

# THE SCREENWRITING MEGADOC

56 pages of raw storytelling techniques and advice.

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# Preface

I read way too many books on writing and screenwriting, and love trying to find patterns in storytelling across the media I consume. In all of the studying I've done, most of the information is vague or useless, and the important stuff is often scattered in different books, chapters, and websites. I wanted to create a centralized database of practical methods for myself and others to use. I'm trying to cover every aspect of storytelling so that this can be an important resource through all stages of writing.

Of course, the best way to learn screenwriting is to write and read screenplays. That doesn't mean you can't accelerate or assist your learning along the way with some guidance. In critiquing many bad movies and shows, many of them make a couple mistakes or forget key techniques that would've saved their stories. You don't want to end up like them, so I hope this document can act as a checklist to make sure your story isn't lacking in any area.

This will be written without fluff and meandering, so the chapters will be short and to the point. I will write everything very prescriptively as if these are the rules you must follow. Of course, you can do what you please, but let these rules guide you or at least inform you when you break them. The many facets of storytelling are organized by chapter for easy reference.

## Defining Terms

Before beginning, let's define some important story terms:

**STORY** – A complete narrative consisting of a **plot** driven by **characters** all connected by an interwoven **theme**. A story that lacks any one component or fails to tie them all together fails to be compelling, and, in my opinion, fails to be a story.

**PLOT** – The series of events within a story that result from the conflict between a character's **goal** and the **obstacles** that stand in their way. A good plot has events that are causally connected, well-structured, and well-paced.

**CHARACTER** – A person, or other decision-making agent in a story. Any well-crafted character will have strengths, flaws, goals, values, and backstory, as well as a want and a need.

**THEME** – A philosophical argument that underlies the surface-level conflict of the film. Examples include *order vs chaos*, *good vs evil*, *nature vs greed*, *freedom vs safety*, etc.

**SCENE** – Often called a “building block of story,” a scene takes place in one location at one time. A scene contains a combination of dialogue and actions, and every scene must have a narrative function, serving to develop a **plot**, **character**, **theme**, or some combination of the three.

**STORY GOAL** – The driving force of the main plotline is called the story goal. It motivates the main character(s) and is an ever-present engine propelling the **characters** and **plot** forward.

**STAKES** – An audience will lose investment without stakes. Stakes include both the reward for a character achieving the story goal and the consequences that follow failure to achieve the story goal.

**MC** – Short for main character, the MC is the primary perspective that the story follows. This character should be closely connected to the **plot** and **theme** of the story, and be someone the audience can empathize with. May also be called protagonist, hero, or perspective character.

**PAGE** – When referring to screenplays, one page (properly formatted) equals roughly one minute of screen time. Pages that are mostly action will be a little longer than a minute, and pages that are mostly dialogue will be a little shorter. “Pages” and “minutes” will be used interchangeably.

# Ideas

This chapter will cover different approaches to generating ideas for a story, along with the types of ideas you may encounter and how to expand on them.

## **Theme-first**

Pulling from philosophy, stories, or life experience, make a claim about the world (moral or factual) and build a story with a plot and characters that will test that claim.

For example: “order is better than chaos” and “average people are good” are both themes present in *The Dark Knight (2008)*. These themes are embodied by Batman, while The Joker acts as a challenge to those beliefs. The characters and events in that movie are really a way of using story to represent a philosophical debate around these themes.

## **Character-first**

Create a flawed character that must change to eliminate the flaw. From there, create a plot or world that forces a character to change. That change becomes the theme.

For example, you might create the character Walter White, a chemistry teacher who is undervalued and can't stand up for himself. He has no sense of control over his life.

How do we utilize his skills and force him to change? Tell him he has just months to live and inspire him to cook meth to provide for his family. This change in character informs one of our main themes: a cautionary tale against greed and ego.

## **World/Concept-first**

Ask yourself – “what if...?” What if there was a secret wizarding world? What if my life was all a TV show? What if a kid could see dead people?

You might also choose an existing setting or community, such as the mafia, high school, or even Ancient Egypt. Explore the unique properties of this setting that will inspire original scenes and plots.

Once you have a story world, populate it with different characters, and create an inciting incident that disrupts the status quo for the world or characters. Certain worlds and concepts will naturally indicate certain themes. A wizarding world with dark magic and chosen ones will lend itself to traditional themes of good vs evil.

## **Plot-first**

Start with some kind of inciting incident to kick off the plot. What does the resulting journey look like? What are some scenes, sequences, and twists you would like to see along the journey? How does the journey end?

Create characters most fitted for the plot and find out what they can learn from the story journey they take. Find out what themes underlie such a journey.

### **Other miscellaneous idea tips:**

- Combine two different or contradictory concepts.
- Start from genre, following and subverting genre conventions to create the story.
- Pull from life experience.
- Use “what if?” questions.
- Create a character with an obsessive goal.
- Create an intriguing setting that the audience/MC can learn about together.
- Put a twist on an existing story.
- Consume lots of literature and film.
- Let your mind wander during mindless activities.
- Subvert a trope, cliché, or genre expectation.
- Use real history or news to steal from or just inspire other ideas.

## High Concept

Having an idea that can be described as “high concept” is a very valuable thing, especially for new writers. It can be a crutch to lean on if your other writing skills are not so sharp yet.

### **What is it?**

A high-concept story is a story with a unique concept that is easy to pitch. A great recent example of a high-concept idea is Jimmy Warden’s script for *Cocaine Bear* (2023). The name itself communicates easily the unique concept of the film: what if a bear took cocaine?

### **Why strive for high concept?**

Aside from the obvious marketability and ease of pitching such a story, a high-concept idea makes writing the story itself easier. Because a high-concept idea usually involves

merging two unrelated ideas, one simply has to contemplate funny or dramatic situations that could result from such a merging. These situations become scenes, and because these scenes pull conflict from both parts of the concept, they generate unique jokes, set pieces, dialogue, and drama.

### **How do you generate high-concept ideas?**

Generally, a high concept involves the merging of two ideas or a twist on a generic idea. The resulting idea is good if it lends itself to conflict, and great if it implies a compelling theme. Here are some “formulas” for pumping out potentially high-concept story ideas:

#### **1. Spicing Up the Generic**

There’s a \_\_\_\_ (setting, character, inciting incident) but \_\_\_\_ (unexpected addition, twist, etc).

Ex: There’s a theme park but with real dinosaurs. (*Jurassic Park*)

Ex: There’s a school but for wizards. (*Harry Potter*)

#### **2. Twisting an Existing Idea**

It’s \_\_\_\_ (existing story) but \_\_\_\_ (new element).

Ex: It’s Castaway but on Mars. (*The Martian*)

Ex: It’s a monster movie but in space. (*Alien*)

Ex: It’s a mafia show but the boss sees a therapist. (*The Sopranos*)

#### **3. Twisting Reality**

What if \_\_\_\_ (everyday thing we take for granted) was \_\_\_\_ (different)?

Ex: What if children’s toys were alive? (*Toy Story*)

Ex: What if reality was a simulation? (*The Matrix*)

Ex: What if aging was happening in reverse? (*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*)

### **What next?**

Hopefully you found those tips helpful, but keep in mind that it’s not always easy to come up with solid high concept stories. I recommend keeping a notepad of all your ideas, and constantly try to find inspiration in your daily life and entertainment.

Once you have a high concept idea, refer back to the Ideas chapter for tips on developing the full story from there. Remember to utilize your concept to generate unique scenes and sequences that set your story apart.

# Format

This chapter will discuss the different formats for telling your story. This doesn't have much to do with the story itself, but will show you how some stories are better told in a certain format.

## Short Film

Any movie with a runtime of fewer than 50 minutes in length is considered a short film. Most often, however, short films are under 15 minutes long.

Short films are used to explore more simplistic conflicts or to experiment with a unique style. Because they lack the depth of longer formats, good short films use comedy, horror, or a final twist to spice up the narrative.

Short films can also be a way to experiment with breaking traditional writing rules, since the budget is low, and you don't need to keep the audience's attention for long.

## Feature Film

A generally self-contained story with a complete character arc. Feature films are versatile because they can cover as much as an entire lifetime or as little as a two hour trek in the woods. Runtime is 80-180 minutes depending on the genre:

- Comedy and kid's movies: 80-100 min
- Horror/thriller: 90-120 min
- Average feature: 110 min
- Superhero/action: 120-160 min
- Fantasy: 140-180

I kinda made these up, but they are generally accurate so I'd recommend keeping your movie within the standard time for its genre. Any audience should be hesitant to watch a 3-hour pixar movie or a *Star Wars* movie that is only 80 minutes long.

## TV – Episodic vs Serialized

Before going into the main types of TV shows, I want to review the difference between episodic and serialized shows.

In an **episodic** show, each episode is a self-contained story, and everything goes back to normal by the following episode. Generally the cast of characters and setting remain the same. Examples: *South Park*, *Criminal Minds*, and *Scooby-doo*.

In a **serialized** show, storylines can last for multiple episodes and seasons. Every episode is connected to the next in order, so that the story is only complete when one has watched every episode. Examples: *Breaking Bad*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Walking Dead*.

### **TV – Comedy**

The first type of TV show is a comedy. Comedies are almost always episodic, with each episode having a runtime of 20-30 minutes. Because each episode's plot can only produce so much comedy, a shorter runtime is favorable to maximize the number of jokes per minute. Comedies also tend to have more episodes per season than most hour-long dramas.

### **TV – Drama**

Dramas are generally 40-60 minutes in runtime, depending on the network and amount of commercials that eat up runtime. Network dramas (*NCIS*, *Grey's Anatomy*) are more episodic, while premium and streaming dramas (*The Sopranos*, *House of Cards*) are more serialized.

Basically every show in the running for best TV show of all time is an hour-long serialized drama. Examples: *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*. This doesn't mean that drama is the better TV format, but people are going to hold serious, emotional shows in higher reverence than comedies. What's important is that you choose the format that best fits the tone and function of your show.

### **TV – Other**

Anthology – New story, new characters, new setting in each episode.

Mini Series – Drama with a limited number of episodes, often less than 10.

Children's Animation – 15-25 minute episodes, episodic format.

### **Novel**

With a wordcount of at least 50,000, a novel can cover as much content as an entire season of television (*Game of Thrones*) or as little as a single feature film (*Harry Potter*).

I don't know much about writing novels, so the rest of the document will be from the perspective of writing TV shows and movies, though the tips will apply to all forms of storytelling.



# Story Essentials Checklist

This chapter provides a checklist of the bare essentials to have a story. If your narrative is missing any of these elements, it will fail to be compelling, and fail to tell a story.

Come back to this chapter every time you come up with a new idea to make sure it has the proper groundwork to be a story in the first place. Only when your story checks all of these boxes can you move on to the nitty-gritty aspects of storytelling.

## **CHARACTER** – *Who?*

The audience needs a vessel to experience the story through. This requires an empathetic, proactive character. More on creating this character in later chapters.

## **GOAL** – *What do they want?*

One strong, main goal is required to set the story in motion. It may be a reactive goal (to survive) or an active goal (to rob a bank). What is important is that the main character wants *something*. MC cannot be inactive, MC must resist change (react) or yearn for it (act). Now MC has a goal.

(Note: the main goal may not fully kick in until the second act.)

## **STAKES**– *Why must the goal be achieved? What happens if it isn't?*

There must be a reason to pursue this goal, otherwise the audience becomes uninvested in the outcome. Achieving the goal must have an outcome the MC desires. Failure must have an outcome that the MC will avoid at all costs. Having stakes is important for audience investment and logical storytelling.

## **CLOCK** – *When must the goal be achieved?*

The MC needs reason to pursue the goal now rather than later, otherwise MC would just wait until later. The clock gives the goal urgency. The clock can be a literal time limit or deadline to accomplish the goal, or it can be more of a “before it’s too late” or “before disaster strikes” kind of clock. Either way there needs to be a reason for your MC to act now.

## **OBSTACLE**– *What is stopping them from getting what they want?*

Without an obstacle, there is no struggle, and there is no story. The MC cannot be allowed to achieve their main goal until the end, because when they achieve their goal, the story is over. Obstacles force the MC to work, struggle, and adapt to achieve the

goal. Obstacles should be formidable and constantly set back your protagonist, ratcheting up the tension in the audience, making them question if the obstacles can be overcome. The series of obstacles your character faces make up your plot, and the chapter on scene structure will explain the most effective way to carry out the obstacles in your story.

**ENDING** – *Is the goal finally achieved or not?*

The ending completes your story. Yes, sometimes endings can be ambiguous or sudden, but there must be some kind of ending that brings closure – or intentionally denies it – to the audience. A good ending resolves as many dramatic and thematic questions as possible in an unexpected yet satisfying way.

**THEME**– *What can we learn from this story?*

Humans likely developed storytelling through evolution as a way of passing down knowledge to future generations. If your story doesn't teach the audience something or at least make them ponder something, you don't really have a story. Stories without themes feel empty. Even if your theme is something as generic as "hard work pays off" or "good triumphs over evil" your story has actually made a claim for the audience. It has taught them a lesson, though it would be better if it was not so obvious. Find some kind of question or claim that underlies your story.

(The chapter on theme discusses crafting a great theme and how to avoid preaching.)

**CHANGE**– *What has changed from beginning to end?*

A story needs to be worth telling. If everything in your story is the same at the end as it was in the beginning, it is not worth telling. If nothing has changed by the end of a scene, cut it. Stories are about change, and the more change the better. By the end of your story, circumstances have changed. Characters have changed. Dynamics have changed. The audience has changed.

One great example of a story lacking change is the horrendous *Ant Man and The Wasp: Quantumania*. By the end of this Marvel superhero movie, virtually nothing has changed. The villain is just as much of a threat at the end as he was in the beginning. Nobody has died. Nobody has changed except for one side character who was promptly killed off. The audience has not changed or learned anything. The main character has barely changed, since now he kinda accepts his daughter more or something. One of

the many reasons this movie sucks is because it fails to show noticeable change by the end of the movie.

## Theme

You may think themes are unnecessary or cringey, but I assure you that theme is the bedrock of your story. It helps you avoid telling an empty, meaningless narrative, and allows you to tell a real story. Themes will inform your plot, characters, tone, arcs, dialogue, ending, and emotion.

So, what is a theme?

A theme is a philosophical argument that underlies the plot, characters, and character arcs within a story. It can be phrased as a question with 2 opposing answers, or simply as one idea vs another. I call it philosophical because a good theme usually covers a deeper argument that has good arguments on both sides and no clear correct answer. This is not always the case when debating obvious things like good vs evil, but that discussion is still philosophical in nature.

It can often be hard to come up with a theme, especially one that isn't generic. The bad news is, there are only so many topics that make for a strong thematic argument. This is why we see the same themes repeated time and again throughout literature and film. The good news is, I'm gonna give you 3 theme formats, and a bunch of ideas in each category.

### **Devise a yes or no question:**

- Should general AI have the same rights as people?
- Does the greater good trump individual rights?
- Can people change?
- Do people have free will?
- Does morality exist?
- Does life have meaning?
- Is anyone really a bad person?
- Is the death penalty right or wrong?
- Is lying ever moral?

- Does love exist?
- Would immortality be a good thing?
- Is freedom more important than safety?
- Is war ever justifiable?
- Can utopia ever exist?
- Is religious faith rational?
- Does objective truth exist?

**Make a thematic statement. A claim about something in life. Is it true or false?**

- Ignorance is bliss.
- Technology is evil.
- Love never lasts.
- Family is a blessing.
- Money can't buy happiness.
- Power is an illusion.
- Being honorable is a weakness.
- The court system is unjust.
- Mankind is a disease.
- Society is uncivilized.
- People can be trusted.
- Peace never lasts long.
- There is beauty in everything.
- People are stupid.
- People are good.

**Pit two ideas against each other using a "vs."**

- Good vs evil
- Order vs chaos
- Cynicism vs idealism
- Faith vs skepticism
- Hope vs despair
- Optimism vs pessimism
- Logic vs love

- Passion vs money
- Morality vs nihilism
- Morality vs money
- Love vs duty
- Nature vs industrialization
- Courage vs fear

### **What does the theme do?**

You have picked a theme for your story. Great! But how do you use it?

Think of your story as a way of taking an abstract theme and putting it into specifics.

Story is really a vehicle for answering a thematic question, or at least exploring it in a way that anyone can understand. This means that when a dilemma pops up in your plot, it should be thematically related. When the character makes a decision, the audience sees how that decision is punished or rewarded, which teaches them which answer to the theme results in more success. In a typical positive character arc, this means that your MC will keep looking at the theme the wrong way, making the wrong decisions, and encounter setbacks that keep them from reaching their story goal. The only time the character makes the truly right decision is at the end, when they succeed.

There is more info on character arcs and weaving theme into your plot and characters in the chapter titled “Character Arcs & Theme Weaving.”

## Character: Creation, Conflict, & Complexity

This chapter will layout a guide to creating layered characters that generate conflict and reveal themselves on the screen.

### **Elements of a Complete Character**

First, a general list of elements to creating complete characters. Sometimes it will be necessary to go beyond this list to add more depth and complexity to a main character, and sometimes it will be appropriate to skip over some parts of the list for more simplistic, single-function, one-dimensional characters (usually side characters). Here is the list:

***BORING STUFF*** – Name, age, sex, occupation, marital status, hair color, etc.

**A LIMP AND AN EYEPATCH** – Give the character a simple physical trait or mannerism that differentiates them from the other characters. Maybe they always wear a black suit, or constantly sharpen their knife. The *Harry Potter* characters are a masterclass in this.

**EMOTION EVOKED** – What should the audience feel when they see this character? You probably want your protagonist to evoke empathy, while your antagonist evokes hatred or disgust. You might want a supporting character to evoke a wholesome feeling, or a side character to evoke a humorous reaction. Once you have an emotion in mind, you can ensure that other elements of your character function to evoke that reaction.

**TRAITS** – Positive and negative characteristics that give the character uniqueness and life. This category generally encompasses surface level skills, fears, and personality traits.

**VALUES** – I would think of this more as ideology. What does your character believe in? Family? Freedom? Honor? Cynicism? What core belief shapes the decisions they make and the way they view the world. Usually you want to focus on the values they have that relate to the theme.

**FLAWS** – Not to be confused with a superficial flaw (negative trait), like being bad at soccer or having a crooked nose, a character flaw is an error in their psychology. They have a mindset that hinders them in their story journey. Giving into this flaw leads to a negative character arc, while overcoming the flaw leads to a positive character arc. This flaw should be punished by the story obstacles until it is fixed or until the character's downfall. The flaw can be in their values, or in a core personality trait.

**PAST WOUND** – An event in the character's past that shaped their view on the world. This is generally the cause of their flaw, and something they have to move on from to complete their arc. It doesn't necessarily have to be a traumatic event, especially if it inspired the character in a good way, but the idea of coming up with a "past wound" is useful to give a justification for why each character is the way they are. It also provides dialogue and reveal opportunities.

**SECRET** – Your character should have something to hide from the other characters. It could be something big like being a traitor or committing a past crime, or it could be something simpler like hiding feelings for another character, or perhaps an insecurity. It's your choice whether the audience knows about it or not, but I would generally say if

it's the main character's secret, make sure the audience knows to maximize suspense of whether another character will find out (Ex: Walter White hiding his meth business, Tony Soprano hiding his cheating). If it is a supporting character's secret, save it to be a mind-blowing reveal for later (Ex: Severus Snape's love for Lily, Hodor's origin, Darth Vader's fatherhood).

**GOALS** – This was already covered in the story checklist, but every character, especially the MC, should have a goal. Even better if goals conflict with another character's goals. These goals all need to have stakes attached to that every character is invested in their goal.

**WANT**– What the character thinks they need. Their conscious motivation. This is the obvious motivator for the goal. For Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, providing for his family is his **want**.

**NEED**– What a character truly yearns for deep down. Their hidden motivation. Love, survival, acceptance, freedom, etc. The **need** tends to align with the **want** in the beginning, both pushing for the same **goal**. This causes the audience to believe that the **want** is the only motivator of the character. To reveal character layers in the story, the **want** and **need** should come into conflict with each other, forcing the character to choose between the two motivations. The character will always choose the **need** in the hardest decisions because this is who they truly are deep down. For Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, having power, control, and respect was his **need**. The great dilemmas in *Breaking Bad* force Walt to choose between his family and his meth career quite often. He always pushes further and further into the drug trade because he is chasing his **need**, and this shows us who he really is, making it that much more cathartic when (spoiler) he finally admits that he never did it for his family at the end.

**ARC** – Your MC must undergo one of the 5 character arcs described in the chapter on character arcs. Don't worry, a couple of arcs involve a character that does not change. For supporting and side characters, an arc is optional, but there are still ways that they can contribute to others' arcs as well as the theme of the story.

## **The Complex Character**

Your story does not need any complex characters. Most stories don't have them. However, there is something incredibly gripping about them, so here is the secret to creating a complex character: **contradictions**.

Remember that big character checklist? For most characters, all of their traits, values, and motivations will work together to create one cohesive character. But real people are not so cohesive. They have cognitive dissonance, multiple dimensions, and conflicted thoughts. Complex characters are like real people – their job might contradict their values, their personality might contradict their goals, and their motivations might contradict each other (want vs need).

Contradictions are the key. Tony Soprano is, in my opinion, the best, most complex character of all time. This is thanks to his endless contradictions. He's a mob boss who sees a therapist. His actions already contradict each other on the surface, but dig deeper, and there's more. He has the personality of a strong, emotionless criminal, but reveals that he has emotional trauma and cries about certain things in front of his therapist. He appears emotional in his therapy sessions, but his actions almost undeniably show him to be a sociopathic killer. He genuinely wants to be a better man for his wife, but also can't resist cheating on her either. Tony Soprano is a giant bag of contradictions that make him layered, unpredictable, and most of all, real.

## **How to Reveal Character**

Whether writing a book or screenplay, you can't just tell the audience your character's traits and deepest desires. You have to show them the hard way, by revealing your character slowly throughout the many scenes of your story. Here are some techniques:

**Name & description** – Names are not totally unimportant, as they can reveal some character to the audience. For example, the name "Wilford Humphrey III" probably puts the image in your head of some posh aristocrat who is always well dressed and feels superior to the commonfolk. In the same way, the short description you give a character when you introduce them can have certain connotations, such as reminding the reader of a character's long, greasy black hair to evoke a negative emotion toward that character.



**Contrast with other characters** – If the audience isn't noticing your character's traits, give them a point of reference. Want to show the audience that Jason is brave? Put him next to some ordinary people, and when danger comes, the ordinary people run away, while Jason faces the danger head on. You can also never go wrong with creating an opposite character who exhibits all of the opposite traits, which creates contrast and conflict.

**Contrast with environment** – Turning your character into a "fish out of water," making sure the setting and story world contrast with their character traits, is a great way to reveal those traits to the audience, as well as laying new ground for conflict and humor involving that contrast.

**How others talk about them** – Even before we meet a certain character, we can reveal their outward-facing traits to the audience by having other characters talk about them in a certain way. Think of Hannibal Lecter, who is warned about and built up to before being introduced, which heightens anticipation and fear in the audience.

**How others are affected by them** – How do other characters react when this character walks into the room? Does this character inspire fear in others, or love? How do the character's current and past relationships function?

**Dialogue** – Use the way a character speaks to convey their mood, attitude, background, education, perspective, ideology, etc. Do they dominate the conversation? Do they speak with respect? Do they use big words, or speak in colloquialisms?

**Actions, reactions, and decisions** – This is the classic actions speak louder and words. When conflict ensues, what is the character's go-to method for resolving it? When a difficult dilemma arises, what do they decide to do? These choices reveal who a character really is.

**Mannerisms** – A shy character holds themselves in a different way than a confident character. A paranoid character might constantly look over their shoulder. A veteran with PTSD may be startled by fireworks. An optimistic character might appreciate the beauty of nature more than a depressed character. Little differences in the way people move and react to the world can imply character traits.

**Occupation/hobbies/interests** – How do they spend their time? What do their skills and passions say about them?

Revealing character is about finding any way to convey character traits and values to the audience without having the character directly state their traits and deepest desires.

### **Web of Conflict**

Before moving onto your plot in detail, consider creating what I would call a web of conflict. List out every possible pairing of main and supporting characters, and find some kind of conflict in every pairing. Conflicting goals, traits, values, wants, flaws, etc. can inform the dynamics between them. Doing this ensures that no two characters are exactly alike, and it lays the groundwork for tons of dialogue, scenes, jokes, and drama between all of the characters.

## The Empathetic Hero

If you want your story to elicit emotion, suspense, tension, and keep your audience invested, you need an empathetic hero. Your MC doesn't need to be a literal hero, or a beacon of moral goodness to be empathetic. The audience just needs to be invested in their story. Every other component of storytelling fails if the audience doesn't care about your protagonist. To ensure that doesn't happen, I will provide a myriad of techniques to endear your main character to the audience.

To start, let's give your character some likeable characteristics. I'll steal this list from Jamie Nash, author of *Save the Cat! Writes for TV*.

### **1. They're underdogs.**

They don't fit in. They are at a disadvantage. They lack money or struggle with disease.

### **2. They care about someone or something.**

They support a cause. They love someone deeply. They value a nostalgic place/item.

### **3. They try very hard to make their lives better.**

They have a dream that they work towards. They try again when they fail.

### **4. They're fun.**

They are funny, charming, or charismatic. They are attractive or cute.

### **5. They are struggling.**

They experience pain, mourning, depression, boredom, anxiety – relatable struggles.

## 6. **We wish we were more like them.**

They have admirable traits: altruistic, optimistic, loyal, honest, ethical, etc.

## 7. **They're just like us.**

They do very normal things, have relatable problems, have relatable secrets, etc.

## 8. **They're the best at something.**

They have some great talent: singing, deduction, fighting, gaming, driving, etc.

After endowing your MC with a couple traits that make you want to cheer them on, you can employ some other useful tricks to get the audience on board with your MC. I'll be stealing these tricks from Karl Iglesias, author of *Writing for Emotional Impact*.

1. **Victimization** – Any way that we can turn the character into a victim will make the audience feel sorry for them. Here are some specific things you can use to victimize your main character: embarrassment, humiliation, injustice, discrimination, false accusation, brutality, abuse, pain, misfortune, deformity, disability, disease, loss, betrayal, deception, abandonment, rejection, neglect, loneliness, regret, injury, and not being believed when telling the truth. Do any of these things to your MC, and you build a sense of sorrow for them. This victimization must be undeserved however. Nobody will feel bad for an MC who gets fired for a good reason, so instead they should be fired when they did nothing wrong.

2. **Virtue** – Giving your character virtues, making them do good things makes them more likable. This trick is what inspired the name *Save the Cat!* for Blake Snyder's famous screenwriting book. Some specific examples include: helping others, being polite, being forgiving, getting along with animals and children, self-sacrificing, being moral, loving others, being loved, acting in a nurturing way, showing humanity, fighting for a just cause, and persevering.

3. **Desirable Qualities** – Even a character that is totally un-empathetic in all other senses can become much more interesting when given attractive traits. This is often used to make villains and neutral characters like detectives more interesting. Specifics include: power, charisma, leadership, cool profession, courage, passion, skills, attractiveness, wisdom, humor, childlike innocence, athleticism, rebelliousness, eccentricity, or intelligence.

You should give every protagonist some victimhood, some virtue, and some desirable qualities. I would warn against making a protagonist that is entirely a victim with no likable aspects, or entirely virtuous with no moral complexity, though you can probably still make interesting characters this way. Also make sure when using victimhood, your MC does not use their struggle as an excuse or come off as whiny. We tend to like characters that push through their struggles without complaint.

If you want to see an example of one of the most empathetic characters EVER, I recommend you watch *The Whale* (2022). Charlie, the protagonist, is an **underdog**, who **cares about people**, who **tries hard** to accomplish his goal, who **struggles** in all aspects of life.

He is **victim** in a multitude of ways: he struggles with morbid obesity, his family won't talk to him, he is too poor to get treatment, he is hated for being gay, he has regret for his past, etc. Charlie also has many **virtues** despite his horrible circumstances: he is kind, optimistic, self-sacrificing, he has a nurse friend who loves him, he perseveres, he wants to help the family that he left, he loves his daughter even if she doesn't love him, etc. Charlie also has some **desirable qualities** too: a deep passion for literature, love of teaching, writing skills, ability to understand people, etc.

I believe this incredibly empathetic set-up for the character is what gets the audience emotionally invested enough in Charlie to cry at various points throughout the film.

## The Antagonist

Not every story needs an antagonist, though they can be great for driving the plot. When I talk about an antagonist, I'm talking about a character (decision-making agent) rather than a monster or system that opposes the MC.

Basically, you wanna build your antagonist like any other character, with the only important difference being that the antagonist has a conflicting goal with the MC. This means that your antagonist can exist on a spectrum from morally good to cartoonishly evil or somewhere in-between.

In *Catch Me If You Can*, the antagonist is an FBI agent who becomes obsessed with stopping the scammer protagonist. He's not evil. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, the

antagonist, Thanos, is more on the evil side of things, but he has an admirable goal. He believes killing half of the universe is justified by reducing overpopulation, war, and hunger. In the *Harry Potter* series, the antagonist, Voldemort, is a purely evil character. Sure, he had a troubled childhood but there's nothing good about him.

My point is, fit your villain to the tone and theme of your story. In a story about moral ambiguity, like *Game of Thrones*, most of the villains will be quite complex. In a story about traditional good vs evil like *Harry Potter*, the villain can just be straight up evil.

### **How do you make your antagonist more evil?**

Just like making your MC more empathetic, it can help the audience's investment in the story to make the bad guy badder. The audience will already root against them by default as long as your MC is empathetic and the antagonist is getting in the way of MC's goal, but you can make the antagonist even more unlikeable.

#### **1. Kill the cat**

The opposite of the *Save the Cat!* technique, show your villain doing something cold-hearted or evil. Sounds obvious right? This can go a long way, especially if this evil act is committed on something likeable, innocent, or defenseless.

#### **2. Kill the audience**

I made this trick up, mostly inspired by *Game of Thrones'* villains. What I mean by kill the audience is to attack them directly through empathetic characters. The audience lives vicariously through the MC and other empathetic characters. We can attack the audience by having the villain humiliate, violate, hurt, scar, or kill an empathetic character or MC. The villains in *Game of Thrones* do this brilliantly multiple times (mainly by killing off, torturing, or raping a beloved character). By making the audience feel attacked through an empathetic character, they will hate the villain much more.

### **Complexity**

Of course, the villain doesn't have to be totally evil and hateable. In more recent media, it's become more common to have villains that aren't entirely bad, reflecting the less black-and-white view of the world in modern audiences.

Finding complexity in an antagonist is the same as in a main character. It's about conflicts within the character. Most commonly, a conflict between the **want** and **need**. Perhaps, as in *Avatar: The Way of Water*, the villain has a **want** for revenge against the

natives, which conflicts with a **need** to reconnect with his son, who has joined the natives. As always, complexity is about contradictions and inner conflict. You can even give your villain a character arc, which could serve to explain their inner corruption, or bring about their redemption by the end. Character arcs are discussed in the next chapter.

## Character Arcs & Theme Weaving

A character arc is a when a character grapples with a truth and a lie throughout the story, and decides which to buy into by the end. This could cause a change in the character's beliefs, or the character may decide to keep believing the same thing they always did. It's the inner war between truth and lie that makes it an arc.

Character arcs are intertwined with theme. Arcs give the story and character a sense of deep change, as well as helping to explore the theme. Remember that a theme is essentially a philosophical argument that underlies the story such as *good vs evil*, *honesty vs convenience*, *logic vs emotion*, *idealism vs cynicism*, etc.

So, to start filling out the character arcs in your story you first need to decide which characters are dynamic and which are static. Basically, do they have an arc or not? The main character(s) should always have an arc. Antagonists can have an arc or be static. Supporting and side characters are almost always static, though being static comes in handy later.

Next you need to take a stance on the thematic argument. As the writer, you will assign one side of the argument as the "**truth**" and one side as the "**lie**." There are no right answers, because these are philosophical questions. The truer side is the one that your story argues in favor of. If your theme is a moral argument, rely on your moral beliefs (or lack thereof).

If the thematic argument is more practical/factual, then the right answer is the one that accurately describes your story world and/or has the most practical applications. It's a tough decision to make sometimes, but this truth vs lie dynamic is what guides character arcs.

Before bringing it all together, I would like to interweave one more concept. In the chapter on character creation I mentioned giving every character two motivations (a **want** and a **need**) where the **want** is the character's conscious motivation and the **need** is their deeper yearning/desire. The want and need work toward the same goal initially, though they start to conflict with each other as the story progresses.

Okay, so what do truths, lies, wants, needs, and themes all have to do with each other? How do we use them to create all 5 types of character arcs? Here's how. Your character will start out believing either the **truth** or the **lie**. Their initial belief is based on their **want**. As the want and need come into conflict, the truth and the lie are in a battle against each other. In the end, when the character's need finally takes over, the **need** decides their final belief in the **truth** or **lie**.

The first 2 are positive arcs, the last 3 are tragic arcs. Here are the five possible character arcs:

### **POSITIVE CHANGE ARC**

MC starts out believing the lie > overcomes lie > new truth is liberating

Examples: Han Solo (*Star Wars*), Cooper (*Interstellar*), Jaime Lannister (*Game of Thrones*)

### **FLAT ARC**

MC starts out believing the truth > maintains truth > uses truth to overcome world's lie

Examples: Batman (*The Dark Knight*), Buddy (*Elf*), Forrest Gump (*Forrest Gump*)

### **DISILLUSIONMENT ARC**

MC starts out believing the lie > overcomes lie > new truth is tragic

Examples: Rick Grimes (*The Walking Dead*), Ned Stark (*Game of Thrones*)

### **FALL ARC**

MC starts out believing in lie > clings to lie > believes worse lie

Examples: Anakin Skywalker (*Star Wars*), Jay Gatsby (*The Great Gatsby*)

### **CORRUPTION ARC**

MC starts out seeing the truth > rejects the truth > embraces the lie

Examples: Michael Corleone (*The Godfather*), Walter White (*Breaking Bad*)

### **Static Characters & Theme**

Earlier I told you to pick out the characters who were dynamic to give them an arc. Now, we take a look at all of our supporting cast, a bunch of boring, static characters. What do we do with them?

They should all represent a different perspective on the theme. They don't need to change because they help the other characters change. One static character might believe in the lie, but use it to great success. Another might believe in the lie to an unhealthy extent. Another might believe in the truth. Another might take an unexpected third position on the theme. Another might feel indifferent to the argument. Use your static characters to explore every possible perspective on the theme, as these different viewpoints will come into conflict as well as push the dynamic characters to change. Think of static characters as the devil and angel on every dynamic character's shoulder.

## Story Structure

When I read my first screenwriting book, *Save the Cat!*, I fell in love with story structure. I loved how step-by-step it was, and it was cool seeing it show up in many popular movies. The problem was that I was so obsessed with story structure, I never learned how to create a good character, write a great scene, come up with dialogue, or utilize a theme.

After a lot more learning, I would say that story structure is one of the least important concepts to focus on when writing a story. Nowadays, I find scene structure to be much more important, which I will discuss in the next chapter. Either way, I'm still going to go into detail on various story structure methods that I find the most practical and helpful. Before we begin, I will say that all you really need to know about story structure is the very basics of the three-act structure, with at least a beginning, inciting incident, middle, and end. Other than that, strong characters, conflict, and scene structure can get you very far. Most of the methods I will discuss are variations on the three-act structure, and they just fill in the empty bits a little differently. So, to start let's talk about barebones three-act storytelling:



## Basics of Three-Act Story Structure

The three acts are a fancy way of saying beginning, middle, and end. In the beginning, or act one, we set up the status quo for the story world and the MC. In that same act, we disrupt that status quo with an inciting incident, forcing the MC to take action.

Now we're in act two, the middle, where the MC has a clear goal that encounters constant setbacks as they struggle to learn the truth of the theme.

Eventually, things come to a head by the third act, the ending, where a final struggle determines whether the protagonist achieves their goal and how they evolve as a character.

The usual pacing of the three act structure involves a first act that is roughly 25% of the story, with the inciting incident happening about half way through the first act. The second act takes up the middle 50% of the story, usually with a big turning point in the middle. Once the story hits the 75% mark, act three begins and takes up the last 25%.

### The Most Common Structures (w/ hyperlinks)

- [Save the Cat! Beat Sheet](#) (15 beats)
- [8-Reel Structure](#) (8 sequences)
- [The Hero's Journey](#) (17 stages)
- [Dan Harmon's Story Circle](#) (8 steps)
- [Freytag's Pyramid](#) (5 steps)
- [7-point Structure](#) (7 beats)

Read into any or all of those structures, and you will realize they are all getting at the same thing. Choose the one you find most helpful. You can even combine them so you fill in every part of the story with a specific beat. I personally think a combination of *Save the Cat*, 8-Sequence, and 7-Point structures will give you a fill-in-the blank guide to the most standardized, tight structure. You might not like the idea of a "formulaic" structure, but a lot of it is in the execution. Some movies will execute the structure using bad dialogue and a lot of clichés (*Ant Man 3*) while other films use good, unique dialogue and strong characters to great effect, showing the capabilities of a formulaic structure (*Top Gun: Maverick*).

Regardless of how you feel about structure, try to default to basic three-act structure, and every time you want to deviate, make sure there is good reason to do so.

### **The Emotional Rollercoaster**

Whichever route you take in structuring your story, here's something important for making the big story beats hit. You want a sort of up-and-down feeling in terms of how well things are going for the MC. Success and failure, one after another, to keep the audience on an "emotional rollercoaster" throughout. This applies to scenes too, which we'll talk about in-depth in the next chapter. The basic idea is, if things are going right at the beginning of a scene, they should be going wrong by the end of it, and vice versa. Show change in every scene, sequence, and act of your story.

Another thing to add onto this idea: every part of your story should ride this roller coaster. If there is an "all is lost" moment near the end, then *everything* should be going wrong – the subplots, the main plot, the character arc, the love story, etc. All plotlines should be in for the same ride, so that they all feel connected, they hit harder, and the audience is not confused about how to feel.

## Scene Structure

Scenes are the building blocks of story. They need to tell a story in their own right, and they need to be necessary. You only get so many scenes in a story, so each one needs to have conflict, internal or external, and something needs to have changed by the end of each scene.

### **Scene-sequel structure**

Luckily, there is a great method that ensures every scene accomplishes something, either revealing character or moving the plot forward. In *Techniques of the Selling Writer* by Dwight Swain, scenes are separated into two types: **scenes** and **sequels**. It is a little confusing that one type of scene is called a scene, but for the rest of this chapter I'll be referring to Swain's scenes and sequels rather than scenes in general.

Both types are split into three components. A **scene** is made up of goal, conflict, and disaster. After every scene comes a **sequel**, made up of reaction, dilemma, and decision. Let's go into more detail:

## **Scene**

**GOAL** – Early into the scene, we should know what the focal character wants to achieve by the end of that scene. This gives the audience a reason to keep watching and an outcome to root for.

**CONFLICT** – Something must get in the way of this goal. An obstacle. This will take up the bulk of the scene. If your scene lacks conflict, it should be cut from the script.

**DISASTER** – By the end of the conflict, the focal character should not get exactly what they want, otherwise the story would be over quickly. So instead, the character receives a setback, or they get what they want but with a catch that disrupts their trajectory. Only by the end of the story can they have a true victory with no setbacks.

## **Sequel**

**REACTION** – In response to the disaster of the scene before, the focal character has some kind of reaction that reveals character. This reaction could be anything from taking a smoke break, to consulting their wife, to attempting suicide.

**DILEMMA** – After the character has had a chance to gather themselves, they recognize the options in front of them. A choice is present for them to make. Preferably this choice is an extremely hard one, that puts the character's inner motivations (want & need) against each other.

**DECISION** – The focal character finally decides what to do. This reveals more of who they are, and sets up a goal for the next scene.

### **How to use scene-sequel structure**

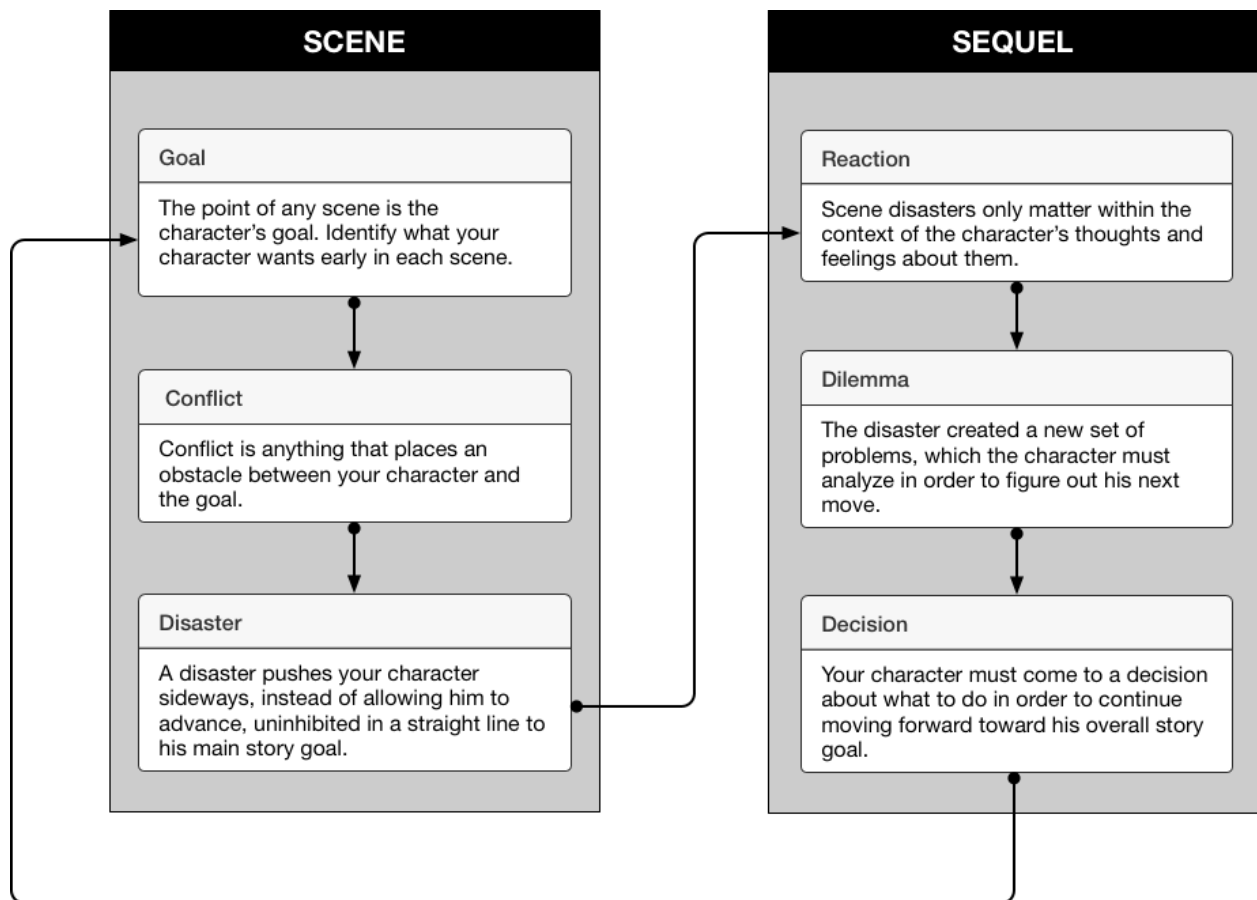
Scenes and sequels basically loop until the story goal is achieved. Your MC will not always be the focal character of the scene, but the structure will be roughly the same. Any scene that is not a scene or sequel does not move the plot forward or reveal character, so it must be cut or reworked. Also remember that there is conflict in sequels too, but it is an inner conflict that reveals character.

Using scene-sequel structure will keep the pacing consistent. Scenes have tension and drive plot, while sequels let the audience take a breath and see some character

revealed. Quite often, the A-story will be told in scenes, and the sequels will occur in the B-story, with the love interest advising the MC on the right decision, and giving them the strength to keep going. (*Top Gun: Maverick* is a great example of this.)

Another great thing about this structure is that it ensures something has changed by the end of each scene or sequel. This rewards the audience for watching each scene and ratchets up the tension for what **disaster** or **decision** could come next.

Here's a graphic for the structure (from Cody Burleson's blog):



# Openings & Character Introductions

This chapter will teach you the essentials of a great opening scene, and some techniques for introducing characters (namely the MC and antagonist).

## The Opening Scene

The opening should, like any other scene, be in **scene** or **sequel** format (see previous chapter). The audience will not be invested in the conflict, setting, theme, or characters yet, so we need to introduce at least one component of the story to them in the opening scene. We also need to grab their attention which can be done with **spectacle**, **dialogue**, **action**, and/or **intrigue**.

I find intrigue to be the most important in an opening scene, as it can grip the audience without them having any investment. The key to building intrigue in the opening scene is planting questions. Don't explain character motivations, don't explain strange happenings, don't explain the origin of something. Intrigue is all about making your audience crave answers. There's a whole chapter on intrigue later, but for now, I'll use an example from the new *Mission: Impossible – Dead Reckoning Part One* opening scene:

The movie opens with a Russian soldier explaining the capabilities of a new invisible submarine carrying a very powerful AI weapon (introduce antagonist). The sub team uses two keys to lock and unlock this weapon (introduce plot/MacGuffin). The soldiers are protecting the weapon (scene goal) but another submarine is following them and fires a torpedo (scene conflict). The Russian submarine fires back, but the enemy submarine disappears (raise questions). Now their own torpedo is coming back at them and their whole crew is killed (scene disaster). Finally, the audience is wondering how the submarine disappeared, what the AI's motivations are, and if anyone will find the sunken submarine (raise more questions).

## **The Flash-Forward Opening**

Before we move on to character introductions, I want to show you one opening that automatically creates intrigue. If you're worried about starting off your story with boring day-to-day life, try starting it instead with the MC's death. Maybe start off with the MC in a dire scenario plucked straight from act three. Basically, take something from the end

of your story, and move it right to the beginning. This will leave your audience totally intrigued as to how your MC got in that position.

One of the most famous uses of this tactic is in *Breaking Bad*'s pilot episode. In the teaser, we see Walter White driving through the desert in his tighty-whities, with two dead men and a meth lab in his RV. We don't know how he got there, and that's what we're dying to know. Now, when the first act shows Walt in his boring daily life, it's more exciting because we know where he's gonna be by the end of the episode.

### **Character Introductions**

The two most common ways to open a story are to (1) introduce the protagonist or (2) introduce the antagonist.

When introducing the **protagonist**, you generally want to show them in some situation that makes them likeable and empathetic. I'd recommend going back to the chapter on creating an empathetic hero, and finding a way to show one of those endearing traits in your MC's introduction. This tactic is called "saving the cat" because it involves showing your character doing something likeable such as saving a cat in their first scene. Apart from that, you can also show your character in a relatable situation, or perhaps an embarrassing one, to create instant understanding from the audience. The important thing in early scenes is building up empathy for the main character. First impressions matter.

For great MC opening scenes, see: *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

To introduce an **antagonist**, you want to make them unlikeable and threatening. Usually you want to show the antagonist in a moment of strength or genius in their first scene, so that the audience knows they are not to be trifled with.

Combine that with "killing the cat" or "killing the audience" techniques introduced in the chapter on antagonists, and you will have a villain that is both powerful and easy to root against.

For great villain opening scenes, see: *The Dark Knight*, *Star Wars*, *Inglorious Basterds*, & *Jaws*.

# Story World

Your story has to take place somewhere. This is where setting and story world come into play. I won't go into worldbuilding here, because that's a huge subject on its own, and it only really matters for a couple of genres. In terms of where your story is set, let's start by looking at the difference between two seemingly similar terms:

## Setting vs Story World

- **Setting** is the the time and place of your story, combined with the overarching conflict of the world. For example: the United States in 1942, during WWII.
- **Story World** is the more specific area of life that the story focuses on. For example: the world of academia and physics during the war.

I find the story world to be the more important of the two, because it generates a lot of conflict and influences the way your characters are created. If your story is set in the world of lawyers, often known for lying, that might influence the theme of your movie relating to honesty. In a story world of cops and drug dealers, obvious conflicts will arise between police and criminals, but also internally on each side of the conflict. Story world is super important and arguably as essential as the main three elements of story (plot, character, theme).

There aren't too many tips because there aren't exactly right or wrong story worlds to choose. The important thing is to remember to stay focused within your story world and explore all parts of it. This is where research usually comes in while outlining your story.

# Exposition

Exposition dumping is one of the most feared pitfalls among writers. In this chapter we will discuss valid ways of delivering exposition without losing the audience.

## **The outsider MC**

This tactic is especially helpful with exposition relating to a story world. Maybe the MC is a new lawyer, or maybe MC just found out they're a wizard. Either way, the audience will need catching up on what that story world entails.

Having your MC be an outsider to the story world means that supporting characters can simply explain everything the audience needs to know to the main character, while sounding totally natural and fitting the story. It helps if the MC actually asks about things, or actively needs teaching on the topics for exposition. That's really all there is to it.

### **Angry exposition**

This method doesn't require any overt anger or shouting, although the name might suggest it. This technique simply requires subtextual conflict to keep exposition engaging. The prime example of this method is *Game of Thrones*. The show has hours of exposition scenes, and yet they are all as gripping as any other scene. How? Conflict. Ned Stark argues with Jaime Lannister for three minutes about whether stabbing the Mad King in the back was honorable or not, and all the while, the audience is unknowingly being fed exposition on the Mad King's death and seeing the characterization of Ned and Jaime. The audience willingly takes that exposition because it is nicely wrapped in verbal sparring and underlying character conflict.

### **The pope in the pool**

This trick is pulled from Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!* book, where he suggests having something funny, distracting, or unusual happen while exposition is being given. Maybe it's a pope in a pool, or maybe it's one of *Game of Thrones'* infamous sex scenes, but something that spices up boring dialogue can be a quick trick to misdirect the audience from it. I personally think this is one of the weakest techniques as it doesn't fix the boringness of the exposition and might even distract the audience from hearing any of it.

### **Intrigue – make the audience work for it**

Instead of telling the audience who Indiana Jones is, show him going on a daring adventure, and only when the audience is begging for some backstory do you give it to them in subsequent scenes. Don't immediately explain the matrix to the audience. Make them thirsty for answers before you deliver exposition. This is why having an intriguing opening scene is so important. It draws the audience in, and makes them happy to hear any exposition that answers their questions.



## Subtext – show, don't tell

I know you've heard "show, don't tell" a million times, but for exposition it is an essential tip. It reduces that on-the-nose feeling and makes the audience feel a little smarter by not spoon-feeding them information. According to Andrew Stanton, "Don't give the audience 4, give them 2 + 2."

Subtext is incredibly hard to teach, because it's largely based on natural intuition. In the next chapter, however, I will give some specific guidance on creating subtext-heavy dialogue.

## Dialogue

Certainly the hardest part of writing for me, as well as the hardest to teach, dialogue is essential for moment-to-moment entertainment within your story. Of course you can have a scene or entire story without dialogue, but it is so common that it is a crucial skill for any writer or screenwriter. Here is my best attempt at teaching how to construct a dialogue scene:

### Conflicting Agendas w/ Stakes

You can't have story without conflict. This applies to dialogue too. You cannot have a whole scene where characters simply agree with each other. When constructing a dialogue scene, you need some kind of **conflict** within the dialogue. Perhaps it's a surface level conflict, like arguing over what to order for dinner. It could be a deeper argument over each character's ideology. Maybe it's a boring, polite conversation with a tense, underlying conflict such as the opening scene of *Inglorious Basterds*. The scene could even be Character A giving exposition to Character B, but a hint of conflict is added because Character B is distracted or disinterested in the exposition. There is a plethora of techniques available to instill conflict in a dialogue scene.

The conflict is made all the more powerful when it has **stakes**. To take an example from LocalScriptMan's video on dialogue, (which I highly recommend) an argument about pineapple on pizza might be a fun scene, but you could raise the stakes if that argument determines what they have for dinner. Two character's with conflicting philosophies

would make for a great dialogue scene, but it's even more compelling if one has to convince the other of their philosophy in order to recruit them. Basically, make your dialogue have stakes – something on the line throughout.

### **The Filter**

So, your characters now have conflicting goals – but they shouldn't just state them plainly. If Sarah wants to break up with Ryan, she won't just walk up to him and say so. She doesn't want to hurt his feelings, so she will struggle to find the right way to say that she wants to end it. This is **the filter**. Characters don't just say what they're thinking unless they are pushed to do so.

Whenever you're writing a dialogue scene, consider the character's goals, but also consider how they will try to achieve those goals with their dialogue. Find out what filter they are speaking through, and apply it to every line. This will add subtext and realism to your dialogue. It's also a good way of avoiding cliché or on-the-nose dialogue. Once again I will recommend LocalScriptMan's video on dialogue.

### **Leading**

You can think of this tip as a small-scale version of set-up/payoff or cause/effect. As much as you can, try to connect the end of one line to the beginning of the next. Each line sets up the next line. This will reward the audience for paying attention, and keep them expecting more payoffs on each consecutive line of dialogue. This generally comes naturally, but it's good to keep in mind.

One variation on this trick is good for quippy dialogue. It involves using a connecting word between two lines of dialogue. Here's an example:

"I never wanted a dog."

"The dog you asked for?"

"Asked for after you started crying in the shelter."

It's simple and shouldn't be constantly used, but it gives your dialogue momentum. Do this trick without repeating the word, and you're still leading properly.

### **Deflections & Interruptions**

The opposite of leading one line into the next, deflections and interruptions are a good way of spicing up the normal flow of dialogue. Interruptions are pretty straightforward, just have character interrupt each other when it feels natural.

Deflections are the more advanced technique because they can be used to reveal character and avoid clichés. Instead of your character responding in the expected and obvious manner, they change the subject or indirectly answer. One classic example is from *The Empire Strikes Back* when Leia says “I love you” to Han Solo, who responds with “I know.” This deflection fits his character and avoids the cliché response of “I love you too.”

### **Musicality, Rhythm, and Rhetoric**

One sort of overlooked technique in dialogue is one that speech writers use all the time. Using different literary devices, like repetition, alliteration, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, anaphora, and analogy. I won't list all of them or explain them all here, but do a couple google searches on rhetoric and literary devices, and make sure to use them when you want to make your dialogue more poetic and satisfying to the ear.

### **Weaponization**

This is basically another form of **the filter**, but using dialogue as a weapon is an important idea. It's a great way of showing who holds the power in a conversation. Basically weaponization is the use of seemingly innocent phrases to assert power. When Tywin Lannister says “The King is tired. Send him to his chambers.” he uses a rather innocuous sentence to assert using subtext that he is in fact more powerful than King Joffrey.

When Hans Landa kindly asks if he may sit down in Mr. LaPadite's house, he is weaponizing that question to show that he can in fact do whatever he wants. Once again, the subtext is more threatening than the surface level comment.

### **Power Dynamics**

Before you start writing lines, consider where every character stands in terms of power in the conversation. Is one character more dominant than the other? Does one have information the other needs? Finding out who has more control of the conversation can affect the way things are phrased, and add more subtext to each line, allowing for the weaponization we talked about earlier.

### **Orchestration**

When composing an orchestral piece, it's important to use the various instruments available to you in their own unique ways. They contrast and compliment each other. Do

this with your characters in order to give your dialogue conflict and energy. Don't fill every scene with similar characters. Provide contrast. If there is a confident character, there should be a shy one. If one character is open and honest, one is closed off. If one is idealistic, one is cynical. Oftentimes this contrast will reflect different perspectives on your theme, but it can also be more surface level personality differences.

### **Motion**

This tip is less about the dialogue and more about how not to make every dialogue scene into two characters talking in a void. Motion in dialogue scenes means to give your characters something to do. Maybe they look at old pictures, they cook a meal, or they repair a car. This can be used to facilitate conflict, but at the bare minimum it **gives your characters something to do**. Nobody wants to watch all 40 scenes of a feature film, where 30 of them are two characters just sitting and talking for three minutes. Of course, there will be some scenes where no "motion" is necessary, but keep it in mind as a way to make each dialogue scene unique and active.

### **The Button**

I'm not sure where I heard this term from, but it basically means that the last line of each scene should have some "umph" to it. End on a compelling, intriguing, funny, or badass line in each scene. End with a twist if you can. Don't let the conversation fizzle out. End each scene at the climax, and cut all of the boring stuff that happens after. You can see this in shows with great dialogue like *The Wire* and *Game of Thrones*. Almost every dialogue scene ends on a strong line that propels the audience into the next scene. This also applies to chapters of a novel. End your chapter on a twist, climax, or strong line of dialogue.

Something about using **the button** gets the audience excited for what's coming next, while rewarding them for finishing each scene/chapter.

### **Things to Avoid**

Avoid: info dumping, long speeches/monologues, small talk, repeating what the audience knows, injecting comedy or profound lines where they don't fit, cliché lines, and being on-the-nose. When you have one of these undesirable things, find a way to fit it into one of the aforementioned dialogue techniques.

# Comedy

Whether you're writing a sitcom, or a heartbreaking drama, most stories should have at least a hint of comedy.

For some people, comedy is an instinct, and for most people, comedy is incredibly hard to write on command. For this chapter, I'm going to be talking about one main way of generating comedy within your story: **character-first**. Of course, you can go **joke-first**, but my comedy skills aren't advanced enough to go that route. It's also much easier and more effective to go with the character-first method. To get started, let's look at the theory behind what makes things funny...

## **Benign violation theory**

To me, this is the most compelling general theory of humor. Essentially it states that for something to be funny, it must (1) **violate** or threaten an expectation or assumption, (2) where the violation is **benign** and does not actually threaten the audience, and (3) both must happen at the same time.

In simpler terms, a punchline should be absurd, unexpected, or offensive, but at the same time make sense and not be so offensive that the joke is no longer funny. There will be some examples ahead.

## **Crafting comedic characters**

The first approach to adding comedy to your screenplay is through comedic characters. These characters write jokes automatically because they are crafted in such a way that everything they do is a **benign violation** of the audience's expectations.

To create such a character, you only need to form a simple character, and give them one comedic trait. A comedic trait is an unusual trait taken to the extreme. Oftentimes this trait will contradict their occupation/goal in a funny way.

For example, Adrian Monk from *Monk* is a detective with extreme OCD, giving him an irrational obsession with cleanliness along with a fear of germs. This is his comedic trait, which shows itself constantly in the show. There are countless scenes where his germaphobia stops him from doing basic things, or his OCD causes him to violate

people's personal space to clean them up. He constantly **violates** expectations by behaving in such an absurd way, but it is **benign** because it fits his character and makes sense in that way.

Another example is Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*. This character is the pinnacle of girly-girl, obsessed with fashion and the color pink. This is her comedic trait. It contradicts with her job, which is being a lawyer. This manifests itself in a bunch of jokes, like when she wears an all pink outfit to a courtroom, which **violates** the usual expectation of black, while **benign** because it fits her character. Or when she teaches the "bend and snap" technique which is a funny **violation** because it's totally absurd and over-the-top, but **benign** because it matches her character's comedic trait.

One more important thing about comedic characters is that they must be totally **serious** about their comedic trait. They can't find themselves funny, because it doesn't make sense and makes them seem too normal to be unexpected. A related quote I've heard is, "comedy is dead serious."

If you are writing in the genre of comedy, in which case most or all of your characters will be comedic, I would recommend giving them 2 or 3 comedic traits, because that will provide more joke material for the overall story, and give your characters more layers.

### **Writing individual jokes**

In terms of writing individual jokes, there are a few mediums through which they can be told, namely dialogue and action, or some combination of the two. This is a really tough thing to learn, and the most effective way to write jokes is through a combination of comedic characters and your own intuition. Always keep the benign violation theory in mind, where jokes are just about subverting expectations in a way you find funny.

If you don't have a strong comedic intuition, there are two books I would recommend which can teach you to write single jokes that can be translated to the medium of film and literature: *Comedy Writing for Late-Night TV* by Joe Toplyn, and *The Serious Guide to Joke Writing* by Sally Holloway.

There's a lot of content in both books that is super helpful, but I haven't found a succinct way to explain it and apply it to storytelling, which is why I didn't go into detail on individual jokes here.

## The comedic scene

When you have a comedic scene idea, whether it's based on a funny character, funny setting, or other central joke-engine, remember the importance of **escalation**. You'll see it in any SNL or YouTube skit, as well as in great comedic scenes. The idea is to have everything going as expected in the scene until the comedic element generates conflict. When the focal character of the scene tries to overcome this comedic conflict, the comedy gets more and more exaggerated and absurd until a final joke/twist.

A perfect example of a comedic scene is the iconic [duel scene](#) in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* wherein King Arthur has to duel the black knight to move through the forest. Everything that happens leading up to the duel is totally normal as far as movie scenes go. That is, until the black knight's arm is cut off, when his **comedic trait** is revealed, and the audience realizes that this knight does not feel pain and will not stop fighting even at loss of limb. The scene continues to **escalate**, as more and more limbs are cut off, yet the black knight is more and more determined to continue the duel. The scene ends in a **final joke**, where even after losing every limb but his head, the black knight says that King Arthur is a coward running away from the fight, and gives one last absurd line: "I'll bite your legs off!" highlighting how far the comedic trait has been taken.

## Tension, Suspense, & Surprise

Tension, suspense, and surprise are some of the most basic, essential feelings that your story needs to evoke.

How to explain the difference between tension and suspense? I spent a great deal of time researching different definitions, but the best I could do was modify a common analogy to explain both terms, so here I go:

A **dramatic question** is an engine that drives a plotline. "Will Lisa survive?" "Will John get hired?" We can represent one of these dramatic questions with a stretched rubber band. The audience is invested in one outcome, represented by the rubber band being released and going back to normal. Then there's a bad outcome the audience doesn't want, which is the rubber band being pulled so far that it breaks. So, in this analogy,

**suspense** is the prolonged uncertainty of which outcome will happen, and **tension** is the stretching of the rubber band, so that the bad outcome looks more and more likely.

### Tension

You can create tension by adding obstacles, conflict, and setbacks to your MC's goal. This causes the audience to worry that the goal might not be achieved, or that something bad is a likely outcome. Tension is really about stressing out the audience. It works best when you show them you're not afraid to make things go horribly wrong. That's why every scene ends with a "disaster" as discussed in the scene structure chapter. *Succession*, *The Sopranos*, and *Game of Thrones* are not afraid to make things go wrong, which keeps the audience constantly doubting that the characters can succeed, and fearing what may go wrong next. These shows do not hesitate to kill off beloved characters, let secrets get out in the open, and let smart plans come crumbling down. They want to torture the MCs and the audience enough to keep them on their toes – to keep them tense, if you will.

### Suspense

Suspense is simply raising a dramatic question and refusing to answer it for as long as possible, keeping the audience *suspended* between the possible outcomes or answers to that question. Suspense is complimented by tension. Suspense makes you wait to see what happens, and tension makes you dread the worst outcome.

Take the classic bomb under the table example: the MC is sitting at a table having a conversation, without knowing that there is a bomb underneath the table, set to go off in two minutes. The audience does know about the bomb. The audience feels **suspense** because they don't know whether the MC will leave the table before the bomb explodes, and they feel **tension** every time the MC gets dragged into more conversation, because it makes a bad outcome look more and more plausible.

### Surprise

As will be discussed in the next chapter, surprise is giving the audience knowledge they didn't previously have, answering a question they didn't even ask or thought they had



the answer to. Make the audience confident that they know what's going on, while leaving little clues that they won't notice until the surprise is revealed.

When it is, they should feel shocked but at the same time not feel cheated by the surprise. More examples and detail on creating surprise in the next chapter.

## Anagnorisis & The Manipulation of Knowledge

Aristotle discussed the term “anagnorisis” in his *Poetics*. Anagnorisis basically describes any time in a story where a discovery produces a change from ignorance to knowledge. Aristotle would have used the term to describe the famous “Luke, I am your father” reveal in *The Empire Strikes Back*. In the modern day, we might call this a plot twist or reveal.

This is cool, but it doesn't really teach us how to manipulate knowledge to elicit different reactions from the audience. To fix this, I would like to use the word in a different way. My main inspiration for this idea comes from a Reddit thread I saw a while ago. Basically one commenter described four “dramatic situations.” This term is a little too general, so I will instead call them the four “info-states.” An info-state describes the balance of knowledge between the perspective character and the audience. Here are the four main info-states and the emotions they foster:

- 1. The audience knows, the empathetic character doesn't know. (anticipation)**
- 2. The audience doesn't know, the empathetic character doesn't know. (ignorance)**
- 3. The audience doesn't know, the empathetic character knows. (secret)**
- 4. The audience knows, the empathetic character knows. (continuity)**

Anagnorisis, then, can be redefined as a change from any info-state (1-3) to the info-state of continuity (4). A change from ignorance to knowledge. Here is what each change produces:

Anticipation (1) to continuity (4) produces **relief**. This isn't always a good kind of relief, because the outcome can be negative. But regardless of whether the audience likes it, this kind of anagnorisis will lift a weight off of their shoulders for the time being.

Example: in *Jaws*, anytime an innocent swimmer is unknowingly pursued by the shark,

the audience feels anticipation. When that person is eaten, we return to continuity, and feel a sense of relief.

Ignorance (2) to continuity (4) produces **surprise**. This can also be good or bad. One quick tip is to think of ignorance as an info-state of false continuity. The audience and character should feel quite confident they know what is going on, before the surprise.

The best examples of this anagnorisis are in *Game of Thrones*' character deaths.

Everyone is led to believe that things are going as planned, or even better, until the audience and character are caught off guard by a plan that has been in place all along to kill this character. The result is pure shock, though it feels earned because the surprise had been foreshadowed and obvious when looking back.

Secret (3) to continuity (4) produces a **reveal**. More specifically, a character reveal. This reveal should re-contextualize past actions by that character, and lay groundwork for future conflict. It can come in the form of a flashback, a choice, or dialogue. Example:

(spoilers) in *The Whale*, the audience can never understand why Charlie (the MC) doesn't go to a doctor. They assume maybe he's too poor. Eventually, it is revealed by Charlie that he could afford to go to the doctor, but he didn't want to use any of the money he was saving to give to his estranged daughter, Ellie. This reveal totally explains his earlier actions, and also ratchets up emotion and conflict for the rest of the film.

Now, there are surely other ways of manipulating knowledge, but these basic combinations seem to be enough for most stories.

Decide what kind of story you're telling, and which type of anagnorisis you would like to use the most. There will be more on tension, suspense, surprise, and twists in later chapters.

## Pacing

The topic of pacing is a very subjective one – there's no basic rule or strategy for "correct" pacing. It's about feel. I can't teach you how to feel pacing, but I can teach you how to speed it up and slow it down until it feels right.

## Efficiency

Before we get into the list of pace-boosting tricks, let's first talk about the most important thing for establishing a pace that doesn't feel slow or boring to the audience: efficiency.

Ruthless efficiency. Remember plot, character, and theme? Any scene that doesn't advance one of those three things needs to be cut. Any line of dialogue that doesn't serve a purpose needs to be cut. A fun character that doesn't further the plot or theme should be cut no matter how much you enjoy them. Kill your darlings.

After cutting the unnecessary, combine what's left when you can. If you can write a scene that forwards the plot, great! But it's even better if you can write a scene that forwards the plot and explores the theme while revealing character. It's all about efficiency.

Next, we'll go through some other tricks to control pacing. Just remember: efficiency should be your absolute priority.

## TRDs

In *Mastering Plot Twists* by Jane K Cleland introduces the concept of a TRD, which stands for **twist**, **reversal**, or moment of heightened **danger**. A twist involves an unexpected development, while a reversal is defined as the opposite of what the audience expects, and a moment of heightened danger is exactly what it sounds like – sudden physical/emotional danger.

The placement of TRDs in your story can determine its pacing. Take the classic murder mystery story: the writer needs to keep the audience engaged for the first 90% of the story until the final reveal of the killer. This is done by having the occasional murder (**D**) clue discovery (**T**) or paradigm shift/theory change (**R**). Regularly placed TRDs will guide the pacing of your story, and should fit with your genre. For example, a thriller should have a TRD as often as possible, while a romance might have them only at key turning points. More on writing plot twists in the later chapter on endings & twists.

## Plotlines

Adding subplots and parallel plots can serve to ratchet up the pace or give the pace more breathing room. Romantic and mentor subplots often give the MC time to recover after each high-conflict challenge. Subplots involving drug addiction or cheating often ratchet up tension and pacing. *Game of Thrones* certainly takes its time with many

expository dialogue scenes, but it boosts its pacing by having so many plotlines to jump between. Just make sure the plotlines have substance and constant developments.

### **Structure and Scene Length**

By keeping the average scene length within 2-3 minutes, combined with using a classic story structure like 8-reel or *Save the Cat* structure will ensure enough turning points to keep the pacing on track. Combine that with good scene-sequel structure and other pacing control techniques, and you should be on the way to a well-paced story.

## **Mystery & Intrigue**

I will forever cite *Attack on Titan* for being a masterclass in creating intrigue. By the end of the first season, the audience is practically begging for explanations, backstory, and history of the titans. Here's how AOT creates intrigue and mystery:

It's all about raising **questions** and not immediately answering them for the audience. You can raise burning questions by simply refusing to explain important character decisions and plot points. Create your story from the outside in, so that you plan everything out but refuse to show the bigger picture to the audience until the end. You also need to drip-feed answers to the audience so that they feel rewarded for watching, but still have unanswered questions until the end.

Remember, these unexplained things need to be important and have **consequences**. You can't just leave a garbage man's intentions unexplained, because the audience doesn't care. But if the garbage man is murdering people, and finding out what he's after is key to stopping him, there are consequences that get the audience invested and intrigued.

The other important thing is the **answer** to the intrigue/mystery. When you give the audience the answer to a question they've been asking, it should be unexpected, but at the same time make sense with everything they've seen so far. You don't want them to feel cheated, in fact the goal is to make them feel like they should've seen it all along. The answer needs to explain past events properly, and seem fitting yet unexpected. By the end of the *Harry Potter* series, (spoilers) we learn more about Severus Snape's backstory, plan, and motivations. This answer not only has important consequences, but

it explains many important events of the past such as his killing of Dumbledore, Snape's allegiance to Voldemort, and Snape's attempts to save Harry in the past. This is a great example of a satisfying answer to a mystery.

## Set-up & Payoff

This chapter is essential to set up the next chapter, (see what I did there?) so make sure you have a good understanding of set-up and payoff before moving on.

### What is it?

Setup/payoff is all about innocuously placing an element (dialogue, object, visual, music, or symbol) early in the story that will come to develop meaning later. The most common example of this technique involves an object such as a gun, lighter, or knife that is introduced in the first act, and comes to be useful in defeating the antagonist later on.

Setup/payoff doesn't have to be practical. It can be emotional, comedic, or dramatic.

**Emotional S/Ps** usually involve dialogue that is repeated in different emotional contexts (see next chapter). **Comedic S/Ps** generally take the form of a running gag or a dialogue where one character's serious statement sets up a punchline from another character, whether in the same scene or much later on. **Dramatic S/Ps** ensure that every action has consequences and every consequence was caused by an action. If your MC cheats on his wife, that should set up some kind of consequence later on even if the audience thinks MC is in the clear.

All types of set-up and payoff increase the reward for paying attention and even rewatching. They make emotional, comedic, and dramatic moments stronger and more satisfying for the audience. In the coming chapter we will discuss use of this for emotional impact.

### Multiple set-ups

Not only should you have multiple S/Ps across your story, but each one can have multiple set-ups before the payoff. Especially for emotional S/Ps this is important to make sure the audience doesn't miss the set-up, and to maximize buildup. Generally I would recommend two set-ups before the payoff.

## Convergence of payoffs

Ever feel like your ending is lacking? A surefire way to make the ending more impactful, satisfying, and worth it to the audience is to show change through various payoffs converging in quick succession during the finale or denouement of your story. These payoffs should show change in the characters or world.

Throughout the first two acts of your story, there will be endless opportunities to lay out the set-ups for multiple payoffs later on. If you save most of these payoffs for the ending, it can help make it feel like a full, true ending. *Interstellar (2014)* is a perfect example of this:

In the beginning of *Interstellar* (spoilers) we are introduced to Cooper's family on the farm. The first major set-up is that Murph thinks she has a ghost in her room. Another set-up is that Cooper says the ghost is actually gravity used to send them coordinates. At the end, this pays off in an unexpected but satisfying way as it turns out Cooper was the ghost all along. Early in the movie Cooper also gives his daughter a watch and says that when he comes back from the wormhole they might be the same age, which sets up the later payoff when he receives a message from his daughter that she is now his age and wants him to come home. It even further pays off at the end when Murph is older than him and they finally reunite and Cooper's promise to return has been fulfilled. Yet another set-up is when Dr. Brand touches the strange distortion in the wormhole and calls it the first handshake. This is paid off at the end when it turns out the distortion was Cooper, giving what turned out to be his last handshake to Dr. Brand as he left her behind in the collapsing tesseract.

## Emotion

Have you ever walked in on an unfamiliar movie or TV show during an emotional moment? Regardless of the music, acting, dialogue, or directing, it's near impossible to feel any strong emotion. It's because you have no context to interpret the scene through. I like this example because many writers focus on the emotional scene itself, wondering why it doesn't work. What they really need to give more attention to is the **buildup**.

But what does buildup even mean? Do I just need to put more time between the beginning of the story and the emotional moment? Not exactly. Here is my all new 5-step guide to the buildup and release of highly emotional moments:

### **1. Empathy**

The MC (or whoever is the main subject of the emotional payoff) needs to elicit empathy from the audience. Read all about how to build empathy in the chapter on “The Empathetic Hero.”

### **2. Context**

The initial status of the empathetic character and their relationship with a person or idea. This should be set up over a decent chunk of the story in order to build up to the change and payoff.

### **3. Set-up**

While the initial context is still in place, use a memorable **element** (usually a line of dialogue, location, or a physical object) that connects to or represents the established relationship, even if the element’s significance is not yet known to the audience. This set-up can be repeatedly shown to the audience to make it more memorable and satisfying when it is paid off.

### **4. New Context**

The empathetic character’s relationship with the other person or idea has changed. Maybe their girlfriend died. Maybe they have come to love someone they used to hate. Maybe they have lost all faith in their earlier idealism. Something has changed.

### **5. Payoff**

Once the change is introduced, at the same time or soon after, we pay off the set-up by **repeating** the earlier **element** under the **new context**.

Now that MC’s girlfriend is dead, he goes back to the place they met, throwing a coin into the fountain just as they did on their first date, except this time under the context of being alone. This type of payoff can also occur in the form of a flashback, which is much more common in anime than live-action media, but it can be very effective in either format if used properly.

You will see this method used in any well-written, very emotional story. Of course, you can write some emotional scenes without this method, but for the major emotional payoff scenes, this is the way to go.

A lot of what makes a scene emotionally powerful can come in after the writing, in the case of screenplays. The coupling of this method with repeated musical themes and great acting is what makes for the most compelling emotional scenes. I will yet again recommend watching *The Whale* (2022) for examples of proper writing and execution of emotional set-up and payoff.

## Tone

I'm gonna keep this short, because tone is really not as deep or important as some think it is. Tone really shouldn't concern the writer, it's more of something the audience uses to describe the story. There is no such thing as a better tone, meaning you should not aim for a specific tone. Also, there is nothing inherently wrong with shifts in tone. Let me explain:

Tone should be considered a consequence of your plot, characters, and theme. It is not something you intentionally add, it is a result of the story itself. If your tone feels wrong, you should turn to check if your plot, characters, and theme are consistently written. If your tone feels confused, maybe it's because your characters are making jokes where it's unnatural. Maybe it's because you tried to force emotional plot points on comedic characters.

Tone is such a vague concept that there's not much else to say on the matter. As long as your fundamentals are strong, the tone should emerge naturally. The main exception is for novel writers, who should consider tone in their word choices.

## Subplots & Parallel Plots

A **subplot** is a storyline involving the MC and another character. A **parallel plot** is focused entirely on a different character/POV and is separate from the MC. For example, a common subplot would be the MC's love interest. A common parallel plot



would be the antagonist plotting on their own time. All subplots and parallel plots must cross with the main plotline at some point in the story, especially at the midpoint or finale. Here is how to use each type of plotline to augment your main plotline.

### **Subplots**

Subplots compliment and tangle with the main plot and MC. The general advice is to have at least two and no more than five subplots, depending on the length of your story. Each subplot involves your MC, and usually their relationship with another character. Most stereotypically, these two subplots might involve the love interest and the mentor, respectively. Other ideas for subplots include: going to rehab, finding/rejecting faith, helping out a friend, cheating, solving a mystery, money problems, preparing for an event, struggling with mental health, a rivalry, getting caught up in a crime, or keeping a secret.

One method for making good use of subplots comes from *Conflict & Suspense* by James Scott Bell. He suggests drawing two columns, one for your main plotline and one for a subplot. From top to bottom, write out the plot points of your main plotline in the left column. Next, write a short summary of your subplot in the right column. In the space between the columns you will draw arrows from the subplot to the main plot, arrows which represent the subplot interfering with the main plot either emotionally or physically. This can generate scene ideas and find interesting conflict that your subplot can provide.

### **Parallel plots**

Parallel plots have a different POV character than your MC. They should still intertwine with the main plot, but they often wait until big plot points to converge with the MC. The most common parallel plot is that of the antagonist, though parallel plots can also be to flesh out another perspective on your story world.

If you are writing a mafia drama, one parallel plot might be from the police perspective, and another might be from a rival crime family's perspective. A few shows that use parallel plots masterfully are *The Wire*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Sopranos*.

You can have anywhere from 0-2 parallel plots in a feature film-length story. If you instead have a long-running TV show, you could have dozens of parallel plots that come

and go. Generally you only want a couple of parallel plots at any given time to avoid overwhelming the audience.

The purpose of parallel plots is to ratchet up **suspense**, because these plotlines show us threats the MC doesn't know about, causing a sense of dramatic irony. The audience wants to warn the MC but can't, which stresses them out. This is good for building suspense and worry.

## Ending & Twists

### Endings

The key to a satisfying ending is **answers**. Answers to dramatic questions, (Does the hero get what they want?) answers to intrigue/mystery questions, (Who killed Bob? Why?) payoffs to set-ups, both emotional and comedic, as well as new answers to questions the audience thought they knew the answer to (twist ending).

The ending should also be the convergence of all parallel plots and subplots. It should resolve all of them, excluding the rare exception of an **ambiguous ending** wherein the resolution is more of a question than an answer. This type of ending is best exemplified by *Inception*, *The Sopranos*, and *Shutter Island*. An ambiguous ending should only be used when it fits the story and theme.

### Twists

The most important thing to know about final twists is that they should feel natural. If your story functions without one, then don't force it.

On the other hand, if you need to add a plot twist at the ending (alternatively at the midpoint) then there are two main ways of constructing one. The first way is outside-in, where you already know everything that is happening in the story, and you simply hide parts of it from the audience to reveal at the end. This method is ideal but extremely hard. The second way is inside-out, where in the process of writing your story you try to come up with a way of subverting the audience's expectations with a twist.

There is no formula for creating a twist, otherwise they wouldn't be shocking or unexpected. There are only categories of twists for you to consider. Here are the two

types mentioned in *Mastering Plot Twists* by Jane Cleland: **Unreliable Narrator Revealed** and **A Wider Lens**.

The unreliable narrator can be done in a variety of ways, some more cliché than others. The MC could be lying, dreaming, hallucinating, mentally ill, a child, or otherwise has a distorted or dishonest view of the world which can be revealed at the end. Unfortunately it is hard to find an original way to execute this twist as there are so many movies famous for using it.

The wider lens method covers every other type of major twist. It essentially means that the audience has limited knowledge until the end, when the big picture is shown to them. This could mean that the audience doesn't know a side character's evil scheme until the twist. It could mean that the audience doesn't know MC's parentage until the twist. There are many possibilities which I won't list here but you can surely find inspiration online and in stories that you consume. Now let's move on, covering the essentials to making your selected plot twist airtight.

**MISDIRECTION** – In order to make the twist unexpected, the audience needs to be convinced that they see what's coming. You can misdirect either by convincing them of the wrong answer, or making them never question anything in the first place. You don't want the misdirection to be too obvious, but it needs to be strong enough to... well, *misdirect* them.

**FORESHADOWING** – It is essential to leave clues and show the audience events that don't add up until they see the twist. This helps make the audience feel like they should have seen it coming, and upon rewatching/rereading, catch a bunch of hints they didn't get before. A great way of keeping foreshadowing subtle is to hide clues in scenes with more important things going on. They then take a backseat in the audience's mind, but become obvious when mentioned later or seen in flashbacks.

**CONSEQUENCES** – You don't want the twist feel like a gimmick. If it has no consequences it feels meaningless and cheap. This is why nobody uses the "it was all a dream" twist anymore. Not only is it cliché, but it totally undercuts any meaning the story could've had, and eliminates all consequences. So, to avoid this, make sure your twist means something for the plot, characters, theme, or all three. Give it a purpose, and that will make it all the more important and memorable. Consequences are essential.

# Clichés & Beginner Mistakes

This chapter is mostly gonna be me ranting about things I find annoying about beginner short films, as well as high budget feature films that make dumb mistakes or use overdone tropes.

## **Crime, Guns, Drugs, and Cursing**

I love a good Tarantino film or crime drama TV series. However, these fun tropes become infinitely less fun when you see them in EVERY SINGLE SHORT FILM. For some reason, film students, and other budding writer/directors seem reluctant to write a script that doesn't contain an absurd amount of drugs, guns, and cursing. Every character has a pistol, smokes constantly, and curses in every sentence. Even if it doesn't fit the scene/character. These elements are either forced into the plot and characters, or the crime genre is the only thing the writer ever chooses to write about. Adopting either of tendencies will hinder your writing, although it may feel cool or stylistic.

## **Preaching the Theme**

When you don't have experience using a theme in your writing, or you feel really strongly about the theme, it can be easy to start preaching. This is when the theme is directly stated to the audience, and is especially annoying when the audience feels attacked or condescended. Preaching the theme makes the audience feel that their intelligence is insulted, and can often feel cringe. There are two main places I see preaching occur: children's stories and stories with a "political" message. The only advice I can give is to show your theme through action rather than words. Children's films have a little leeway, because they are supposed to teach an obvious lesson to developing minds. On the other hand, if you are writing a film with a theme that can be even slightly political, you need to be very tactful and subtle if you want to actually change minds and avoid preaching.

## **Mary Sue**

This is when a writer creates a main character that is young, attractive, and usually female that is very competent, universally loved, and without flaws or change. As writers who love conflict, this sort of character is an instant red flag to us, because a flawless

character hinders conflict. Usually this type of character is written (A) by someone who wants to insert a glorified version of themselves into the story or (B) is afraid to show a certain marginalized group (woman, minority, or disabled) as capable of being incompetent or having character flaws. This problem is fixed by following the character creation checklist and giving every character a flaw and an arc.

### **Saving the World**

Marvel is a huge victim of this trope. Every single story is about saving the world, the galaxy, the universe, the multiverse, etc. In theory, these are good, high stakes for the plot. But what these stakes really are, is empty. The audience is not emotionally connected to all of the billions of people in the world. So, for most stories, stick to smaller, more primal stakes, such as a relationship, or the MC's survival.

### **Bad Romance**

This trope has two parts. The first part is that the MC always has a love subplot, usually with someone very attractive, and most of the romance is told through long glances at each other rather than actual connection. The second part of this trope is the fact that no healthy relationships ever last an entire story. It's always a relationship where they only get together at the end of the story, or a relationship where they start out together, and break up by the end of the story. Very rarely is the main character in a healthy romantic relationship throughout the whole story. Avoid this trope by actually emulating realistic romance.

### **Deus Ex Machina and Cheating the Audience**

How many times have you seen a character saved at the last minute, or seemingly dead but then revived? The writer is trying to have their cake and eat it too. They want to have an emotional death scene while still having the character survive and get a happy ending. Don't do this. If you want to shock the audience with a character death, follow through with it. If you want to give that character a happy ending, don't try to trick the audience into thinking they're dead. You won't need to trick the audience as long as you build strong tension throughout the story.

### **The "Character Study"**

Some filmmakers try to use the terms "character study" or "character-driven" as an excuse to write a story with no plot. A real character study still has a plot, and even uses

it to show character. For good examples of character studies using plot, look at *Oppenheimer* and *The Sopranos*.

## Diversity & Culture

Stories are about people, and there are many types of people in the world. Your story should aim to represent these different types of people realistically when you can, as well as explore different cultures in a well-researched way. Obviously, you don't want to hinder your story by forcing diversity where it doesn't make sense (especially historically) but you should make sure your story isn't just a big projection of you, your community, and your culture onto the broader world.

### Diversity

One interesting technique proposed by Shonda Rhimes, creator of *Grey's Anatomy*, is to take your MC or other supporting characters, and ask, "what if they were another race/sex/etc?" This idea allows you not only to test some possible diversity in your story, but could also spice up your concept altogether. Asking "what if this mob boss was a woman?" will lead to other conflict and themes in your story relating to the fact that this character is now female.

Another important idea is called the Bechdel Test, which has three criteria: (1) it has to have at least two named female characters (2) who talk to each other (3) about something besides a man. This test can also be flipped (Reverse Bechdel Test) to make sure that men are represented properly as well. This can be a deceptively easy-looking test, until you realize big-budget movies like *Oppenheimer* and *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 3* fail the test, and some of your own writing probably does, too.

### Culture

Writing about people and stories with different cultures than your own can be extremely difficult without having experiences in those groups. It's still good to try and show other cultures in your writing. Just make sure you do a lot of research, and consult people who know about the culture firsthand and can make corrections to your story.

# Good Writing Habits

This chapter isn't super related to storytelling itself and is more about the practice of writing. This is another big weakness of mine so don't expect too much wisdom here.

## **Ideas**

You can try random word/prompt generators, but you will never get better ideas than the ones you randomly think up throughout the day. Make sure you keep a physical or digital notepad to record these ideas. Make sure you actively use your writing brain throughout the day, making use of the boundless inspiration around you. Your friends are potential characters, your location is a potential setting, that funny moment is potentially a scene.

My friend, who only writes screenplays for fun, keeps a list in his phone of comic characters that would make for funny scenes. I recently started this practice and it's amazing what kind of list you can build.

Once you have little ideas for a single scene or element of your story, use the chapter on ideas to flesh out the idea into a story. Even if you never end up using an idea, keep it written down. You never know when it'll come in handy.

## **First drafts**

There is so much stuff to get right in the outlining phase that it can be tempting to spend months outlining. This is a dangerous form of procrastination as it feels very productive, but could end in you abandoning the project and never writing.

Do a healthy amount of outlining, and spit out a first draft. The plot may be shaky, the characters may be inconsistent, and the dialogue will be bad, but the draft needs to exist.

If you have trouble writing due to procrastination, you've got to set a goal. An "x" pages/week goal is probably best, because eventually you will finish the draft, rather than an "x" hours/week goal where you stare at a blank page for most of those hours. No matter which type of goal you set, you need to clear your work area of distractions and force yourself to either write or do nothing.

You will never learn more about the flaws in your story than when you complete your first draft, which is why it's so important that you actually write a draft instead of outlining

until you lose interest. You can use that first draft to inspire rewrites and revisions that will tighten your story immensely.

## **Revisions**

For the early drafts, try finding errors on your own. Figure out where the problem stems from and how to change it in your next draft. This can take a lot of investigating but is important.

After couple drafts, even if you feel the script is done (you probably won't) you should start having others read it. From friends and family to professional consultants, somebody needs to read the script and tell you what they think. Don't dismiss their criticism, and try to find out what specific thing bothered them. They can sometimes be wrong, though you should treat it as an important note nonetheless. This is why you need multiple eyes on your draft – to find the important problems and weed out the less credible criticism.

There isn't a magic number for how many drafts until finishing. You'll likely hate even your best draft, which is why it's so hard to feel done. This is where experience and outside opinion come in handy again.

When revising, read dialogue out loud. This will give you a sense of how it will sound to audiences. Is it too stiff, hard to deliver, or on-the-nose? Address it in your rewrite.

Another important revision tactic is to examine every sequence, scene, and dialogue exchange, asking what purpose it serves, and if it can be cut. To decide what is necessary to keep, ask if it furthers plot, character, or theme. Ask if something has changed by the end of that scene, such as the direction of the plot, or the audience's knowledge about a character. If a scene shows no change, it should be cut or modified.

## **Sources & Further Reading**

We have taken quite a journey throughout this document. I've pulled knowledge from various YouTube videos, articles, books, friends, and occasionally my own pondering. This chapter will give you a few sources to go more in-depth on specific aspects of storytelling. I will rank my sources by usefulness, content, and how well written/spoken they are.



## **Books**

- *Writing for Emotional Impact* by Karl Iglesias
- *The Secrets to Creating Character Arcs* by John Warner
- *Save the Cat!* by Blake Snyder
- *Conflict & Suspense* by James Scott Bell
- *Save the Cat! Writes for TV* by Jamie Nash
- *Mastering Plot Twists* by Jane Cleland
- *Save the Cat! Strikes Back* by Blake Snyder
- *Screenplay* by Syd Field
- *Character* by Robert McKee
- *Techniques of the Selling Writer* by Dwight Swain
- *Story* by Robert McKee
- *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell

## **YouTube channels**

- LocalScriptMan
- Writer Brandon McNulty
- StudioBinder
- JustWrite
- Lessons from the Screenplay
- Tyler Mowery (very guru-ish)
- Film Courage (lacks substance/practical advice)

## **Blogs/websites**

- StudioBinder
- ScreenCraft
- Save the Cat
- Masterclass (articles and classes)

## **Stories that are close to perfection, each with their own strengths to learn from**

Shows:

*The Sopranos, Breaking Bad, Game of Thrones (S1-S6), The Wire, Succession*

Films:

*The Shawshank Redemption, Forrest Gump, The Godfather, The Whale, Interstellar*

Books:

*The Great Gatsby, Harry Potter, A Song of Ice and Fire, Lord of the Rings*

### **Final words**

I wrote this document in about a month, largely as a way of procrastinating from working on my current project. My hope is that myself and everyone else will have this as an easy, centralized place for free information, so they can spend less time reading and researching, and more time writing. If you found any part of this document useful, or have a criticism you would like to share, please send feedback on reddit ([u/largenecc](https://www.reddit.com/u/largenecc)).