She wants the coins. He tosses them to her, and she promptly pulls the trigger.

• Alone, with five of her onetime best friends now dead, Julie turns the sailboat back to shore.

• In the distance a storm is coming, and the seas are choppy. Lightning illuminates the entire sky, revealing ominous thunderheads. The little sailboat rises and falls on the massive swells, standing little chance against nature's fury—and the curse of the coins.

THE END

Treatment *v.* Outline

The words *outline* or *reblocking* are used to describe a list of the scenes in a cinematic story, much like the beat sheet. Outlines of this kind are especially useful in the development process because they reveal the flow of the scenes, without elaboration, at a glance. An outline can be thought of as a skeletal treatment. Where a treatment may contain dialogue to dramatize a particular moment, the outline will not. Its purpose is strictly diagnostic, to allow the executive, the director, and the producers to chart the direction of a story and to make course corrections before the writer is fully committed to writing or rewriting.

The following example is a partial outline for our Disney film, *Meg:*

1. Seventy million years ago. T-Rex attacked and destroyed by *Megalodon*.
2. Professor Jonas Baxter finishes lecture on Meg. Terry Tenaka tries to get his attention.
3. Jonas attends media awards party. Learns his wife is cheating on him, walks out. Terry Tenaka is waiting for him.

In the next chapter we will discuss how to write an original treatment for motion pictures, while at the same time examining the basic elements of fiction and drama.

2

The Big Screen: *Original Treatments for Motion Pictures*

▪ ▪ ▪

Make it new.
—Ezra Pound

Walt Disney Pictures has paid $700,000 against $1.5 million . . . for the first hundred pages and treatment of an unfinished novel.

After heated bidding during the past few days, the publishing house of Bantam-Doubleday-Dell obtained the rights to two novels by a first-time novelist for $2.1 million—one of which is still in treatment form.

Wouldn't you love to read those words about your story? Our client Steve Alten did! His dream of making it as a writer came true when after twenty rejections for representation, his "idea" for a novel titled *White Death* about a prehistoric shark found its way to our office. Steve spent ten years researching the sixty-foot *Megalodon Carcharodon* while working days at a meat processing plant in South Florida. His awesome idea was swimming in the depths of 450 dense pages complete with every known fact about the *Megalodon* and its environment. We clearly saw the potential, but Steve needed to

work on a treatment that would assist him in developing his idea into a thrilling commercial plot showcasing provocative characters. It took a dozen drafts over a period of six months, plus the assistance of thewriterslifeline.com's David Angsten and screenwriter Tom Wheeler, to come up with the final 15-page treatment and 100 sample pages of the novel that AEI and Zide Films, with the assistance of Jeff Robinov, then of International Creative Management, sent to Disney Pictures.

Is there a mysterious secret to accomplishing this dream scenario? No. Once you've got the basic talent it's simply a combination of being persistent, having access to Hollywood (via your manager, agent, or producer), knowing the basics of the business and your craft, and then honing your skills and going for it! Kevin Costner, as reported by Peter Keough in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, once drew an analogy between the artist's dedication and people jettisoning all the weight to keep a plane from going down. He said, "I think one of the first things to go as people's lives start to go down is their dreams. Dreams should be the last thing to go—dreams are the things you go down *with*. If you're left clinging to a piece of driftwood in the middle of the ocean, I'd put on it the word *dreams*."

Okay, so let's get started making your dreams come true.

What Makes a Great Treatment?

A treatment can be useful in getting your story straight, getting the details of the screenplay you wish to write clearly spelled out. When you begin creating the details of the script, it's all too easy to lose track of the backbone of the story. But the treatment *focuses* on the story's backbone, allowing it to be seen clearly.

Not only is a treatment good for keeping track of the forest instead of the trees, but also the writer has less invested psychologically in a treatment than he does in a full screenplay. Having to redo a portion of a treatment is far less agonizing

than having to rewrite a portion of a script. For the same reason, it's often a better idea to do a short treatment than a longer one.

Using a treatment to develop the story before writing the screenplay, moreover, parallels the actual film development process in which the director, producers, and/or the financing company's executives want to make sure they "buy" the story's overall shape before committing to the time and financial expense required by a script. Experienced screenwriters may go to one story development meeting after another without writing down their ideas until everyone involved has agreed upon the main elements.

A treatment re-creates the story development process in the privacy of your own workshop. Your treatment is your own private story development meeting. With it you can be sure that the four elements of drama—character, action, setting, and point of view—are being mapped out clearly scene by scene, act by act. Having these elements clearly outlined in the treatment allows you to sit down to write the screenplay with the greatest self-confidence possible.

The main structural work involved in the script-writing process will occur during the treatment stage. For the treatment to be effective, all the following elements must be in place:

- an **opening** that hooks the audience;
- a final **climax** that satisfies their sense of storytelling;

and in between:

- a **protagonist** the audience relates to;
- a **central conflict**, around which all the action revolves;
- a **central emotional line** that determines the mood and viewpoint of the film;
- all the necessary **main and supporting characters;**
- the **essential structure and content of every scene** from beginning to end.

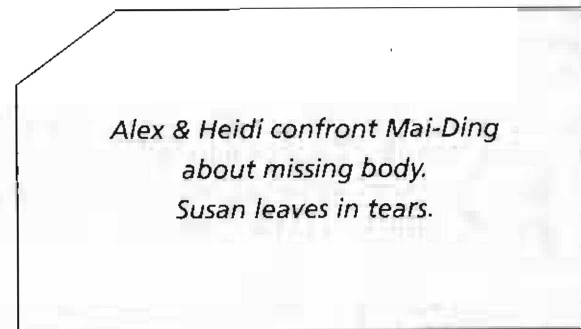
A treatment for an original screenplay can be any length, but it can't go wrong at five pages and should rarely be more than twenty. It can't go wrong at five pages because if it catches your reader's attention, he'll ask to see a longer treatment—or he'll start talking to you about a script!

The Writer's Storyboard

Directors often use *storyboarding* to plan a shoot. A storyboard is a series of sketches or diagrams illustrating every basic scene and camera setup, thereby providing a visual account of how the film will look before shooting begins. The writer can also adopt this technique to assist him in seeing his story and how it will lay out on the page. Many writers have found it useful to use three-by-five-inch index cards in the early stages of developing the treatment, each card containing a shorthand description of one scene (the dramatic interaction of the protagonist with one or more of the other characters). Others create a color-coding system that makes it easy to keep track of character interaction by assigning each character a different color card. This also helps to keep the entire story in perspective, since you can see its overall shape and identify its holes at a glance as you lay out your cards on a table or corkboard. Using this system, one scene might consist of a beige and a blue card, each cut in half, because in that scene Alex (beige) interacts with Heidi (blue). In another scene, where Alex and Heidi are joined by Susan (violet), the scene card might be beige, blue, and violet.

Laying the cards out in acts on the corkboard allows you to flesh out the story before committing it to a prose narrative. What's on each card? Whatever's required to remind you of the heart of the proposed scene: "Alex and Heidi confront Mai-Ding about the missing body. Susan bursts into tears, runs out the door." The setting should also be noted, and whether the scene is an interior or an exterior, and if it's day or night. When working with clients on treatment cards, we use a black border around

night scenes, and indicate interiors by cutting the left corner of the card:



The development of scene cards in a step-by-step order detailing a brief description of every scene from beginning to end involves the expenditure of creative energy, thought, and imagination. The creative process is not logical and need not be done in chronological order. Put cards on the board as they occur to you. When they stop occurring to you, take a break and come back to your work when you have new ideas for scenes. Allowing the creative process to follow its nose in this fashion makes it fun, and generally more effective than sitting in front of the corkboard until you've thought up all the scenes. If you're collaborating with someone else, a typical writing session at this stage might be nothing more than brainstorming together until you start filling your storyboard with scene cards.

Don't be afraid to take cards *off* the board and toss them. Director Paul Mazursky (*Diary of a Mad Housewife, Down and Out in Beverly Hills, Scenes from a Mall*) says, "I've storyboarded every picture. I throw out some of it, but I use a lot of it." That's the advantage of the storyboard. Its flexible structure allows the story to develop without committing it to the linear reality of a computer screen or paper. This storyboarding process is the heart of constructing a film treatment. If you succeed, and your film is made, a director will re-create your storyboard with his own.

Don't be impatient with this process. It may take many sessions. Good stories grow slowly, gestating into their own natural shape until they're ready to be born, or until they click. Taking the time now will allow the actual writing of the treatment, and then of the script, to be almost automatic. You'll just be filling in the blanks that you created in your storyboard sessions. Yes, it's time-consuming, and yes, it's difficult. But that's what makes screenwriting the most challenging of all writing careers. If you're in a hurry, find something easier to write!

When you finally arrive at an order that seems to click, check to see that every scene:

- expresses conflict, and
- moves the plot forward another step.

If it doesn't express conflict, either add conflict or cut the scene. If it doesn't move the story forward, either collapse the scene into one that does, or cut it. Only scenes that move the story forward are allowed. Imagine yourself sitting in the theater, wondering, "What was the purpose of *that* scene?"

Once you've completed your storyboard, and your story is laid out with all its necessary scenes, it's time to write the treatment. Now all you do is turn the sketches written on the cards into clear, simple, vivid, and dramatic prose that allows the reader to *envision* your story. For example:

> Alex and Heidi confront Mai-Ding about the missing body. Susan bursts into tears, runs out the door.

becomes:

> Harsh light illuminates the face of Mai-Ding. In the shadows, on either side, Alex and Heidi hold her arms.
> "Where's the body?" Alex demands.
> "We know you moved it," says Heidi.
> "If you don't tell us, we're calling the police."

Let's take a closer look at the qualities that make up a good film and, thus, must be represented in your treatment.

Action or Story

> Ideas have to be wedded to action; if there is no sex, no vitality in them, there is no action. Ideas cannot exist alone in the vacuum of the mind. Ideas are related to living.
>
> —Henry Miller

If the action of your story doesn't reveal itself within the first few paragraphs of your treatment or the first two or three pages of your script, most people in the entertainment industry will stop reading. Agents, producers, directors, and story editors are all looking for the same thing: great storytelling. A great storyteller knows the story must begin immediately, not "at the beginning," but "in the middle of things." Aristotle was the first to point this out, crediting Homer for starting *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* "in the middle of the action"; more recently, William Goldman advises writers, "Begin as far into the scene as possible, and get out of it as soon as you can." In the first few minutes of the movie *Witness*, after the death of an Amish man, his widow and young son leave on a train journey. In the station in Philadelphia, the little boy witnesses a murder. In the first ten minutes of *Independence Day*, humongous alien ships appear in the sky entirely shadowing the cities below, an immediate threat. As the White House is alerted to the crisis, helicopters are dispatched to make contact—and they are blown to smithereens. Now we know: These aliens ain't friendly!

A good story instantly hooks even the most jaded people in the business. What's your story about? What's its *one-liner*, the tag that might be used to sell the film to prospective buyers?

- *"Die Hard* in a tunnel." *Daylight* with Sylvester Stallone.
- "What happens to a friendship after you sleep with your best friend?" *When Harry Met Sally* with Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal.
- "When two men get into a minor accident on the FDR Drive the ensuing feud escalates into a sinister game of cat and mouse." Ben Affleck and Samuel L. Jackson's dark thriller, *Changing Lanes.*
- "Everyone has their limit. Self-defense isn't murder." In the vein of *Sleeping with the Enemy, Enough* with Jennifer Lopez.
- *"Searching for Bobby Fischer* meets *Dead Poets Society."* *Finding Forester* with Sean Connery.

Here's a checklist that might help you sharpen your story:

- Does your story make a statement? Does it make your audience think or feel strongly about its subject matter?
- Does it say something important about today's world?
- Is its statement clearly reflected by the protagonist's character?
- Does the protagonist learn a lesson in this story that can be shared by the audience?
- Does your story ask a question important for today's audiences?
- How do you want your audience to feel when they leave the theater?

Not Just Action, Dramatic Action

There are two kinds of action in a treatment:

1. **Something that happens** to a major character to move the story forward.
2. **Dialogue** that moves the story forward.

"A black limo rounds the corner," is *not* action. "A black limo rounds the corner and heads directly for Mary" is. Whether the limo hits her or not, if Mary is one of your major characters, that's action.

When a minor character gets hit by the limo, it's dramatic action only if the collision is a *necessary* part of your story, causing the major character or characters to react. Not everything that happens to a major character is dramatic action. When Mary runs up the steps just before opening the door and being blown away, running up the steps is action only if it has a direct purpose in the story, such as building suspense. If you show her pouring milk into her coffee before she goes off to her final rendezvous, you're probably going to remove that scene along the way. In a perfect film, putting milk in the coffee works only if the milk or the coffee is poisoned. Even the smallest actions must have meaning, or they distract from the forward movement of the story.

In 1928, Walt Disney wrote instructions from New York to Ub Iwerks, his chief animator in Hollywood:

> Listen—please try and make all action definite and pointed and don't be afraid to exaggerate things plenty. It never looks as strong on the screen as it appears on the drawing board. Always work to bring the GAGS out above any other action—this is very important.

Over the years Disney repeated to his animators, *"Make it read!"* meaning, make the action distinct and recognizable. No contradictions, no ambiguities.

Once the character work-up is done, you can turn back to your story's action line. Even though many of your action elements may have occurred to you before this point, you'll now discover that they come into focus because the characters are in focus. The most important thing to recognize about your dramatic action is that it must be *rhythmic,* arranged in a fashion that constantly holds your audience's attention. There

are as many ways of creating good dramatic action as there are writers, but in successful film storytelling the *pattern* must be compelling.

The pattern of dramatic action can be determined by giving each scene in your story what we call an *intensity rating*. Rate each scene of your story on a scale of one to ten, one being least dramatic, ten being most. The hard part about writing action is maintaining your perspective to help determine where your script is strong and where it's weak as far as story pattern is concerned. The intensity rating is part of a diagnostic tool we've invented at AEI that helps writers visualize their action line and turn weaknesses into strengths.

Here's how it works:

On a single sheet of paper, as in the accompanying illustration (see p. 33), write "page 1" at the top left-hand corner, and "page 115" at the bottom left-hand corner. Then start filling in the most important scenes of your action line, with only a few key words to describe each—and drawing a dashed line under each scene with the number of hyphens from one to ten that fits the intensity rating. At the end of each hyphenated line, type a right karat (>, usually found at the far right of the bottom row of your keyboard. It's best to write the scenes down from memory, on the principle that if you don't remember them they aren't dramatic enough to include in your overview.

In the sample Intensity Rating illustration, we've written only scenes we've thought of so far, and we've been random and arbitrary about the page numbers—which are simply guesses at the present stage of our thinking about the process. We learn some things, though, just from doing this much:

1. Nothing very intense happens until Jack breaks out of prison.
2. Nothing very intense happens between pages 15 and 30.
3. Susan killing Jack, on page 96, is just as intense as Jack jumping Elmer on page 70. Maybe that should change. (And so on.)

We learn even more about our action line if we turn the page sideways and view the arrows as vectors in a "roller-coaster graph." Now the shape of the action line, as we've established it so far, becomes clear. And it can use improvement. Wouldn't it be better, for example, to begin with a 10 instead of a 1? The idea, after all, is to hook the audience immediately. So Jack's prison break might be a better opening. By the same token, maybe the ending should be rethought immediately. After the killing of Jack and the near-death of Elmer, do we really want our story's action to trickle off into a sunset dinner? One come-down moment might be fine, but three will leave the audience without the intensity we've gone to all the trouble to bring them to.

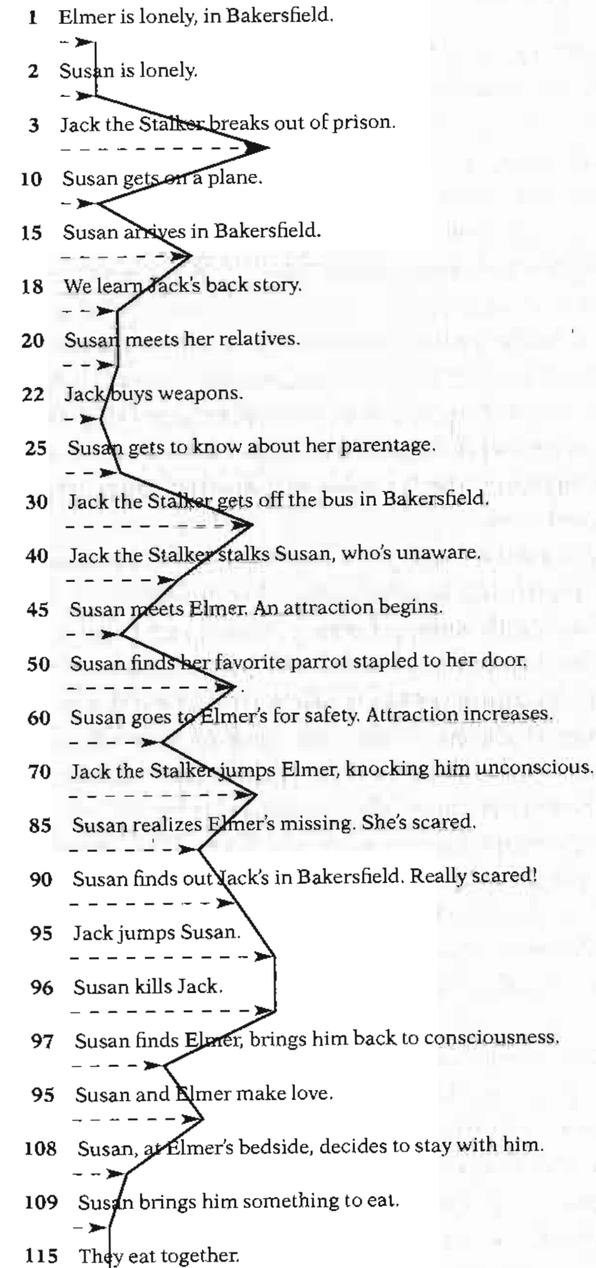
Nothing beats doing this for yourself. Watch your favorite film on videotape, stopwatch in hand. As story action occurs, stop the tape and note how far into the story this particular scene falls. Create a one-page chart, just as we've described, for *Jaws* or *Jurassic Park* and you'll understand why these films knocked the box office for a loop.

You'll want to make sure that the high and low points reflected in your overview chart correspond with *act breaks*. Obviously you'll close each act, not with a "2" scene, but with a "10" scene. This closing scene is known as a *cliffhanger* from the many films that literally leave the protagonist at the edge of the cliff at a momentous turning point in the action line. We're not going to duck out to the bathroom just as Indiana Jones opens the ancient pyramid to discover it's writhing with snakes. If you can't think of dramatic closes for your acts but are very good at thinking of dramatic beginnings, chances are you have a very small problem. Simply move your act break. If act 3 opens with a 10, but act 2 closes with a 4, cut the 10 scene in half and place the first half at the end of act 2. Presto! you now have a cliffhanger ending for act 2 as well as a dramatic opening scene for act 3. Remember, your goal is to keep your audience on its toes so that they never know when to expect the next shock. In general, the more turns, twists, and cliffhangers in a story, the

more involving the story. Of course, none of these action moments mean anything if they're not completely related to the character and don't derive clearly from the character's motivation and his mission.

So see the Intensity Rating illustration on the facing page.

INTENSITY RATING



Source: Rollercoaster graph: ©thewriterslifeline.com

What's the Hook?

If you don't know what a hook is, you probably aren't a born storyteller. A born storyteller, like someone who knows how to tell a good joke, has an innate knack for capturing his audience's attention; it's called the dramatic instinct. A good treatment wastes not a single word pulling you into the world of the story and involving you in the protagonist's conflicts. Remember that commentary like "The story begins with" has no place in a dramatic treatment. Instead, write "The woman on the black stallion races toward the speeding train." It's essential to *intrigue* the reader with your opening words so she will want to know what's going to happen next.

Make sure it's clear very early in your treatment what your story is about. If the reader hasn't figured this out by the end of page 1, you'll lose him. He's not reading to study; he's reading to be entertained. Introduce the central conflict as soon as you possibly can. The ensemble mystery movie *The Usual Suspects* hooks the audience immediately at what appears to be the end of a story. The audience views the bodies of several men. Then the movie stops at the wounded Keaton (Gabriel Byrne) awaiting his death at the hands of a mysterious figure. But, like the savage opening murder of the main character played by Diane Keaton in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, this end is the genuine beginning of the story—through which eventually we will meet the only survivor and flash back to the fateful meeting of the suspects.

Don't get carried away with setting up your story, or with presenting *back story*, the background history of a character that the writer reveals to the audience in bits and pieces along the way. Your reader is experienced enough to make the necessary assumptions about what has brought your character to where he is now—and *now* should be as far into the action of the story as possible. In the opening of *Swordfish*, we see John

Travolta's character engaged in a highly dramatic bank raid. By the time he makes his escape, we know exactly who he is and what he's all about: an extraordinary, death-defying terrorist, willing to risk his life on an impossible mission.

The Thematic Core of Your Story

Not every story needs to explore a theme, or even convey a message. Many excellent movies, like *Heist* or *Eraser*, are written as pure entertainment and have no intention of showing anything more than what's on the surface. Yet the greatest films, and the ones every agent or manager wants to set up, revolve around a central theme that seems to shape every aspect of the story's characters and action. The urban drama *Set It Off* produced by Dale Pollack (*Blaze*, *Saturday Night Fever*) and Oren Koules depicts the self-destructive heroism that comes from desperation. *The Professional*, on the surface about killing and revenge, also explores love's ability to grow under the most unlikely circumstances. Each scene in the best-told story reflects that story's theme, examining it from yet another dramatic angle. But don't be surprised if the theme of your story isn't clear when you begin the storyboarding we described earlier. It won't be. Let it emerge as the story itself emerges from the depths of your unconscious where myth makes its home.

The theme will emerge only when the characters are clear. Yes, it's a chicken-and-egg situation. You must storyboard the story to know what it's "trying to tell you." Then you must understand the individual characters, their motivations and missions. Only then can you bring the theme, what Lajos Egri called "the premise," into final focus. The children's writer Phyllis Reynolds Naylor advises that if you sometimes confuse plot with theme, you can keep the two elements separate by thinking of *theme* as what the story is about, and *plot* as the situation that brings the theme into focus. You might think of theme as the message of

the story, the lesson to be learned, the question that is asked, or what it is the author is trying to tell us about life and the human condition. Plot is the action by which this truth will be demonstrated.

In the 1979 movie *Kramer vs. Kramer*, for example, the thematic core of the story raises the question, Who's the better parent: the transformed, self-involved, ad exec father (Dustin Hoffman)? or the mother (Meryl Streep) who, after leaving behind her child in a quest to reclaim her own identity, returns to fight for custody? In *Seven* (Brad Pitt, Morgan Freeman), a serial killer uses the seven deadly sins to choose his victims. The thematic core suggests that no one alive is immune from the impact of the deadliest sins, and that only someone detached from life can escape their psychological and emotional horror.

THE TREATMENT AS TRAILER

The treatment offers a way to get the story straight quickly and efficiently. Often writers come up with ideas that spark my interest and in order to get the support of my coworkers and help gauge their enthusiasm I'll ask for a brief treatment to pass along. While treatments vary in length, my favorites are ideally around three pages with one act per page. This delineates the concept quickly and hits upon the important beats within each act.

The best advice I've heard came from a colleague who instructed a writer to think of the treatment as a great trailer. Not only should it sell the basic story, characters, tone, and the world, but most important, it should contain unforgettable moments that make you not want to wait a minute longer to see the movie. Like cutting a great trailer, treatment writing has become an art form that requires a delicate balance. One must know how to reveal just enough information to whet the appetite without giving "the powers that be" too many opportunities to say no.

—Terrence Myers, Director of Development,
Laurence Mark Productions

The Centrality of Characters

> The personages in a tale shall be alive, except in the case of corpses, and . . . always the reader shall be able to tell the corpses from the other.
>
> —Mark Twain

No matter what kind of movie you're writing a treatment for, your work begins with characters. Characters are the most important element of the story and should generate the action, the setting, and the point of view. Characters are not, after all, human beings; they are created by the dramatist to attract and hold an audience's attention. Your job as a writer is to give us insight into each and every character in your story, no matter how evil or virtuous his actions may be.

Characters are the heart of drama, and a treatment in which the characters aren't clearly drawn and compelling is too dull to read. Today's viewing audience is extremely sophisticated and demands well-constructed characters whose actions reflect their motivational pattern. As the television producer Norton Wright puts it, "Character is revealed by action. Action is motivated by character." Precisely because real-life people behave inconsistently and with motivations only vaguely understood, we demand in our fictional men and women actions that are easily related to recognizable "character patterns." Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) in *Lethal Weapon* acts the way he does because he's torn between his suicidal tendencies, based on his love for his dead wife, and his instincts as a cop. While it might take years of psychotherapy to fully understand such behavior, the theater audience must get it in the first half hour—or they will feel the character is unclear. And dramatic characterization must be done from the inside out. You can't just tell us your character is angry. You must provide action that shows his anger.

In development meetings the most important first step is to

bring the protagonist (also known as the main character, or hero) into dramatic focus. It's his or her story, which means that every scene in your treatment must relate to his *character arc*, a term used to describe the various "beats" by which a character develops or evolves from the beginning to the end of a story. In well-constructed stories, the major characters change or grow. In poorly constructed stories, the protagonist remains the same at the end as he was at the beginning.

Types of Characters

There are four basic types of dramatic characters. In reverse order of importance, they are:

- function characters
- minor, or *tag*, characters
- supporting characters
- major characters, including the protagonist and the antagonist

Function Characters

A function character is one who performs a single function in the story without being involved in the motivational pattern of the major characters. Linda Emery's mother in *Dragon* (played by Michael Learned) has only one function: to disapprove of her daughter's marriage to Bruce Lee. The elderly next-door neighbor in *Sliver* serves only one purpose: to warn newcomer Carly Norris (Sharon Stone) that the high-rise she's moving into is haunted. The function character has no distinguishing characteristics. Less is better. Too much description is the bane of screenwriters. The minute you give a function character a distinguishing characteristic, you've turned him into a minor character.

Minor, or Tag, Characters

A minor character's *tag* or neurosis is a single defining attribute that distinguishes him and makes him memorable. For Serge (Bronson Pinchot), the gallery receptionist in *Beverly Hills Cop*, it was his heavily accented exchange with Eddie Murphy that had the audience laughing out loud. Where a function character is shaped to be forgettable, a minor character is written to be instantly recognizable. A minor character may have motivation (he's addicted to power), but he doesn't have a mission in life. Dan Aykroyd as the son in *Driving Miss Daisy* gives new meaning to gentility as he strives to keep his mother in check.

As a rule neither function nor minor characters are ever highlighted in the treatment. They need not even be mentioned unless they serve an indispensable function in moving the story forward. If you can tell the story without mentioning function or minor characters, do so. Otherwise, include them only where necessary.

Supporting Characters

Think of the supporting character as a recurring minor character. Like the minor character, he has a tag that identifies him immediately. But, like the major character, the supporting character *evolves*. When the power-hungry character dies in the midst of his quest for power, he's still a minor character. When he's reduced to impotency before he dies, he's become a supporting character. His tag has developed or evolved. The memorable, fast-talking, ever-grinning government witness played by Joe Pesci in *Lethal Weapon 2* serves at first merely as an exasperation for the Mel Gibson and Danny Glover characters, but eventually he becomes their ally.

Major Characters

> I understand one secret: The way you get screenplays on the screen is you write parts actors want to play.
>
> —Larry Ferguson, screenwriter, *The Hunt for Red October*

"If you write a big action piece that showcases a great character for Harrison Ford to play, you stand a better shot of selling it," says former William Morris agent Dave Phillips. The most important major character, of course, is your protagonist. But both hero and villain, protagonist and antagonist, are major characters. The *protagonist*, a term used first by classical Greek tragedians, is the first actor, the one who dominates most of the action. The *antagonist*, who's sometimes but not always a villain, is his opponent, the one who acts against the protagonist. Creon is Antigone's antagonist in Sophocles' *Antigone*, but he is by no means a villain. In Shakespeare's *Richard III* or Jerzy Kosinski's *Cockpit* the protagonist is villainous.

Depending on the complexity of your story, there may be a number of major characters. Once you have your protagonist figured out you'll want to go through the same brainstorming process with your second main character and especially with your antagonist. It's a rule of thumb in the industry that the best stories draw their strength from the antagonist because the audience is excited when a protagonist faces an extraordinary challenge from a fascinating and complex opponent. Audiences love to hate great antagonists:

- Mitch Leary (John Malkovich) in *In the Line of Fire*
- Cruella de Vil (Glenn Close) in *101 Dalmatians*
- Eric Qualen (John Lithgow) in *Cliffhanger*

Keep in mind that your antagonists don't necessarily have to be human. Consider:

- the storm in *The Perfect Storm*
- the creature in *Alien*
- the spiders in *Arachnophobia*
- the fire in *Backdraft*
- the tornado in *Twister*

It's a truism of drama that the stronger the antagonist (whether human or not), the stronger your protagonist will look. Yet although it's sometimes easier to create a believable antagonist than relatable and admirable protagonists, you won't want this strength to become overbalanced in favor of the antagonist.

Who's the Protagonist?

The protagonist or hero of your story is the major character whose motivations and mission shape the action. He or she is the central focus, the actor who is on camera most of the time and through whose eyes the audience learns the story. The protagonist is literally the center of attention, the star: Dave Kovic (Kevin Kline) in *Dave*, Mrs. Doubtfire (Robin Williams) in the film of the same name.

In a story treatment for a mainstream film, the protagonist is

- someone the audience is able to identify with, or relate to, although not necessarily sympathize with;
- someone eminently castable, a part a star would want to play.

Identification with a protagonist means that the audience is able to experience emotion through that character. You create audience identification by making your protagonist someone for whom we feel sympathy, whose flaws and foibles we understand; by making him likable; by giving him internal and external conflicts; and more than anything else, by placing him in jeopardy from the first moment to the last. Introduce your protagonist as soon as possible, preferably in the opening lines of the treatment.

A protagonist is convincing when all of the following four dimensions of his makeup are clearly focused:

1. his **motivation**
2. his **mission** in the story
3. the **obstacles** he faces in pursuing this mission
4. the **change** he undergoes from the beginning of the story to the end

Let's examine these dimensions one at a time.

Motivation

When a real-life person does something strange, you find the behavior believable because you know it has happened. A dramatic character doesn't have the same advantage. The moment he acts out of character, he throws the entire story into jeopardy. The reader, who suspends his disbelief when he begins reading the treatment, immediately recovers it when a character's behavior jars him. That doesn't make sense, he says to himself, and tosses the treatment aside. The spell is broken.

In order to make the major character's development from beginning to end convincing, his motivation must be believable and well defined. Usually motivation is a simple matter, although it's not so simple to create a character as convincingly motivated as the grandfather in *Heidi* or Romeo in *Romeo + Juliet*. After reading your treatment, the buyer should clearly understand the main character or characters and their relation to the dramatic elements of the story.

Motivation is the mechanism that makes your character tick. A minor character can be motivated by love, hate, greed, despair, or anxiety; that is, by any recognizable emotion. To sustain our interest, a major character usually requires a combination of two motivating emotions. Greed and love warring within your protagonist, for example, automatically provides both internal and external tensions that lend themselves to scene-by-scene dramatization.

At the heart of every good story is the question, What would happen if a character like X found himself in a situation like Y?

What would happen if an irrepressible and exuberant little girl found herself the ward of a bitter and cynical old man? That question powers *Heidi*. *Moonstruck* asks what would happen if a woman about to be married went to convince her future husband's estranged younger brother to attend the wedding and they were instantly, passionately drawn to each other. Aristotle was the first to point out that the greatness of drama is that it shows us not just what happened, which is history's job, but what *might* happen under certain circumstances. If a noble man, acting in character, is faced with a threat to his nobility, he would die rather than act ignobly. Drama allows us to participate vicariously in fateful actions without being burned by them ourselves. In a sense, your character is *forced* by his motivational mechanism to act the way he does. Examples from recent films include these:

- The powerful motivation for **revenge** works well in films like *The Specialist* (Sylvester Stallone, Sharon Stone) and *Desperado* (Antonio Banderas). In *The Quick and the Dead*, Ellen (Sharon Stone) must survive a quick-draw contest in order to exact revenge against the evil Herod (Gene Hackman) who presides over the town of Redemption.
- **Greed** mixed with a **need for family love** is the driving motivational complex of Tom Cruise's character Charlie in *Rainman*. After he discovers that his deceased father's millions have gone into a trust to support an autistic older brother he never knew he had, Charlie vows to bring his brother back to California as a way to control the inheritance. Along the way, Charlie finds the family love he never experienced growing up.
- **Redemption** motivates Clint Eastwood's character Frank Horrigan in *In the Line of Fire* and Sylvester Stallone's Gabe Walker in *Cliffhanger*. Both films examine what would happen if a man who made a mistake that ruined his entire life got the chance to do it all over again and set things right.
- The strongest motivation is often simply **survival**, the

instinct to avoid death, which motivates the protagonists of *The Pelican Brief* (Julia Roberts) and *Seven* (Morgan Freeman).

Mission

Your story goes into high gear when the character is given, or decides to undertake, a mission. Your major character has a mission in life, expressed through and determined by his motivational makeup.

The character's mission in the story is usually related to his mission in life: *A deeply cynical private detective with an inflexible personal code is hired by a woman who does not fully reveal how deep her troubles are. His loyalty is to this woman, but when evidence turns up that seems to incriminate her, his code is put to the test. His mission in life, being true to his code which does not tolerate clients who lie to him, is now in conflict with his mission in the story—to discover where guilt lies. Succeeding in the investigation reconciles this tension by allowing him to justify his trust in the woman.* This is the mission setup for *Chinatown* (Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway).

Drama becomes even more dynamic when the primary mission of the story's protagonist directly challenges or interferes with the mission of others—especially that of the antagonist. Robin Hood's mission is diametrically opposed to that of the Sheriff of Nottingham, as is Luke Skywalker's to Darth Vader's in *Star Wars*. The conflict can be resolved, therefore, only when protagonist and antagonist face each other in a duel. The key to creating powerful drama is establishing a clear-cut mission for protagonist and antagonist, and making sure that each of these opposes the other.

Obstacles

The obstacles in the way of fulfilling the protagonist's mission comprise the bulk of your story material—that daunting "middle part" that connects your dramatic opening with your conclusive ending. The protagonist must face serious challenges, hurdles,

and dangers in the motivated pursuit of his mission. Barriers of all sorts must stand in the way of his reaching his objective—or your treatment will be judged to have insufficient conflict and complication. Before you begin writing your treatment, you'll want to know that you have enough obstacles to give your protagonist plenty to do and plenty to think about.

The most convincing dramatic obstacles aren't usually "invented." They're *discovered* by brainstorming about the nature of the protagonist's mission. Brainstorming is exactly what happens in a development meeting when you simply throw out ideas, anything that comes to mind, opening the floodgates of imagination and creativity. One idea leads to another, and before you know it your story is unfolding. If your protagonist needs to deliver a prisoner across country, as in *Midnight Run*, what might stand in his way? Jack Walsh (Robert De Niro), a skip tracer, and Jonathan Mardukas (Charles Grodin), an accountant who embezzled millions of dollars from the mob in Vegas and then jumped bail, face all the normal hazards of a cross-country trip:

- The FBI is trying to capture them.
- The Mafia is trying to kill them.
- They hate each other's guts (at first).
- How will they travel (train, car, etc.)?
- What will they eat?
- Where will they sleep?
- How will they avoid the Mafia in order to keep Mardukas alive?
- How will they keep the FBI at bay so that Walsh can deliver his "meal ticket"?

And there is the added twist of Walsh actually beginning to like Mardukas, who never misses an opportunity to explain why Walsh should let him go.

If you don't come up with enough exciting obstacles you'll

find yourself in deep trouble when writing the long middle portion of your treatment, act 2. The best stories use the momentum of escalating obstacles in act 2 to carry the reader toward an exciting climax in act 3. Obstacles are the successful writer's stock in trade and why he gets paid the big bucks. In *Cliffhanger*, Sylvester Stallone's character, Gabe Walker, must overcome his internal obstacle, memories of his failure to save the girlfriend of his former friend and present climbing partner, Hal Tucker (Michael Rooker), from plunging to her death. His external obstacles are the icy cliffs and antagonist Eric Qualen (John Lithgow). Can you imagine *The Wizard of Oz* without the Wicked Witch of the West? *D.O.A.* takes its heightened conflict from the ticking clock. College professor Dexter Cornell (Dennis Quaid) is deliberately poisoned by a radioactive substance, giving him only twenty-four hours to live and to discover the identity of his killer.

Obstacles can be found in the natural environment of the protagonist as he undertakes his mission, whether it's the high-tech voyeur's dream of a modern condominium tower in *Sliver*, the sordid urban underbelly of *Blade Runner*, John Nash's schizoid visions in *A Beautiful Mind*, or the artistic isolation of Australia in *Shine*. Nothing is more helpful than visualizing your story; the visualization process lets you see your protagonist on the battlefield where he will encounter the dragons you've invented to thicken the plot. Once, for example, you've set the *Nautilus* as your stage in *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, it's just a question of vicariously experiencing what dangers—from loss of air pressure to giant squids—the *Nautilus* will confront in its natural setting.

If you don't know whether your protagonist's battlefield is high or low, curved or flat, seething with tropical heat or frozen with arctic winds, on the moon or under the sea, you're not ready to begin writing your story treatment. Imagine *Lawrence of Arabia* without the desert, *Alien* without outer space, *Monster's Ball* without the southern town, or *The People vs. Larry Flynt* without Los Angeles. Obstacles are generated as much by the setting as they are by the characters.

Your treatment, having provided the initial framework of your character's motivation and mission, should offer only the most dramatic scenes where your character meets progressively more dangerous obstacles that finally lead him toward a dramatic decision or resolution. Along the way, reveal as many cliffhangers as you can to propel the reader from one act to another and, within the long act 2, from one part to another. Director Merian C. Cooper calls this "the three D's: danger, distance, difficulty. Or better still, difficulty, distance, danger. And if you go through those three D's you get a picture at the end of it." Obstacles!

Your story's action line is divided into acts: first, second, and third—beginning, middle, and end.

- Act 1 is the grabber, introducing the protagonist and his mission or quest.
- Act 2 develops the story, as the protagonist faces one obstacle after another.
- Act 3 shows him succeeding or failing to accomplish his mission.

Whether you're writing a thirty-second commercial or a four-hour miniseries, telling a joke, or inventing an excuse for calling in sick to work, the overall three-act pattern is natural. (As we'll see in the next chapter, television films have seven acts because they divide act 2 into five parts).

Change

The best-crafted major characters change as they move through obstacles to accomplish their missions. Don Quixote becomes more realistic after tilting at so many windmills, replacing his initial idealism with fatalism; Sancho Panza, his sidekick, progresses in the opposite direction, assuming the mantle of

crusader at his don's deathbed. Stallone's Gabe Walker (*Cliffhanger*) evolves from a man who's lost his nerve to one who's regained his courage and self-respect. Falstaff in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* learns that there's an end to frivolity, and that his friend Prince Hal must replace folly with responsibility. Tom Cruise's Charlie (*Rainman*) begins as a self-involved, grasping workaholic. At the end of the story, through his relationship with his autistic brother, he has become more sensitive, learning to listen and care. Amélie's disbelief, in *Amélie*, that anyone could get to know her enough to love her turns to the sweetest love when Nino does.

Characters that don't change, like Batman, or James Bond, or Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*, or Indiana Jones, are referred to by critics as "cardboard" or "comic book" characters—dramatically effective with audiences only if they're colorful enough, and the star who plays them charismatic enough, to hold our interest, generally in a story filled with numerous and entertaining obstacles.

Your protagonist's change must be in character, caused by the interaction of his mission with his motivational makeup. In the title role in *Dave*, Kevin Kline's good-humored avoidance of life's important issues evolves into a serious realization that his ingenuous perspective can make a difference for all Americans. Dave Kovic's transformation is "in character."

Dramatic change is at its most compelling when the writer places two strong dimensions of the character's motivation at war with each other and allows the stronger force to win. At the moment of victory, the transformation is complete.

In examining what makes a good film, we've looked at story and dramatic action, opening hook, theme, and the essentials of character. Next, your treatment should have a setting that enhances your action line and a point of view from which your story is being told.

Setting

Nothing can happen nowhere.
—Elizabeth Bowen

Your treatment will indicate in a few brief strokes the importance of the story's setting to its action line. Imagine *Midnight Cowboy* or *Taxi Driver* set in a city other than New York. The setting in the best conceived stories is virtually another major character. *Under Siege, Die Hard, Executive Decision, The Guns of Navarone, The Shipping News, The River Wild, Blade Runner*—all these films would be entirely different if you changed the setting.

Your setting doesn't have to be elaborate. Consider *Working Girl* and *9 to 5*, where the setting is an ordinary workplace. In *Eat Drink Man Woman* the setting is a Sunday dinner table in Hong Kong at which every major turning point in the movie is revealed. The setting is suggested in the titles of such films as *The Panic in Needle Park* (Al Pacino), *Boyz N the Hood* (Laurence Fishburne), *The Abyss* (Ed Harris), and *Bad Day at Black Rock* (Spencer Tracy). In each of these films, the setting provides obstacles that keep the protagonist busy throughout the story. When you're "discovering" the obstacles to your protagonist's mission, and running low on ideas, it often helps to consider switching the setting. Look for one inherently more dramatic than the setting you've been having trouble with. An emergency room is more dramatic than a convalescent ward; a criminal court more dramatic than a civil court. Outstanding theatrical motion pictures such as *Witness* or *Babe* present not just a story, but a whole new world.

Point of View

As you begin to write, ask yourself, Whose story is this? Hitchcock was a master at letting the audience know who was telling the story. His haunting classic *Rebecca* unfolds through the point of view of the second Mrs. De Winter (Joan Fontaine). In *Rear Window*, the story is told from the POV of James Stewart's character, the news photographer confined to his room by a broken leg. *Shadow of a Doubt*'s viewpoint is that of the young niece who slowly realizes her suspicions that her uncle is a mass murderer.

The point of view in a dramatic treatment must be unified and, ultimately, identifiable. This is the hero's story, told from his point of view; or it's the hero's story, told from someone else's point of view—that of a friend, a cop, a lover, a survivor. *The Secret Garden* tells its story from a child's point of view in an adult world. *Babe* offers a delightful look at barnyard life (a metaphor for the big bad world) through the point of view of a piglet.

Point of view can be tricky to deal with or even to understand at first, but it basically dictates that no scene you write can exist without relating, directly or indirectly, to the viewpoint you've chosen. Either the viewpoint character—the one from whose perspective the story is being told—is involved in the scene and therefore has firsthand knowledge of what happens within it, or he could have found out about the events of the scene and therefore has a rationale for including it as he narrates the story. Scenes of which the viewpoint character or characters could have had no knowledge destroy the unity of point of view. In *Witness*, scenes in the Amish country *without* John Book (played by Harrison Ford) are allowable even though he is the viewpoint character because, before the end of the story, he could have been told about all the events by Rachel (Kelly McGillis).

Experiments with point of view abound in the art of film, and the more you think about this dimension of drama the more complex it becomes. Movies need not limit themselves to a single perspective. A good example of multiple point of view is *Courage under Fire*. When Denzel Washington's character opens an investigation into the death of an officer (Meg Ryan) to see if she was in fact courageous under fire and deserving of a medal of honor, the audience is offered several characters' points of view of the events relating to her death. The classic example of multiple viewpoint is the Japanese film *Rashomon*, which shows the same sequence of events from four points of view in succession. Suffice it to say here that you should ask yourself as you revise your treatment: (1) Is it clear from whose viewpoint the story is being told? and (2) Does this point of view distract from, or enhance, the story?

Let's review the basics again. Your treatment needs to reflect all the important dramatic elements you intend to develop fully in your completed screenplay. The buyer should be able to recognize:

- the general rhythmic shape of your story's action line
- its act breaks
- the "arc" of the main characters, as they change from beginning to end
- the dramatic impact of its setting
- its point of view

With all this in mind, the following basic structure recommended by most screenwriting authorities should also shape your treatment. This outline is based on a 115-page script and a 15-page treatment.

Outline

Act 1
Who's the Protagonist? What's His Problem? How Does It Become His Mission in the Story?
Treatment Pages 1–2

In the first two pages of your treatment:

- introduce the protagonist in a way that makes him immediately relatable to the audience, someone we care about and for whom we want to root;
- announce the protagonist's mission in the story in the form of an inciting incident or problem he must solve;
- set up the mood, the movie's tone, its setting, and its stakes;
- suggest why this story is important to all of us—the central question, theme, metaphor, or conflict that will be explored throughout the movie;
- introduce the subplot, or *secondary action line*, that complements or conflicts with the protagonist's main action line;
- introduce the antagonist, the protagonist's chief obstacle;
- introduce a major event that turns the protagonist around completely (what he wants in life is challenged, and now he must react) and launches him or her into act 2.

Act 2
The Protagonist Encounters Obstacles to His Mission
Treatment Pages 3–10

The bulk of your treatment, from pages 3 to 10, narrates the protagonist's encounters with the obstacles that stand in the way of accomplishing his mission. These obstacles are made dramatic by the rhythmic way you've arranged them, so as to take the

audience on a roller-coaster ride of highs and lows, expectations and surprises, escalating complications and increasingly serious and costly confrontations in which, along the way, the stakes grow progressively higher and higher.

Since act 2 does comprise the bulk of your treatment, it's helpful to break it up into three parts, each of which should end with a major cliffhanger or twist.

Act 2, Scene 1
Treatment Pages 3–6

In pages 3 through 6 (roughly):

- As your protagonist reacts to the challenge he encountered on page 2, his major decision leads him into action.
- As he faces the first challenges, we witness his initial development.
- Something happens that also impedes the subplot.
- We're given an inkling of what's to come.

Act 2, Scene 2
Treatment Pages 7–8

The protagonist's reversals continue, until he begins to make headway. Then around page 8, new information, or the triumph over a major obstacle, turns everything 180 degrees to force the protagonist to face an even greater obstacle than he or we had previously imagined. Now your protagonist should be in big trouble, forcing him to reflect and make an even deeper commitment to his mission.

Act 2, Scene 3: Build to Climax
Treatment Pages 9–10

Now the characters converge. The heart of the movie happens, that quiet romantic or philosophical moment that ups the ante

and makes us root for the protagonist's mission even more than before. This is where to hint at the moral of the story. It may be the place where all seems lost. The protagonist may look like he's about to give up.

As the protagonist faces the biggest hurdle of all, both the main action line and the subplot seem to be falling apart. It's the protagonist's darkest hour, his final breaking point, the moment when he realizes all may be lost, and he knows he must deal with that.

Suddenly something happens that changes everything. The universe offers him a break. He seizes the moment and goes for it. Now he has an even bigger picture of what it would mean to accomplish his mission: not just satisfying his quest in the story, but fulfilling his quest in life as well. By page 10, he's standing at this crossroads of action. His next move will be definitive. He faces the climactic turning point. Will he win or lose?

Act 3
The Protagonist Achieves His Mission
Treatment Pages 11–15

The final pages of your treatment contain the crisis, the climax, and the story's resolution.

- The **crisis** is the scene or sequence of scenes in which the final outcome of the story is determined by the protagonist's actions. When you get to this point, write it as though it were a separate story, giving it its own beginning, developed middle, and end. "Milk it for all its worth," the producers tell the director. The milking begins with your treatment of a complicated crisis, filled with its own twists and turns.
- The **climax** occurs at the end of the crisis, its final moments: the Terminator in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* finally destroys the bad guys. Now, all that's left is—
- The **resolution**, when, to save the human race, the Terminator destroys himself in the fiery cauldron.

When it's over, let it be over fast. Don't hang around with lots of words that only take away the dramatic punch of a strong and satisfying resolution.

In chapter 3, we take a look at the treatment for television films.

KENNETH ATCHITY · CHI-LI WONG

WRITING TREATMENTS THAT SELL

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Your Story Ideas to the
Motion Picture and TV Industry

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