

Elements of The Three Acts

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Act One: The Set-Up

Usually the story really begins at the moment when the first character faces the difficulty that he or she has to solve, and it better be a clear difficulty, and he better realize that he must do something. Dramatic form means action, and action brings tension. So the awareness of the tension, and the clarification of what the nature of your tension is, helps to build the whole script.

ACT ONE: ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

TONE: Very quickly you want to establish the tone of the script: is it a serious film, a comedy, a fantasy, a spoof? Let people know right away that it is okay to laugh, to cry, to dream, etc.

THEME: You will also want to establish the theme of the film – what message are you trying to convey: “Don’t judge a book by it’s cover”, “The underdog triumphs”, “Good versus evil”.

WORLD OF THE STORY: As the story begins, you will introduce the world of the story – where does it take place? What is different and interesting to this world? What are the rules of this place?

CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS: At the same time, you will introduce the principle characters to the audience. Be specific and original. Let us know their age, how they dress, walk, talk. Give them a scene in which they stand out from the others. Let the audience know these people are special.

PROTAGONIST WEAKNESS: The main character’s weakness(s) must be clear so that the later obstacles can attack that weakness in the second act.

INCITING INCIDENT: The inciting incident (or point of attack) is the moment when the dramatic conflict announces itself. It’s the first perception of the predicament to come, and usually, a moment that is very visual.

MAIN TENSION: And this predicament sets up the main tension around which the story will be built: Will they fall in love? Will they rob the bank? Will they escape alive? Will they do all three?

THE STAKES: The stakes have to be clear in order to show the audience how and why this tension is important to them, or – more importantly – what will happen if the character does not solve his/her problem. It should be huge – a matter of life and death.

OBJECTIVE: A character's objective or goal is what drives him. This should be very specific, very clear. How badly does he/she want something and what are the lengths he/she is willing to go to get it.

LOCK-IN: The first act concludes once the main character is locked into the predicament, propelling him/her forward on a new quest trying to accomplish a specific goal. Now the reader/audience knows the character, the predicament, and the objective, so everything else is about the future.

Act Two: Obstacles

This is the meat and potatoes portion... AND the most difficult part of writing a screenplay. Most mediocre and flawed screenplays are plagued by slow or meandering second acts. Keep in mind the main tension – and that your character should always be on the path to resolving that tension. The second act begins right after the lock-in: the moment when the character is stuck in the predicament and main tension – it is too late to turn back, so he/she must go forward. Now the character aims towards the goal, the objective, and he/she has the first meeting of the obstacles and antagonists or circumstances, always with rising actions.

The first sequence usually presents the alternative solutions. What are the choices? What should be done? And the character selects one alternative, and if it should be the worst one, then he selects another one, and in the meantime, the rest of the alternatives are eliminated. Then the character uses one of the ways to solve the predicament, and it seems to work, and that's usually the first culmination or midpoint.

But it's not that simple, because there are consequences of things that happened before that he didn't take into consideration. He offended somebody. He didn't do things that he was supposed to do. He forgot about things. You bring those things back in the second part of the act, and at that time they can be entered almost without motivation, because anything that works against your character at that time is acceptable. Any accident, any coincidence is fine because it makes his predicament worse, and therefore we enjoy it. Also it helps to explore the validity of the desire of the dream.

ACT TWO: ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

OBSTACLES: The second act is all about obstacles. It elaborates in great detail and intensity on the difficulties and obstacles the hero faces as he or she struggles to achieve his or her goal. Just when we think the situation can't get worse, it does. And when there is no way that our hero can get out of the jam, he does, only to end up in a worse jam. Basically, each sequence centers around a new obstacle or obstacles of increasing difficulty.

FIRST ATTEMPTS: Now that the character is locked-in, he makes his first attempts to solve the problem. This is usually the simplest, easiest manner to resolve the problem, and these attempts usually fail.

RAMIFICATIONS: It is important to show the ramification of the attempts, which must result in an increase in complications.

ACTION: Every move the character makes traps him even more. Each actions leads to more entrapment. Be merciless on the character.

SUB-PLOT: A solid sub-plot that carefully intertwines with the main tension in both plot and theme will be a great channel in which to relate the character's emotions (in regards to the main tension).

FIRST CULMINATION: This is the midpoint of the film. If our hero is to win in the end, this then is the first time the character finds a solution that seems to work. It is a victory. If the script is a tragedy, however, this often a low point for the character.

MIDPOINT MIRROR: The first culmination and ending of the film usually mirror each other: both victories or both failures.

MIDPOINT CONTRAST: The first culmination (Midpoint) and the main culmination (End of Act II) are usually in contrast with each other.

NEW ATTEMPTS: By the first culmination, our hero has failed in his/her first attempts but in failure, realizes the weight of the issue and becomes aware of the correct method in which to resolve the main tension. He/she then can begin new attempts, still faced with new obstacles, that get him/her closer to resolving the issue.

CHARACTER CHANGE: Throughout the second act, the main character starts changing, learning, and developing, or at least intense pressure is put on the character to change, and that change will manifest in the third act.

MAIN CULMINATION: this is the end of the second act and the point where the character sees that what he/she thinks he/she has been doing is not what he/she has been doing. The tension is at the highest point, and this is the decisive turning point. You must convince the audience that their worst fears are going to come true. This moment will change the main character in some way.

FIRST RESOLUTION: This resolution of the second act tension often spins the character(s) into the third act. (Luke Skywalker and Han Solo rescue Princess Leia from the clutches of evil Vader... but they still have to destroy the Death Star.)

Act Three: Resolution

The audience has seen the journey through which our protagonist has traveled. Yet the audience still wants reassurance that all is well, that the characters have changed, and a glimpse of his/her future.

Once the second act is resolved, there is usually a twist and new confrontation, which pushes us into the third act conflict. Often this is the result of the plot and subplot main culmination: the conflicts of the plot and sub-plot colliding.

In the third act, the protagonist will demonstrate his/her character arc in the manner in which he/she chooses to resolve the third act conflict. (For instance: In the beginning, a low-down character may choose to lie or cheat to resolve an issue, but since his/her arc has taught him/her morals, he/she tries to honestly resolve the situation).

The character's new vision and his/her attempt to end the third act conflict leads us to the obligatory scene – a big scene which the audience has been waiting for since the story began.

After that, you have the descending part of the story where we see what happened after the evil won, lost, or whatever. You see how they live afterwards. And the function of the twist in the middle of the third act is the last test. You shouldn't believe the solution, very often, if it came directly from the resolution. So you come with something that once more offers the character a possibility to try for the last time, in a different manner.

The main story and subplots are all resolved in differing ways, but all with some sense of finality, the feeling that the conflict is over.

ACT THREE: ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

CONDENSED: Fast. Organized. No new characters. No new locations. The story is unraveling.

TWIST: The final twist is a surprising, explainable, and motivated change in direction of the action.

FINAL CULMINATION: Up to this point, our hero has been tested, has tried everything he could, and there is only one way left, because all the alternatives were presented and eliminated, and therefore, comes the final culmination, often where the main plot and sub-plot collides, which propels our hero head on into a new confrontation with the inevitable.

CHARACTER ARC: The main character is now in a new situation with a new tension, and he/she must have opportunities to go back to the old character and see if there is a change. There should be.

OBLIGATORY SCENE: The obligatory scene the scene the at the end of the film in which the viewer has been waiting and looking forward to. If tension is an eager anticipation of the future, then the

obligatory scene is one that the viewer almost consciously expects. In a way, it has been promised to the audience.

RESOLUTION: This is the end. The third act conflict is complete, character arc complete, all issues resolved, and the audience sees the new status quo – or what the future holds for the characters.