, characters tend to be less complex and more morally ambivalent because audience enjoyment in these genres derives more from working out the solution to the mystery and/or exposing or defeating 'the monster', than from seeing the lead character change. This is also one of the reasons why TV loves Detective shows and Medical dramas, because the lead characters remain largely the same from week to week and only the mysteries, diagnoses and opponents change.

EXERCISE: Examine your story idea to see how closely it conforms to Aristotle's basic analysis. If you can't see how your lead character might be 'better' than most of the members of the audience, it doesn't mean Aristotle was wrong. Just remember that their superiority may be defined not in absolute moral terms, but in relativistic terms. For instance *Rocky* was not a morally better person than members of the audience, except in his ability to persist in his ambition. Likewise, as a street prostitute, Aileen Carol Wuornos is hardly noble, though her ability to survive such a life can be admired, particularly by an audience which probably has little first-hand experience of this world.

Dramatic Tension, Mystery, Surprise and Originality

After Aristotelian suspense, which was discussed in the preceding section, the most powerful tools a screenwriter has to keep the audience interested are dramatic tension, mystery, surprise and recognition.

DRAMATIC TENSION occurs when the audience knows only as much as the lead character and sees the story unfold through their eyes (i.e. the screenwriter's 'point of view system' focuses exclusively on the lead character). Although this is one of the best ways to make an audience identify with a character, it does not necessarily make an audience *sympathise* with the character. To truly sympathise with the character (and achieve Aristotelian suspense), the audience needs to know more than they do. For instance, in *The Matrix* Neo is told by the Oracle that that he is not 'The One', which is one of the reasons he decides to go and rescue Morpheus. This sets up the dramatic tension for the following sequence – which is in effect a suicide mission. However, the screenwriters are very clever to also introduce a hint of suspense (or dramatic irony) to this sequence, because we have learned through Trinity's conversations with Morpheus that the Oracle has predicted that she will fall in love with 'The One' and she is clearly falling for Neo big time. The audience is therefore asking itself two questions on different dramatic levels: Will Neo survive against the agents (dramatic tension)? And will he be revealed as 'The One' (dramatic irony)? If he is 'The One' we assume he will defeat them, which is why it is such an effective dramatic moment when he is ambushed by Agent Smith and shot six times through the heart!

MYSTERY is created when the audience knows less than the character, as often occurs at the start of a movie or at the beginning of a new sequence where we do not know what the lead character or main opponent is going to try next. To differentiate this type of mystery from genres that are constructed as a mystery (where the audience uncovers a mystery through the characters), this is sometimes called *mystery for the viewer*.

SURPRISE is where the character and/or the audience receive some new information that they did not expect. This is sometimes called a reversal of action. Audiences love to be surprised by the various twists and turns in a plot, which mould and shape their expectations with regards to the outcome from scene to scene. It is the screenwriter's job to make sure they are not disappointed. So if your character is doing something obvious in an obvious way, like walking through a door, parking a car, or telling someone else exactly what you've just shown them do, you probably don't need this scene at all. Often it's best simply to cut straight to the next scene: if it doesn't have a real reason to be there, drop it.

RECOGNITION often accompanies a reversal of action and is where new information is revealed to the audience that changes their understanding of the character's backstory, motives and actions. For instance, in *Cold Mountain* we realise from an early stage that Teague wants Ada's farm, but it comes as a nasty surprise to discover that he also craves her. This moment of recognition has a big emotional impact on the development of the story and raises the stakes considerably. We realise that while Teague might walk away from just the property, he will not now take no for an answer and that Ada's honour, her life and her

livelihood will be placed in growing jeopardy. As an audience we start to imagine all sorts of possible new developments and ask new active questions: Will Inman get back in time? What consequences will Ada's refusal have for her?

Originality

When the audience can guess exactly what's going to happen, they quickly become bored. You are in control of the story - so whether you are writing an animation, thriller or love story, you should try to make the audience *think* they know what will happen next - only then to surprise them with something a quarter-turn away from what they might be expecting. To be original you do not have to completely reinvent movie making, you simply need to refresh it with your personal insights and storytelling flair.

Once again, why not study your favourite movies and this time look for examples where the filmmakers make their characters do something a little different from what you were expecting. *The Simpsons* is great for this, as you might expect from the world's favourite comedy series. For instance, in the episode *Lisa on Ice*, Lisa discovers that she is a natural at ice hockey. Bart is envious of her newfound skill at his favourite sport and decides he's going to show her by becoming a teacher's pet. The animators then cut directly to the classroom where Bart puts up his hand to answer every question the teacher asks. At first we think that he has changed his ways and become a really good student, but at the end of the sequence we discover he has answered every question incorrectly and only succeeded in making the teacher extremely irritated with him.

While comedy needs to surprise at every turn in order to create laughter, drama does not have to be pedestrian merely because it is more 'serious'. So, whenever your lead character has to do something obvious, like make a simple choice, try to think up a clever way for them to phrase it. For instance, s/he could lie, s/he could beg comically like s/he was begging for her life, s/he could try and convince Dad that he really needs new clothes himself, s/he could try to sell him something else in exchange, try to flatter him – or whatever is most fun to watch. For example in *The Matrix*, the writers imbue a choice with mystery when Morpheus tells Neo that he can either choose a Blue Pill and return to his life or a Red Pill and “go down a rabbit hole”. This is clearly a reference to Alice in Wonderland but few people in the audience are quite prepared for just how deep the rabbit hole does go, which makes this a brilliant scene.

Simple really – except now I'm going to complicate things again. Because while you want to surprise the audience with something different, it can't be just anything. The audience expects to be surprised within a register of what is credible and believable within the story world you've created. They also do not like writers 'to cheat' and introduce new characters or events to solve plot problems that you yourself have created. For instance...

As a rule of thumb, the only coincidences you should really allow yourself in a movie are in the beginning of the film (e.g. two old friends meet again on a gameshow after 20 years and start to fall in love). If they have a chance meeting later, this must be set-up (or foreshadowed as it is sometimes called) so the audience go “of course: he said that twenty minutes ago”. A good example of this is in *Kill Bill Vol II* where Bill

mentions a particular Kung Fu technique early in Act II which only pays off in the final scene. You can thus avoid coincidence by building the reasons for it into the story, letting the audience forget about that and then spring it back on them when you need a “get out of jail card”.

There's a special type of coincidence which people particularly hate and that's when you save your character at the end through an unbelievable twist or lucky break. There's even a special term for these type of cheat endings, which dates from the days when the only plays were religious rituals to celebrate the power of the Gods. This type of coincidence is called *deus ex machina*, which roughly translates as 'God intervening from outside the play'. So be particularly careful of using complete coincidences in the final act as they really bug the audience. Take *Mystic River*, for instance, which featured some really powerful performances, had suspense and tension and then blew it in the final act when the two detectives suddenly discovered an old telephone message they hadn't listened to which solved the mystery. As a result everyone in the audience feels short-changed.

① HOT TIP: In some movies like *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club* or *The Usual Suspects*, the writer holds back a key piece of information right to the very end. All the way through the story, the audience thinks they are watching one story and only at the very end do they find out that they have been tricked. These types of surprise stories can be hugely popular if you get it right. So think hard: consider who knows what, when? What secrets do you want to hold back from either the audience or your characters?

EXERCISE: Review one of your favourite movies and make a note of how much you know compared to the characters at any stage of the story and whether you are experiencing dramatic tension, mystery or suspense. Also jot down those moments when you receive new information that changes your understanding of what is happening in the film. You will find that these big moments of recognition divide the acts and sequences and define the structure of the narrative.

Linking Action through Questions and Answers

We all know that some movies move along at a brisk pace whatever their genre, while others make us feel like we're watching paint dry in real time. This even happens with well known directors who have a great track record. But why?

The answer of course is that last time, the director and his team were probably working with a great screenplay and this time they are not. For no matter how good the performances, the cinematography or the editing might be, if the screenplay doesn't hold up there is little that even a genius director, director of photography or editor can do to rescue it.

The reason why some narratives feel slow is actually profoundly simple: the filmmakers, for all their artistic instincts, have not understood that the way to create pace in a story is by setting and answering questions from moment-to-moment, scene-to-scene and sequence-to-sequence to drive the story forward. As the screenwriter, it is your job to keep the audience in an almost continuous state of anticipation and expectation regarding what will happen next, even if the audience knows in advance from the reviews and the trailers how the story will end.

As we have noted before, a screen narrative at its most basic level is a series of individual shots (or clips) that are cut together like a comic book to create a comprehensible film narrative. For instance, if one character says something, they will expect a response from another and so we cut to their reply or reaction shot. Likewise if you show your lead character pulling a lever, the audience will immediately ask themselves what the consequence of the action will be. If the consequence is that 40,000 litres of toxic waste are dumped on some thug's head, the audience will then ask both, "What is that going to do to the man's body?" and "How will the thug's partner react?". Thus the logical cut from here would probably be first to a shot of the thug's physical and emotional reaction to the toxic waste, followed by another cut to his partner revealing a new source of danger and so on. The process of using each clip to set a question in the audience's mind, and then both answer it in the next clip and set a new question is the very basis of filmmaking, and a screenplay in this sense is like a massive wooden toy train linked by question shaped hooks and eyes.

Just as each clip is linked to the next by a question, so is each scene linked to the next: we enter each new scene to answer the question hanging from the previous one, and then cut out of the scene as soon as a new question is set in the audience's head. Now these questions that link scenes do not have to be big philosophical questions. In fact it's much better if they are simple and easy to understand, eg:

Action: The character drains the last drop of water from their canteen. Q: Will they get something to drink?

Answer: no, the oasis is a mirage. Question: How will they survive now?

Answer: not easily, the character has blistered lips and looks half dead. Q: How can this be happening, the lead character can't die?

Answer: He sees a camel approaching from the distance. Question: Who is it?

...And so on...

As soon as a major new question is set in the audience's mind, it is the perfect time to cut to the next scene or new location, because the audience is now keen to find out how the character is going to try and answer this new question or solve the problem it creates. This process of setting and answering questions motivates each cut, each scene change and each sequence transition throughout the movie. It is also the fundamental means by which the audience is able to 'suspend its disbelief', and will themselves into the narrative. If the screenwriter does not set and answer questions, and use them to determine where to cut between scenes, the flow and pace of the screen narrative becomes slow and uneven, and the audience loses interest. It's as simple as that.

Controlling questions

This question and answer methodology exists at every level in storytelling: at the character level, as discussed above, and at the genre level. As we have already noted, each genre and sub-genre conjures up a specific set of questions in the audience's mind. As a screenwriter it is your job to take these general questions and spin them in your particular way each time. Here are some examples of the type of controlling questions the audience will expect to be answered as soon as they realise they are watching one or other of these genres:

- 1 Romance – Will the protagonists fall in love, and what will be the consequences for their worlds?
- 2 Thriller – Will the lead character(s) survive the threat of death and discover why the opponent is persecuting them?
- 3 Investigation – Will the detective solve the mystery? Who is responsible? Will they be brought to justice?
- 4 Journey – Will the lead character complete the journey? Will they return home?
- 5 Revenge – Will the protagonist get revenge or not?
- 6 Contest/Sports Movie – Who will ultimately win? How will the contest change them?
- 7 Disaster/Horror – Who will survive? And what does it take to survive?
- 8 Rites of passage – What will it take to make him/her finally grow up or change?
- 9 Family drama – Will the family overcome their differences? And at what cost?

Even if you think you are writing a movie that has no specific genre (could there really be such a thing?), you must always be aware that the audience will be trying to double guess what the genre parameters are, which questions you are setting and how the story will unfold. This is one of the key areas of an audience's enjoyment of a screen narrative, so be careful not to stray too far from the path.

❗ **HOT TIP:** Audiences expect questions and answers to move the story along in a logical manner. As soon as the active questioning stops the audience expects a major complication or a roadblock or a reversal. The screenwriter is an entertainer – even if the entertainment is a bleak tragedy – so don't disappoint your audience!

EXERCISE: Try writing down the basic events that happen in your story in bullet-point form. This way of planning your story is called a beat outline. Then type next to

each point in a different colour, the question and answer process that will lead your characters and the audience through the story. You will find that this process of attaching questions to each event can really help you concentrate the essential elements of scenes and sequences to make sure you don't break the chain of questions and answers and kill the pace.

From scenes to sequences

Sometimes, new screenwriters (like Boxley in Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*) think that screenwriting is writing down what the actors will say, along with a few general ideas as to where they say it – thinking that the director will do the rest. This rarely results in a good screenplay.

As a screenwriter you need to have a clear sense of direction and know the meaning of every single word, comma and full-stop in your script. All good screenplays contain a wealth of suggestions and instructions for how to shoot the movie, that even the directors and producers may not be consciously aware of.

As soon as you have decided on your characters and predicament, and the basic arc and structure of your story, you must then build your screenplay from the bottom up. Starting with your characters and character motivation, you must build your story outline action by action, reaction by reaction, to create scenes, then sequences, and finally entire screenplays that flow in a logical and credible manner. If you don't the story will feel slow and uninteresting – however good the concept, story premise, characters or performances.

As we have seen in the preceding section, the pace of the narrative is maintained not only by visual interest, but by the process of setting and answering questions. At the scene level this functions as follows:

- 1 A scene ends as soon as one of the main characters in that scene sets a major new question that demands an answer and a shift of location or time.
- 2 The audience expects that the next scene will answer that question.
- 3 The character enters the next scene to try and find the answer.
- 4 They struggle to persuade the scene opponent to answer the question.
- 5 Whether they succeed or not, the action within the scene sets a new question.
- 6 This represents a natural cut-point to the next scene.
- 7 Sometimes screenwriters need a scene to deliver several pieces of information, but it is always best to tie-up other business first and use the main question as the cut point to maintain optimum pace.

To sum up:

- Every single shot in the movie can be viewed as a question that must be answered by a reaction that sets a new question.
- Each scene has an active question that drives the action within each scene.
- As soon as that question is answered and a new question is set, you cut to the next scene.

Just as each scene is built around a few simple Q&As, so each sequence has a controlling question that drives the direction of the story. Unlike scenes sequences sometimes seem to end cold with no clear direction of where the story is heading from here. This is because for most of your story your lead character is attempting to complete a challenge. Each sequence therefore represents a stage in their efforts to overcome their opponent. Since there are typically around four main sequences in

the middle section as the story builds towards the climax, each of these sequences represents in effect a different strategy taken by the lead character to achieve their objective. Since the lead character can only succeed fully in securing what they want and/or need at the end of the story, most sequences end in failure or at best only qualified success. At the end of each sequence therefore, the lead character usually needs time to reconsider their position and at this moment there is often a sequence aftermath scene. Here the pace slows slightly until the lead character hits upon a new strategy. This should become clearer if you break down a sequence from a well-known movie to illustrate the process.

Here is a sequence taken from the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, transcribed in bulleted Beat Outline style. *To set the scene*, After Bilbo Baggins pulls his disappearing trick at his 111th Birthday Party Gandalf the Grey has begun to suspect that the ring Bilbo stole from Gollum in the Misty Mountains is the One Ring, a most powerful magical weapon that if returned to its maker Sauron will enslave all the free peoples of Middle Earth. He manages to scare Bilbo into leaving the Ring to his nephew Frodo Baggins along with Bag End. He then tricks Frodo into dropping it into an envelope and tells him to hide it, saying words to the effect of “keep it secret, keep it safe.”

The main controlling question for this second sequence in Bilbo’s story is therefore IS THIS THE ONE RING? This is answered over the next sequence of shots as we see:

- a) Answer: a group of Dark Riders gallop out of the gates of a scary green castle. New Question: Who are they? And where are they going? *NB. The audience is now in SUSPENSE because we know more than Gandalf.*
- b) Gandalf rides to a mysterious city. New Question: Where is this?
- c) Gandalf walks through the frightened city, a dog barks at him. Answer: It is a city of men under siege. New Question: Why are they scared?
- d) Answer: Because they are enemies of Sauron too – the descendants of Isildur, Gandalf looks at the old parchments and finds out how to test the ring. New Question: Will Gandalf arrive back before Sauron’s agents?
- e) Answer: No. The Dark Riders arrive in the Shire looking for ‘Baggins’ New Questions: How far ahead of Gandalf are they? Where is Frodo? Will Frodo be captured?
- f) Answer: Frodo drinks at an Inn in the Shire. Talk of strange goings on. Q: Will the Hobbits be alerted to the danger in time?
- g) Answer: No. Frodo leaves the bar with Sam unaware of the danger. New question: Are the Dark Riders going to waylay him on the way home?
- h) Answer: He returns to Bag End. Papers blow around. Someone is there. New Questions: Who is there? Is it a Dark Rider?
- i) Answer: No. It’s Gandalf with a question, “Is it Secret? Is it safe?”
- j) Answer: Yes. The ring is thrown into the fire. New Question: Will the markings appear to prove it is the One Ring?
- k) Answer: No. Wait a minute: Yes! New Question: What will they do now?
- l) Frodo says no one knows it is here. Gandalf disagrees and tells the story of Gollum’s torture. Answer: Frodo is scared and tries to give the ring to Gandalf. New Question: Will Gandalf take it?
- m) Answer: No. It would overpower him. New question: What can they do now?
- n) Answer: Gandalf will seek Saruman’s advice. Frodo must take the Ring to

Bree across country. Gandalf will meet him there in a few days time. Frodo looks scared.

END OF SEQUENCE

AFTERMATH SCENE

- There is a rustle outside the window. New Question: Who is it?
- Answer: Gandalf grabs the spy: it is Sam. New Question: What did he hear?
- Answer: Enough that he must go to.

The controlling questions for the Next Sequence will be:

1. Will Frodo evade the Dark Riders and take the One Ring to Bree?
2. What will Saruman's advice be?

The answers to these questions will be: Yes, only just, but Gandalf will not meet him there, because Saruman has been corrupted by Sauron.

These outcomes will in turn raise the further controlling questions in the audience's mind which will guide the next sequence:

1. Can Strider be trusted?
2. Can he help them reach the safety of Rivendell? What will happen to Gandalf?

Once they arrive in Rivendell, there is a long aftermath scene, since it appears that Frodo has done his part and is reunited with his Uncle Bilbo. However, here it becomes clear that no one else can be trusted to take the Ring to Mordor and it is here that Frodo accepts his dread fate and becomes the Ring Bearer.

As you can see from this example, an entire movie is constructed by the actions of characters which raise successive questions, drawing the audience into the storyworlds. The pace of the story can therefore be defined as the frequency with which questions are set and answered. Good screenwriters understand completely the importance of this question-setting and question-answering process in making the audience feel a particular way at different points in the story and giving them intellectual pleasure from the viewing process. Knowing what the active questions are at any point of the story can also help you guide your plot so that you avoid writing unnecessary scenes or pursuing diversionary subplots. The question-answer process is your story compass, so use it properly and you won't fall off the story mountain.

① HOT TIP: At the end of the middle section, the lead character often hits a brick wall, when s/he stares defeat in the face. At this point you want the audience to believe that everything is lost, and to worry how on earth your lead character is going to escape this problem (in the *Fellowship of the Ring* this is the point when Gandalf is dragged down by the Balrog). As a screenwriter you should be worried too about how you can resolve the situation and kick start the resolution phase of the story. At this point it is usually good to look to one of your subplots and see if you can find a way to use a subplot to re-energise the main plot (e.g. in the *Fellowship of the Ring* this is where the lead subplot character, Aragorn starts to take charge and tells Boromir they cannot rest but must reach Lothlorien before darkness falls and the Orcs of Moiria pursue them). To use another example from our study films, in *Big*

Fish Will Bloom seems to have failed to get his father to tell him the truth, but then he finds out about Jenny and finds out some surprising facts about his father that open his eyes and lead us into the final confrontation between fiction and reality).

EXERCISE: Take a sequence from a movie you like and ask yourself what is the main question that is driving the sequence. Having done this, break the sequence down into individual scenes, described in single bullet points. Then try asking yourself how questions set-up in the previous scene are answered in the current scene, and how new questions are set to link this scene to the next. When you reach the end of the sequence there is often an "Aftermath" scene which ties up loose ends from that sequence. How does the writer rekindle the action after this? Is the new question generated inside the main plot, or does it come from a subplot? If you have the energy to break down an entire film in this way, you will be rewarded with a much greater understanding of how movies are put together, where they work and where they break down.

Endings

Almost all films revolve around disagreements, arguments, fights or battles between the lead character and secondary characters, whether they are friends, enemies, family members, boyfriends or girlfriends. But what really makes a story interesting to the audience is the fight going on inside the lead character's head and heart.

Audiences identify with the lead character not just because they are clever, cool, beautiful or attractive, but because we know that - like us - they are not perfect. They too have to make difficult choices, and still have something to learn about themselves. As an audience we are interested in finding out how they face up to their problems. The ending is the part of the film where you have to tie up the external action, as well as the character's inner conflict, to show that s/he has learned something from the story.

Now you might say that in an action film, a hero like James Bond remains the same from start to finish, defeats the bad guy and then goes home. However, on closer inspection you will see that in every story the writers take the trouble to make Bond fall in love with one particular woman. So while in the beginning James Bond may be interested in lots of beautiful women, by the end he is only interested in one. The final battle always involves him rescuing her from the clutches of the bad man - proving that he loves only her at the same time as he saves the world. Very romantic!

Audiences love it if the writer can tie-up the external action and the internal conflict at exactly the same moment, but if you can't don't worry. Lots of professionals have trouble with this too. So let's look at a few more famous examples of recent films to see how their writers managed to deliver a big finish that ties up the main plot in a satisfying yet surprising way.

Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King – After all their struggles, and with the armies of the West about to be massacred at the Black Gate, Frodo and Sam climb Mount Doom. But as Frodo is about to throw the One Ring into the fires, he finally claims it for his own. As Sauron turns his gaze on Frodo it looks like Middle Earth will finally fall and all will be lost. But just as all seems lost Gollum reappears. He also wants the ring and using his acute sense of smell, he catches the invisible Frodo before Sauron and bites off his finger before falling to his death in the magma below clutching his "Precious" ring.

Notting Hill – With the help of his friends, William Thacker chases across London to speak to film star Anna Scott before she leaves the UK. He catches her at a press conference where he must find the courage and passion to declare his love openly in front of the world. This is the only way to prove to her clearly that he really does love her and is capable of sharing her life in the public eye.

Spiderman – Peter needs to overcome his natural shyness so he can tell Mary Jane Watson that he loves her as Peter Parker - and not just as Spidey! He works up to it through the whole film, but then the Green Goblin finds out his true identity and kidnaps Mary Jane as bait for his trap. Spiderman kills the Green Goblin and saves Mary Jane, but (unlike Bond) Peter unexpectedly becomes worried about her future safety. Instead of telling Mary Jane he wants her, Peter tells her that they can't be

together. This leaves her sad and confused, because s/he doesn't know he is only saying this to protect her. It also sets up Peter's problem nicely for the inevitable sequel.

① HOT TIP: The ending of a film always ties back to the first scene where you introduce the lead character. It is the moment when the conflict caused by the gap between what a character wants and what they really need is finally resolved. As soon as that happens whether the ending is *up* or *down*, the story can achieve what dramatists call resolution and literature students call closure. If a character acts crazy at the start, s/he might learn right at the end that this is only a way of avoiding admitting s/he needs friends (*Lethal Weapon*). If s/he thinks s/he is better or different in the first scene, s/he must learn that she has similar needs to everybody else at the end (*Emma* or *Amelie*). If s/he wants to write about love at the start, s/he must learn that one cannot learn about love without falling in love (*Shakespeare in Love*). As is often the case, the tag line for the 'Shakespeare in Love' film poster sums up the story and ending very well, 'Love is the only inspiration'.

Recognition, Resolution and Character Transformation

Some writing gurus believe that you have to know exactly what your story is going to be about before you start writing it. While it is important to map out where you think you are heading, the truth is that you probably will not know exactly how it should be structured until you have written a couple of drafts. That's because once your characters start reacting with each other – even the best planned story starts to assume a life of its own.

The ending of any screenstory is the part when the lead character not only faces up to the enemy for the last time but also confronts their own problems. This resolution involves what Aristotle would call *agnagoris*, which roughly translates as moral recognition. This is the moment when the character finally understands his or her internal problem and/or their true place in the world. They understand for the first time why they have been placed in this difficult predicament, where they have been making their mistakes, facing the hardships they have been exposed to, or what they really need.

Now this moment of understanding inside a person's head cannot be filmed, and it is patently undramatic to have someone say “I have realised that I am a selfish person but from now on I will stop acting like one of those egomaniacs on *Big Brother* and become a caring, loving, tolerant and generous individual.” This would be a little wooden and uninteresting... The best way to show that the lead character has understood their weakness (or fatal flaw) is for the realisation to be closely followed by a moment of decision where the character can demonstrate not only that they understand their weakness but also that they are prepared to put this knowledge into action. For maximum suspense, it is usually best if you can weave both the moment of recognition and the moment of decision into the final struggle at the very climax to the movie.

In most comedies and dramas, the moment of recognition occurs before the climax of the movie so that the character has a chance to escape their fate; however, in some tragedies such as *Othello* the moment of recognition occurs too late, after the climax (in *Othello*, Othello kills Desdemona before he realises that he has been misled by Iago and recognises that his jealousy has got the better of him).

This may sound rather complex but if we look at a few more of our examples you will see how screenwriters build in a final moment of moral choice into the climax of the film that resolves the story one way or another.

Braveheart – At the end of the movie William Wallace is given the opportunity to renounce his cause and be spared a brutal execution. He chooses torture and immortality instead of an easy death, screaming out “Freedom” as he is disembowelled. Now if you remember back to the beginning of the film, Wallace is asked to join the fight but says that he has no quarrel with the English and wants a peaceful life, but by the end of it he is in a diametrically opposed position. He realises through his struggle for revenge that there will be no peace until Scotland is free. And freedom is only possible when each person makes an individual stand against tyranny.

Cold Mountain – At the beginning of the movie Ada is already a memory for Inman and vice versa. We soon discover that they shared just one kiss before the war broke out and it is this tiny spark of a memory that keeps them alive. At the end they then share just one night together and yet from this second moment is implanted the seed of hope for the future. In the climax of the movie, Inman is given the choice to wipe away the last vestiges of the war as represented by Teague's albino gunman or live with the fear of his return. He chooses the former for the love of Ada. This tragic ending firmly nails the theme to the action of the screenplay: a single spark of love can be stronger than a cold mountain of hate.

Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King – Aragorn, Gandalf and the other Captains of the West choose to take an impossible stand against the might of Sauron to distract Sauron's eye from the search for the Halflings. For them it is better to die on their feet than live on their knees. To increase the stakes, the writers also give Frodo a choice: whether to complete his quest and throw the ring into Mount Doom or finally seize it for himself. After all his struggle and self-sacrifice, it looks Frodo chooses the ring. All seems lost as the eye of Sauron turns on Frodo, but then Frodo's earlier charity pays off when Gollum bites the ring from his finger and falls into the crack of doom.

The Matrix – Neo has been struggling with his self-belief since the very start of the movie, but since he rescued Morpheus he has begun to believe. The audience knows that anyone who has been killed in the Matrix dies in real life, but also that Neo has been rewriting the rulebook. Thus in the climactic moment of the chase, just as Neo reaches the phone, he is shot through the heart by Agent Smith. He must now make the ultimate choice of whether he now has the self-belief in his destiny to resurrect himself from electronic death. With the help of Trinity's love he does – and NEO becomes the ONE. All very religious!

Sixth Sense – In the course of helping Cole overcome his fear of ghosts, Malcolm Crowe finally realises that he himself is a ghost and that is the reason his wife is not listening to him. Having failed to communicate properly with her while he was alive, Crowe must choose either to continue as a ghost who helps scared psychics channel their fear, or release his wife from her grief and move on into the next world. Crowe chooses to fulfil his emotional need and heal the wounds of the past. The silver lining is of course that Cole has been saved from fear, unlike the disturbed patient who shot Crowe. The theme is therefore that what should scare us most is not death but the breakdown of communication in life which has afflicted Crowe and all the other suffering ghosts.

Big Fish – All his life William Bloom has been embarrassed by his father's stories, but as his father lies dying he must choose whether to indulge his father's storyteller's world view and help him die or stick rigidly to the cold hard facts. He chooses to help his father die peacefully and in so doing unexpectedly releases himself from his emotional isolation. The theme of the story here seems to be that ultimately it does not matter how we construct our world picture, but whether that world picture has an emotional honesty or not.

Billy Elliot – Billy has struggled against his family's wishes to continue dancing; however, on arrival in London for the Royal Ballet School auditions he is confronted

by the same class conflicts that lie behind the miners' strike and his underprivileged position as a working class boy. At first this makes him revert to his former shy and introverted self and lash out at the upper class boy who asks why he is crying. It seems all has come to nothing. When he is asked one last question about what it feels like to dance, he must choose whether to walk away or give an honest answer to the question. He chooses to answer the question and reveal how his sense of outrage at life's injustices fuels his passion for dance. The theme here seems to be that it is far better to sublimate one's sense of injustice into art than into wasteful and self-destructive anger.

Intolerable Cruelty – Miles Massey has hired a contract killer to murder his gold-digging wife Marilyn to stop her taking him for everything he has, but after he learns her philandering first husband Rex Rexroth has died of a massive coronary he must save her from the hitman. In the aftermath of this very comic scene, Miles and Marilyn meet with their legal representatives to discuss what to do next. Since Marilyn is richer than he, Miles now agrees to sign away any right to her new fortune. Marilyn is so impressed with his newfound altruism that she forgives him for trying to have her killed. She tears up the paper and they find true love. The simple theme of the story suggested in this resolution is that until two people give freely to each other with no thought to the financial consequences, true love is not possible.

In a very real sense how the story ends relates right back to the conflicts you set up in the beginning of the film, regarding

- What the lead character wants?
- What s/he needs?
- And what s/he has to do to get what s/he wants?

These three questions set up the predicament and the conflict. How you choose to resolve their predicament will determine the exact theme of the movie, so always go back to the beginning to ensure that this ending closes the gap between what the character wants and what they need and does truly resolve the story.

📌 HOT TIP: The setbacks your lead character faces in any story, not only stop them getting what they want – but more importantly they are an opportunity for them to recognise what their problem is and solve it. When you are working on your rewrite you should be careful to ensure that scenes that immediately follow any major setback should in some way touch upon what the character needs to learn during the course of the story. This will add depth to your character, help intensify the theme of your story and make it more emotionally satisfying to the audience. For most of your story your character will not see the setback as an opportunity to change, but instead make them more obsessed with gaining what they want. Only when they start to see the setbacks as an opportunity for change are they in a position to meet their opponent in the final struggle and close the gap between what they want and what they need.

EXERCISE: Analyse a couple of your favourite films to see how the resolution consolidates the more general theme of the story into a specific message. Then look at your own story outline to see whether the ending closes the gap between what your lead character wants and what they need and therefore provides a satisfactory

resolution. If it does not, make adjustments to the ending, the character setup or the nature of the opposition and predicament your lead character faces.

The screenwriter's toolkit

Just like any good craftsman, a screenwriter has a set of tools at their disposal that they need to master if they are going to have any real chance of success in this highly competitive industry. As a writer you must become good at most of these, but few can master them all. So here is a checklist of the main tools you need to learn about and a brief description of how you can use them.

A Log Line – A log-line is the basic idea for your movie written in one or two sentences. It should show what the genre is, who the lead character is, what they want, what they are forced to do to try and get it, and what happens. (see the section on Loglines)

A Premise – When producers ask for a premise they usually mean a Log-Line, because a premise is essentially a writer's tool that says who the lead character is, what their character weakness is, what they want, what unexpected action they are forced to take by the opponent to get what they want, and how they change as a result of their experience. This is essentially the lead character's story arc which provides the spine of your movie. NB. As well as your lead character premise, it can also be useful to map out your other character premises to see where they are likely to come into conflict.

A Synopsis – essentially a premise expanded to three sentences for a short film or three paragraphs for a feature (beginning, middle and end). The synopsis expands on what will happen to the lead character at each stage of the story and how they come to change by the end. Synopses should show the main reversals and twists and how these impact on the lead characters (and sometimes the opponent's motivation).

A Treatment – producers, broadcasters and funding bodies frequently ask screenwriters to submit a 5-20 page (depending on the funder) treatment of their idea before reading or commissioning a screenplay. Treatments are incredibly tricky to write because some readers want the treatment to show primarily what the audience will see on screen and other readers want a novelistic impression of the story. If you write the former the reaction will often be “the story reads a little flat” (especially if it is a comedy), and if you write the second way the reaction will often be “the structure seems weak”. This is why most screenwriters will tell you that they hate treatments more than anything else!

A Beat Outline – this is effectively your first attempt to map out the main scenes that you will need to tell your story. So that you can keep track of the overall structure of your screenplay, it is usually best to limit yourself to a one sentence description of each scene - though certain big scenes (e.g. a family party) might need to be broken down into sub-beats describing the mini scenes taking place throughout the house between different characters. Write your story out scene by scene; and see if you can group them into sequences.

1. Galadriel narrates the story of Sauron and the One Ring
2. Frodo is relaxing in the idyllic surroundings of the Shire, when Gandalf the Grey arrives for Bilbo's birthday party
3. Gandalf talks with Bilbo about the ring

4. The Birthday Party - Clips of guests enjoying the party
 - Gandalf starts the firework display
 - Merry and Pippin let off a big rocket
 - Bilbo and Gandalf smoke their pipes and talk about old times
 - Bilbo gives his speech and uses the Ring to disappear
5. Gandalf finds Bilbo back at Bag End and forces him to leave the Ring for Frodo on the mat
6. Frodo picks up the Ring and drops it in Gandalf's envelope. Gandalf tells Frodo to keep the Ring in a safe place.

For a feature you are likely to need around 50-60 (main scenes) at this stage of the development process.

A Step Outline – this is effectively an expanded Beat Outline. But instead of writing scenes in a single sentence, you expand each beat to give some indication of how it might be shot. For instance in a beat outline, you might write, “James goes to the Church to see the priest and beg forgiveness for his sins.” In a Step Outline this would become.

INT. HOLY CROSS CHURCH. DAY.

James walks into the Church. He stops at the door. Crosses himself. Then staggers on down the aisle. He reaches the altar and collapses sobbing with shame. The young priest sees him and hurries over. James looks up.

INT. CONFESSIONAL BOX. DAY.

James confesses to the murder. The priest lets out an involuntary groan of sympathy. James bows his head and continues.

NB. Be aware that sometimes broadcasters or funding bodies will ask you for an outline for your project when they really mean a treatment, so it is always worth checking what exactly they are asking for.

The Screenplay – this is effectively the Step Outline with the Action expanded in greater detail to give an impression of the succession of shots, and with the Dialogue and Reaction Shots added. Since movies are told primarily with images, the Dialogue should only be added after all the other stages have been completed. This is because writing dialogue often makes the writer lazy about describing what is happening and the screenplay becomes overloaded with unnecessary conversation instead. The more of the story you can tell with images alone the better the audience will like the movie. NB. If you are writing a comedy it is often worth writing sample scenes to explore the way characters interact on a comic level.

More detailed information about these and other more advanced tools can be found in a wide variety of screenwriting books, See *The Bibliography* for more details.

① HOT TIP: As a writer you should go through all these stages before writing the screenplay. However, do not regard these as fixed points, you should always check your work using these tools throughout the writing process, just to make sure that you are actually writing the screenplay you set out to and if you are not find out which story you are writing and update your writing toolbox in line with the changes in the screenplay.

Preparing your outline

An outline is a short visual description of a screenplay. It is always written in the present tense, like the final screenplay, and usually does not include any dialogue (what people say), except perhaps for a few key words. It is like a map of the screenplay that tells the writer and the reader the bare bones of what happens in every scene of the story. This should concentrate on the motivations, actions and reactions of the characters and a very brief synopsis of any critical dialogue.

The difference between a beat outline and a step outline is that a beat outline does not include scene headings, whereas a step outline does.

BEAT OUTLINE:

- Johnny's Birthday Party – Johnny's party starts well, but goes pear shaped when he catches his sister's junkie boyfriend, Dougie pocketing his mother's antique plate.
- Johnny throws him out, but his sister notices. She comes to Dougie's defence. A fight starts and Johnny accidentally breaks Margaret's nose.

STEP OUTLINE:

INT. JOHNNY'S HOUSE - KITCHEN. NIGHT

Johnny's precocious niece Agnes sings a cheesy pop-song to the assembled family. Johnny smiles at his guest.

Smiles back from FAMILY and friends.

Johnny frowns; there's someone missing.

INT. JOHNNY'S HOUSE – DINING ROOM. NIGHT

Dougie is stuffing an antique plate into the inside pocket of his leather jacket.

Johnny is disgusted. He rushes over. Dougie is caught red handed. Johnny places the plate on the table, then frogmarches Dougie to the door.

EXT. JOHNNY'S HOUSE – BACK DOOR. NIGHT

Johnny throws Dougie out, cursing him as a "goucher". Dougie doesn't like the insult and starts cursing back.

Margaret hears this and wants to know what the hell's going on. Johnny tells her he caught Dougie stealing. Dougie denies it. A scuffle.

Margaret tries to pull them apart. Dougie drops another piece of china. Case proven. Johnny lumps him. Dougie's head snaps

back and breaks Margaret's nose. Margaret screams hysterically.

❶ **HOT TIP:** Screenplays are always written in the present tense – even when you are writing a **FLASHBACK**. You must always describe what the audience is seeing at that moment on the screen. If it's something the audience can't see, don't write it. It's a cheat that will be found out in the edit and cause the rest of your team no end of problems. So when you write a synopsis, treatment or outline make sure that you stick to the active present tense (e.g. He kisses her and smiles. She picks up the Wedding register. He stares at her confused. She whacks him on top of the head with the book.)

EXERCISE: If you are finding it difficult to put together a beat outline, first try laying out your story in the form described in the **Action** section of the guidelines, answering all of the following questions:

- 1 **Introduce your lead character and setting**
 - Where is s/he?
 - What is s/he doing?
 - Does s/he have friends or family with him/her?
 - What is his/her character weakness?
- 2 **What does the lead character want?**
 - What does s/he need to learn?
 - Is there something s/he is overlooking
- 3 **How does s/he set about getting what s/he wants?**
- 4 **Set-backs** - Because s/he is not aware of what it is s/he *really* needs, s/he will usually go about getting what s/he wants the wrong way. This brings the lead character into conflict with other people who don't like what s/he is doing - or the way s/he is going about it.
 - Who tries to stop him/her?
 - And how do they try to stop them?
 - How does the lead character try to overcome them?
 - Does anyone help him/her?
- 5 **Conflict** - The arguments and fights become more and more heated until it looks like the lead character will be defeated.
 - How does the fight get worse?
 - Do the friends support or desert him/her?
- 6 **Final Struggle** - The lead character summons his/her strength for a final attempt to achieve his/her goal.
 - What happens? And where?
- 7 **Endings** - The lead character discovers that what they thought they wanted in the beginning was only part of the truth; that there is more to life than they originally thought.
 - What is the outcome of the conflict or adventure?
 - What has the lead character learned?

If you can answer all these questions, you will be well on your way to writing your outline. Just expand the sections 4) and 5) to show the different strategies your lead character employs to try and overcome their opponent and get what they want, and how this leads up to the final conflict. Good luck!

Screenplay Layout

Layout is not something that should trouble you when you are writing your screenstory. However, when you do sit down to write your draft screenplay, it is very important that it is written in the correct format.

The Mastershot format (as the feature film format is known) was developed in Hollywood during the days of the typewriter, so the font you use is always Courier 12 point or Courier New 12 pt, using standard margins for each different element of your screenplay.

SCENE HEADINGS (or 'Slug Lines'):	Left Margin: 1.50" Right Margin: 7.50"
ACTION (description of what happens):	Left Margin: 1.50" Right Margin: 7.50"
CHARACTER NAME:	Left Margin: 3.50" Right Margin: 7.25"
PARANTHETICAL:	Left Margin: 3.00" Right Margin: 5.50"
DIALOGUE:	Left Margin: 2.50" Right Margin: 6.00"
TRANSITIONS:	Left Margin: 5.50"

There are several reasons for this:

- When screenplays are formatted correctly, one page translates, on average, into one minute of screen time so you can tell whether your story is the right length
- Readers and producers do not like it when writers pretend their screenplay is shorter than it is by stretching the margins or using a tighter font
- Formatting helps readers check at a glance whether you are writing too much dialogue or describing things in too much detail
- Formatting helps readers compare one script with another without being distracted by fancy typefaces.

Be aware that there are other formats used for TV fiction; however, all broadcasters will accept first draft screenplays written in Mastershot format.

i HOT TIP: Ask a friend to read through your screenplay to check that everything makes sense. Sometimes when you are in the middle of writing a screenplay, it becomes difficult to see which parts of the story are clear and which are not. Making a film is a collaborative business from beginning to end, so don't be afraid to ask for comments and suggestions.

Writing Action

As shown in 'Linking Scenes' **DG where**, the pace of the story is established by the way you set up and answer questions within scenes, and the speed and economy with which you cut between them. However, it may come as a surprise that the way you describe what you are seeing in your mind's eye also suggests to the producers and director how the film will look when it's shot.

Writing action for the camera is the best and most effective way of telling your story. The reason screenplays are laid out with dialogue in that narrow column down the middle is not to make it easier to read, but to allow for the fact that dialogue eats screentime in a way that action does not. Always remember that you are a screenwriter and not a playwright and this means that you need to "see" your story, and then describe it so that the reader will see it too.

This does not mean writing in specific camera angles, which distances the reader from the action. Instead you should write simple descriptive sentences, that convey the crucial elements of the human interactions which move the story forward. Think how people look at each other; how they react to what someone does; and how they react to what someone says. Think who you might need to reveal is watching or overhearing the action; and how the observer's reactions can best be shown to the audience. But above all, concentrate your action around the main questions the scene has to answer, and the emotions of the lead character in the scene and their opponent. When in doubt always focus on the character under the greatest emotional strain because they will almost always be the most watchable character.

Think who you intend to focus on in each scene and when you might switch angles to focus on their scene opponent. Think of the scene's purpose within the overall narrative and whether it is best shown in close up, medium shot or long shot (or a combination of the above) and then write your description to suggest your preferred camera position.

A few do's and don'ts

1. Think like a camera - but don't write the camera. Thus you don't write Medium Shot or Long Shot, but describe what you would see if the camera was placed in that position. Similarly if you write a long sentence with commas that picks out several things to look at the reader will assume you are writing a PAN or DOLLY SHOT; whereas if you write staccato sentences they will assume that you intend to make quick cuts. Every time you move the camera from one set-up to another (e.g. from a table in a restaurant to the door), this needs to be written as a separate paragraph indicating a new camera position.
2. Put another way, don't write camera angles unless the angle is ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL to understanding the action (e.g. CLOSE ON the Ambassador's wife's hand as she slips the key into James Bond's pocket; or PULL BACK TO REVEAL the Ambassador watching from the balcony above), or you have some splendid CRANE SHOT opening where you absolutely need to indicate how they might go about achieving the desired visual result.
3. Don't write what a character is thinking or feeling – find a way to show it. You can't film thoughts or emotions except as they are expressed in action.
4. Don't forget to focus on how the conflict is playing and use your descriptions

to increase the sense of tension or suspense. Think how gunfight scenes are shot to focus closer and closer in upon the action and to use surreal low angles to intensify our emotional response; study similar movies so you can steal and reinvent their descriptive techniques.

5. Don't shy away from describing scenes of sex or violence if they are necessary to the narrative. It is your job to give a suggestion of how these might be shot (or suggested) even if they end up being reworked by some hot-shot director or choreographer.
6. Every time you write a full stop you suggest a new shot, and every time you use a paragraph break you are suggesting a new camera placement, so use punctuation to create the visual impression you require. Conversely if you bunch all your action descriptions altogether to save space (as some new screenwriters do), it will either suggest the camera is not moving or look as though you do not understand how to write action.
7. If you wish to describe a moving shot (whether it be a steady cam shot, a tracking shot or a pan), write it as one sentence broken up with commas every time important new elements come into frame. For example: A busy street. A man dodges through the oncoming crowd, ducks left into a lane, and starts to run.

① **HOT TIP:** When you are writing action, use the old editor's trick and work standing up. Your lack of movement in a writing chair can sometimes limit your ability to visualise movement. Choreograph what you are seeing with your own movements or alternatively with rudimentary storyboards to explore the cinematic possibilities of the scene and the visual shorthand you can use to tell your story with the greatest economy.

EXERCISE: Take an action filled scene from your outline story and try writing it using the correct screenplay layout. In the first instance do not write the dialogue, but just synopses what they need to say. Concentrate instead on describing the clips you would want to shoot, where every new sentence is a new shot and every paragraph break represents a move of camera position.

Writing dialogue

I have left writing dialogue until quite late in this guide for the simple reason that it is not something you should really start to do until you are really sure about the structure of your story and the way it will look on the screen. To state the obvious, movies are primarily about moving images, where the sound design and dialogue support the image and not the reverse. It is therefore more important to know where your imaginary camera is pointing and what the purpose of each scene is before you decide what needs to be said and what does not. If you write a scene of dialogue between two people without knowing what the scene needs to do to move the story forward, then it quickly starts to resemble a ping-pong match with no foreseeable end, and the audience may lose interest in what is being said.

The most important thing therefore is to work out whose scene it is and what that character wants out of that scene. You then need to concentrate on the visual elements of the scene to work out how the characters will interact physically, and only then do you start to write dialogue that will achieve your purpose. And, as a general rule, the less dialogue you write the better!

Once you are clear about what needs to happen in the scene and the overall look and feel, you can start to write your dialogue.

But what makes good dialogue?

Dialogue has a number of key functions to move a story forward:

- it needs to reveal character motivation and help explain why they act as they do, and what they learn during the course of the story.
- it needs to give the audience key information about the context and setting of the story,
- and thirdly and least importantly (unless you are writing a comedy), it needs to entertain.

To write good dialogue you should know your characters so well you can think like them and know what they would say based on their specific desires and needs, interests and contradictions. This is why it is so important to ask the basic motivation questions about all your characters and build up an active character description of who they are and how they think (see the section Describing Characters).

To help you master dialogue, here are a few useful pointers:

- Think in character, understand their motives and background in each scene – ask what does each person want?
- Establish who is the lead character in each scene and ask: what do they want? And will they get it?
- Then order your dialogue around these questions and what the main active question is in the current scene.
- Write as though for a particular actor.
- Get some friends around to read scripts aloud – then rewrite the scene to see if you can make it better.

① **HOT TIP:** If you still find that all your characters sound alike, try restricting their vocabularies (e.g. allow Jeff only to use Plain English words like talk and choose, and allow Dr Morris to use more Latin-based words like communicate and decide); give them different idiosyncrasies (e.g. Sally never finishes a sentence, Doris always finishes other people's) or give each character distinct slang expressions to use (e.g. 'by the way', 'pure magic', or 'actually, darling'). Restricting what characters are allowed to say can help you focus on who they really are and what they want. You're just coming at it from a different angle.

EXERCISE: Choose a scene of verbal confrontation from one of your favourite films and transcribe it in screenplay format describing both the actions you see and the words that are spoken. Note carefully how the actors move in the scene and how you might describe who is in control at different points in the scene. The ability to give the director and actors a sense of how the scene will play visually is an integral part of good screenwriting.

Subtext and 'on-the-nose' dialogue

When you listen to people talking at work, or on the bus, they almost never say what they are really thinking. There is therefore no reason to have people in movies say exactly what they are thinking either, except during those few big confrontation scenes where your characters finally tell each other what they really think.

As a screenwriter you need to find ways for characters to reveal to the audience what they are thinking, without using obvious, 'on-the-nose' dialogue, and without necessarily giving the same information to the other characters in the scene. This hidden information is called subtext and is extremely entertaining for the audience, since it adds extra layers of meaning to the action. Some of the characters in the scene may be aware of some of these layers of meaning, but rarely all of them. This often places the audience in a privileged position, where they know more about (or think they know more about) what is going on than the characters.

When the audience has privileged information about what is going on they are able to sympathize even more with the lead character (or enjoy the comeuppance of opponents or comic characters). This helps build suspense (or comic anticipation) about what is likely to happen, and how you the screenwriter will resolve the difficult predicament created for the characters. Subtext also allows actors to explore the character of the person they are playing, which further intensifies our enjoyment of the film.

A good example of subtext occurs in *The Two Towers* when Frodo is captured by Faramir. The audience knows that Frodo has the ring, that Faramir is Boromir's brother, that Boromir was hungry for power, and we suspect that Faramir may be too. We quickly realize that Frodo is in a very difficult position because if he does not explain who he is, Faramir may think he is working for Sauron, while if he does he risks revealing he is the ring bearer, and Faramir may try to steal it like his brother. These underlying narrative elements make the scene rich in subtext and very tense. Frodo manages to wriggle his way through this difficult conversation, though after Gollum is caught stealing fish from the sacred pool he has to come clean. With the truth of his mission revealed, it seems that Faramir will indeed steal the ring as his brother intended. However, then the Nazgul arrive and Faramir is wise enough to see that the ring cannot be controlled and must be destroyed.

❶ HOT TIP: Exposition is defined as the critical information necessary to understand the plot. Exposition is always necessary at the beginning of the film where the writer needs to communicate to the audience where we are, who the characters are and what they have been doing up to now. When critics talk about there being 'too much exposition' in a film, they usually mean that it has been handled obviously and sounds false. The trick as a writer is to think very carefully about what you really need to tell the audience for them to understand what is going on. Then think of all the possible ways you can give the audience information through visual clues. When you cannot find a way to tell the audience using a visual, try to bury the exposition in scenes of emotional conflict, humour or spectacle (as is done at the start of *The Fellowship of the Ring* when Galadriel tells us the story of Sauron and the Ring of Power). This way the audience will be distracted by more important business and not notice you are feeding them important – and potentially boring -

information along the way.

EXERCISES: Here are a few simple exercises you can try to help you improve your dialogue writing and your understanding of subtext:

- Write a scene where one character tells another a story without realizing that the other person already knows what happened; concentrate on how the other person reacts and responds.
- Write a conversation in which the characters are so excited that no one finishes a sentence.
- Write a scene with one person trying to tell another that they love them, but being too afraid to say it straight for fear of being rejected.
- Write a Hitchcock style scene with two people talking intercut with another scene showing the police about to raid the house they are in. How much tension can you create?
- Write a scene about a young child describing a fight between their parents without knowing what it was really about.
- Write a wedding scene where lots of relatives are giving different versions of what the bride and groom are really like.

Rewriting

Most writing is rewriting. A screenplay by its very nature is a blueprint for a movie, so by definition it can never be truly finished. As soon as a producer, funder or actor comes aboard a project, the screenwriter will be expected to make changes to accommodate any number of things, from alterations to the setting or budget, to the specific desires of any of the other people involved. For some, this can be an intimidating and difficult process, but the more you understand what your screenplay is really about, the greater the chances are you will be able to defend what is really important and make changes which improve the story rather than damage or compromise it.

Since the writer is always rewriting, the most important rewrite of all is the first rewrite - which you will often make on your own and in isolation. This is the time when you assess whether you have fulfilled the promise of your premise, synopsis, beat outline, step outline (and sometimes treatment) or not.

If you are not happy with your rough draft – and the chances are you won't be – you need to be able to analyse your own work to find out where it is working and where it is not. This is not easy, but you should by now have many of the tools needed to really interrogate your own work and see where improvements can be made.

Sometimes rewriting is a painful process because it can mean going back to the beginning and starting again. But rest assured no work you will have done on a project is ever truly lost. Indeed, even if you throw the whole screenplay out it will inform the rewrite.

The rewrite therefore encompasses two main stages:

- a) identifying the problems,
- b) fixing them in the correct order

Identifying the problems

So what's the problem?

You've finished the script and something isn't right. But you don't know what it is – let alone how to fix it. Problem is that even with a well planned script certain aspects of the story will change through the telling. Some of these things will be for the better and some for the worse.

Characters do develop a life of their own and sometimes they will surprise you. Sometimes you find you are writing two movies simultaneously and need to strip one out. So how do you analyse your narrative and identify the problems.

First look for the obvious big problems:

Do you now know what the story is about? Or are you still confused?

Are you writing a cohesive movie? Or are you writing two or more competing narratives from different genres?

Concept:

- Does the story still have the x-factor you thought it did? (i.e. Is the concept clear or

not?

- What does the movie poster look like?
- Would you pay to see this film?

Structure and form:

- Look at the ending: Does the story have a positive or negative ending?
- Is the story properly structured to deliver that ending?
- Is the form appropriate to the aims of the story? (e.g. Could you tell this story a different way? Would it be less clumsy without the narrator? Does it really need to be an ensemble piece?)

Theme:

- What moral choices does the lead character make (particularly at the end)?
- Has the lead character changed in a meaningful way and how? (Have you shown this properly through action)
- Has the theme changed since you started? (What's the poster strapline?)
- Is the task sufficiently testing to challenge your lead character's weaknesses to the full? (i.e. Has the inner conflict been successfully externalised?)

Character:

- Have you written a passive lead character who is reacting rather than acting?
- Are the character's actions credible or do they jump unbelievably?
- Have the subplots become more interesting than main plots?
- Has a secondary character become more interesting than the lead character you started with?
- Are the lead character's motivations clear?
- Do you know what s/he wants and what s/he will have to do to get it?
- Do you know what s/he really needs to find out about him or herself by the end, and whether they will realise it in time or not?
- Do you set your lead character a big enough challenge or place them in an almost impossible predicament? (if not why not)
- Are you sure you have picked the right character to be challenged by your predicament?
- Can the character be weakened to make the challenge more difficult?
- Can you intensify the character's problems, weakness and greatest fear?
- Remember: the gap between what the lead character wants and what they really need creates the opportunity for the antagonist to attack.

Opponent:

- Do you know who your opponent is and why they are appropriate to this movie?
- Does the main opponent make the lead character jump through sufficiently large hoops?
- Does the opponent exploit the lead character's weakness to the full?
- NB. The main opponent should have similar wants to the lead character – that is why the love interest can be defined as the main opponent in a romance or a romantic subplot because they want and need similar but crucially different versions of the same things: love and sex.
- Is the opponent too easy to beat?
- How has the opponent exposed the lead character's weaknesses and forced

him/her to change?

- Can you make the opponent stronger and still deliver a believable ending?
- Does the final struggle provide a satisfying conclusion to their struggle?

Secondary characters:

- Do you have too many secondary characters? (this is a frequent problem with screenplays which move between two worlds)
- Does each subplot complement the main plot? (or do they operate independently from each other)
- How does each subplot relate to the central theme?

The Audience:

- Are you aware how the audience will be made to feel at each stage in the story and why?
- Do you hook the audience properly at the beginning?
- Do you give them a big finish at the end?
- Does the story twist in interesting and unexpected ways in between?
- Are you using all the main dramatic tools at your disposal to their most telling effect?
 - Dramatic Tension – this is when the audience sees the narrative through the actor's eyes
 - Suspense (a.k.a. dramatic irony) – this is when the audience knows more than the character, sympathises with them and therefore starts to pity them and fear for them in drama, or contrariwise enjoy anticipating their discomfort in a comedy.
 - Mystery – this is when the audience knows less than the character (e.g. at the beginning of a movie and the start of every sequence or scene)
 - Surprise and Reversals – have you constructed the back stories, motives and needs of your characters, so they can act towards each other in surprising and revealing ways which will energise and refresh your story.
 - Genre irony – this is when the audience knows more than the character because they know what type of movie the character is in where the character does not. Are you delivering therefore an original twist on the audience's plot expectations or are you merely serving up genre clichés? NB. Genre expectation also relates to the specific mix of dramatic tools you use in any specific genre (e.g. contrary to popular belief a thriller usually relies more on dramatic tension, surprise and genre irony than true Aristotelian suspense).
 - Cinematic irony (a.k.a suspension of disbelief) – In one sense an audience always knows more than the character by virtue of the fact that they are watching a movie, whereas the character believes they are real. Do you have a clear vision of how the audience will relate to your story, or are you alerting them too often to the fact that they are watching a movie and thereby distancing them from the cinematic experience. Movie references can be very effective in certain types of films (particularly comedies), but used inappropriately they can really damage the audience's enjoyment.

Plotting:

- Is the plotting credible?
- Is the plotting clever with unexpected twists and turns? Or is it wholly predictable?
- Is there a point in the plot that is far too convenient and does not spring from cause and effect in the character motivation?
- Do you rely too much on coincidence? If so remove it, remember you are only allowed one obvious coincidence which usually occurs near the start of the movie, any more and you are short-changing the audience.
- Does the story lack suspense? (have you set the story up to make the lead character interesting enough to engage with? Does s/he “suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”? If not, why not? We need to sympathise with him/her.)
- Is the pace uneven?
- Do all the characters weave into the story properly or are some left hanging?
- Does your ending deliver on the promise of the main active questions in surprising ways? (i.e. do you solve all the issues)

Sequences and scenes:

- Can you identify the purpose of each scene?
- Is each sequence driven by an overriding question that must be answered?
- Have you properly alerted the audience to this imperative?
- Do you enter on a question, do battle over it, resolve it and set a new one?
- Are your scenes linked properly into sequences with active questions or do you kill the pace by overwriting and not cutting away early enough to propel the action ?
- Does each scene have a beginning, a middle and an end?
- Do scenes develop in surprising ways or are they a bit predictable?
- Do sequences end with intersections from sub-plots, to reinvigorate the main plot?

Action and visual style:

- Are you in control of your visual style?
- Are you viewing the whole story through an imaginary camera, or are you writing for the stage?
- Is the narrative visually interesting?
- Is your POV system clear or is your camera flitting around between characters like a lost dog?
- Are you writing what people reveal about themselves through action - or are you trying to describe the thoughts inside people's heads and giving the actors impossibly complex lines?

Dialogue:

- Is the dialogue economical and does it support the action? (or vice versa?)
- Is dialogue rich in subtext or blunt and on-the-nose?
- Is the tone consistent?
- Are characters' speech patterns distinct from each other?
- Do some characters have too much dialogue and others too little?
- Are you giving the best lines to your lead characters? Your actors will kill you if you aren't.

Budget:

- Are your locations appropriate? (Too costly? Uninspired?)
- Could the story be told on a smaller scale, or should it be told on a larger one?
- Are there parts here for big names?

① **HOT TIP:** 'Breaking the Fourth Wall' refers to the idea of unnecessarily reminding the audience that they are watching a movie, instead of allowing them to be absorbed into the cinematic world. The 'Fourth Wall' in this sense is the screen that separates the audience from the action. It can be broken when characters address the camera; through excessive and unmotivated use of narration; hammy acting; on-the-nose dialogue; unnecessary 'smarts'; overt and gratuitous cinematic referencing; the appearance of the director on screen; rogue booms, poor continuity, etc. 'Breaking the Fourth Wall' is a more acceptable conceit in ironic comedies (e.g. *Blazing Saddles*, or *Pulp Fiction*), but can lessen an audience's enjoyment of drama unless handled with great delicacy. Sometimes, a film can be structured in such a way that the 'Fourth Wall' can be broken to good effect (e.g. *Alfie*). The general rule of thumb for breaking the 'Fourth Wall' is that the device (e.g. addressing the camera) should be motivated by the nature of the story (e.g. it's a confessional) and used consistently throughout the film.

EXERCISE: Analyse your draft screenplay using the checklist above. Give yourself marks out of ten for each question. This may sound daft but giving yourself a score will help you identify where you are strong and where you need to concentrate your rewriting efforts.

Rewrite in stages

Having identified the problems in your screenplay it can be tempting to correct areas as you discover them. However, it is often more productive to stage the rewrite, since there's no reason to fix the dialogue if there is a structural problem that may require more major surgery. Different screenwriters have different ways of going about this, but here is a way that works for me.

Step 1 - Structure: Plots and sequences.

- Check the ducks really line up: plot out the emotional arc of your story.
- Check whether the drama increases in intensity through the story up to the final resolution.
- Check your themes are appropriate to the genre or genre mix.
- If you are testing genre boundaries, gauge how an audience is likely to feel when they discover they have been misled – and how much of the audience you might lose as a result? Genre boundaries can be broken but it is more difficult to do well than it looks. For instance, in *Psycho* Hitchcock pulled the biggest genre busting trick of all time, but he understood clearly that he could only make it swing if we didn't like the seeming heroine too much. Thus he goes out of his way to make us feel ambivalent about her in the first half of the movie. We feel the dramatic tension of the situation but we don't feel real suspense (pity and fear for her), so when she is killed we can move on to our new lead character, Norman Bates, shocked but not emotionally gutted. Similarly, the movie *Lantana*, which starts as a detective story and ends as an existential story about people's lives in modern Sydney, appealed to cineastes, but was not a massive box office success.
- Map out in a beat outline or diagrammatic form the main active questions at story and sequence level. Do you understand how these drive the story?
- Do the same for your subplots and identify how these intersect with the main plot.
- Check that your theme is nailed into the narrative in the set-up and conclusion of your story. (e.g. *Cold Mountain* is very good at reminding us both at the beginning and the end that this story is about how one spark of fleeting love when properly cherished is ultimately more powerful than war)

Step 2 - Characters: make them all they can be

- Write down in one sentence the motivation and arc of each character and lay them out in order of importance in a matrix: what do they want, what do they need to find out about themselves, what is their weakness, what do they have to do to try and get what they want and how will they change by the end of the story? For example Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* might be *synopsised* in this fashion:
 - Don Corleone is a powerful but ageing Don who takes a moral stance against drugs and is badly wounded in an ambush (and forced to abdicate as Don).
 - The emotional daughter Connie marries Carlo, a pretty boy opportunist who betrays the family.
 - An ambitious Turkish gangster attempts to assassinate the Don for the rival New York families.
 - Sonny, the hot-headed eldest son, launches a full-blown gang war and ends up dead.

- The second son Fredo hasn't the brains or the bottle to take over and becomes envious of his younger brother.
 - McClusky, the corrupt police captain, helps the Turk but ends up dead.
 - Tom Hagen, the adopted son, is pressurised to betray the family but remains loyal.
 - Kay, a good American girl, believes Michael can change and ends up destroying her life.
 - Michael, the idealistic third son in a crime family, avenges his father's attack and becomes the new Don of Dons.
- Try to find ways of intensifying the conflict between what characters want and what they need, as well as between each other.
 - See if you can push your characters' conflicts to greater extremes (without damaging their emotional credibility).
 - Check that each character is clearly drawn and introduced at an appropriate dramatic moment.
 - Be honest with yourself and ask whether each character is emotionally believable - and do the change in a credible way as a result of what happens to them (cause and effect)?
 - Try to think of ways to make them more active, more interesting and more watchable. Give them things to do.

Step 3 - Sequences and scenes

- Identify the active questions for each sequence.
- Identify the active questions in each scene and check that they build through the sequence.
- Check you have a similar number of scenes in each sequence.
- Check each sequence has a proper climax and work out the best way to lead in to the next sequence (remember this dramatic impetus often comes from subplots that have been bubbling away off-screen)
- Check that the intensity of the questioning rises with each successive sequence (e.g. *Intolerable Cruelty*, Will Miles Massey defeat Marylin in Court? Will he persuade her to fall for him? Can he dissuade her from marriage to Howard Doyle? Will Marylin call for Miles? Will he marry her? Can he save his reputation and fortune? Can he save her life? Will they find true love?)
- Check the scenes have a cohesive sense of pace and rhythm and aren't clogged with unnecessary dialogue based scenes.
- Check that the dramatic nature of each sequence is in keeping with the overriding genre expectations.
- Make sure you incorporate aftermath scenes at the end of each sequence to allow the audience time to digest what is going on.

Step 4 - Scenes, action and dialogue

- Dramatise each scene to ensure that it has an active question, a clear emotional structure and a clear purpose. And be honest here!
- Check who is driving the scene and who is opposing them.
- Make sure you understand what the lead character wants and what they need in each scene, and that the main opponent attacks them in an unexpected but appropriate fashion.
- Check that you enter and exit each scene on a clear question and don't hang

about unnecessarily.

- If a scene is unnecessary and adds little to the story structure seriously consider cutting it.
- Check the scenes are active and that the dialogue supports the action and not the reverse.
- Check that dialogue is revealing character and that exposition is disguised with emotional conflict.
- Check that every word has a purpose as well as a meaning.
- If you are writing a comedy – check that each scene is funny.

Step 5 - The polish

- Once all the other steps are complete read the screenplay through again and then concentrate upon improving your description of action to give the screenplay a good sense of style and pace.
- Check once more whether you need all that dialogue or whether you could say it better with a look. It sounds like an old movie cliché, but if you analyse most good movies people say a lot less than you probably think they do.

Step 6 - The proof

- Proof read your work. Punctuation and typos do count.
- Look out especially for character name changes.
- Discrepancies in scene headings (e.g. sometimes you call it MIKE'S HOUSE and at others MIKE'S APARTMENT etc.).
- Number discrepancies that have built up through the writing (e.g. the ransom started off as £1million but you later decided to make it a more realistic £50K).

Step 7 - Final Read Through

- You must know what every word in your screenplay is there for and why. You must also be sure that there are no words missing that are necessary to explain the story to reader, director or producer.

❗ **HOT TIP:** Only once a rough draft has been fully rewritten do you have a First Draft screenplay and it remains a First Draft screenplay, however many times you rewrite it, until it is in development with a production company. Do not write Draft 17 on the front unless your project is in funded production.

Writing for Film or TV

There are numerous differences between Film and TV production values that stem from the different viewing experiences and the different economic imperatives faced by these two related industries.

Watching a movie in the cinema, one is totally focused on the screen, whereas when we watch TV in our living rooms at home the screen is smaller and there are numerous things to distract us. As a result TV tends to be more obvious and less demanding of the viewer's attention. The pace is often slower, the cinematographic style less flamboyant, and the sound design less complex.

While film is the work of relatively few artisans (and I include Hollywood here), TV is a giant worldwide industry with an incredible need for throughput. It has a ravenous appetite for product and therefore tends to prefer endlessly repeating stories that can be used to fill up the schedule, repeated and then sold on to other broadcasters around the world. A large segment of TV drama budgets are therefore soaked-up by long-running drama franchises, which are predominantly made up of 'soaps', sitcoms, sit-dramas (like 'Bad Girls') and detective formats, and the occasional two-part drama or landmark series.

When you write for TV, it is unlikely you will be the creator of the programme format but rather a jobbing writer who is paid to write on a show that has been 'storylined' by a series editor (who has worked their way up through the TV system). You are expected to know the characters inside out and not to make them change in such a way that would jeopardise the longevity of the series.

When you analyse dramatic output you cannot escape the conclusion that the main difference between TV and Film Stories is that in movies, characters undergo much greater change in less screen time than in TV-land. The implication of this is twofold:

1. If you are writing for a movie you need to construct your story in such a way that the character will face bigger challenges (often the biggest challenges of their lives) and undergo greater change than in TV drama. NB. There are action franchises such as the *X-Men* or *James Bond* which do not seem to conform to this pattern; however, it is worth noting that in action movies in general the need for grand spectacle tends to mean that characters are more two-dimensional and undergo less change than in other genres.
2. If you are trying to come up with a TV story format you will need to come up with a formula that can repeat from week to week with few lasting consequences for the lead characters. In soaps like *East Enders* and *Coronation Street* (or even the new hybrid American soaps like *Six Feet Under* and *The Sopranos*) the characters do need to change, but at a much slower pace than in movies. Indeed, greater change is often seen in the story opponents, and greater attention should be paid in TV writing to showing the moral complexities and revealing the fatal flaws of the villain in each episode or story strand.

Another key to remember is that movies usually have fewer characters than TV series. This is not only because there are very few true 'ensemble' movies, but also

because in a two-hour movie you have much less time to set-up characters, create meaningful conflict between them and bring all the story threads together to create a big finish that is decisive, satisfying and pays off the theme of your story in a meaningful way. As a rule of thumb, movies should have between five and seven key characters (lead character, main opponent, friends, false friends, etc.), whereas a TV series like a cop show or a soap may have anything from 10-20 returning characters.

① HOT TIP: When you have written a scene, see if there is a way to enter the scene later and leave earlier to increase the dramatic conflict and maintain the pace of the story. Audiences are very good at filling in the gaps regarding how the character entered the building, was served a cup of coffee, etc. So unless someone is trying to stop them doing these things, cut to the chase and get to the real meat in the scene. American TV series like Crime Scene Investigation are very good at making hard cuts along a line of questioning to make the otherwise episodic TV experience as gripping as possible.

Short Films

Writing, directing or producing a short film is one of the best ways to get yourself noticed in the Film and TV industries. They are a great proving-ground for your talent, and, though the ability to write a short film by no means guarantees your ability to create a satisfying feature drama, the short is nonetheless an important step in many screenwriters' careers (particularly if you want to become a screenwriter/director).

The most important thing for you to remember about short films is that they must have a similarly high-ambition as feature films. Just because you are writing a short film does not mean that you should write about little events, less interesting characters or more humdrum predicaments. On the contrary, you should instead look to concentrate your cinematic imagination around a few highly significant dramatic events in your lead character's life that result in meaningful change, or alternatively reveal something emotionally profound about their inner nature.

Short films are as much about conflict as feature films and should therefore follow a similar schematic structure to that discussed in reference to feature films.

1. **Introduce your lead character and setting**
2. **What does the lead character want?**
3. **How does s/he set about getting what s/he wants?**
4. **Set-backs** - Because s/he is not aware of what it is s/he *really* needs, s/he will usually go about getting what s/he wants the wrong way. This brings the lead character into conflict with other people who don't like what s/he is doing - or the way s/he is going about it.
5. **Conflict** - The arguments and fights become more and more heated until it looks like the lead character will be defeated.
6. **Final Struggle** - The lead character summons his/her strength for a final attempt to achieve his/her goal.
7. **Endings** - The lead character discovers that what they thought they wanted in the beginning was only part of the truth; that there is more to life than they originally thought.

But how do you get all this narrative into a short film?

The answer of course is that you compress action, you restrict your themes and – most importantly - you limit the number of significant characters,. Whereas, a feature film has 5-7 key characters (this does not include minor characters, background artists and cannon fodder), a short film rarely has more than two well developed characters: the lead character and the main opponent.

To help you understand this better, it is worth noting that there are three main types of short film, each of which has different characteristics:

- A. **Short shorts** (2-5 minutes) – sometimes called shotgun shorts, the short short is usually a one-trick pony employing mystery and dramatic tension more than suspense:
 - i. They usually feature one lead character whose nature is often *revealed* rather than fundamentally *changed* by the narrative.

- ii. Short shorts are often told in a formally inventive way and are often (though not necessarily) comic in tone.
- iii. Most short shorts tend to be constructed a little like a joke or a TV advertisement where the nature of the narrative is often unclear until the very end when all is revealed with a big twist. So much so, that a big audience for short shorts is admen looking for ideas to 'borrow' for their next TV advertising campaign.
- iv. The second most popular form of the short short is the circular short where a character repeats a set of comic actions in order to attain a simple goal, e.g. a boy makes repeated attempts to retrieve a ball from a fearsome dog.
- v. In the third most popular form of the short short the film has a conceptual structure that reveals a familiar world from a new perspective, e.g. a baby's eye view of the adult world.
- vi. Short shorts may cost as little as £3000 to make (even less if you have friends in the industry or have editing software at home) and are therefore a great way for an absolute beginner to get themselves noticed.

B. Mid-range shorts from 8-12 minutes – The mid range short is the most popular length for funded short film schemes like the UK Film Council's Digital Shorts Scheme, Scottish Screen's Tartan Shorts or Cineworks.

- i. Mid range shorts usually have a lead character and a main opponent with perhaps two or three other archetypal or even stereotypical supporting characters (e.g. the lead character's husband).
- ii. Stories often focus on a specific moment of conflict between the two central characters.
- iii. The thematic ambitions are usually greater than short shorts, though usually not as morally complex as the long short form.
- iv. Mid-range shorts often have more defined genre ambitions than short shorts, since they have more time to play with audience expectations and generate sympathy, pity and fear for the lead character.
- v. Mid range shorts often play with narrative form (e.g. cross-cutting between two separate timelines or series of events as a way of compressing action and making the piece feel more intense).
- vi. Mid range shorts often have a very short mid-section with more resources devoted to the beginning and the end.

C. Long shorts (a 12-25 minute short film) – sometimes called Academy shorts, with big ambitions and more complex themes.

- i. Long shorts have a developed beginning, middle and end.
- ii. They may have up to four key characters, though probably only two will be fully developed, (i.e. they will be characters who show significant change between the beginning and the end).
- iii. The greater length allows for more significant character development and real change.

- iv. This means that screenwriters are able to show the character predicament more clearly and deploy the full range of dramatic tools at their disposal (dramatic tension, mystery, genre irony – but particularly suspense) to generate meaningful life-changing drama.
- v. They tend to be less conceptual and have a more traditional narrative form, e.g. a linear timeline from beginning to end.
- vi. Long shorts often have higher production values than shorter shorts because they are produced by writer-director-producer teams aiming to prove they are ready to take the step-up to features.

For more in-depth analysis of the short film see Phil Parker's *The Art and Science of Screenwriting*.

① HOT TIP: Though the idea may come to you in a second, developing a short film script may take up to a year to complete. Before you commit to any single idea, why not try to come up with several different short film ideas. Once you have four or five to work with try analysing the ideas to identify a) how many significant characters there are, b) where the conflict comes from, c) what events you will need to show, d) the different forms in which you might tell the story (Is the story linear? Is it constructed with the final scene at the beginning so that most of the narrative is a flashback? Could you cross-cut action to compress time?), e) the genre of the story, f) a basic premise that shows who the lead character is and what they want, what they will have to do to get it, and how this will change them.

Asking these questions and referring back to these notes will help you identify which type of short your stories could be, and then allow you to refine your ideas accordingly. There's no point trying to force a good academy short idea into the mid range format to fit the criteria of a short film scheme without simplifying the character structure, nor trying to stretch a 'one-liner' shotgun short into eight and a half minutes.

Final word and Bibliography

In this basic guide, I have tried to put forward a cohesive theory that covers most of the main areas of screenwriting. I could have written at much greater length about all these areas, particularly on comedy, which is often given short shrift in critical circles despite its enormous popularity at the box-office. Clearly my ideas have been greatly influenced by the work of others and I therefore include a short bibliography which I hope you will find useful.

If you are serious about screenwriting I recommend that you read and internalise every single one of these books and any others you can find. Like me, you are unlikely to agree fully with every theory in every screenwriting book, but ultimately you will become more informed and more able to understand the process if you understand where other people are coming from when they criticise your work.

Otherwise, all that remains is to thank you for taking the time to read this guide, and before I go one final tip:

Think like a camera, screen your story in your head and write exactly what you see. And if you ever get depressed just remember writing a screenplay is damned hard work even for the professionals and if it doesn't keep you up at nights it won't keep anyone else up neither.

Good luck!

David Griffith

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- **Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization** by Michael Tierno
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- **The Great Movies: Why They Work** by John Truby. Free to download from www.truby.com/
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- **Art of Dramatic Writing: Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives** by Lajos Egri

General movie related books:

- **In the Blink of an Eye** by Walter Murch. More a bible for editors but really useful for writers too.
- **An Actor Prepares** by K.S. Stanislavski. The bible for actors which will help you enormously in constructing scenes.
- **Scene by Scene** by Mark Cousins

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Script Example - *Inside An Uncle* by David Cairns

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Gavin, aged seven, sits on the stairs and watches as MUM and DAD pull on their coats, ready to go out.

MUM

'Night, Gavin. We'll be back at ten.
Do what your Uncle Bob says.

UNCLE BOB, a big sweaty fat bloke, smiles warmly.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

One robot punches another. Gavin works the handset of his video game, making this happen.

UNCLE BOB

Hoy!

Gavin's hero is knocked flat.

UNCLE BOB (cont'd)

Bedtime.

Gavin is appalled.

GAVIN

But it's only -

UNCLE BOB

You've to do as I say, remember? And
I want a quiet evening, which means
bedtime for you. And brush your
teeth!

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Gavin's head hits the pillow in a huff.

GAVIN

Just 'cause he's bigger than me...

KLANG! A distant impact.

Gavin sits up. What was that?

KAPOW! Now he recognises it - the unmistakable sound of robot

butt being kicked.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Gavin creeps out of his room and down the stairs. He peers into the living room. He can see the back of Uncle Bob, on the couch facing the TV, the video game playing.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Gavin creeps closer.

And is shocked to see it's NOT Uncle Bob playing the game. On his lap is a small, fat, sweaty boy, LITTLE BOB, working the controls. Little Bob is just like Uncle Bob - only little.

GAVIN

Hey!

Little Bob spins around, startled and guilty.

GAVIN (CONT'D)

Who are you? That's my game!

The boy looks nervous, shooting glances at Uncle Bob, who sits motionless, giving no sign of hearing Gavin.

GAVIN (CONT'D)

Uncle Bob?

(to Little Bob)

What have you done to Uncle Bob?

LITTLE BOB

Nothing! I AM Uncle Bob.

This is patently nonsense.

GAVIN

THAT'S Uncle Bob!

LITTLE BOB

No it's not.

Little Bob looks furtive - he's said too much. Gavin whips out his mobile phone.

GAVIN

This is weird. I'm calling mum.

LITTLE BOB
Don't! You wouldn't want to get your
Uncle Bob in trouble, would you?

GAVIN
Wouldn't I?

He starts to punch in the number - BEEP BEEP BEEP -

LITTLE BOB
I can explain everything!

GAVIN
(skeptical)
Oh yeah?

He enters another digit - BEEP.

LITTLE BOB (cont'd)
Look - you believe that when you
grow up, you'll turn into a big
adult. Well you don't. You'll just
get given one of these.

He pats Uncle Bob's knee.

LITTLE BOB (cont'd)
A BOB - Big Outer Body.

Little Bob presses the buttons on Uncle Bob's waistcoat. They beep, and Uncle Bob's chest pops open, revealing a dark cavity, fitted with a small chair. Gavin is amazed.

LITTLE BOB
We decided it was important for us
adults to be bigger than you kids so
we could boss you about. But inside
every Big Outer Body is one of us.

GAVIN
You live in THERE?

LITTLE BOB
Why not?

He climbs in.

LITTLE BOB (cont'd)
Look, the whole thing's done -

He puts on a set of headphones with a microphone attached,
and Uncle Bob comes to life:

UNCLE BOB
- with electronics. It's smaller
than a car and the insurance is
cheaper. It's -

Little Bob removes the headset and climbs out.

LITTLE BOB
- the safest way to travel.

Gavin lowers the mobile phone and thinks.

GAVIN
But you can't be my uncle, you're
just a little kid.

Little Bob is indignant.

LITTLE BOB
I am not! I'm a fully grown adult.
This is as big as I get.

GAVIN
But what about growing up? Getting
hair on your chest? Getting
interested in girls?

LITTLE BOB
Those are just stories we use to
frighten kids. NOBODY'S interested
in girls - I mean, YUCK!

GAVIN
This is a lot to take in. You mean
I'll never really grow up? I'll just
get -

LITTLE BOB
- a Big Outer Body. Yes.

Gavin thinks.

GAVIN
I want a go.

LITTLE BOB
No way! When you're older.

GAVIN
(grinning wickedly)
Try and stop me.

He pushes Little Bob aside and jumps into Uncle Bob.

GAVIN (CONT'D)
Ready, steady -

He slams the hatches, nearly hitting an indignant Little Bob.

UNCLE BOB
- go! this is great!

INT. UNCLE BOB - NIGHT

A small TV shows what Uncle Bob sees. A greenish glow from the screen lights Gavin's face. He scans the instrument panel. A red button looks tempting.

GAVIN
Let's see what this -

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

UNCLE BOB
- does.

Uncle Bob farts.

UNCLE BOB (CONT'D)
That's BRILLIANT! Again!

Little Bob is frantic (and nauseated) as Uncle Bob lets off a plethora of pumps. His hair wafts in the warm breeze.

LITTLE BOB
Stop it! You'll blow a gasket!

BANG! The last fart tapers off into a strangulated whistle.

UNCLE BOB
OK, what else can this baby do?

LITTLE BOB
That's enough! You've already burst
my farter!

Uncle Bob wobbles to his feet.

UNCLE BOB
Wow! This is -

INT. UNCLE BOB - NIGHT

GAVIN
- fantastic! Let's hit the road!

He starts throwing switches randomly. The compartment rocks,
and on the TV he sees the living room lurch past, while
Little Bob jumps about in his path, trying to stop him.

LITTLE BOB (TV)
Stop! You're too young to drive!

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Uncle Bob collides with the doorframe, backs away into the
other side of the doorframe, and bounces back and forth in
the doorway several time.

UNCLE BOB
Oops!

LITTLE BOB
You'll break it!

Uncle Bob boings into the hall and heads for the stairs. He
stumbles up each step, swaying precariously.

Little Bob follows him, trying to grab him, backing off when
it looks like Uncle Bob might fall on top of him.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Uncle Bob falls onto the bed, laughing.

Little Bob jumps onto his chest, and presses the buttons on
Uncle Bob's waist coat.

UNCLE BOB
Ha ha! That was -

The hatch flips open.

GAVIN

- cool.

Little Bob is beside himself - in a very real sense.

LITTLE BOB

Do you have ANY idea how much one of these costs? Get out!

Little Bob climbs in, but Gavin won't get out.

GAVIN

No! I'm the grown-up now! You're the little kid! Go to bed! And brush your teeth!

LITTLE BOB

Get out of my body!

The hatch falls shut on them.

INT. UNCLE BOB - NIGHT

The two kids wrestle for the controls.

GAVIN

Come on! You get to play with it all the time!

On the TV we can see the bedroom wobbling about.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Uncle Bob bounces around the room, waving his arms, hopping, and pulling strange faces. His head turns from side to side as he argues inside.

UNCLE BOB

Get out! Will not! Will! I want you out of there! It's my turn! No it isn't!

His torso bulges as Gavin and Little Bob battle within.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Uncle Bob cavorts out of the bedroom.

UNCLE BOB

I'm going to count to three! I don't
care! One! I'm not listening! Two!
La la la la! Three! Get stuffed!

Uncle Bob teeters at the top of the stairs -
- and down he goes.

INT. UNCLE BOB - NIGHT

The kids rattle around as the compartment turns over and
over. The TV shows the staircase from a variety of ever-
changing angles.

CRASH! The screen fills with static.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Uncle Bob's hatch pops open. His arms and legs break off at
the joints. Springs sproing from odd places. His head rolls
into a corner.

Little Bob's legs stick out the legholes, and his head
emerges from the chest.

LITTLE BOB

Gavin?

Gavin sticks his head out of Uncle Bob's neck-hole.

GAVIN

Oh. Sorry.

LATER.

Gavin and Little Bob sit on the bottom step, looking over the
wreckage of Uncle Bob.

LITTLE BOB

We are in so much trouble. They'll
never give me another one of these.

A small fart.

GAVIN

Hey, at least the farter's fixed.

LITTLE BOB

(sad small voice)
No. That was me.

Little Bob is in despair. Gavin looks sheepish. Then he looks at the hall clock - ten to ten.

GAVIN
Get Dad's tool kit.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

With Uncle Bob's bits laid out on the bed under the glare of a standard lamp, Gavin and Little Bob prepare to operate. Both wear hankies as surgical masks and Gavin wears a set of Playstation miniature floodlights on his head.

GAVIN
Screwdriver.

LITTLE BOB
Screwdriver.

Little Bob slaps the device into Gavin's hand and he gouges at Uncle Bob's innards, discarding a chunk of machinery.

GAVIN
Sticky tape.

LITTLE BOB
Sticky tape.

Gavin rips off a length and binds it round Uncle Bob's neck.

GAVIN
Cheesy toast.

LITTLE BOB
Cheesy toast?

GAVIN
(shrugs apologetically)
My Mum says I've to eat.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Furious banging and boinging as they operate...

LATER.

The hands of the clock hit ten o'clock
The front door opens and Mum and Dad return.

MUM
We're back.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

They enter the living room and head straight for Gavin, who is sat on the floor playing his video game.
Uncle Bob slumps on the couch. His head is at a funny angle, one leg is raised, and his left hand keeps twitching.

MUM
Hello dear.

The hatch on Uncle Bob's chest pops up involuntarily. Inside, Little Bob frantically hushes Gavin and pulls the hatch shut.

MUM (CONT'D)
Hope he wasn't too much bother.

Uncle Bob replies, his voice crackles and slurs.

UNCLE BOB
N-n-none at allll.

Mum smiles.

MUM
Is that right, Gavin? Were you a big grown up boy?

Gavin works the controls of his video game and smiles.

GAVIN
Briefly.

Storyboard - Inside an Uncle



POW!
CGI, TV image (pixels)

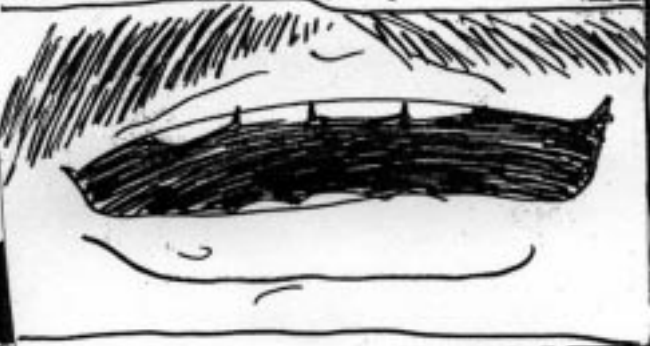
①



Wide angle
blue TV light
Unc Bob looms in

②

cover whole scene



COVERAGE - CU BOB
"and brush your teeth"

③

cover whole scene



Gavin lies DOWN into shot

3

1.

"Just cause he's bigger than me"



Gavin sits UP into view

exits screen right

2

we see his shadow on wall leave after him



4

1.

Gavin tiptoes downstairs
FAST.