

# SCREENPLAY BASICS

The essential elements of virtually every popular narrative movie plot (although not necessarily presented in any specific order!)

A **chain of events**, each fitting into some **cause/effect relationship**, and **occurring in time and space** (usually a specific time and place; rarely an ambiguous/indeterminate time or space unless some sort of experimental symbolic or allegorical drama)

## **EXPOSITION – DEVELOPMENT – CRISIS – CLIMAX – RESOLUTION**

More simply, this is broken down as:

- BEGINNING** (Setup)
  - **MIDDLE** (Confrontation)
  - **END** (Resolution)

In standard screenplay format, a script will run about one minute of screen time per page, so a typical feature-length screenplay for a two-hour movie is about 120 pages.

Approximate page lengths noted below can be divided by five or ten for short narrative films

NOTE: traditionally, scripts are printed in 12-point Courier type on one side of the paper, with three hole punches along the left edge, bound with two or three brass paper fasteners, sometimes between two sheets of heavier-weight paper or cardstock. The title page includes the writer contact information in the lower right corner.

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**BEGINNING** (about the first quarter, 20-30 pages)

– The Setup:

Characters, situation, needs/goals, problem(s), question(s) -- dramatic premise established

IMPORTANT NOTE: within the first 10 pages, the major characters should be introduced and placed in some intriguing situation that immediately grabs the viewers' interest and forces them to keep watching to find out what will happen next; major plot points can often be set up or foreshadowed from the start, motifs can be introduced that will recur throughout the plot and reinforce various themes the story is dealing with; the second 10 pages develop your main character(s) and their predicament

**- Major Plot Point 1** – an incident, crisis or subclimax that shifts the action to middle section

**MIDDLE** (about the middle half or so, 40-80 pages)

– The Confrontation:

development, complications and conflict

(barriers to characters' goals and characters overcoming those obstacles), rising action with small crises and subclimaxes (very often with some critical sequence at the section's mid-point), eventually building to

**- Major Plot Point 2** – the climax, shifting action to the final section

**END** (about the last quarter or less, 10-30 pages)

– The Resolution:

falling action with problem(s) solved, goals reached, questions answered, mysteries revealed (or not)

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**A moving picture drama should SHOW more often than it TELLS**

Stage drama and radio drama tend use more spoken words than action.

**"Movies *move!*"** Character personalities and actions may be emphasized with dialogue, but should be illustrated through actually depicting *action* and *behavior*.

Like every individual scene itself, any dialogue should either reveal character traits, forward the direction of the plot, or establish important information the audience must be aware of (or any combination of the above). Verbal explanations should be kept to a minimum and avoided if possible. Dialogue should *expand on* or *elaborate upon* what can be seen on the screen, *not* merely repeating in words what is already obvious in the action.

Voice-over narration and on-screen titles can be useful techniques that are part of a valid style, and may allow for easy condensation of time, but both techniques often tend to be used more as a cop-out to avoid depicting action.

**Character-based drama:** action arises from the characters' individual personalities and needs, character actions may be obviously motivated or motivations may be hidden

until resolution reveals more character background; characters are the main focus, with just enough action to hold the audience attention and forward the plot to a logical conclusion.

NOTE: *Dialogue is not always necessary to develop character!* Character actions, reactions, and reactions of others to them are what let the audience see what type of people they are – what they *do*, how they *behave*, and not what they *say* (which could very well all be lies to cover up some plot point).

Main characters and their personal histories are usually developed first, their needs or goals established, barriers set in their ways; then the plot “writes itself” from how the characters would react in such situations. An ending may or may not be decided upon from the outset, or several possible endings may be explored. All the elements invented for the characters’ backgrounds are rarely depicted, but they still determine how the characters must act (whether or not they explain their reasoning to the audience), and aid the writer in deciding what is most likely to happen next if a character experiences a certain thing.

It is certainly possible, even enjoyable, although often more difficult, to start writing with only the main characters and the basic dramatic premise in mind, with the writer not knowing how it will turn out, and allowing the characters to determine the direction of the action. Unfortunately, this approach to writing may often lead to dead ends and abandoned ideas. It is far easier to have at least a general feeling of where the characters will be at the end, and write towards that end.

**Action-based drama:** more generic characters may be invented simply to fulfill the needs of the action and go through the motions of the plot; character background is suggested just enough to keep them from being too superficial, with the action being the main focus.

The main climax and ending are usually established first; then all the characters and events needed to reach that ending are invented and plotted out. From here (and in later revisions), more character development may be added to give depth to the story and introduce various themes the author finds of interest.

**Theme-based drama:** philosophical, psychological, and/or socio-political themes are decided upon first, with character types, deeds, and events chosen to help illustrate those ideas in action; then the plot is designed to represent them allegorically, or by implication, or by explicit depiction/statements

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### **“CABLE” PLOT**

Plot threads are tightly woven together like a cable or rope, touching and interacting with each other to the extent that deletion of any characters, events, or subplots often weakens the overall script

### **“BEAD-STRING” PLOT**

Like a string of beads, one main plot thread is used as a unifying factor to “string” a series of incidents or episodes that may or may not be directly related to each other, and any one of which can be eliminated with little or no effect to the overall movie (hence, these plots are often called “episodic”) – comedies and “road” movies often employ this technique

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**NOTE:**

Many scripts combine all three types of drama and both types of plot to some degree, often with one type dominating.

With any type of script, it can be much easier to write after first developing a plot outline that briefly describes all major scenes in the movie, from beginning to end. This may be done by writing out what is essentially a bare-bones short story in present tense, by arranging index cards that contain notes for each scene or sequence, or by merely going over and organizing the basic plot material in one's head.

Virtually all scripts can fit into the typical "three-act" format, even if things may be rearranged a bit

Virtually all scripts start out with some major complication that must be explained or solved (whether or not it is the main conflict of the story), before getting into much background about the characters and developing the plot -- many start *in media res* (in the middle of things)

Plots can present the story material



- chronologically, each thing happening once and moving on to the next
  - out of order, through flashbacks, possibly with the same thing happening more than once from different points of view
  - within one or more framing stories (flashbacks within flashbacks, etc.)
  - jumping back and forth in time
  - from one character's point of view
  - from one group of characters' point of view
  - from an omniscient point of view, shifting from one character to another at any time
  - from a mixed point of view, revealing or withholding story information from the audience at some times and from the characters at other times
  - objectively depicting the characters' actions
  - subjectively depicting the characters' actions using one or more specific attitudes or points of view (either those of the characters themselves or of the author or of some disembodied narrator who is not even part of the story)
  - any way you decide!!
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**UNDERSTAND** that there are thousands, if not many tens of thousands of screenplays written every year, but that only a few hundred major movies are produced every year for theatrical release. Even selling a script or having it optioned by a producer is no guarantee that financing will be raised to produce it, and even if it is produced there is no guarantee it will ever be released! Writing a screenplay that gets turned into a movie people will eventually see is extremely rare!

On the other hand, dropping costs of digital video equipment now makes it practical for screenwriters to produce and/or direct their own work, entering it in festivals, self-distributing it on DVD to local and regional markets or internationally through the internet, and/or using the finished movie as a calling card for potential commissions or other script sales.

**CONSIDERATIONS for writing a screenplay you can produce on a minimal budget:**

NUMBER ONE – *MOST IMPORTANT!*

-Keep the cast and number of locations *SMALL!* A half-dozen or fewer, if possible!

Using only two to six major characters and primary locations can make production feasible on little or no budget. *Less* raw material means *more* chance of finding everything you need!

RELATED TIP: Write your scenes with no more than two or three characters in any one scene at the same time, even if you have more characters in the story. It is much easier to arrange for two or three volunteer actors to meet at the same time for rehearsals and shooting than it is to coordinate schedules of a half-dozen or more people who have other commitments.

## NUMBER TWO

-Imagine your story and write your script with actual places and people in mind that you know you might be able to use in the movie. It is far easier to change your script to fit a location or specific actors than it is to find or build necessary sets or search for some exact character type that a script might call for. A cast of thousands or at least crowds of hundreds may actually be possible in certain cases, but is much more difficult to arrange for on the specific days you need to shoot.

## NUMBER THREE

-Set your story in the present day in a location comparable to where you expect to shoot the movie. For example, don't write scenes that take place in deserts, on the ocean, at a mountain resort, etc., unless you expect to be able to go there with your cast and crew! On the other hand, if you know you will be going somewhere on vacation with someone who can act, you may wish to write in scenes to take advantage of that. (see NUMBER TWO and NUMBER ONE)

#### NUMBER FOUR

-Do not rely on any special effects in your script unless you know you will be able to achieve them (e.g., age makeup, bloody wounds, explosions, fires, computer-generated props/sets/characters, etc.). On the other hand, if you have or know someone who has the ability to create certain effects, you may wish to design your story to take advantage of them.

#### NUMBER FIVE

-A very low-budget film (shooting on real film with a professional crew and one or more bankable stars) can still cost from one to ten million dollars to produce. You will definitely need investors to produce it.

-A “no-budget” film (shooting on film but with cast and crew salaries deferred) will probably be a minimum of \$20,000-\$30,000 and may easily cost from \$100,000 to a half-million. You will probably need investors or go into debt to pull it off. Most cast and crew will be donating their time or working for basic room and board expenses.

-A “no-budget” movie on standard-definition digital video, on the other hand, may cost as low as a few hundred dollars to several thousand dollars to complete! You can finance it yourself for less than the price of a decent vacation, with the cast and crew donating their time.

## **WE MADE IT, SO THEN WHAT?**

-Just finishing your screenplay is a major accomplishment. Actually getting it to production stage, and then actually completing the movie are likewise major accomplishments. If you want anyone to see it, however, you should enter it in film festivals and you can try to sell it to distributors (who may be somewhat more likely to pick up a finished product than to finance production of a screenplay written

and produced by unknowns). However, it is still the exception rather than the rule for independent movies to get much, if any distribution, even with the positive publicity and acclaim of film festival screenings. So just as you can produce your own screenplay, you can try to distribute your own movie.

- Once finished, a feature-length movie made on digital video can usually be transferred to theatrical standard 35mm film for an additional \$30,000, permitting a limited theatrical release or major festival screenings. A few theatres and many film festivals can project from the semi-standard Beta SP professional video format, reducing that cost to perhaps only an additional \$100 (plus or minus) to transfer from your digital video master. DVD copies, on the other hand (suitable for direct sales and video stores but very few theatres or film festival screenings), can be run off at about 40 to 50 cents apiece for plain discs or 70 cents to a dollar for inkjet-printed discs, plus another 30 to 40 cents for the plastic "Amaray" DVD box and another 50 cents to a dollar for the color boxcover insert. That's roughly two

dollars or less for a saleable DVD, compared with about \$2000-\$4000 for a single 35mm film print that can be run in theatres.

- A modest, 500-print limited theatrical release will cost about a million dollars just for the film prints, so a special region by region release of maybe a half-dozen or so prints might be more practical. Running off and packaging 500 home-burned DVDs will cost about a thousand dollars, and you can make them on-demand as needed. (If you want or need any more than that, you'd be money ahead to have the discs commercially mastered and mass-produced, costing roughly \$2000 for the first thousand fully-packaged DVDs.) Advertising and promotion will cost whatever you're willing to spend, from a few thousand to a few million dollars. You're already a writer, so you can write your own press releases and newspaper-radio-TV ad campaign.