HOW TO WRITE A SCREENPLAY

BOOK 1

A Primer

How stories work

THE NEXT GREAT SCREENWRITER

You may have heard that breaking into the movie business is tough. It is.

However, if you write a script that features a character who has a clear and specific goal, and there is strong opposition to that goal, leading to a crisis and an emotionally satisfying ending, your script will automatically find itself in the upper 5%. Few would-be writers have mastered even the *basics* of screenwriting.

If your script also presents a well-crafted story with a strong story concept and an original character with whom people can sympathize, there are agents and producers awaiting the advent of the next great screenwriter.

You can be that next great screenwriter if you work hard, learn your craft, and develop discipline. You'll need to apply the fine art of pleasant persistence. And there are going to be disappointments. But you can do it! Now stop for just a moment and say that to yourself.

All screenwriters begin in the same way. All write one or more feature-length scripts of about 110 pages. Even if you want to write for television, your best means of entering the industry is a feature script that you can use as a sample.

Book I is designed to help you write that one spec script that's going to get you noticed. What is a spec script? It's the script you're writing now on the speculation that someone will buy it later. Book II gives you specific direction in the actual writing of the script. Books III and IV will help you with formatting and style. Book V helps you sell it. And Book VI provides additional resources.

THE STRENGTH OF THE SCREENPLAY FORM

A screenplay differs from a stageplay or novel in a number of ways.

A novel may describe a character's thoughts and feelings page after page. It's a great medium for expressing internal conflict. A stageplay is almost exclusively verbal. Soap operas and sitcoms fit into this category. A movie is primarily visual. Yes, it will contain dialogue. It may even deal with internal things. But it is primarily a visual medium that requires visual writing. I have seldom read a "first screenplay" that did not have too much dialogue and too little action. You may have that same common tendency to tell rather than show.

For example, picture a stageplay in which a babysitter cuts paper dolls with her scissors. The children are upstairs playing. From the other side of the room, a robber enters. He approaches her with a knife. Just in time, she turns and stabs him with the scissors. Not particularly exciting. In an actual stageplay, these people would probably talk to each other for ten minutes before the physical confrontation, because the conflict in a stageplay comes out in dialogue. That's the strength of the stageplay form.

A novel may focus on the thoughts and feelings of each character. That's the strength of the novel form—inner conflict. The babysitter contemplates suicide. And this is the robber's first job. He's not sure he can go through with it.

However, a screenplay will focus on the visual and emotional aspects of the scene. The scissors penetrate one of the paper dolls. The doorknob slowly turns. The babysitter doesn't notice. Outside, the dog barks, but the kids upstairs are so noisy that she doesn't hear the dog. A figure slides in through the shadows. His knife fills the screen. He moves toward her. The dog barks louder. The intruder inches closer. But she is completely absorbed in cutting paper dolls. He looms over her. His knife goes up. The dog barks louder still. She suddenly becomes aware, turns, and impales the man with the scissors. He falls. His legs twitch and finally become still. She drops the scissors and screams.

The focus here is on the action—the drama—because movies are primarily visnal. Yes, there are notable exceptions, but you are wise to use the strength of the medium for which you have chosen to write. Inner conflict is great, dialogue is important to bring out interpersonal conflict, but make your screenplay visually powerful. Showing through action usually works better than *telling* with dialogue. Even in character-driven "dialogue" scripts, add visual touches.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING STRUCTURED

Your screenplay must be well structured because you want your story to survive once the director and other collaborators take your work of art and make it their own—you want the story to survive. This is one reason William Goldman emphasized in his book *Adventures in the Screen Trade* that "screenplays are structure."

Art—whether it's a painting, a vase of flowers, a rock ballad, or your story—is a union of form and content. Accordingly, the *content* of your story requires a dramatic structure or *form* to give it shape. Structure is the skeleton on which you hang the meat of your story. And without that skeletal framework, your story content falls flat like a blob of jelly, incapable of forward movement.

Most beginning writers just begin writing without any thought of story structure—where are their stories going, how will they end? Soon, writer's block sets in. One of your first writing steps will be to construct a skeleton, a structural model. Let's discuss that basic model.

Aristotle was right

Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics* that all drama (and that includes comedy, since comedy is drama in disguise) has a beginning, a middle, and an end. You've heard this before. Traditionally, the beginning comprises about 25% of the story, the middle is approximately 50%, and the end is about 25%. These are the basic proportions of the three-act structure. If you like to think in terms of four acts, then Act 1 is the beginning, Acts 2 and 3 are the middle, and Act 4 is the end. A seven-act structure still has a beginning, middle, and end. Shakespeare's five-act plays have a beginning, middle, and end, as does the five-act FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL.

Because a screenplay is about 110 pages (120 pages at the most), the beginning is usually the first 15-25 pages. The middle is the next 50 pages or so, and the end is the last 10-25 pages. Obviously, the exact length can vary, but the middle will always be the biggest section.

Beginning, middle, and end

All great screenplays have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the beginning, you set up your story, grab the reader's attention, and establish the situation for conflict. During the middle, you complicate matters and develop the conflict, which should rise to a crisis. In the end, you conclude the story and resolve the conflict. The end is the payoff for the reader, for the audience, and for you. Put your hero in the proverbial tree, throw rocks at her, and then get her out. Boy meets girl, boy loses girl and tries to get her back again, boy gets girl. Beginning, middle, and end.

What about DOA? It opens with the ending. Granted, it opens with the end of the central character's life, but not with the end of the story. What is this story really about? It is not about the central character's death, it's about who killed him. The dramatic premise is this: Can he find his killer before he dies? The story ends when he finds his killer. This is just a creative way of using the basic model.

In BACK TO THE FUTURE, the beginning takes place in 1985, the middle in 1955, and the end in 1985 again. A very simple overall framework.

THE TWO KEY TURNING POINTS

Twists and Turns

How do you get from the beginning to the middle and from the middle to the end? *Turning points*. They are also called *transition points*, *action points*, *plot points*, and *character crossroads*. Turning points are the twists and turns. They are the important events that complicate or even reverse the action, such as cliffhangers, revelations, and crises. Structure organizes these events into a story.

Your story may have dozens of turning points, but the two that facilitate the transitions from act to act are key to your story's success. The first big turning point ends Act 1 (the beginning) and moves the reader (and the audience) to Act 2 (the middle). It could be called the *Big Event* because it is usually a "big event" that dramatically affects the central character's life.

The second major turning point moves the reader into Act 3 (the end) and the final showdown. This is the *Crisis*. Of all the crises in your story, this is the one that forces the central character to take the final action, or series of actions, that will resolve the story. Let's look at some examples.

How big an event?

In CHINATOWN, detective Jake Gittes deals with extramarital affairs. A woman claiming that she is Mrs. Mulwray hires him to spy on her husband. So he takes some photographs of her husband with a girl. These are published in the *Los Angeles Post-Record*, and his job is done. He celebrates at a barber shop, where he hears a dirty joke. Cheerfully, he returns to his office and tells his buddies the joke. He doesn't see the beautiful woman standing behind him. The tension increases as Jake tells his joke because we know he's going to be embarrassed when he finally notices the woman. Jake tells the joke, gives the punchline, and turns. Surprise! The woman informs him that her name is Mrs. Mulwray and that she never hired him to spy on her husband, and now she's suing him. He's been embarrassed a second time. The first embarrassment foreshadowed the second. There's a beginning, middle, and end in this scene.

Is this not a big event in Jake's life? Jake has big problems now. If this is the *real* Mrs. Mulwray, who was the *first* Mrs. Mulwray? Who set him up and why? And how is he going to save his reputation?

Steven Spielberg said that, in the best stories, someone loses control of his/her life and must regain it. The Big Event causes that loss of control. In CAST AWAY, it's when Chuck Noland is cast away. In GHOST, the Big Event is the murder of Sam Wheat (played by Patrick Swayze). In THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION, Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) is incarcerated. In THE GREEN MILE, Paul Edgecomb (Tom Hanks) is healed by John Coffey. In THE INCREDIBLES, Bob Parr is lured to a remote island for a top-secret assignment.

The Big Event is the clincher in setting up your audience. They're now prepared for the long haul through the second and third acts. They want to know what happens next.

Crisis management

Now let's look at an example of the Crisis, or second major turning point, the one that moves the story from its middle to its end. In E.T. it is the moment when E.T. is dying, and the scientists converge on the house. Everything looks bleak. It is the moment when it looks least likely that E.T. will ever get home. This is the Crisis. What follows is the final struggle to get home. You have a similar low point in THELMA & LOUISE. How will they ever escape the law now? And, in THE INCREDIBLES, how will the Incredible family defeat Syndrome when he has apparently defeated them?

When you watch SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE, you feel pretty low when Annie (Meg Ryan) announces that Sam (Tom Hanks) is history and that she's finally decided to marry Walter (Bill Pullman). You feel even lower when you see the physical distance between the building she's dining in and the Empire State Building Sam is headed for.

In TITANIC, the central character is Rose. The Crisis is precipitated by the separation of the lovers. Jack is arrested for stealing the Heart of the Ocean. (Is he stealing Rose's heart as well?)

Crisis in Cairo

In THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO, Cecilia has a crummy life, a crummy husband, a crummy job, and lives during the Great (or Crummy) Depression. For relief, she goes to the local theater where, this week, THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO is playing. She's seen it four times already, and at the fifth showing, one of the fictitious characters in the movie notices her in the audience and walks right off the screen and into Cecilia's life. The Big Event—right?

Let's take a closer look at THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO. In the beginning, we are introduced to reality (Cecilia's husband and life) and then to fantasy (the fictitious character and movies in general). So what will happen next—in the middle? Can you guess? We'll have a rising conflict; in this case, fantasy vs. reality. This conflict will build to the Crisis. What's the Crisis going to be? It's the point when Cecilia has to choose between her husband (reality) and the fictitious character (fantasy).

The Crisis in this film is not just a low point, but an event that forces the central character to make a crucial decision. Once she decides, she can then move into the final act, the *Showdown* (or climax) and resolution of the story.

The crisis decision
As with THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO, the Crisis often forces the central character to make a decision.

In THE GREEN MILE, Paul learns that John Coffey is innocent. What will he do now? Will he lead him to the chair so he can "ride the lightning"?

In ALIENS, the Crisis is precipitated when the little girl is kidnapped by the alien creatures, and the planet is about to explode. Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) must make a crucial, life-or-death decision. Will she abandon the planet and save herself? Or will she return for the little girl? She demonstrates her choice by igniting her flame-thrower.

Meanwhile, back in Casablanca
CASABLANCA: The Big Event, which seems subtle enough, is when Ilsa enters Rick's place and says, "Play it, Sam." Sam tells her that she's bad luck to Rick but plays "As Time Goes By" anyway. Then Rick enters and tells Sam, "I thought I told you never to play that song." Then Rick sees Ilsa. Obviously, there's a lot of history between these two people.

The Crisis in CASABLANCA occurs as follows: Ilsa must get the Letters of Transit from Rick. It's the only way she and her husband, Victor Laslow, can escape from the Nazis. One night, Rick returns to his room, and Ilsa is waiting for him. She pleads with him, but he will not give her the Letters of Transit. Finally, she pulls a gun on him. He says, "Go ahead and shoot, you'll be doing me a favor." Will Ilsa shoot him? That's her personal crisis in this story.

She can't and Rick realizes that she must still love him. They have their moment together and then Ilsa says that she can never leave Rick again. "I don't know what's right any longer. You have to decide for both of us, for all of us." Ilsa turns the responsibility

over to Rick because he is the central character, and, as such, he should be the most active person in Act 3. Rick accepts by saying, "All right, I will." Here, Rick agrees to make the crucial decision about who will benefit from the Letters of Transit. The rest of the story—the end, the final act—is the unfolding of Rick's decision.

The perfect drama

Several years ago, I discovered the perfect drama: Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol.* We meet Scrooge, Tiny Tim, Bob Cratchit, and others. Each has a problem. Scrooge's problem, which he doesn't realize that he has, is that he lacks the Christmas Spirit. The Big Event is the appearance of Marley's Ghost.

During the middle of the story, three more spirits appear to Scrooge, but the Crisis comes when Scrooge sees his name on a tombstone, and he asks the crisis question: "Is this fate or can I change?" The story ends with Scrooge getting the Christmas Spirit and helping the others solve their problems.

We are allowed to catch our breath after each apparition. In other words, this story is well paced. Excitement and action are followed by reflection and reaction, and each major and minor turning point creates even more anticipation for the next, so that the story's high points get higher and higher until the end.

In terms of dramatic tension and conflict, *your* story also needs peaks and valleys. Remember that the peaks should get generally higher as the story progresses.

Of mints and men

I'll take a moment here and offer a letter from a student who thanked me for bringing mints to class and demonstrated her clear understanding of basic story structure. She writes:

> It was ironic that I met another writer who shared my addiction to starlight mints. In my case, it began as an innocent habit. I would keep a jar of mints beside my computer so I could have a little pick-me-up at any time during the day. THE SET UP. Then a trip to the dentist revealed I had my first cavity in 12 years. BIG EVENT. Things went from bad to worse as I missed dentist appointments, spent the housekeeping money on starlight mints, and couldn't even kiss my husband because of all the mints crammed into my mouth. PLOT COMPLICATIONS. Until the CRISIS MOMENT, when my husband told me that I had to choose between starlight mints or our marriage. I made the agonizing decision to give up mints. I'm happy now and my marriage is stronger than ever. RESOLUTION.

Comedy and story structure

Does comedy use story structure? Yes. Effective comedy is built on the same principles as effective drama. AIRPLANE! is the story of a man who has lost his nerve to fly and who must regain it to save the people on the airplane. Here's a quote from the writers of AIRPLANE! and THE NAKED GUN, David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and Jerry Zucker.

> The movies appear to be a kind of screen anarchy, but believe me, the process of getting it up there is much different. I mean, we're not maniacs, we don't bounce off the walls when we write. It gets to be a very scientifically designed process, actually. We spend a lot of time . . . marking off the three acts, concentrating not on the jokes but on the structure and sequence of the story. It's a very dull first couple of months, but that's how we spend them. (*Hollywood Scriptwriter.*)

Situation, conflict, and resolution—the flow of the story

MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

The first thing your script should be concerned with is hooking the reader and setting forth the rules of your story. If the opening scene captures the reader's interest in some unique way, it is called the *hook*. Otherwise, it's just the opening scene.

Obviously, the opening image—the first thing we see—makes your first impression. It implies something about your story—the location, the mood, and even the theme.

BODY HEAT opens with "Flames in the night sky."

APOCALYPSE NOW opens with a jungle aflame and the surreal sounds of helicopters. Superimposed over this is the face of Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) watching a ceiling fan that reminds him of helicopter rotors. He is recalling his last mission. The writer/director is setting the standards by which we'll measure the rest of the story. He is defining the context of his story.

What is the context of your story? It will include the atmosphere or mood, the location, the emotional setting, and the genre. Genre refers to movie type: for example, action/adventure, Western, thriller, romantic comedy, sci-fi, family drama, and so forth.

In SIGNS, first we see the farm, then we see the central character wake up. There's a sense that something is wrong. And then we see the crop circles in the corn. (Although crop circles are normally found in wheat fields and similar grains, Shyamalan used corn because it is scarier.) From this quick opening, we get an idea of who the story is about, where they live, the fact that they have a mystery at their farm, and the film's genre.

O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU? opens with a Depression-era chain gang. SEABISCUIT opens with photos of Depression-era cars and assembly lines: "It was the beginning and the end of imagination all at the same time."

In SPIDER-MAN 2, Peter Parker is late delivering pizzas. He's fired. And then it's one problem after the other. He has money problems. He's late for class. And so on. Peter's situation is well established and we feel for him early on.

In GHOSTBUSTERS, we see a librarian scared by a ghost and we laugh our heads off. Supernatural comedy. Then we see Dr. Venkman (Bill Murray) hitting on a coed. There are probably a thousand ways to portray this, but the writers stay in the genre. Venkman pretends the coed has ESP and that she needs his tutelage and support to understand her gift.

In L.A. CONFIDENTIAL, we meet two Los Angeles police officers in the 1950s. The first few scenes define the story's tone, time, and location. And we see a particular police officer dispensing "justice" before an arrest.

BLADERUNNER opens with a "guided tour" of a definite future place while setting the mood of the story. JERRY MAGUIRE opens with an introduction to the world of sports-agenting.

SCREAM begins with a long sequence of Casey Becker (Drew Barrymore) at home alone. Someone calls her, terrifies her, asks her questions about horror movies. The caller tells her the consequences are deadly if she answers the questions incorrectly. She answers incorrectly. This interchange and resulting carnage establishes the film's genre as well as its hip style.

In Episode IV of STAR WARS (A NEW HOPE), the "rules of the game," the nature of the weaponry, the limits of the technology, and the two conflicting sides are all introduced early.

YOUR TWO KEY CHARACTERS

Early in your script, you'll want to introduce us to your *central character*, who is sometimes called the *pivotal character.* Often this person will appear in the opening scene. Obviously, the primary *opposition character* must be introduced as well. This person does not have to appear as early, but could. It's your dramatic choice.

The *protagonist* is the good guy or hero, while the *antagonist* is the bad guy. Usually the protagonist is also the central character, but sometimes the role of central character goes to the antagonist. In AMADEUS, Salieri, the bad guy, is the main cause of action and, therefore, the central character around whom the story is built. His opponent is Mozart, the good guy.

In THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE, Peyton, the nanny, is the central character because it's her goal that drives the story. Claire, the wife, is the primary opposition character, even though she is the protagonist. Marlene is a secondary opposition character.

And certainly, in THE LADYKILLERS, the central character is Professor G. H. Dorr (Tom Hanks), and he is definitely the antagonist.

One key to making a story dramatic is to create a strong central character with a powerful goal, and then provide a strong opposition character who tries to stop the central character from achieving that goal. This assures us of conflict. And *conflict is drama.*

A DYNAMITE EXPERIENCE

Recently, my 17-year-old nephew saw NAPOLEON DYNAMITE and urged me to see it. "Uncle Dave, it's great. It's totally unique, and it doesn't even have a plot."

I watched it and loved it, especially the classroom "happy hands" scene, but I had "bad" news for my nephew. I said, "I hate to tell you this, but the writers used classic romantic-comedy structure for their story." He looked shocked. "Let me take you through the main turning points," I said. "A drama begins with things more or less in balance and then the *Catalyst* upsets the balance and gets the story moving. The Catalyst is when Deb meets Napoleon at his doorstep, where she tries to sell him beauty aids."

"But 'Dynamite' is a comedy, not a drama," Taylor said.

I explained that comedy has its roots in drama and then continued with the lecture. "The Big Event is when Deb sits down next to him in the cafeteria. And this is a big event if girls don't usually like you."

Even though my nephew doesn't have girl problems, he understood, having read the third edition of *The Screenwriter's Bible*. Encouraged, I blabbered on. "The *Pinch* is usually the moment toward the middle of the movie when the character becomes more committed, involved, or motivated. In NAPOLEON DYNAMITE, it's the dance. And who does Napoleon end up with at the dance?"

"Deb," Taylor said knowingly. And then he put the rest together. "The *Crisis* is when the two are pulled apart by a misunderstanding. She calls Napoleon a 'shallow friend.'"

"But the big guy bounces back," I interrupted. "He dances at the election assembly demonstrating his skill. Remember what he said earlier about girls liking boys with skills such as 'nunchuk skills' [referring to nunchakus]?"

My nephew laughed, recalling the moment, and then resolved the story for me: "So Deb returns to the tetherball court, where Napoleon delivers his immortal romantic line, 'I caught you a delicious bass,' and asks, 'Wanna play me?' So she plays him. That, combined with his earlier dazzling footwork, is the *Showdown* or climax."

"A dynamite experience," I quipped. "But it's not the whole story. Napoleon has not one but two goals that drive this movie. Remember, he's trying to help Pedro win the election for student-body president. In fact, that's the only reason Napoleon dances at the end, to win the election for Pedro. So his dancing is not only the Showdown for the get-Pedro-elected plot, it also sets up his climactic meeting with Deb at the tetherball court. That's when Napoleon realizes he's got himself a babe; we call that the *Realization*."

"Hey, don't forget the other romantic subplot of Kip and La Fawnduh," Taylor added proudly, emphasizing the last syllable "duh." My nephew scratched his head, thinking. "I guess the flick seemed plotless because the structure was handled in a fresh and original way."

"Exactly," I said, and then I put my hand on his shoulder and said, "Hungry?" He was. "I know a place that serves a delicious bass."

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Let's review those key turning points, one by one.

THE CATALYST AND BIG EVENT

You've heard the horror stories of readers, agents, and executives reading only the first few pages of a script and then tossing it on the dung heap. One way to avoid that is for something to happen in the first ten pages. It pains me to be so pointed, but I do so for your own good: Readers need to know right from the get-go what kind of story they're reading, who to root for, and an idea of the direction of the conflict.

I recall how delighted my agent was when he told me about a script he had just read, REGARDING HENRY. "He's shot on page seven! Imagine, shot on page seven!" He emphasized "page seven" for my benefit because I was late getting things moving in the script of mine he was representing at that time.

Somewhere in the first 10 or 15 pages of your script, something should happen to give your central character a goal, a desire, a mission, a need, or a problem. I like to call this event the *Catalyst*, although it's often referred to by others as the *Inciting Incident*. Yes, it is a turning point. No, it's not usually the same as the Big Event, although it could be. This term and many other terms are used in a variety of ways by industry people. One person's Catalyst is another person's First Major Turning Point. The key is to understand the principle.

Here's the principle: When a story begins, life is in balance. Yes, your hero may have a problem, but it's a problem he's always had—his status quo. Luke Skywalker, in Episode IV of STAR WARS, wants to become a pilot, but he's stuck on the farm. It's a problem he's always had. Life is in balance.

Then the Catalyst kicks things out of balance and gives the central character a new problem, need, goal, desire. The central character spends the rest of the movie getting things back into balance. For Luke Skywalker, the Catalyst is when he tinkers with R2-D2 and accidentally triggers a holographic image of Princess Leia saying, "Help me Obi-Wan, you're my only hope." Now Luke has a desire to help Princess Leia and find Obi-Wan Kenobi (Old Ben). Luke's life will not find a new equilibrium until the Death Star is destroyed. The Big Event is Luke's return home to find that his aunt and uncle have been slaughtered. Now he joins with Obi-Wan to fight the empire.

In WITNESS, an Amish boy witnesses a murder. It feels like the Big Event, but it can't be because it doesn't happen to the central character, Detective John Book (Harrison Ford). Rather, it's the Catalyst. It creates a problem or desire for Detective Book. Now he wants to solve the murder. Now the movie's moving. In other words, the Catalyst begins the movement of the story. But the Big Event in WITNESS occurs later.

The little boy peers through the trophy case at the police office and spots a picture of the killer. Book realizes that the murderer is on the police force. He goes to the chief and reports this. The chief asks, "Have you told anyone else?" Book says, "I haven't told anyone." Then when Book goes home, he is shot. He knows they'll attempt to kill the boy next, so he rushes to the boy and his mother and together they escape to Act 2 and the world of the Amish.

Do you see that the Big Event is bigger than the Catalyst?

In CHINATOWN, the first Mrs. Mulwray who hires Jake is the Catalyst. She gives Jake a mission. But the Big Event is when the real Mrs. Mulwray shows up.

In MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING, Ian Miller enters Toula's restaurant. That's the Catalyst. She decides that the only way to land a hunk like Ian is to get away from her family and improve herself. The Big Event is when he walks into the travel agency where she works.

In PRETTY WOMAN, Edward (Richard Gere) and Viv (Julia Roberts) meet: the Catalyst. He pays her to stay with him at the hotel: the Big Event.

In TOY STORY, the arrival of Buzz Lightyear (Catalyst) creates a lot of buzz in the toy community. And now Woody has something of a problem to solve. But it's not until Buzz tumbles headlong out the window (Big Event) that Woody's life really changes.

JERRY MAGUIRE: He sees his client in the hospital, then writes a mission statement: the Catalyst. He is fired: the Big Event.

INDEPENDENCE DAY: The aliens arrive: the Catalyst. They blow up the White House: the Big Event.

THELMA & LOUISE: They leave town to go fishing: the Catalyst. Louise shoots Thelma's attacker: the Big Event.

You may ask, Can the Catalyst also be the Big Event? Sure. GHOST and REGARDING HENRY are two examples. Keep in mind that I am presenting guidelines in this book, not hard-and-fast rules.

A good Catalyst and/or Big Event, besides giving the central character a new problem or desire, will often reveal something of the main conflict or story premise. It may raise *the central dramatic question* for that film. For example, will John Book (in WITNESS) catch the killer? Will E.T. get home? Will Toula get Ian (in BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING)? What was CITIZEN KANE referring to when he said,

"Rosebud"? Will Police Chief Martin Brody (Roy Scheider) get Jaws? Will Edward and Viv find true love in PRETTY WOMAN? Can J. C. Wiatt (Diane Keaton) have it all—a family and a career—in BABY BOOM? Will Chuck Noland in CAST AWAY survive and return home?

FORESHADOWING

Because Act 1 is primarily devoted to setting up the story situation, foreshadowing becomes a vital tool. In the first act of ALIENS, it's established early that Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) can operate a combination loader/forklift. This large contraption is literally an extension of her arms and legs. That's the setup. At the end of the movie, she uses it to fight the big mama alien. That's the payoff.

The tetherball court is established in the first act of NAPOLEON DYNAMITE. Napoleon asks Summer Wheatley, "Wanna play me?" She rejects him. The payoff is the final scene when Napoleon asks Deb, "Wanna play me?" And she does. This new response is the measure of how things have changed for Napoleon.

You can get away with almost anything if you set it up, or foreshadow it, early in your story. Much of screenwriting is setting things up for a later payoff.

In most James Bond movies, Q gives James the gadgets he'll use later in the movie. They can be pretty ridiculous, but as long as they are established early, we believe them. However, if at the end of the movie James saved himself with a gadget that Q did not give him, perhaps a tiny missile that carried a 100-megaton nuclear warhead, we'd say, "Where did that come from?" And we'd feel ripped off—right?

HIGH NOON is a wonderful example of foreshadowing. The audience is made aware of the terrible thing that might happen at high noon. This foreshadowing helps motivate conflicts between Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper) and his wife, and with certain townfolk.

In an early scene in GHOST, Sam Wheat (Patrick Swayze) watches an airline disaster on the news and comments about how quickly life can end. Later he confides in Molly (Demi Moore) that he is afraid—every time something good happens in his life, something bad happens. This is a foreshadowing of his imminent death. There is also a suspenseful moment when a statue of an angel is moved into the apartment. Can you guess what this foreshadows?

Early in A BEAUTIFUL MIND, John Nash (Russell Crowe) witnesses the "presentation of the pens." This is the ceremony at which each professor in a department gives his or

her pen to a member of the department in recognition of a lifetime achievement. When we see this presentation again, Nash is the recipient.

Here's a partial list of foreshadowing elements in TITANIC. Most are introduced early in the story.

The sunken ship, rooms, fireplace, safe
Rose's comb
Nude drawing
The automobile where they later make love
How the *Titanic* would sink
Heart of the Ocean necklace
How freezing the water is (Jack points this out in the "suicide" scene)
Spitting lessons pay off later when Rose hocks one up on her fiancé
The number of lifeboats
The gun
Jack: "You jump, I jump."
Jack: "You'll die warm in your bed." This foreshadowing comes late.
The whistle. This is also introduced appropriately late, and its payoff is powerful.

Foreshadowing creates a sense of unity in a story and also becomes a tool of economy, providing more than one use for an element.

Look at all we learn in the first scenes of RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK. The story is about lost artifacts, archeology, and high adventure involving World War II Nazis. We learn that both Belloq and Indiana are resourceful, that Indiana hates snakes, and that he must recover the lost Ark of the Covenant.

A word of caution on the first act taken as a whole: Don't provide too much background information or exposition at once. Only give the audience what they need to understand the story without getting confused. We'll discuss *exposition* at length in the dialogue chapter.

THE PINCH, RISING CONFLICT, AND CRISIS

The beginning of a story ends with the Big Event. The middle focuses primarily on the conflict and complications. The central character emerges from Act 1 with a desire to do something about the difficult situation created by the Big Event. Her action will likely fail, forcing her to take new actions. There will be many setbacks in Act 2 as well as some breakthroughs or temporary triumphs.

The long middle section (Act 2 of a 3-act structure) focuses on a *rising* conflict. Your reader will lose interest in a conflict that is merely repetitive; for example, when the central character and opposition character fight, then fight again, then fight again, and so on. Strong subplots that crisscross with the main plot will help you avoid repetitive conflict because they will create more complications that ratchet up the conflict. Thus, the conflict builds or intensifies.

At the *Pinch* of the story, about half-way through, another major event occurs. The central character often becomes fully committed. GONE WITH THE WIND'S Pinch is when Scarlet O'Hara makes her famous vow before intermission: "I'll never go hungry again."

The Pinch can also be the moment when the motivation to achieve the goal becomes fully clear, or the stakes are raised. In GHOST, this is when Sam, as a ghost, learns that his best friend is the one who had him killed.

In DAVE, the Pinch is when Dave defies the press secretary and acts as president. This is truly a *point of no return* for Dave, the point when he becomes fully committed.

In TITANIC, the Pinch comes when Rose decides to jilt her fiancé and go with Jack. Once she makes this decision to leave her social world, there is no turning back. Shortly after her decision, the ship strikes an iceberg.

From the Pinch on, the central character takes stronger actions, perhaps even desperate actions that threaten to compromise her values. One or more temporary triumphs by the central character arouse the opposition, who now shows his true strength. There may be a major setback, followed often by a new revelation or inspiration.

This is when Charlie Babbitt (in RAIN MAN) discovers that his brother Raymond is the Rain Man of his childhood, and that his dad protected Charlie as a baby by putting the Rain Man (Raymond) in an institution.

As a story's conflict intensifies, its pace quickens until the worst thing that could happen happens. This is the Crisis, the point when all seems lost, or when the central character faces a crucial decision. The worst thing that could happen to Indiana Jones is to be locked in a tomb with thousands of snakes while his enemies get away with the world's most important artifact. What's the worst thing that could happen to your character?

THE SHOWDOWN

As you know, the Climax or Showdown follows on the heels of the Crisis. Often, someone or something spurs the character on to the Showdown. The goal is on the line, including the theme or movie message (discussed later) and/or some important value.

In INDEPENDENCE DAY, the crisis is very dark, but a new revelation provides a glimmer of hope that moves our heroes to take one last gamble. Basic American values and global unity are at stake.

There's something you should know about the story's end: It's not mandatory to have car chases and explosions in it. In MOONSTRUCK, everyone simply gathers around the breakfast table. It's the big scene at the end—the biggest scene in the movie. It's the point when everything comes together. It's the Showdown, which is bigger than the Big Event. It's the biggest event (or series of events) in the movie because everything, up until now, has led up to it.

Although Hollywood loves a happy ending, some of the most effective and affective stories are bittersweet or end in some sadness: e.g., CAST AWAY, MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING, TITANIC, GONE WITH THE WIND, SLING BLADE, and CASABLANCA.

Avoid the *deus ex machina* ending (literally, "the god from the machine"). In ancient Greece, at the end of a play, the gods would enter in some sort of a contraption and solve all the mortals' problems. Easy solutions are not dramatic; better that your central character do his own rescuing in the end.

Likewise, don't end your screenplay by saying, *It was all a dream.* And bring closure to your story's end; don't leave its ending open or ambiguous. I realize there are exceptions to these guidelines. After all, THE WIZARD OF OZ was a dream, and the ambiguous ending of Hitchcock's THE BIRDS worked for me. But I advise you to wait until you're well past your salad days before attempting such an ending.

THE REALIZATION

During or just after a screenplay's climactic scene or sequence of scenes, the central character realizes something new about herself, or we're shown some visible or spoken evidence of her growth. The central character has been through a crucible, has shown great courage—physical, emotional, and/or moral—and now the final result must be revealed to the audience and understood by the central character. This is a story's moment of *realization.*

In GHOST, Sam's growth is demonstrated at the end when he's finally able to say "I love you" to Molly, instead of "ditto." Sam grows in another way—from mortal to guardian angel to heavenly being. Beginning, middle, end.

In A CHRISTMAS CAROL, Scrooge needs the Christmas Spirit. His attitude toward Christmas is neatly summed up in two words of dialogue: "Bah, humbug." The story is about transforming his attitude. In the end, the change in Scrooge is revealed through his charitable actions and words.

At the end of CASABLANCA, Louie observes, "Rick, you've become a patriot." Of course, the words by themselves are not enough. They simply confirm the meaning of Rick's recent actions. However, they work in the context of the story's theme that some things are worth sacrificing for.

In CITY SLICKERS, after Mitch Robbins (Billy Crystal) battles the river, he declares, "I know the meaning of life. It's my family."

When Ada goes (literally) overboard with the piano (in THE PIANO), she realizes she wants to live.

In THE MATRIX, Neo realizes that he can view the matrix as software code. Thus, he is able to destroy the antivirus code (Agent Smith). In this case, the realization is what gives the central character the ability to defeat the opposition.

JERRY MAGUIRE brings many elements together in the Realization. At Rod's interview after the game and on television later, he expresses gratitude to Jerry. It's then that Jerry realizes he has achieved his mission statement about integrity and providing personal attention. This realization is never directly stated, but the audience recognizes it when Rod thanks Jerry in the interviews. The audience also realizes that Jerry has succeeded with his outside goal when the terms of Rod's new contract are announced in the interview. Finally, during all this, Troy Aikman, quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys, mentions to Jerry that he likes his "memo," referring to the mission statement. Is Troy going to let Jerry represent him now? Looks like it to me.

In MR. HOLLAND'S OPUS, Mr. Holland is rewarded for his years of dedication to teaching when all of his students return and play his composition for him. He realizes that he has touched all of these students.

In GROUNDHOG DAY, Phil Connors (Bill Murray) goes through the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression (the Crisis), and acceptance—and then is presented to us at the town dance and bachelor auction. The town likes him, Rita likes him, and (at long last) he likes himself.

In the beginning of FALLING DOWN, we identify with William Foster (Michael Douglas), but soon lose affection for him as he declines. Detective Martin Prendergast (Robert Duvall), however, grows. So our affections shift to him. At the end, these two characters square off, both realizing what they've become. Prendergast has become a good cop and a man. Foster has a different realization. He says, "You mean I'm the bad guy?"

Sometimes, the Realization can be thought of as a "resurrection" of the hero. Oskar Schindler is presented with a ring at the end of SCHINDLER'S LIST. He realizes the good he's done (though he regrets not doing more) and that maybe he is a good man after all. He has grown from sinner to saint.

In A BEAUTIFUL MIND, the hero not only is recognized by his colleagues in a "presentation of the pens," but is awarded the Nobel Prize.

• • • • •

Finally, we have the *Denouement*, where all the loose ends are tied together and any remaining subplots are resolved. In BACK TO THE FUTURE, we see how Marty's family turns out, and the professor returns from the future with a stunning new outfit.

In summary, the six key turning points are:

1. The **Catalyst** kicks things off. It's part of your story's setup.
2. The **Big Event** changes your character's life. We move to Act 2.
3. The **Pinch** is a major moment in your story's middle; it's often a point of no return for your central character.
4. The **Crisis** is the low point or a moment that forces a decision that leads to your story's end. We move to Act 3 (the end).
5. The **Showdown** is the final face-off between your central character and the opposition.
6. The **Realization** occurs when your character and/or the audience sees that the character has changed.

Note: For a summary review of the function of each of these key turning points, see pages 92-94.

FORMULAIC WRITING

Now please don't internalize the above guidelines as a formula. This book is not intended as a write-by-the-numbers text. It is your handy guide for your writing journey.

Movies such as SHREK, NAPOLEON DYNAMITE, BEING JOHN MALKOVICH, SPY KIDS, AND O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU? are fun to watch partly because they are so fresh and original. They use classic dramatic structure in inventive ways, in some cases bending the framework.

PULP FICTION tells two stories. One is about how Jules (Samuel Jackson) comes to believe that God has a mission for him. At the Showdown, he doesn't shoot the robber because he's going through a "transitional period." In the other story, Butch (Bruce Willis) refuses to throw a prizefight and comes to terms with his boss while escaping with his life. Each story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but the events are not presented in exact chronological order. I wouldn't try something as tricky as this for my first script, but it illustrates an unorthodox and effective use of dramatic principles.

A BEAUTIFUL MIND is an episodic story that deals with a man's entire adult life. As with PULP FICTION, the story doesn't precisely follow the pattern we have discussed. At a key point during the second act, John Nash faces a crisis decision: He must choose between his wife Alicia and his imaginary life. It is here he realizes that his imaginary friends do not age; he now believes he has found the key to solving his schizophrenia problem. This leads to the main Crisis that determines his fate. Instead of placing that main Crisis in the hands of the central character, as I would normally recommend, it's Alicia who must make the key decision to sign the commitment papers. This is followed by a longer-than-normal final act. I have no quibbles with any choices made because they worked wonderfully! It's a beautiful and dramatic film.

Dramatic structure is at once firm *and* flexible. There are many ways to tell a story. Your basic structure may change or evolve as you write, so be open to new, creative insights. Keep in mind that every story has its own structure, its own life, its own way of unfolding. It uses you, the writer, to express itself.

The low-down on high concept

A TITILLATING TITLE

Every screenplay and teleplay needs a titillating title. Of course, from the very beginning you'll want a working title to inspire you. The title you choose for your completed work should be short enough to fit on the marquee. Ideally, it conveys something about the concept or theme. Like the headline in an ad, the title must stop the reader and pull him into the story. For example, the title STAR WARS instantly conveys something of the story.

SPY KIDS has a direct appeal to its primary audience. The premise is clearly implied: What if James Bond were a kid?

SCREAM is almost as good as PSYCHO as a title for a horror movie, and TOY STORY identifies its market as well as the story concept. DIE HARD and DIRTY DANCING were considered "million-dollar titles" at the time of their conception because they were so provocative.

SUPER SIZE ME was enough to grab my attention. That expression is well known by most people.

The title THE SIXTH SENSE clearly communicates the genre and main idea of the story.

Although a little long, HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS is a superb title. It effectively conveys the idea of a fun sci-fi family comedy.

An example of an ineffective title might be RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK. I heard Sydney Ganis, the marketer of this project, explain how much he worried about this title. Is this the football Raiders? Is this Noah's ark? How is this title going to fit on the marquee? Not to worry. The movie had good word-of-mouth and a heck of an advertising budget, so it didn't matter.

Nevertheless, in almost every case, an effective title can make an important first impression for your script, especially if it hints of a high concept.

IT'S GOTTA BE BIG

Jeffrey Katzenberg, in his now-famous and still-relevant internal memo to Disney executives (published in *Variety*, January 31, 1991), preached the following:

> In the dizzying world of moviemaking, we must not be distracted from one fundamental concept: the idea is king. If a movie begins with a great, original idea, chances are good it will be successful, even if it is executed only marginally well. However, if a film begins with a flawed idea, it will almost certainly fail, even if it is made with "A" talent and marketed to the hilt.

Leonard Kornberg said, "When a script comes in, it is the concept that gets it purchased."

And in the words of Jason Hoffs at Spielberg's company: "Probably 80% of the spec scripts this year were bought for concept and not execution."

According to Robert Kosberg, "Screenwriters usually focus on the craft of screenwriting . . . plot, developing characters, but these all fall aside if the initial concept is not clear. Find great ideas. Keep asking yourself, Do you have a good idea here?"

These quotes should not surprise you when you consider that producers, distributors, and exhibitors need a simple, easy way to sell the movie to their audiences. The concept sits at the core of every pitch, regardless of who is pitching to whom. So let's discuss what makes a good concept. Here are a few snippets I've gleaned from Hollywood pros.

- Easily understood by an eighth-grader
- Can be encapsulated in a sentence or two
- Provocative and big
- Character plus conflict plus a hook (the hook is often the Big Event)
- Sounds like an "event" movie with sequel potential
- It has legs—it can stand on its own without stars
- It will attract a big star
- A fresh and highly marketable idea
- Unique with familiar elements

May I summarize all of that? *When I hear a good concept, I immediately see a movie that I can sell.* Does your concept say, "This is a movie!"? I realize there is an element of subjectivity here, but that should come as no surprise.

There is an *implied structure* in good concepts.

For example, here's the concept of HOMEBOY, a spec script that Fox Family Films paid $500,000 for: *Two black brothers are out to adopt a younger brother to mold into an NBA player and get rich. They find only a white country bumpkin, then bring him to their neighborhood to make him a star.*

You can almost see the beginning, the middle, and the end. You see the conflict. You see the fun. It's a subjective evaluation to be sure, but that's a good movie concept.

Concept comes in many forms. For example, it can be presented as a *premise question:*

> *What if Peter Pan grew up?* (HOOK)
>
> *What if you learned that your friends and work only existed in your imagination?* (A BEAUTIFUL MIND)
>
> *What if the devil had a son?* (ROSEMARY'S BABY)
>
> *What if super heroes were forced out of action due to lawsuits?* (THE INCREDIBLES)

The concept can be expressed as a *logline.* The logline is the *TV Guide* one-sentence version of the story. *Terrorists hijack Air Force One* (AIR FORCE ONE). Here's the logline for CHAIN LETTER, a spec script sold to Touchstone for around a quarter of a million dollars.

A legal secretary, after being fired and getting dumped by her boyfriend, receives a chain letter, then sends it to the people who wronged her, only to find them dead the next morning.

You know it's a movie. It grabs you—hook, logline, and sinker. Most importantly, you (as a producer) know just how to sell it to the public. And that's the key. You know you can sell it to your particular market. You see the theater ad in the paper. You see the DVD jacket at Blockbusters.

The following logline became THE KID: *A 10-year-old boy time-travels 30 years into the future to save the overly serious man he will become.*

While doing research, I spotted the following sale description at www.scriptsales.com. The sale amount was reported to be in the "mid- against high-six figures." Here's the pitch for BLADES OF GLORY: *A pair of men's figure skaters are banned from the sport following a brawl during the Salt Lake Olympic Games. After three years of obscurity, they attempt to put aside their differences and exploit a loophole in their suspension, partnering to compete as pairs figure skaters.*

The concept is always a *hook*, which is any brief statement, premise, or logline that hooks someone into the story.

> *What's the worse thing that could happen to a babysitter? Lose the kids.* (ADVENTURES IN BABYSITTING)
>
> *TOP GUN in a firehouse.* (BACKDRAFT)
>
> *What would you do if you were accused of a murder you had not committed . . . yet?* (MINORITY REPORT)
>
> *A man dies and becomes his wife's guardian angel.* (GHOST)
>
> *DANCES WITH WOLVES goes to Japan.* (THE LAST SAMURAI)
>
> *Your girlfriend is able to have all memory of you blotted from her mind. What do you do?* (ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND)

These are very briefly presented concepts, but they grab your attention enough to make you want to get to the substance behind them.

Considering the large number of teenagers who go to movies, here's a strong concept: *A teenage computer hacker breaks into the Pentagon computer system. In the end, he prevents World War III.* (WAR GAMES)

Or how about this one? *A spoiled teenager realizes too late that she has wrecked everyone's life and jumps off a cliff.* I'm sorry, but I couldn't resist sharing my wife's reaction to CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON.

The concept is important for another reason. It's what you lead with when you pitch your script or write a query letter. We'll cover all of that in Book V. What's important now is this: The concept is what hooks—or fails to hook—the agent or producer.

Some of the best concepts present something extraordinary happening to someone who is ordinary—someone just like us. That something extraordinary is often the Big Event, the first major turning point in the story.

A radio talk-show host is out to redeem himself after his comments trigger a psychopath's murderous act. This is the intelligent, character-focused FISHER KING.

The fish-out-of-water concept is always popular—a character is thrown into a whole new situation or lifestyle, as in BEVERLY HILLS COP. SPLASH, for example, is literally about a "fish" (mermaid) out of water.

As I mentioned earlier, successful concepts often combine something familiar with something original. The following concept helped sell THE ROTTENS for $150,000 to Avnet-Kerner. Here's the concept:

When the most rotten family moves into a small town and wreaks havoc, the family's youngest son starts to break his parents' hearts when he realizes that he wants to live a life of goodness and virtue. Instead of the familiar black sheep of the family, we have the white sheep of the family. It's a twist on an old idea. In fact, some people might see it as a twist on the ADDAMS FAMILY concept.

Speaking of a twist on an old idea, a high school version of *MY FAIR LADY* sold for low-six figures. It was produced as SHE'S ALL THAT.

Can you see why this next concept sold? *A teenager is mistakenly sent into the past, where he must make sure his mother and father meet and fall in love; then he has to get back to the future.* It presents a clear beginning, middle, and end. It's about a character with a problem.

Keep in mind that most of the scripts sold are not produced. In fact, only about one in 15 or 20 of the scripts purchased and developed are ever produced. Even million-dollar scripts are sometimes not made: e.g., THE CHEESE STANDS ALONE and THE TICKING MAN. But the money still changes hands.

A good concept has *universal appeal.* Most everyone can identify with it. Some concepts give us a peek into a special world. We all want an insider's look. Here's the concept of a script that sold for $1 million. It's called BLADES.

A news helicopter pilot is deputized by the police after the president's helicopter, Marine One, is taken over by terrorists. He has to save the president as the terrorists try to manipulate the news media to their advantage.

Of course, not all production companies are looking for high-stakes action. You would not pitch *DIE HARD in a mall* to a producer of art films. But regardless of the company, they all are looking for an angle they can use to sell the kind of movie they want to produce.

One of the many pluses of having a powerful concept is that the execution of the concept into a screenplay does not have to be superior. In other words, the higher your concept, the more forgiving producers will be with your script. Of course, you don't want it to be rewritten by another writer, so make that script the best it can be.

But what if you're writing a sweet little character-driven story with no car chases and bombs? Don't despair! LOOK WHO'S TALKING is just a simple love story, but the premise is *What if babies could talk?* And that's hot. In fact, a script entitled FETCH sold for the "mid-six figures" as *LOOK WHO'S TALKING for a dog instead of a baby.*

Also, keep in mind that stories are about characters with problems. For example: *A starving sexist actor masquerades as a woman to get a role in a soap opera.* As you can see, high concept does not necessarily mean high adventure. TOOTSIE is neither, but the concept is strong, and the character growth arc is implied.

Stories that are offbeat or provocative stand an excellent chance of being purchased if they're easily visualized and encapsulated in a few words. Regardless of how mainstream or non-mainstream your story is, ask yourself these questions as you begin the writing process:

What is at the core of my story?
What makes my story stand out?
What is the concept that will help the people understand what it's about?

ADAPTATIONS

Don't adapt it until you own it. This is one of my few carved-in-stone rules. Don't adapt a novel or play unless you control the rights to the property. We'll discuss the acquisition of rights to true stories, books, and plays in Book V. There are three basic steps to writing an adaptation:

1. Read the novel or play for an understanding of the essential story, the relationships, the goal, the need, the primary conflict, and the subtext.

2. Identify the five to ten best scenes. These are the basis for your script.

3. Write an original script.

Adaptations are not as easy as that, of course; they're difficult assignments. A script cannot hope to cover all the internal conflict that the novel does, nor can it include all the subplots that a long novel can. Novels often emphasize theme and character. They

are often reflective, but movies move. These are all reasons why novel lovers often hate movie versions. But Hollywood thrives on adaptations.

Jurassic Park is a novel that was adapted to the screen. The book's central character is the billionaire, with the mathematician as the opposition character. The book is science-driven, an intellectual experience as much as an emotional experience. Spielberg saw the high concept: *What if you could make dinosaurs from old DNA?*

It's interesting to note the changes that transformed this book into a movie. First, the central character becomes the paleontologist. This provided a more youthful hero. Our paleontologist is given a flaw he didn't have in the book—he doesn't like children. He grows to like them by striving for his goal. There is no love interest in the book, but Dr. Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern) fills that role in the movie. Although the character development in the movie is thin, the above changes make for a more visual and emotionally accessible film. The focus of the movie, of course, is on the dinosaurs, the T-Rex in particular. Hey, movies are visual.

My favorite scene in the book—the moment at the end when the paleontologist realizes that the velociraptors want to migrate—is simply not visual enough or emotional enough for the movie; plus it doesn't have a strong bearing on the main action plot. I think the right choices were made.

Story-layering, plot, and genre

Now that we have a basic understanding of how a story works, let's expand on that and deepen the story.

GOALS AND NEEDS

In every story, the central character has a conscious goal. The goal is whatever your central character outwardly strives for. Of course, opposition makes it *almost* impossible to reach the goal. That opposition usually comes in the form of a person who either has the same goal or who, in some other way, opposes your central character's goal.

Beneath it all lies a great unconscious *need*. The need has to do with self-image, or finding love, or living a better life—whatever the character *needs* to be truly happy or fulfilled. This yearning sometimes runs counter to the goal and sometimes supports or motivates it. The Crisis often brings the need into full consciousness.

Usually the need is blocked from within by a character flaw. This flaw serves as the inner opposition to the inner need. This character flaw is obvious to the audience, because we see the character hurting people, including himself. The flaw is almost always a form of selfishness, pride, or greed.

Where does the flaw come from? Usually, from the backstory. Something happened before the movie began that deeply hurt the character. Now he acts in inappropriate or hurtful ways. Let's see what we can learn about goals and needs from TWINS.

Vincent Benedict (Danny DeVito) is the central character. His conscious, measurable goal is $5 million. There is a strong outward opposition to this goal—a really bad guy wants the money as well. Vincent also has a need of which he himself is unaware. He needs the love of a family. Blocking him is his own greed and selfishness—he's out for himself. This is the character flaw, and it is motivated by his backstory. His mother

abandoned him, and he learned early that all people are out to get him, so he'd better get them first. Vincent can never have what he truly needs until he gives up his selfish and self-pitying point of view.

This is a neat little story because the goal and the need happen to oppose each other at the Crisis. Vincent must choose between the two. He can escape with the money (his goal), but someone holds a gun on his brother (his need). What will Vincent decide?

At this crisis moment, he finds himself unable to leave his brother. Why? In a later scene, we learn that he really cared but didn't fully realize it until the Crisis. That's why he turned around and willingly gave up the money to save his brother's life. Vincent reformed. He gave up something he wanted for the sake of his brother. Fortunately, in the end, he gets both a family and the money. The writer gives the audience what they want, but not in the way they expect it. Don't you love those Hollywood endings?

TWO STORIES IN ONE

Screenplays often tell two main stories. The *Outside/Action Story* is driven by the goal. It is sometimes referred to as the spine.

The *Inside/Emotional Story* usually derives from a relationship and is generally driven by the need. It is sometimes referred to as the *heart of the story* or the *emotional through-line*. To find the Inside/Emotional Story, look in the direction of the key relationship in the story. Sometimes there is no inside story, no flaw, no need, as in many thrillers, action/adventures, and horror movies. James Bond has no flaw or need, only a goal and an urge.

Each story—the Outside/Action Story and the Inside/Emotional Story—has its own turning points and structure. One is the main plot; the other, a subplot. Hopefully, the two stories are intertwined synergistically.

Again, TWINS serves as a good example. The Outside/Action story is driven by the $5 million goal, and the Inside/Emotional Story is driven by his need for a family. The action is what keeps us interested, but the emotion is what touches us. Although there are exceptions, the Inside/Emotional Story is what the movie is really about. The movie is really about a relationship.

In GONE WITH THE WIND, Scarlet has several goals. She wants to be seen by all the boys. She wants to get married. She wants never to eat radishes again. She wants to save Tara. And she wants Ashley, which is probably her main goal. Rather complex.

It may even sound confusing until you realize that the story is really about what she needs—Rhett Butler. Scarlet is outwardly striving for all the things just named, but she is not consciously after Rhett. Nevertheless, the movie belongs to Scarlet and Rhett.

In ROMANCING THE STONE, what is Joan Wilder (Kathleen Turner) outwardly striving for? She wants to find the stone so she can save her sister. Is this a clear and visual goal? Yes. Is she consciously aware that this is what she's after? Yes. Is her goal opposed by anyone? Yes. Zolo wants it, as do the kidnappers. And Jack Colton (Michael Douglas) wants the stone so he can buy a boat and sail around the world.

What does Joan Wilder need? Romance. Is she striving for romance? No. She writes out her fantasies in her romance novels. Her flaw is simple indifference—she won't try. In this story, she gets what she needs by striving for the goal.

In my script-consulting work, I receive many scripts that are completely missing a goal. To illustrate, let's pretend I was a consultant for Diane Thomas when she first started writing. She tells me she has a script about a woman who goes on vacation to South America and falls in love with an adventurer. Sounds interesting, but it's not compelling enough. So I ask Diane about the goal.

"Happiness is Joan's goal," she responds.

"Happiness is not a goal. It's too vague."

"Well . . . romance is her goal. That's it."

"That feels more like a need than a goal. It's actually part of your Inside/Emotional Story. You need an action track for this inside story to roll on."

"Well, vacationing is her goal. She consciously wants to have a good vacation. She deserves it after all that writing."

Diane relaxes. It appears as though she has a complete story now, but I disappoint her. "Technically, vacationing is a goal," I say, "but it does not stir my heart, nor does it set up strong opportunities for conflict. Something has to *happen.*"

"I know!" Diane states triumphantly. "What if her sister is kidnapped and she has to save her?" Now Diane has a strong Big Event and a story.

This problem is so common that I strongly urge you to stop and examine your story. Are you missing an action track for your wonderful inside story to roll on?

Variations on the action and emotion tracks

In BACK TO THE FUTURE, the outside story plot, as you would expect, is action-oriented. It is driven by Marty's goal to get back to the future. So far so good. The inside story plot, however, is driven not by a need, but by a second goal: Marty wants to get his mom and dad back together again.

This results in twin crises at the end of the story, side by side. First, can Marty get his parents to kiss before he disappears into oblivion? This is the Inside/Emotional Story built around a relationship. Once resolved, Marty races from the dance to the Outside/Action Story: Can Marty, in the DeLorean, hit the wire at the same moment that lightning strikes the tower?

Is there an inner need in this movie? Yes, Marty needs a better family, and that's just what he gets in the end.

In THE SIXTH SENSE, two characters go through a mutual healing. Dr. Malcolm Crowe wants to help Cole, but needs to communicate with his wife and accept his separation from her. His backstory is the first scene of the film; he is shot by a former patient. His flaw is that, like other dead people in this film, he only sees what he wants to see. He achieves his goal of helping Cole and meets his need by communicating with his wife and seeing the truth.

Cole wants to stop being scared by dead people, but his need is to communicate with them and also with his mother. Cole's flaw is that he won't share his secret with his mother for fear she'll think he's a freak. In this case, his flaw is not motivated by a specific backstory. What's interesting is that Cole's goal is achieved by satisfying the need. In other words, once he communicates with the ghosts, he's no longer afraid of them. We'll discuss this story in more depth in the chapter on "Theme."

MOONSTRUCK: Loretta's goal is to marry by the book. This goal is represented by Danny. She was married once before and it was unlucky because they didn't do it "right," so "this time, Danny, you've got to have a ring and get on your knees and propose, and we're going to a priest." She's doing this marriage by the book.

Loretta *needs* to marry for love. This need is represented by Ronnie. This is not fully in her consciousness until she goes to the opera with Ronnie. Blocking her need is her character flaw—she's going to marry someone she doesn't love. This character flaw is motivated by her backstory of having an unlucky marriage. At the breakfast-table scene in the end, she admits that the need is more important to her than the goal.

In SPIDER-MAN 2, the hero's main goal is to defeat Otto. He has a goal/need to find his identity. Underneath it all, there is a need for Mary Jane. His flaw is that he's too

passive with Mary Jane and won't communicate with her because he wants to protect her. He has an additional flaw of not knowing his true mission.

HOME ALONE's Kevin strives to protect the house and himself from the Wet Bandits. That's the main action plot. The emotional story? He needs his family's acceptance, his mother's in particular. Two flaws block him: One, he's a brat; two, he is incompetent—he can't even tie his shoelaces. These are subplots. The first flaw hooks the parents in the audience—he becomes a son who learns to appreciate his mother and family. The second flaw hooks the kids—he becomes competent when fighting the adult bandits. This is a coming-of-age subplot.

The mother's goal is to get home. Her need and her flaw are similar to those of her son. In fact, they are mirrors of each other. Another subplot involves the man with the shovel who wants to become reconciled to his son. It's not hard to see that the underlying theme of this flick is family reconciliation.

MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING: Julianne wants to break up her best friend's wedding, but needs to accept it and let life go on.

KRAMER VS. KRAMER: The goal? Custody. The need? To be a loving father. In this screenplay, the goal and the need oppose each other, creating a crisis. Ted Kramer (Dustin Hoffman) loses custody in a court battle and wants to appeal. His attorney tells him: "It'll cost $15,000." No problem. Ted wants to go ahead. "You'll have to put Billy on the stand." Well, to put Billy on the stand could deeply hurt him. Ted loves him too much. He chooses to give up custody rather than hurt the child. He overcomes his selfishness and abandons his goal for custody.

There's another way to look at this. Think of yourself as the next great screenwriter creating this story from scratch. You know the story is going to be about Ted Kramer becoming a father, learning to love his son. So you, the writer, give Ted goals, behaviors, and desires that are flawed. You give him a main goal of gaining custody because you know it will eventually contrast with what he really needs, which is to unselfishly love his son. So Ted's goal in this story is flawed—seeking custody is not the best way to love his son or satisfy his inner drive to be a father. In the end, he becomes a father by giving up custody, by giving up the goal.

In THE WIZARD OF OZ, the main goal is Kansas; the need is to realize there's no place like home.

JERRY MAGUIRE wants a big contract for his only client, Rod. In the process of working with Rod, he manages to accomplish his mission and even finds intimacy with his wife. Let's take a closer look at this story, since it has not one but two flaws and two growth arcs. (Naturally, the flaws are related.)

	Action story	Emotional story
Flaw	Self-doubt.	Can't love and be intimate.
Catalyst	Client suffers in hospital; client's son accuses Jerry of not caring.	Meets woman who believes in him.
Big Event	Fired.	Goes on a date.
Pinch	Jerry accuses Rod of playing without heart; Rod accuses him of marrying without heart.	Proposes marriage.
Crisis	After refusing contract, Rod is apparently injured.	Wife separates from Jerry because he doesn't love her.
Showdown	Rod plays well, not injured, gets interviewed, and gets big contract.	Jerry returns to his wife.
Realization	At the two interviews, Rod recognizes Jerry: Jerry has fulfilled his mission, no longer doubts himself, and wants to be with his wife.	

PRETTY WOMAN: Here we have two people who need love, but who are prostituting themselves. Their behavior does not harmonize with their need. In the end, they give up their old ways and thus fill their needs. They grow.

My favorite romantic comedy is SOME LIKE IT HOT. Joe (Tony Curtis), posing as a millionaire, uses Sugar Kane Kowalczyk (Marilyn Monroe). He's after her body, but he *needs* to love her in the full sense of the word. Sugar's goal is to marry a millionaire. She chases after Joe because she thinks he is one. Her unconscious need, however, is to marry for love. The Crisis comes when Joe is forced by Spats Columbo, a gangster, to leave Sugar. At that point, Joe realizes he is actually in love with Sugar. He realizes what a jerk he is and vows to get out of her life. He'll do what's best for her and leave without her. Sugar, however, realizes that he's the one, even though he's not really a millionaire. She chases after him. Together for the right reasons, they sail off into the sunset.

In love stories (and even buddy movies such as MIDNIGHT RUN), one or both of the characters is willing to give up something in the end for the sake of the other. That something is often a goal related to their flaw. In PRETTY WOMAN, Edward not only gives up his questionable business practices, but he also overcomes his fear of heights. Love stories are essentially about two people transforming each other and learning to love each other. PRETTY WOMAN is pretty good at doing just that.

PLOT

Up until now, we've explained the Outside/Action Plot and the Inside/Emotional Plot. *Plot* is the structure of action and emotion. The verb *to plot* is a creative process that uses character development and story structure. When all the plotting is over, you end up with a *plot* and several *subplots*.

Plot comprises the important events in a character's story. The words *plot*, *structure*, and *story* are often used interchangeably. Plot grows from character because everything starts with a character who has a goal. Since the goal is opposed, the character takes action. The resulting conflict culminates in a crisis. Will she win? Will he lose? Will he grow? Will she decline? The answer to those questions determines the kind of story—the kind of plot—you're writing.

There are basically two kinds of stories: plot-driven stories (which I prefer to call goal-driven stories) and character-driven stories. In goal-driven stories, the focus is primarily on the character's goal and the action—the spine of the story. In character-driven stories, the focus is primarily on character dynamics, a need, and a key relationship—the heart of the story. First, let's look at some examples of goal-driven stories.

• **The character wins.** In this plot model, the character strives for a goal and wins. Very simple and very common. Examples include: THE INCREDIBLES, SHREK, INDEPENDENCE DAY, I, ROBOT, ROCKY, DIE HARD, THE FUGITIVE, MEN IN BLACK, THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS, RUDY, TRUE LIES, NATIONAL TREASURE, and THE KARATE KID. In SAVING PRIVATE RYAN, Captain Miller achieves his goal, even though he dies. NAPOLEON DYNAMITE not only succeeds as a campaign manager, but he gets the girl, too.

• **The character loses.** With this plot, a moral victory of some kind often results despite the failure of a very sympathetic character. SPARTACUS fails to achieve his goal for the slaves and is crucified, but he sees his wife and child escape to freedom. In TITANIC, Rose loses Jack but her heart will go on. THELMA & LOUISE never get to Mexico, but in the attempt they achieve a certain freedom. In O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU? Everett (George Clooney) never gets his wife back, and there's not much of a moral victory either except that he has a job with the governor, and that ain't bad in Depression-era Mississippi.

Other examples are BRAVEHEART, ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST, FROM HERE TO ETERNITY, THE MISSION (here, they flat-out lose), and JFK (the Jim Garrison character).

• **The character sows the seeds of his own destruction.** What Goes Around, Comes Around. Examples include: THE LADYKILLERS, FRANKENSTEIN, DANGEROUS LIAISONS, MOBY DICK, and SCREAM (the perpetrators). In Episode III of STAR WARS (REVENGE OF THE SITH), the Emperor molds Anakin Skywalker into Darth Vader; in Episode VI, it is Darth Vader who kills the Emperor.

The following plot models seem more focused on character dynamics, and on the Inside/Emotional Story.

• **The character grows by doing the right thing.** Here, the character is about to do the wrong thing, but transforms into someone who overcomes his or her flaw, and does the right thing. Very popular everywhere. In CASABLANCA, Rick wants to get even with Ilsa; in the end, he does the right thing and helps her and her husband escape. Charlie (Tom Cruise), in RAIN MAN, wants his inheritance; in the end, he tears up the check and does the right thing for his brother.

An ideal example is AN IDEAL HUSBAND where at least three characters grow by doing the right thing. Other examples include: HITCH, EMMA, ON THE WATER-FRONT, A BEAUTIFUL MIND (both John Nash and his wife, Alicia), MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING, JERRY MAGUIRE, SAINTS AND SOLDIERS, THE SCENT OF A WOMAN, BIG, AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN, GROUNDHOG DAY, and SCHINDLER'S LIST.

Romantic comedies usually fit this plot model because one or more of the lovers gives up something for the other. In PRETTY WOMAN, both characters give up their careers. In SOME LIKE IT HOT, the lovers stop using each other. MIDNIGHT RUN is a love story without the romance—both Jack Walsh (Robert DeNiro) and Jonathan Mardukas (Charles Grodin) give up their goals for each other in the end.

• **The character grows up.** Here the character comes of age while striving for one or more goals that are either achieved or not achieved—it doesn't matter which. We don't really care whether the boys are first to find the body in STAND BY ME. What we care about is the relationship and growth of the boys. The goal is only there to give the relationship a track to roll on. In some character-driven stories, the goal may change. And that's fine as long as the conflict intensifies and rises to a crisis and showdown.

Here are more examples of characters growing up: GOOD WILL HUNTING, RISKY BUSINESS, HOOK (Peter Pan grows up), BREAKING AWAY, PLATOON, and AMERICAN GRAFFITI. In UNBREAKABLE, David Dunn grows from mere mortal, bad husband, and not-so-great father to a hero.

In a sense, Peter Parker, the central character in SPIDER-MAN 2, comes of age by affirming his identity as Spider-man. However, this could also be seen as a "character learns" plot. Let's look at that next.

• **The character learns.** Here, the character learns what he or she needs to be happy. George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) realizes he has a wonderful life in IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. Bishop Henry Brougham (David Niven) learns what's important in life in THE BISHOP'S WIFE—that the people in the cathedral are more important than the cathedral itself. Harold, in HAROLD AND MAUDE, discovers that life is worth living. In THE SIXTH SENSE, Cole and Malcolm learn to communicate.

In THE GREEN MILE, Paul learns that "everyone must walk his own green mile." This knowledge does not necessarily make him happy, but it deepens his character and his appreciation for life.

In THE WIZARD OF OZ, Dorothy finds out there's no place like home. She also achieves her goal of returning to Kansas. (An argument could be made that the main plot is a Character-Wins Plot and that the realization of her need is merely a subplot that supports the goal.) Other examples: THE PRINCE OF TIDES—Tom Wingo (Nick Nolte) learns he wants to live with his family. In CITY SLICKERS, Mitch Robbins (Billy Crystal) finally figures out the meaning of life. In FINDING NEVERLAND, little Peter tells James Barrie that he (Barrie) is Peter Pan.

• **The character fails to learn.** Here, the character fails to learn what he or she needs to learn to be happy. In this plot, the character does not grow, but the audience learns the lesson. Examples include WAR OF THE ROSES, GOODFELLAS, and RAGING BULL. In BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID, Butch and Sundance never figure out that they are in the wrong line of work and need to change with the times.

I suppose you could argue for O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU? After all, even at the end, Everett (George Clooney) still wants to print up a dentist diploma and just get any old wedding ring for his wife. He's not very bright for someone who uses Dapper Dan pomade.

• **The character declines,** often by striving to achieve a worthy goal. Here are your examples: LAWRENCE OF ARABIA, UNFORGIVEN, CITIZEN KANE, and SUPER SIZE ME. In the beginning of THE GODFATHER, Michael (the central character) is something of a patriot who doesn't want a part of the family business. In the end, he *runs* the family business, but his rise is also his decline, which is demonstrated in the final scene where he lies, straight-faced, to his wife.

In virtually all stories, there is one main plot. Everything else happening in the character's life is a subplot. In addition to the central character's plot and subplot, each of the other characters in the screenplay has his or her own plot with a goal, action, crisis, and resolution. These are all subplots.

Furthermore, each character's crisis may come at a different juncture in the script, or may converge at the same crisis moment, depending on the story. The great secret to master-plotting is to bring the various subplots and main plot into conflict. In other words, most or all of the subplots should cross the central character's main purpose. One purpose of the step-outline on pages 99-100 is to accomplish this. You should find the Character/Action Grid on pages 105-109 to be helpful as well.

When two characters are at cross purposes, you have a *Unity of Opposites*. To ensure a conflict up until the story's end, you need a unity of the central character's main plot and the opposing character's plot. The unity exists when the two plots are in direct opposition to each other, and compromise is impossible, ensuring a struggle to the end. For example, in FATAL ATTRACTION, a married man has an affair with a beautiful blonde and wants to terminate the relationship with her, but he can't because she carries his baby and is fixated on him. There exists a *unity of opposites*. He wants to end the relationship. She wants the relationship to grow. Compromise is impossible.

GENRE

Another element to consider in plotting is genre. Each genre carries with it certain characteristics.

Love stories
In a romantic comedy, the lovers meet (Catalyst), are forced to be together or choose to be together (Big Event), fall in love (Pinch), are separated (Crisis), after which one or both will change in some way, reform, and return to the beloved (Showdown). Most often, this results in a Character-Grows-by-Doing-the-Right-Thing Plot.

This category includes "date movies," a term popularized by Jeff Arch and Nora Ephron's SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE. In fact, in the film itself, *guy movies* are distinguished from *chick flicks*. A date movie is a movie that appeals to both guys and chicks. In the case of SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE, women presumably see this as a love story, while men see a widowed father getting a second chance.

Action/adventure
These stories usually open with an exciting action sequence, followed by some exposition. Although these can be suspenseful, the key to this genre is exciting action. Make

sure there is plenty of it. These stories generally follow a Character-Wins Plot and usually end with a chase and/or plenty of violence.

William Martel, quoting Shane Black in *Scriptwriters Network Newsletter*, writes the following:

> The key to good action scenes is reversals. . . . It's like a good news/bad news joke. The bad news is you get thrown out of an airplane. The good news is you're wearing your parachute. The bad news is the rip cord breaks. The good news is you have a backup chute. The bad news is you can't reach the cord. Back and forth like that until the character reaches the ground.

Thrillers

Thrillers focus on suspense more than on action. In a thriller, an ordinary man or woman gets involved in a situation that becomes life-threatening. The bad guys desperately want the *MacGuffin*, a name Hitchcock gave to the plot-device that often drives the thriller. In NORTH BY NORTHWEST, the MacGuffin is government secrets. In CHARADE, it's $250,000 in stamps.

Although the characters are after the MacGuffin, the audience cares more about the survival of the central character. This is because she cannot get help, has been betrayed in some way, and cannot trust anyone. The primary motivation is one of survival, so there's not much of a Character Realization in the end.

Many thrillers don't have a MacGuffin, but all thrillers isolate the central character, put her life at constant risk, and get us to identify with her fears.

Horror

Scary movies differ from the thriller in that the opposition is a monster, or a monster-like human. This genre leans heavily on shock and surprise. Examples include JAWS and SCREAM. ALIEN also relies on surprise, but the sequel, ALIENS, was wisely written as an action/adventure story, not another horror movie. Instead of scaring us, James Cameron thrills us with exciting action. Naturally there are horror elements in ALIENS, but the focus of the movie is on action.

Science fiction

Yes, ALIEN and ALIENS were science-fiction movies, but the horror and action/adventure genres dominated in each respective case. Thus, we have hybrid genres: horror/sci-fi and action/sci-fi. BACK TO THE FUTURE is a fantasy family drama, or a sci-fi comedy, or a combination of all four. The point is that most science-fiction takes on the characteristics of another genre and moves it to another world or time.

Traveling angel

This is a story about a character who solves the problems of the people around him. He doesn't grow much himself because he's "perfect," but other characters do; and once they have done so, the angel rides off into the sunset. MARY POPPINS, SHANE, and PALE RIDER are examples. Percy in THE SPITFIRE GRILL redeems virtually everyone. In the case of THE BISHOP'S WIFE, the traveling angel really is a traveling angel.

In a way, Seabiscuit (in SEABISCUIT) qualifies as the only horse to be a traveling angel. The other characters in the story heal because of Seabiscuit, although Seabiscuit himself grows, too.

Detective/mystery

The murder mystery opens with a murder. Then, the police officer, private detective, or retired novelist solves the case. Since solving the case is primarily a mental exercise, there is often a voice-over narration so we can be privy to the central character's thoughts, as in MAGNUM, P.I. If this central character is a private detective, he will usually be portrayed as one who operates on the fringes of the law, such as Jake Gittes in CHINATOWN. Often, detectives uncover a small corruption that leads to a larger one. Many detective stories contain elements of "film noir."

Film noir

Film noir (literally, "night film") describes both a genre and a shooting style—shadowy, cynical, and realistic—and a storyline that features ordinary people in over their heads, no heroes and villains per se. In fact, there is usually a moral ambiguity, even though there may be a struggle between good and evil within the central character. Stories often end unhappily. L.A. CONFIDENTIAL, DOUBLE INDEMNITY, THE USUAL SUSPECTS, TOUCH OF EVIL, DOA, BASIC INSTINCT, PULP FICTION, FARGO, THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE, and BODY HEAT are examples.

Fish-out-of-water

This is a popular genre because it creates so much potential for conflict and fun. A character is abruptly taken out of her element and forced to adjust to a new environment. Thus, Detective John Kimble (Arnold Schwarzenegger) becomes a kindergarten teacher in KINDERGARTEN COP. And Detective Axel Foley (Eddie Murphy) goes to 90210 in BEVERLY HILLS COP. In THREE MEN AND A BABY, three Peter Pans suddenly must care for a baby. PRIVATE BENJAMIN could be pitched as *Jewish American Princess joins the Army.*

I suppose you could say that Marty in BACK TO THE FUTURE is a fish-out-of-water when he drops into 1955 culture. So maybe that film is actually a sci-fi/fantasy/fish-out-of-water/family comedy.

Obviously, there are many genres and combinations of genres: Revisionist Western (DANCES WITH WOLVES), Screwball comedy (BRINGING UP BABY and WHAT'S UP, DOC?), Historical epic (SEVEN YEARS IN TIBET, LAWRENCE OF ARABIA), Buddy picture (OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE), Milieu (ALICE IN WONDERLAND, MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL, and LORD OF THE RINGS), Action/romance (ROMANCING THE STONE), and on and on.

Once you choose your genre, watch several representative films. You will not be researching your story but learning more about what makes the genre work.

MYTH

Beyond genre and plot is myth. In any story you write, it may help you to understand the mythological journey. The "hero's journey," as presented by Joseph Campbell, follows a particular pattern that may be weaved into the fabric of any story, regardless of its genre. Many stories contain elements of this mythological journey, while a few, like Episodes IV-VI of STAR WARS, THE POLAR EXPRESS, and THE WIZARD OF OZ, can be called myths because the central character passes through each stage of the hero's journey. Briefly, these are the stages in the hero's journey:

The hero lives amid ordinary surroundings. The Catalyst is actually a call to adventure, but the hero is reluctant to heed the call. This could be the moment when the hero receives her mission. She is given an amulet or aid of some kind by an older person, a mentor. For example, Dorothy is given the ruby-red slippers by a good witch. Luke is given the lightsaber by Obi-Wan. Many stories feature mentors: e.g., Sean Maguire (Robin Williams) in GOOD WILL HUNTING, the train conductor in THE POLAR EXPRESS, and Agent K (Tommy Lee Jones) in MEN IN BLACK. In THE LORD OF THE RINGS, Frodo is mentored by Gandalf.

The central character travels to the extraordinary world. This is followed by a series of tests and obstacles. The hero often undergoes a death experience and enters the secret hideout, the witch's castle, the Death Star, the belly of the whale, or the innermost cave.

Finally, the hero seizes the treasure and is chased back to the ordinary world, where this treasure blesses the people. The grail heals the land. In THE POLAR EXPRESS, the little reindeer bell confirms the spirit of Christmas to all who hear it ring.

The hero may be resurrected in some way. Luke and Han are honored at an awards ceremony. Dorothy returns to her family. THE LAST STARFIGHTER is transfigured in front of the townspeople. Oskar Schindler is honored in a ring ceremony.

As a writer, you may have heard a call to action, a call to write, but hesitated. You must heed the call. As you struggle, as you learn, and as you write, you may very well walk the path of the hero, overcome obstacles, gain allies, and become the next great screenwriter. The hero's journey may very well become your personal odyssey.

Note: This is a good time to do Steps 1, 2, and 3 in the workbook (Book II).

Ten keys to creating captivating characters

Your central character requires ten things from a writer. Keep in mind as we review these that virtually all of them apply to supporting characters, and even minor characters, as well as to your main characters.

1. A GOAL AND AN OPPOSITION

Your character wants something. A dramatic goal is specific and measurable. Dealing with life is not a goal. Happiness is not a goal. Seeking $10 million worth of doubloons on an old Spanish shipwreck off the Florida Keys is a goal. Winning the Pan American Ballroom Dance Competition is a goal. Getting the broomstick of the wicked witch in order to return to Kansas is a goal. The nature of the goal reveals a lot about your character.

Whatever the goal is, it should not be easy to attain. There must be opposition to the goal. Opposition creates conflict, and conflict makes drama. Conflict reveals character and motivates people to learn. Ask yourself, *What does my character want and what does she most fear?* The opposition will force her to face her fear.

The opposition should be an individual. If it is an organization, let someone represent that organization. In GHOSTBUSTERS, the Environmental Protection Agency is represented by a man who makes it his personal business to bust the Ghostbusters.

To demonstrate the importance of an opposition, here's a story I'm paraphrasing from William Froug (*American Writers Review*, January 1997, p. 17). It concerns the classic

SOME LIKE IT HOT and how Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond solved their writing problem. They had a funny idea of two men joining an all-girl band. They weren't able to develop a story from it because they didn't have a motivation for the two men to join the band, and they didn't have an opposition.

One day, Diamond walked into the office they shared on the studio lot to find Wilder waiting for him. As soon as he entered the office, Wilder shouted out, "St. Valentine's Day Massacre!" and Diamond shouted back, "That's It!" They made the two men accidental witnesses to the famous gangland killing. Now, in order to escape from both the law (represented by one individual cop) and the mob (represented by one individual mobster), they become cross-dressers so they can join an all-girl band. Once on the road with the band, they become opposition characters to each other (they both want the same woman). Now that's a movie!

In situations where a group opposes the central character, such as a gang, focus on one person in that group who stands as the greatest personal threat to the central character. Personalizing the opposition will create greater drama and will elicit the audience's sympathy for the central character. The hero is often defined by his/her opposition. And that opposition need not be evil; you just need someone who has a good reason to block your hero's attempt to achieve his goal, even if she is doing so subconsciously (as with the overprotective mother controlling her adult son's life "for his own good").

It is possible to have a nonhuman opposition, such as the forces of Nature, or even a monster (such as the Great White in JAWS). If you do have such an opposition, consider adding a human opponent as well. In JAWS, the mayor of Amity serves as a secondary opponent to Police Chief Brody. In ALIENS, Burke is a strong secondary opponent. In fact, a well-written story often features three opponents.

In addition to the goal, you may wish to give your character some related inner drive or yearning that either supports the goal or is in opposition to the goal. This inner need may be inwardly blocked by some character flaw. This was discussed more fully in the preceding section.

2. MOTIVATION

Your character must be motivated. Ask yourself this question: Why does my character want what he wants? The answer to that question is the motivation. And the more personal, the better. The more personal it is, the more the audience will identify and sympathize with the character. It's the emotional touchstone between your audience and your character.

What is Rocky's goal in the first ROCKY movie? His goal is very specific. He wants to go the distance with the champ—fifteen rounds. Why? *To prove he's not a bum.* It's the personal motivation that gives the story its power. Personally, I hate boxing. I couldn't care less who won the "Thrilla in Manila." And yet I've watched four of the Rocky movies. Why? Well, it's not for the boxing scenes. It's for the motivation *behind* those boxing scenes.

In the second ROCKY movie, his wife goes into a coma. Then she blinks her eyes open and says, "Win." Now Rocky has a motive for winning.

In ROCKY III, Clubber Lang (Mr. T) has a tiff with Rocky's manager, Mickey (Burgess Meredith). Mickey suffers a heart attack and dies. Does Rocky want to clean Clubber's plow? Absolutely, and so does everyone in the theater.

Another boxing movie, MILLION DOLLAR BABY (which is actually more of a character drama than a "boxing movie"), goes deeper. Frankie Dunn (Clint Eastwood) is motivated by guilt and by the fear of getting close to someone. He is lonely. Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank) grew up believing she was "trash." She wants to escape the past. She needs someone to believe in her. Boxing gives her life meaning. It's easy for people to identify with her personal motivation and with Frankie's; thus, people get "emotionally involved" with these characters.

Love is behind the desire to get well in A BEAUTIFUL MIND. John Nash is motivated to give up his *imaginary* life for a *real* life with his wife. Her love is his motivation.

And, in THE SIXTH SENSE, Dr. Malcolm (Bruce Willis) wants to help Cole because he was unable to save Vincent. He has a personal reason for wanting to achieve his goal.

In RAIN MAN, Charlie Babbitt's perception of his father's past harsh treatment of him motivates his goal of collecting the inheritance. In other words, he wants the inheritance to get even with his father.

JAWS is a horror movie complete with body parts and a monster. The only personal motivation needed here is survival, but the writer adds something very personal. When Brody fails to close the beach, a boy is eaten by JAWS. At the funeral, the mother slaps Brody's face in front of the entire town and says, "You killed my son." Now Brody wants not only to protect the town, but redeem himself.

In JERRY MAGUIRE, our character is fired and humiliated. He is also motivated by his employee/wife, who is the only person who supports him.

Like Jerry Maguire, Rose, in TITANIC, is motivated by two things: She is imprisoned by a lifestyle where no one "sees her" as she is, and Jack is the only person who really does "see her." This is why she literally reveals herself to him.

The motivation usually grows with the conflict. It becomes stronger as the story progresses. Often, the motivation deepens or becomes most evident at the Pinch or midpoint of the story. In AMADEUS, Salieri has many reasons for disliking Mozart. It seems that whenever they are together, Mozart finds a way to insult Salieri, even if it's innocently done. These accumulate over time.

The clincher, however, is when Mrs. Mozart visits Salieri. She brings her husband's work with her and confesses that they need money and wonders if Salieri will help them. Salieri scrutinizes the manuscripts, and sees that these are "first and only drafts of music," and notices no corrections. From Salieri's point of view, Mozart must simply be taking dictation from God. Salieri takes it personally. He goes to his private room and throws his crucifix into the fire. "From now on we are enemies," he says. Why? Because God chose a degenerate like Mozart over him, Salieri, whose only wish has been to serve God through music. So here, at the Pinch or midpoint, we have the goal—to fight God by killing Mozart—and the motivation—because God is unjust.

3. A BACKSTORY

Before page one of your screenplay, something significant happens to your central character. That singular event is called the *backstory*.

In ORDINARY PEOPLE, the backstory involves two brothers, teenagers, boating on a lake. A storm capsizes the boat and one drowns. The other blames himself and tries to kill himself. The script begins when he returns from the hospital.

IN SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE, the backstory is the death of Sam's wife.

In the above examples, we are given quick glimpses of the backstory. Most often, the backstory is not seen by the audience, but it is there, haunting the central character and affecting his actions.

In THELMA & LOUISE, Louise was raped in Texas. It's what makes it possible for her to shoot Thelma's attacker. This backstory is not revealed to Thelma or the audience until much later in the story.

Hana in THE ENGLISH PATIENT is troubled by the notion that everyone she loves dies.

In UNFORGIVEN, Bill Munny (Clint Eastwood) was a killer before his wife reformed him.

In THE SPITFIRE GRILL, Percy's dark past involves the death of her baby and a five-year prison sentence.

Fox Mulder, in the X-FILES TV series, is haunted by a single, traumatic event. When he was young, his sister was (apparently) kidnapped by aliens. This event deeply affects his actions and personality. He's not just an FBI man, but a person with a life and a past.

Sometimes only the screenwriter knows the backstory (as in AS GOOD AS IT GETS), but because he knows it, the characters seem fuller on the page. Not every character has a single past event that haunts her, but every character has a past that influences that character's actions and dialogue.

Backstory, flaw, and need

The backstory can be subtle. For example, in FOUL PLAY, Gloria Mundy (Goldie Hawn) was once in love and it ended badly. It's as simple as that. At the beginning of the movie, we see a cautious Gloria, a person not quite ready for a new lover, particularly if it's Tony Carlson (Chevy Chase). It's easy to see how the backstory gives rise to the flaw that blocks the need. In the case of Gloria, she needs to feel safe with a man. She's not approachable because she's afraid.

In ORDINARY PEOPLE, Conrad's need is to forgive himself for his brother's accidental death. His flaw is that he tries to control his feelings too much and is self-accusing. This all emerges from his backstory.

In SIGNS, Rev. Hess's wife is killed tragically before the movie begins. This gives rise to his flaw of losing his faith and his need to regain his faith.

Del Spooner (Will Smith), in I, ROBOT, hates robots. This is because of his backstory: a robot saved his life instead of someone more deserving. He needs to stop blaming robots and overcome his bias.

In the CHINATOWN love scene, Mrs. Mulwray asks Jake why he avoids Chinatown. He explains, "I thought I was keeping someone from being hurt, and actually I ended up making sure she was hurt." Jake is referring to his backstory, a traumatic event that transpired before the movie began. In the climactic showdown, Jake tries to keep Mrs. Mulwray from getting hurt and, in so doing, inadvertently facilitates her death. The backstory foreshadows the resolution.

THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS: When Clarice (Jodie Foster) was a little girl, her dad, a police officer, was killed. She went to live on a ranch. One night they were slaughtering lambs and they were crying. She picked up a lamb and ran, but she wasn't strong enough. They caught up with her and slaughtered the lamb. The need of her adult life was to silence those cries. When a woman is captured by Buffalo Bill and placed in a pit, that woman becomes a crying lamb that Clarice wants to save. But is she strong enough? She is. After she saves the woman, she gets a call from Dr. Lecter. "Well, Clarice, have you silenced the lambs?" That's the *Realization.* We know she hasn't. They'll always be crying, but now she is strong enough to save them. (Some of my students dispute this, maintaining she *has* silenced the lambs of her past. What do you think?)

Showing the backstory

Occasionally, the audience is actually shown the backstory. In FLATLINERS, we see each main character's backstory at the appropriate moment in the script. The films CONTACT, THE PHILADELPHIA STORY, BACKDRAFT, THE SIXTH SENSE, and VERTIGO open with a backstory.

In CASABLANCA, the backstory is revealed in a flashback, as is the case in many films. In NUTS, attorney Aaron Levinsky (Richard Dreyfuss) must unravel the backstory of his client Claudia Draper (Barbra Streisand) to win the case.

4. THE WILL TO ACT

How do you judge a person? By words? Or by actions? Don't actions weigh more heavily than words for you? As the saying goes, "What you do sounds so loud in my ears, I cannot hear what you say."

Action reveals character, and crisis reveals his true colors, because a person does what he does because of who he is. Problems and obstacles reveal what he's made of. Since actions speak louder than words, your character will generally reveal more through action than through dialogue. Yes, dialogue can tell us a lot, particularly about what is going on inside, but actions tell us more. Dialogue can be action. When Darth Vader tells Luke that he is his father and that he should join him, that's an action.

Running Bear is a Sioux hunting buffalo on the wide prairie. This is interesting action. The buffalo are the opposition. But how can we make this more dramatic? Suppose the white settler's son is in the buffalo's path. The white man is Running Bear's enemy. But now Running Bear must make a decision that will reveal his true character. He decides to save the boy. Now he has an action—to save the boy from the herd.

Okay, let's take this one step further. The boy's father looks through the window and sees his son, and the buffalo; then to his horror, he sees his enemy, Running Bear. He thinks Running Bear is trying to kill his son. He grabs his rifle and races outside. Now we really care about the outcome. This is drama—characters in willful conflict. Note that each character has a different view of the facts. That leads us to our next point.

5. A POINT OF VIEW AND ATTITUDES

Everyone has a belief system, a perception of reality that is influenced by past experience, a point of view that has developed over time. Our current experience is filtered through our past experience. This means that two people may react in totally different ways to the same stimulus. It depends on their perception. Their point of view is expressed in attitudes.

Some time ago, I was in a department store. I found a little two-year-old who was alone and crying. I tried to calm her down so I could find her mother. The problem was that her mother found me, and guess what she thought I was? That's right, Chester the Molester. Her perception was understandable, given the times we live in, but it was not reality. We don't see reality the way it is; we see it through the filter of our past experience.

Your character also has a past. We're going to discuss how to create that past shortly, but for right now realize that your character has a point of view expressed through attitudes. What is your character's point of view about life? What is your character's concept of love? How does he or she view the opposite sex? What is your character's attitude toward growing old? sex? falling rain? grocery shopping? dental hygiene and regular professional care? Is happiness a warm puppy or a warm gun?

Sol Stein recommends that you "give each character a separate set of facts. Don't give them the same view of the story." With different views of things, your characters will also have different attitudes. Your character will act from his or her point of view or belief system, regardless of how that point of view squares with reality. Salieri believes that great music comes from God. Therefore, Mozart must be God's creature on Earth.

A summary example

In STARMAN, an alien creature crash-lands in Wisconsin. He is a being of light who floats over to Jenny's house. Jenny has withdrawn from life because her husband was killed. The alien finds a lock of her husband's hair and clones himself a body. Now he looks just like her husband. He then makes her drive him to Arizona, which is where

his mothership will pick him up. The alien's motivation for this goal is to get home. (This is "E.T. meets IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT.") His point of view of life happens to be that *life is precious.*

Jenny's goal is to escape. Her motivation is to be safe from the alien and also to be safe from her past. And the alien looks just like her past. The writer has taken her inner problem and put it on the outside to make it visual. Jenny's point of view of life or belief is that life is scary: Husbands die (the backstory) and aliens kidnap you (the action story).

At the Pinch, Jenny observes the alien as he brings a dead deer to life. This action emerges from his belief that life is precious. Touched by this action, her goal of escape is displaced by a desire to help Starman. This new goal is motivated by his inspiring action. Her point of view of life changes as well. Life is not so scary.

This story uses the deer as a metaphor. Jenny is the dead deer that Starman brings back to life (the emotional story). Her perception of life changes. And that's the key. When a character's point of view changes, that's character growth.

6. ROOM TO GROW

Your central character also has a point of view of herself. This point of view of self is called self-concept. *I'm a winner, I'm a loser. I'm clumsy, I'm graceful.* All of us act from this point of view of ourselves, and so do your characters. Here's what happens in the well-written story:

Metaphorically speaking, your character is a fish. The Big Event pulls him out of the water. He tries to swim. It's worked in the past, but it doesn't work now. And so he is forced to take new actions, different actions, but things get more and more difficult right up to the Crisis. Mustering all the courage and faith he has, he takes the final action; then he emerges from the climax with a new self-concept—he's a fish no longer.

This moment is the Realization—the character realizes a change has taken place. Usually the Realization follows the Showdown (or climax), but it can take place during the Showdown or just before. It's a key emotional moment for your audience. We discussed the Realization at length in the second chapter, but here's a couple of additional examples.

Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) states his realization in TOOTSIE as follows: "I was a better man as a woman with you than I was as a man. I just have to do it without the dress." He has grown or changed.

In THE WIZARD OF OZ, Dorothy is asked pointblank, "Well, Dorothy, what did you learn?" And then Dorothy tells us all the ways her perceptions and attitudes have changed. Most important, her attitude toward home has changed. She realizes now that "there's no place like home."

How does growth come about? Only through adversity and opposition, and striving for a goal. Only through conflict, making decisions, and taking actions. "True character is revealed," the proverb goes, "when you come face-to-face with adversity." Part of the excitement of reading a script or viewing a movie is identifying with a character that grows and learns in the face of adversity.

In defining your character's growth arc, ask yourself how your character grows or learns. Often, your character will grow from some form of slavery to some form of freedom (TITANIC), but it can be from death to life (STARMAN). A character can learn to love (RAIN MAN) or overcome pride (DRIVING MISS DAISY) or become more principled (AN AMERICAN PRESIDENT). As already stated, all growth can be defined as a changed perception of self, life, others, or something else. Often that change is gradual. Often it comes with breakthrough events.

As a footnote, let me reiterate that in some action/adventures, thrillers, and other stories, the central character may not grow. James Bond doesn't grow; he just accomplishes his mission. However, in most genres, character growth of some sort is desirable, even essential. One reason I enjoyed DIE HARD was that the writer gave action hero John McClane (Bruce Willis) room to grow in his relationship with his wife.

7. BELIEVABILITY

One reason dramatic characters are interesting is that they are generally single-minded and focused. Humans have many things going on in their lives and tend to run off on tangents. Your job as the next great screenwriter is to make your dramatic and comedic characters seem as human as possible. In other words, your job is to make us care about them. Here are some ways to accomplish that.

Give them human emotions

As you know, people watch movies to feel emotion vicariously. Whether it's love, revenge, fear, anticipation, or what-have-you, you can only touch these moviegoers if they are able to relate to how your character feels. This doesn't mean that your character should blubber all over the place. It means that we need to see your character frustrated, hurt, scared, thrilled, in love, etc. Often, we empathize with a character more when she fights what she feels rather than when she expresses it.

RAIN MAN is a remarkable film because one of the main characters is incapable of emotionally connecting with another person. I admire the writers, who dealt with this problem by giving Raymond (Dustin Hoffman) a desire to drive a car. "I'm an excellent driver," he would say. If your eyes became misty, it was at the end, when Charlie (Tom Cruise) lets Raymond drive the car on a circular driveway.

Give them **human traits**

SPIDER-MAN 2 succeeds largely because the focus of the story is more on Peter Parker the human being than on Spider-Man the superhero. Peter has human emotions, traits, values, and dimension. And that's why we love him.

When SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS was being developed, the dwarfs were seven old guys who looked alike and acted the same. Then Walt Disney decided to give each dwarf a human trait and to call him by that trait. What a difference a trait makes.

In creating characters, first focus on the core of your character—her soul. Who is she? What is her strongest trait? We'll call this her dominant trait. Look for a couple of other traits. Then look for a flaw that might serve as a contrast. That flaw, if it exists, will create an inner conflict.

Finally, determine if your character projects a façade. That fake persona is an element of the character and can be thought of as a trait. In THE PINK PANTHER series, we all love Inspector Clouseau's presumed competence. Children who watch THE POLAR EXPRESS gradually learn that the train conductor is not nearly as mean as he first seems. In AS GOOD AS IT GETS, Melvin Udall's articulate attacks and obsessive-compulsive behaviors are part of the scary façade he uses to fend off a scary world. Once he learns to deal with his fear, his hidden compassion begins to emerge and his obsessive compulsions become less intense. That is what is at the core of his growth arc.

In all, identify three to five specific traits for each of your characters, including a possible flaw, façade, or imperfection.

You don't have to reveal a character's traits all at once. Ideally, each scene reveals something new about your central character. Each contact with a new character sheds new light until the central character is fully illuminated. You will want to introduce your central character in normal circumstances before the Catalyst upsets that balance so that we have a feel for who this person is. Occasionally, this is done by other characters talking about the central character. For example, in CASABLANCA, everyone talks about Rick before we meet him.

It is also important to include characteristics, problems, and imperfections that are familiar to all humans. He's a grouch. She can't deal with people until she's had her morning coffee. Inconsequential human imperfections will make your dramatic or comedic character more believable and more human. An opposition character's imperfections might be more irritating than endearing.

Some writers determine their characters' astrological signs for them. You could give your character one of many psychological and personality tests. Is your character primarily visual, auditory, or kinesthetic? Since you want difficult people in your story, you might avail yourself of a copy of *Coping with Difficult People*. The book describes certain difficult personality types.

Give them human values

Now let's take a moment to consider the Corleone family. It's doubtful that you'd invite these guys over for dinner. And yet, in the GODFATHER movies, you actually rooted for them. Why? Well, for one thing, these guys are loyal. They have a code of honor, a sense of justice. They have families and family values just like you and me. We like people with positive values.

If *your* central character happens to be a *bad guy*, make sure he's morally superior to the others in the story. If your character breaks the law, make him less corrupt than the law. The Corleones had a code of honor—they didn't sell drugs. Sure, extortion, protection rackets, murder, prostitution, gambling, but hey—they didn't sell drugs.

Other ways to create a little sympathy for your character is to give her a talent for what she does, and/or an endearing personal style in how she does it. Give her a moment alone to reveal her goodness. In such a moment, Rocky moves a wino out of the street and talks to a puppy.

Confront your character with an injustice, or place him in a difficult situation or in jeopardy. Be careful not to make him too much of a victim. In GODFATHER II, the Corleones are immigrants in an unfair situation. We sympathize. They take action. We may not agree with their choices, but we admire their fortitude.

Give them human dimension

Your characters, and particularly your central character, should have dimension. Avoid cardboard characters and stereotypes. Occasionally a stereotype works, particularly in a comedy or action script, but your main characters will play better if they have depth. No one is totally evil or perfectly good. The bad guy loves his cat, while the good guy kicks his dog once in a while.

Writers have a tendency to make their favorite characters flat, lifeless, and passive. We're afraid to bloody their face or to give them flaws. Don't fall into that trap. By and large, the most-loved characters in film have depth and dimension. Yours should, too. Even sitcom characters tend to have some dimension to them. They may not be terribly deep, but you'd be hard-pressed to name a favorite TV character who is not flawed.

Heroes and villains

Depending on the nature of your story, your character lies somewhere between real life and a cartoon. Some heroes are swashbucklers with hardly a flaw. And some villains are bad all the way through. Often, that works for special-effects movies. (I say that without any intent to denigrate such movies. Each movie should do what it does best.)

Other films go deeper. In such stories, the hero is often an ordinary man or woman who becomes a hero on his or her way to something entirely different. An ordinary person becomes an extraordinary person or an extraordinary person comes to realize who he really is or finally finds his way.

Likewise, the opposition character does not need to be a classic villain. Who is the villain in AS GOOD AS IT GETS or GOOD WILL HUNTING or KRAMER VS. KRAMER? Yes, there is plenty of opposition, but no villain among the main characters, just people.

Generally, the best villains or opposition characters believe they are doing the right thing. In other words, they wouldn't characterize themselves as a villain. Even the fiancé in TITANIC (who is rather one-dimensional) would be able to justify his actions, but he cannot respect Rose's point of view. The opposition character often has difficulty recognizing another person's view of reality or her needs.

8. DETAILS

Details are the little things that mean a lot. Think of them as characterization tools or aspects of character. Idiosyncrasies, habits, quirks, imperfections (as discussed) and other characterizations will add a lot to a character. They help make the character a distinct individual. Who would Columbo be without his crumpled overcoat? Who would Melvin Udall be (in AS GOOD AS IT GETS) without his obsessive compulsions? Even when he's under pressure to get a coat so he can have dinner with Carol (Helen Hunt), he cannot bring himself to step on a line.

Personal expressions can make a difference. The Emperor in AMADEUS concludes his pronouncements with, "Well, there it is," and Raymond the Rain Man says, "I'm an excellent driver." Jane Craig (Holly Hunter) just cries periodically in BROADCAST NEWS, and Roger Rabbit has an endearing way of stuttering when he says, "Please."

In WHEN HARRY MET SALLY, Sally orders her food in a certain way, and she drops letters into the mailbox one at a time.

Napoleon Dynamite likes to draw. He considers himself an artist, but his drawings are terrible.

In CONTACT, Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster) sits the same way both as an adult and a child. These are tiny characterizations that add to the believability and definition of a character. How does your character handle the little things?

If it seems right for your character, give him a specialized knowledge or skill, such as David Lightman's computer-hacking skill in WAR GAMES, and Luke's knowledge of The Force in Episodes V and VI of STAR WARS.

In THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR, Joseph Turner (Robert Redford) is a full-time reader for the CIA. It's easy to believe in his intelligence and knowledge when he's forced to the streets.

In O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU? Everett (George Clooney) is obsessed with his hair. He wears a hair net at night, says, "My hair" when he wakes up in the morning, and uses Dapper Dan pomade in the daylight hours. You can see how original, specific details can make a character memorable.

A prop becomes a character in THE LADYKILLERS. A portrait of Irma's husband always seems to have a different facial expression each time Irma looks at it. And she takes guidance from it.

When a prop takes on special meaning, it becomes especially effective. That is true for a beautiful detail in the movie A BEAUTIFUL MIND. Alicia gives John Nash her handkerchief for good luck. We see that prop on two other key occasions in the film, the latter on the occasion when he declares his love to her at the Nobel Prize ceremony.

Props have been used with good effect. Melvin's plastic baggies in AS GOOD AS IT GETS. Captain Queeg's ball bearings. Kojak's lollipop. Captain Hook's hook. James Bond's gadgets. The weapons in MEN IN BLACK. Whenever Indiana Jones gets into trouble, he has his whip. He uses the whip to get himself out of trouble. (The whip, of course, does not save him. He uses the whip to save himself. That's an important distinction.)

It follows that coincidences should generally work against your central character. Make it increasingly difficult for her to achieve her goal. Don't bail her out at the end (*deus ex machina*). She should be the most active character in the final act.

9. A WRITER WHO CARES

Every character hopes for a writer who cares. Your central character must have a life and a voice of his own. He can only get that from a writer who cares. You show that you care by researching.

The main purpose of research is to come to really know your characters. Once you know who they are, you can observe them emerging on the page as real. One of the most beautiful experiences you can have is when your characters take over your story and tell you what they want to do.

Research is observing people, taking notes in your little writer's notebook when things occur to you. Research is searching your mind, your own experience, people you've known who can serve as character prototypes, places you've seen, and so forth.

Research is investigating, exploring, and creating your character's background. For instance, your character has an educational background; ethnic, cultural, and religious roots; a professional (or work) history; past and present social connections; and a family of some kind. Your character also has a particular way of speaking.

What kind of character would Forrest Gump be if little thought were put to his background, psychology, traits, imperfections, idiosyncrasies, and moral character?

Research means trips to the library for information, or to a place of business to understand your character's occupation. Research is interviewing someone of a particular ethnic group, or even visiting a neighborhood. Don't assume you can get by because you've seen other movies that have dealt with the same subject matter.

It's easy to get interviews. Recently, I interviewed a petroleum geologist. I told him I'd buy him lunch if he'd let me ask him some questions. He was thrilled for several reasons. One, he could tell the guys at work, "Hey, I can't go to lunch with you tomorrow. I got a writer interviewing me for an upcoming movie." Two, he was getting a free lunch. Three, he's proud of the job he does. The benefit to me was that I learned many unexpected things that I could use in my screenplay to lend authenticity and authority to it.

A struggling student on the East Coast tells me that she didn't really understand her story until she interviewed a blackjack dealer in Las Vegas. Another from the Heartland benefited immensely from a quick jaunt to the library to investigate fencing and other kinds of sword-fighting. A client informed me that most private investigators are employed in family and marital disputes, and by insurance companies. They use clipping services. They sit on the passenger side of the automobile because there's more space. He also learned that it's legal to go through someone's garbage.

Research is writing a character biography or completing a detailed character profile. Of course, much of this information will never make it into your script, but since your character will be alive to you, he or she will appear more fully drawn on the page.

Although your character's physical description is very important to you, it will be of little importance to the script. All actors want to see themselves in the part, so only include physical details that are essential to the story. When you describe a character in your script, it will be with a few lines or words that really give us the essence of the character. Something the actors can act.

But you, the writer, the creator, need to see this person in detail, because a person's physiology affects his psychology. What kinds of emotions does your character have? What is her disposition? How does he handle relationships?

Identify complexes, phobias, pet peeves, fears, secrets, attitudes, beliefs, addictions, prejudices, inhibitions, frustrations, habits, superstitions, and moral stands. Is your character extroverted or introverted? aggressive or passive? intuitive or analytical? How does he solve problems? How does she deal with stress? In what way is he screwed up? And so on. Have fun with this!

Research is reflecting, and asking questions.

- What are my character's values?
- What does my character do when she is all alone?
- What's the most traumatic thing that ever happened to my character?
- What is his biggest secret?
- What is her most poignant moment?
- What are his hobbies?
- What special abilities does she have?
- What is his deepest fear?
- What kind of underwear does she wear?
- Which end of the toothpaste tube does he squeeze?
- What kind of car does she drive?
- What is the worst thing that could happen to my character? (Maybe this will be the crisis.)
- What is the best thing that could happen?
- What is my character doing tonight?

Research is creating unique aspects to your character that make her stand apart from all other movie characters. Part of this may consist in giving your character a contradiction or traits that exist in opposition, such as the beautiful woman who's as clumsy as an ox, or brave Indiana Jones' fear of snakes. You may wish to identify one or more loveable imperfections as well.

As this research progresses, certain things will stand out. After all, in the actual script, you will only be able to emphasize certain aspects of your character, so you will want to select those that say the most about your character and best relate to your story. The work you've done will reveal itself in the unique and multi-faceted character that you have created from the dust.

When do you do this research? Some writers like to do it early in the process; others prefer later in the writing so that the characters can be created to fit the demands of the script. Whenever you choose to do it, it's important to be thorough. A thumbnail sketch of the main characters is seldom sufficient.

10. A STRONG SUPPORTING CAST

A screenplay is a symphony and a symphony requires orchestration. Your character is just a lonely solo without other characters. In the well-written story, relationships are emphasized. Some relationships work because of opposite personalities. The ODD COUPLE is an excellent example. Some relationships work because each can fill the other's need and they transform each other. Others work because the characters are rivals. Still others work because of similar interests or goals.

In your cast of characters, you want one central character, at least one opposition character, and a confidant (or sidekick) your central character can talk to. This is one way to reveal your central character's thoughts, feelings, and intentions. The confidant sometimes performs the additional function of lending contrast to your central character. In dramas, the confidant sometimes creates necessary comic relief, although this function (if needed) can be performed by another character. Roy O'Bannon (Owen Wilson) is a superb sidekick and comic-relief character in both SHANGHAI NOON and SHANGHAI KNIGHTS; he also serves as a clear contrast or foil to Chon Wang (JACKIE CHAN). In REVENGE OF THE SITH (STAR WARS Episode III), R2D2 performs important duties while also serving as a comic-relief character.

You will probably want a love interest, who may function in another role as well, the way Eric Matthews (Benjamin Bratt) is both love interest to Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock) and leader of the police investigation in MISS CONGENIALITY.

Occasionally, you see a thematic character, someone who carries the theme or message of the story, such as Uncle Ben in SPIDER-MAN 2. We'll discuss this in more detail in the upcoming chapter on "Theme."

Sometimes a shapeshifter adds a twist to the story. For example, the central character's friend betrays her. In THE MATRIX, Cypher betrays his fellow crewmembers to Agent

Smith. In THE VERDICT, one of attorney Frank Galvin's aids works for the opposition. In MINORITY REPORT, John Anderton's mentor/boss turns out to be the bad guy. You have a similar shapeshifter in L.A. CONFIDENTIAL when Captain Smith shoots one of his own police officers.

You want characters with contrasts, and you can contrast characters on many levels—from attitudes to methods to social status. As you add characters, remember that each character in your story must perform a specific function in moving the story forward.

Note: This is a good time to do Step 4 in the workbook (Book II). You will find plenty of character-building tools there. You will also find Step 7 to be helpful.

Theme

Did you know there is something inside you that is motivating you to write? There is something that you want to say. This thing inside you is not a little alien creature; it is the *movie message*, sometimes called the *premise*, sometimes called the *theme*.

Regardless of what it is called, think of it as the *moral* of your story. This moral is not a sermon and it is not preached. Often, you don't know what this moral or message is when you start scripting your story. Not to worry—you'll know before you're through. Just keep writing. CAUTION: There is a danger in focusing on the movie message. You run the risk of writing a preachy script.

The resolution of your story will verify the acceptability of your message. This message or theme could be expressed as a universal statement that could apply to anyone. It's something you've been wanting to say. For this reason, it can be thought of as the *point of view* of your story.

WITNESS has a point of view. *Love cannot bridge the gap of two different worlds.* In THE AFRICAN QUEEN, the opposite is true. *Love can bridge the gap of two different worlds.* As you can see, the movie message isn't necessarily true in real life, just true in your story. And it should never be communicated in a heavy-handed way.

Speaking of love, A BEAUTIFUL MIND proves that *love can overcome mental illness.* Or in the words of John Nash, as he addresses his wife at the Nobel Prize ceremony: "It is only in the mysterious equations of love that any logical reasoning can be found. I am only here because of you."

The message of CHINATOWN is this: *You can get away with murder if you have enough money.*

After Chuck Noland (Tom Hanks) is cast away on a deserted island and returns home (in CAST AWAY), he finds that he has lost the love of his life. He tells his friend that at one time on that island he wanted to kill himself. When that failed, he realized that he had to stay alive. And then the tide came in and gave him a sail. Then he explains to his friend that now that he has lost Kelly (his love), he knows what he has to do. He has to stay alive because *who knows what the tide could bring.* And that's the message.

WHEN HARRY MET SALLY suggests that *men and women cannot be "just friends."*

In MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING, the controlling idea is *My family may be obnoxious, but they're my family and they'll always be there for me.*

Times are a-changin', and you have to change with them if you want to survive. This thematic statement, or movie message, suggests characters who are fighting time (the conflict) and who will not succeed. Can you name the movie? BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID.

In THE SPITFIRE GRILL, Percy is an apparent Christ figure who gives her life in the end. The theme is *Christ redeems and heals.* Notice how most of the characters have biblical names. And the name of the town is Gilead from the bible passage that asks, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" The Balm of Gilead is what heals, and that is what Percy becomes—a healing balm.

SEABISCUIT's theme also sums up the story: *Everyone thinks we found this broken-down horse and fixed him, but we didn't . . . he fixed us.*

John Truby suggests that theme is the writer's view of how people should act in the world. For example, in GHOST and ROMEO AND JULIET, *great love defies even death.* And in CASABLANCA, *self-sacrifice for the right cause gives life meaning.*

Theme is what your movie is about. According to Patrick Sheane Duncan, ". . . a movie is generally about one thing, one theme or idea, and every scene and every character is formed from that fountainhead." (*Screenwriter Quarterly*, Fall 1996)

In MR. HOLLAND'S OPUS, *life is what happens when you are making other plans.* Each scene and the conclusion in particular points to that idea. In NICK OF TIME, it is simply *how do I save my daughter?* That question is the controlling idea. And *life goes on* in MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING.

Sixth Sense

M. Night Shyamalan called THE SIXTH SENSE a "writer's final cut." That may be why I like it so much. It's a writer's movie about characters that *need* to communicate. Once they learn that, they are at peace.

Malcolm (Bruce Willis) wants to help Cole because Cole reminds him of another child that he was unable to help. So he seeks redemption. He has a second, lesser goal which is to save his marriage. His unconscious need is to communicate with his wife and accept his separation from her (his death).

Cole wants the ghosts to go away. His driving desire is to stop being scared. His need is to communicate with his mother. But he won't, because he is afraid she'll think he's a freak. So he has nowhere to go emotionally until Malcolm comes to him.

Things get scarier and scarier until Malcolm has a breakthrough and tells Cole that maybe the ghosts want something. Essentially, he tells Cole to try to communicate with them.

Along comes a very scary Kyra. Cole finds the courage to say, "Do you want to tell me something?" In other words, he opens the lines of communication. Once he does, everything goes well for him. The final two sequences serve well the theme of *Communication overcomes fear.*

In the first of these sequences, Cole finally tells his mother his secret, risking the relationship. Will she think he's a freak? It's an emotional, cleansing scene that is very touching. It is successful not just because it is a great scene, but because of what preceded it in terms of character development and story.

In the final sequence, Malcolm communicates with his sleeping wife. It is then that he realizes he is dead, but now he is able to accept it. The characters are healed, at peace.

Thematic material and thematic characters

A few stories may lack a theme. Some others deal with *thematic material.* For example, WITNESS explores themes of violence and non-violence. BROADCAST NEWS discusses substance versus style. BABE presents issues of self-worth, class structure, and personal identity. UNFORGIVEN compares false reputation (Bob and the kid) with true reputation (Will and Bill).

In a few stories, it may be effective to create a thematic or symbolic character: someone whose purpose is to carry a theme, a value, or even the story message. This character is seldom the central character. For example, the mathematician in JURASSIC PARK and Libby Holden (Kathy Bates) in PRIMARY COLORS are both thematic characters. They also serve as moral consciences. The same is true of Uncle Ben in SPIDER-MAN 2, who says, "With great power comes great responsibility."

Dialogue, subtext, and exposition

WHAT DIALOGUE IS

Dialogue is not real-life speech; it only sounds like it. It is more focused, less rambling than real-life speech. Yes, it contains fragments and short bits, but anything extraneous is pulled out, including the *ans* and *uhs*. You might say that dialogue is *edited* speech. It is organized and has direction, but it retains the style of real-life speech. It doesn't have to be realistic, just believable.

Dialogue should be lean. Avoid long speeches. Try to keep to one or two lines. Naturally, there are exceptions. However, remember that in a movie, people have to understand what's being said the first time through. In a novel, a passage can be reread, but a movie keeps "reeling" along. Avoid monologues. Dialogue should be conversational. Allow characters to interrupt each other on occasion. Let them lie to each other. Avoid having your character say the other person's name he is talking to.

Don't think too hard when writing dialogue. In fact, don't think at all. Write from the heart. You can always return to it later, read it out loud to hear how it sounds, and make adjustments. Take a look at your words and ask yourself: Is there a better, leaner way to say this? Am I writing more but the audience enjoying it less? I'm not saying you can't write long speeches; I'm only saying they must be justifiable.

Be patient in writing dialogue. Sometimes it takes a while for your dialogue to break through. With many professional writers, dialogue is often the last thing written, so don't panic if your dialogue isn't working at first. The key here is to know your characters well enough that they speak with a voice of their own. That voice consists of eight elements.

1. The text, or words
2. The subtext, or the meaning of the words
3. Grammar and syntax
4. Vocabulary
5. Accent and/or regional or foreign influences
6. Slang
7. Professional jargon
8. Speaking style, including rhythm and sentence length

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY, BUT HOW YOU SAY IT

Mama was right—the ***subtext*** (how you say it) has more impact that the text. Of the eight elements of dialogue, subtext is the one that gives writers the most fits, and yet it is a key principle.

What is subtext? Subtext is what's under the text. It's between the lines, the emotional content of the words, what's really meant. Dialogue is like an iceberg. The text is the visible part. The subtext is below. Audiences seldom want to see the whole block of ice. Likewise, your characters should seldom say exactly what they feel. When an actor wants to know her motivation in a scene, she wants to understand the emotions going on within the character. She wants to know the subtext.

Usually, the dialogue's context in the story suggests the subtext. For example, in the "fireworks" scene of TO CATCH A THIEF, Frances Stevens (Grace Kelly) seduces John Robie (Cary Grant), a reformed jewel thief. That's the context. Does she talk about sex? Does she say, "Come on, John, let's go for a roll in the hay?" Of course not. This moment requires finesse. She talks about her jewelry, and wouldn't he do anything to steal such beautiful works of art? "Hold them," she says, "the one thing you can't resist." Clearly, she's not talking about jewelry here. The subtext is, "I'm the jewelry; you're the thief—take me." She says one thing by saying something else. The subtext is always obvious to the audience.

In a previous section, we discussed goals and needs—your character not only has an outside goal but some inner need. The goal is the *text* of the story and the need may be thought of as the ***subtext*** of the story, or emotional through-line. It follows, therefore, that the subtext of the dialogue in a scene will often derive from the character's underlying need or drive in the scene. Here's an example:

Late in SPIDER-MAN 2, Spider-man tries to convince Otto Ottavias to give up his dream. Here's the text: "Sometimes we have to give up the thing we want the most—even our dreams." The subtext: "I am going to have to give up the thing I want the most to be Spider-man, my dream of being with Mary Jane."

In MOONLIGHTING, one detective is romantically interested in the other. The two, David and Maddy, are hired by a woman to find her runaway husband. During their investigation, David and Maddy argue over the husband's motives for running away. What are they really talking about? Their own relationship. After all, isn't Maddy running away emotionally from David? It's more fun (and believable) to observe them spar over the case while they are investigating it than it is to listen to them talk about their personal problems directly in a restaurant.

Subtext has to do with the true intention of the character. THE PRINCESS BRIDE is the story of a grandfather who wants to convert his young grandson to a kissing book. A kissing book is one where the boy and the girl actually kiss in the end—yuk! The grandson is sick in bed and is forced to listen to his grandfather read him this kissing book. The grandfather begins reading something like this:

"Once upon a time, there was a boy and a girl. And the girl used to torture the boy by asking him to do things for her, and every time the girl asked the boy to do something for her, he would say, 'As you wish.' But what he was really saying when he said *as you wish* was *I love you.*"

I can't think of a better explanation of the relationship between the spoken word and the subtext than this grandfather's explanation.

At the end of this movie, the grandson is converted to this kissing book—he likes it—and as the grandfather leaves, the boy asks him if he could . . . well, maybe . . . come by tomorrow and read it again. And the grandfather says, "As you wish." Wouldn't you agree that this indirect statement, loaded with subtext, is much more powerful than the more direct *I love you*? And it's a lot more fun as well.

Which works better? "I'm very fond of you, Ilsa." Or: "Here's looking at you, kid."

Here's a dramatic situation: A cop confronts a robber, who holds his gun to an innocent woman's head. Which line works better? "If you shoot her, I'll be real glad, because I'm gonna enjoy killing you." Or: "Go ahead, make my day." In this case, less is more.

In DOUBLE INDEMNITY, Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), the insurance salesman, uses an automobile metaphor to express his sexual interest in Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck). She replies, "There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Fifty-five miles per hour." He asks how fast he was going and she tells him, "About ninety." Then he says, "Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket." She says, "Suppose I let you off with a warning." The subtext is steaming off the words. Of course, she's lying. She's interested even though she says she isn't; that's the subtext. When the text is a lie, the truth (the subtext) will be/should be understood by the audience.

How do you show that someone's parents don't understand their teenaged daughter? One client handled this with the following simple exchange.

GIRL FRIEND
Did your parents like your poem?

SUZANNE
They don't understand poetry.
They think it's dumb.

When writing dialogue, keep in mind the character's attitudes, point of view, feelings, thoughts, and underlying need or drive. Try to say one thing by saying something else. This does not mean that every line of dialogue must have a subtext. However, most beginning scripts have too little subtext.

WRITING BETTER DIALOGUE

Here's a technique that will improve your dialogue. Read your dialogue out loud or have members of your writers' group read it to you. With the spoken word, it's easier to detect errors. You will hear what works and what doesn't. Is the dialogue too *on the nose*, too direct? Does it have an implied meaning or subtext?

Also be aware of the rhythm. Some characters are terse and staccato; some are lyrical and elegant. Each character has a style of speech. (If a character speaks with a dialect or accent, just give us a flavor of it.) Avoid VOICE OVER narration. Avoid chitchat. *Hi, how are you? Fine, and how about you?* Also, avoid introductions. *Hi, this is Clark. Clark, this is Lois.* In the well-written story, when introductions are made, there's some clear and overriding dramatic purpose. It's not just cheap exposition.

Dialogue should also move the story forward, just as scenes do, and reveal something about the character's attitudes, perceptions, traits, and values. Every dialogue scene should involve some conflict, even if it is just passive resistance. Back and forth, like a contest or competition.

The diner scene from FIVE EASY PIECES illustrates the essence of dramatic writing. Robert Dupea (Jack Nicholson) stops at a diner. He wants toast, he orders toast, but the waitress won't give him toast because it's not on the menu and she doesn't "make the rules." He tries several approaches. She fends him off every time, each time the tension building, the conflict escalating. Finally he orders a chicken salad sandwich, toasted. And he tells her to hold the butter, lettuce, and mayonnaise, and to hold the chicken between her knees. She kicks him out, so he clears everything off the table and

onto the floor. The exchange of verbal blows creates the rising tension of this classic scene. The theme underneath the dialogue has to do with "the rules."

EXCITING EXPOSITION

Another purpose of dialogue is to communicate the necessary facts and background information of the story. These facts are called *exposition*. Your job is to make the exposition exciting.

Most of the exposition comes out in the beginning of the story. For example, the audience needs to understand how Indiana Jones' mission will benefit the world. Don't give the audience any more information than is necessary to understand the story. Be careful not to reveal too much too soon. Let your characters keep their secrets as long as they can. Often, saving up exposition and using it in crucial moments will make it more exciting, and even transform it into a turning point. At the same time, don't hold back so much exposition that the audience is confused rather than intrigued.

Some exposition can be creatively planted in love scenes, action scenes, or comedy scenes, because at those moments you already have the audience's attention. I love the sword fight scene in THE PRINCESS BRIDE for that very reason. You learn a lot about both characters in the dialogue exchange that accompanies the thrusts and parries of their swords.

Be careful not to get *too* exciting. In the second INDIANA JONES movie, the main exposition is presented through dialogue at a bizarre dinner. The food is so disgusting that the audience's attention is diverted from the characters' dialogue.

In the first INDIANA JONES movie, the exposition is handled more effectively. The opening sequence is so exciting that we are riveted to the screen for the succeeding sequence, where most of the necessary information about the Lost Ark of the Covenant is communicated through dialogue.

Exposition should come forth naturally and not be tacked onto a scene. Seldom should you allow one character to tell the other something he already knows. Her: "We've been married ten years now, honey." Him: "Yes, I recall. We were married under the great oak in the backyard, the one that your mother cut down a year later." Her: "I remember it well." It's forced and contrived. Please don't do that.

Another way to make exposition exciting is to have characters argue over it. Some exposition can be handled without dialogue. In the opening scene of UNBREAKABLE, David Dunn (Bruce Willis) sits on the train looking rather morose. A pretty woman

sits next to him and he removes his wedding ring. That's exposition. It tells us he's unhappily married.

In the opening sequence of WAR GAMES, we are shown how the U.S. nuclear-missile firing system works. This information not only underscores the danger and prepares us for a thrilling ending, but also makes the story more believable.

Flashbacks

About 95% of the flashbacks in unsold scripts don't work. Usually, the flashback is used as a crutch, a cheap way to introduce exposition. This has given rise to the industry bias against them in spec scripts. Seldom does it move the story forward. And that's the key—use a flashback only if it moves the story forward.

If you watch THE FUGITIVE, you'll see dozens of flashbacks, but each pushes the story forward or wants you to know what's going to happen next. Don't give exposition in a flashback unless it also motivates the story, as in JULIA, MEMENTO, and CASABLANCA. Do not take us to the past until we care about what's happening in the future. Otherwise, a flashback becomes an interruption.

Avoid long flashbacks and dream sequences. They are high-risk. If you must have a flashback, use a transitional device: an object, place, song, visual image, color, phrase, or incident. Quick flashes are the safest, such as the momentary glimpses of the backstory we see in ORDINARY PEOPLE.

My advice on flashbacks is to find a more creative way to communicate exposition. To illustrate, put yourself in the place of the writer of STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN. You have a problem: Khan, the opposition character, is Kirk's superior physically and mentally. How can you make it believable that Kirk can defeat Khan?

One solution is to *flash back* to the days when Kirk was a cadet. He takes a field test called the Kobiashi Maru, which presents a no-win scenario. Kirk, however, beats the no-win scenario by reprogramming the test computer so that he can win.

You, however, reject this idea of a flashback for one that is more creative. You decide to open the story with a starfleet captain on a ship that is in trouble. Soon we learn that this captain is really a cadet and that she is taking a test called the Kobiashi Maru. She is bothered by her performance. Kirk tells her not to worry, that there is no correct solution—it's a test of character. So she asks Kirk how *he* handled it. He won't tell her.

You have made it a mystery that is touched on throughout the story—how *did* Kirk handle the Kobiashi Maru? The audience wonders. You, the next great screenwriter, have created suspense.

CUT TO: Late in the story. It appears as though Kirk and his friends are trapped in an underground cavern with no way out, and with no apparent way to contact Spock, who is somewhere out in the universe. At that moment, the female cadet once again asks Kirk how he handled the Kobiashi Maru. Bones tells her that Kirk reprogrammed the computer. "You cheated," someone says.

Then Kirk surprises everyone by pulling out his communicator and contacting Spock: "You can beam us up now," he says. Ah-ha, so Kirk had it all pre-arranged, but to do it, he broke Federation rules. He has cheated Khan and has surprised everyone else. That's when Kirk explains: "I don't believe in the no-win scenario. I don't like to lose." Not only have you explained how Kirk could defeat a superior being, you have also given us the *key* to Kirk's character. And this plays better than a flashback.

Note: There are many sample scenes containing dialogue in Book IV.

How to make a scene

Screenplays are composed of acts, acts break down into sequences, sequences into scenes, and scenes into beats. A scene is a dramatic unit consisting of the camera placement (INTERIOR or EXTERIOR), a location, and time. When one of these three elements changes, the scene changes as well. In this discussion, I am using the term *scene* loosely. The points that follow could apply to any dramatic unit consisting of one or more scenes.

KEYS TO GREAT SCENES

- Each scene should move the story forward in terms of both plot and character. In other words, the scene you are now writing should be motivated by a previous scene, and it should motivate a scene coming up. One creates anticipation for another in a cause-and-effect relationship.

  If the central character gets more involved in some way, that means your scene is probably moving the story forward. All scenes should direct us to the Showdown at the end, which is the biggest scene, or sequence of scenes, in the movie. Ask yourself: What is the payoff for this scene? Why do I need this scene? What is my purpose for

this scene? Does the scene reveal something new about a character and/or the story? At the end of this scene, does the audience want to know what happens next?

- Never tell what you can show. Be as visual as possible. Rather than two ladies at tea commenting on the fact that Darla skydives for relaxation, *show* us Darla actually jumping from a plane, or show her coming home with a parachute and trying to stuff it into the closet.

  Do you recall the barn-raising scene in WITNESS? When the workers pause for lunch, the eyes of the elders are on Rachel Lapp (Kelly McGillis), who is expected to marry an Amish man, but who likes John Book (Harrison Ford). Without a word of dialogue, she makes her choice by pouring water for John Book first.

  One scene in SEABISCUIT presents a key episode in the life of Charles Howard, the central character. We first see his young son reading *Flash Gordon*. Charles tells him to go fishing. That's about the only dialogue in the entire scene.

  Next, his son sees his father's car. He gets his fishing equipment. He starts the car, and notices the birds and trees. He drives erratically; he's too young to be driving. We see another car approaching going the opposite direction. We sense there could be a collision.

  Back at the house, the phone rings. Charles picks up the phone. We cut to the car; there's been an accident. Charles drives. Charles runs. Charles holds his dead son MOS (without any sound).

  We cut to the graveside, then back to the house where Charles plays with his son's Flash Gordon puzzle. He cries. He locks the garage.

  In MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING, Julianne (nicknamed Jules) and Michael (her best friend) have a moment together. The setting is visual: A boat on the Chicago River and not a couch in an apartment. They both want to tell each other how they feel about each other, but they fight it (which makes the audience empathize with their feelings more strongly than if both characters just blurted out what they were thinking).

  Jules wants to tell Michael that she loves him. As they both approach the moment where they might say what they feel, they approach a bridge. The dialogue continues as follows:

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                MICHAEL
Kimmy says, when you love someone,
you say it. You say it out loud.
Right now. Or the moment ...
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He pauses. Jules wants to say. They are under the bridge, silent for a long moment, and then past the bridge. She's misty-eyed.

JULIANNE
... passes you by.

That visual cue of passing under the bridge tells us that the moment has passed for her to say that she loves him. The visual cue brings the message home and makes for a stronger moment.

- **Avoid talking heads.** John and Mary argue over breakfast. One head talks, then the other. Make this more interesting by beginning the argument at breakfast, continuing it while in the car racing to the club, and concluding it during a racquetball match. Each statement a character makes is punctuated by the whack of the racket or the whop of the ball slamming against the wall. Now the action complements the dialogue, plus you give yourself the opportunity to characterize your characters by how they play racquetball, how they drive, what they drive, etc.

- **Every dramatic unit has a beginning, a middle, and an end.**

- **Start the scene as close to the end of the scene as possible.** In other words, once your scene is fleshed out, evaluate it and lop off anything at the beginning that is unnecessary. (In fact, cut the fat anywhere you can.)

  Imagine a cowboy riding up to a log house in the middle of the prairie. No one for miles around. He quietly dismounts, grabs his rifle, and gingerly approaches the cabin. He peeks through the window. There she is. Young, beautiful, and alone. Inside the cabin, the woman turns. The door is kicked in. The cowboy steps inside and points his rifle right at the woman. He wants the money and he wants her. She reaches behind for a knife and throws it at the cowboy.

  Does this scene remind you of the opening scene of ROMANCING THE STONE? It is, except that the final version of the scene begins at the moment the door is kicked in. Everything preceding that moment was cut. The writer wisely started the scene as close to the end of the scene as possible.

  In terms of scene length, challenge any scene that runs more than two pages. Many great scenes are long, and some scenes should be long. Nevertheless, if you challenge your long scenes, you may find ways to improve them and shorten them. This will strengthen the pace of the story. You may even find scenes that should be a little longer, and that's okay, too.

- Pace your scenes. Provide peaks and valleys of emotion and tension, with the peaks ascending toward a climatic conclusion. Follow action scenes with dialogue scenes. Contrast heavy scenes with light scenes. Make sure the pace quickens as you close in on the Crisis and Showdown. In HOME ALONE, we have the reflective scene in the church just before the madcap slapstick sequence at the house.

  Pacing does not need to focus on action and events, such as in LETHAL WEAPON; it can focus on details as in STEEL MAGNOLIAS. LETHAL WEAPON is plot-driven and must move fast, while STEEL MAGNOLIAS is character-driven and more leisurely paced; you can stop and describe the roses.

- Scenes should culminate in something dramatic. This could be a decision or an imminent decision. It could be a reversal, a cliffhanger, or a revelation—some event that makes us want to see what's going to happen next. Keep in mind that twists and turns in the plot are essential. You cannot allow your story to progress the way your audience expects it to. Scenes should end with a punch, with some kind of tension that leads us to another scene. For example, in TITANIC, Rose's mother orders her to never see Jack again. Throughout the scene, Rose's mother tightens Rose's corset. Note how that adds visually to the tension of the scene. The pressure is tightening around Rose.

  In GOOD WILL HUNTING, Will (Matt Damon) confronts a college kid who is hitting on a coed (Minnie Driver). After the long scene, Will flashes the coed's phone number at the college kid, showing he has won. It punctuates the scene. It brings the scene to a conclusion, but it also creates anticipation that more is to come.

  In dialogue scenes, generally the last line should be the strongest line. In the very last scene of SOME LIKE IT HOT, Jerry (Jack Lemmon), posing as Daphne, must convince Osgood Fielding III (Joe E. Brown) that she (Daphne) can't marry Osgood. The wonderful conflict is created by Osgood's subtle resistance to Jerry's attempts to achieve his goal of getting out of the wedding.

  First, he tells Osgood that he can't get married in his mother's dress because they aren't built the same way. "We can have it altered." Then Jerry (still posing as Daphne) confesses that he is not a natural blonde. "Doesn't matter." Then Jerry admits that he smokes all the time. "I don't care." Jerry tries another angle; he tells Osgood he's been living with a saxophone player. "I forgive you." With feigned remorse Jerry announces that he can never have children. "We'll adopt some." Finally, Jerry removes his wig, speaks in his male voice, and admits that he is a man. The response? "Well, nobody's perfect." And that's the *punch*line that ends the movie.

- Strive to create effective transitions between scenes. I'm not referring to tricky cuts and arty dissolves—leave editing directions to the editor. Find ways to fit the scenes together. For example, one scene ends with a roulette wheel spinning. The next scene begins with a car wheel digging into the mud.

  Early in 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY, a prehistoric man throws his tool into the air. It's a bone that becomes a spaceship, a tool of modern man.

  Here's an effective transition from Bruce Joel Rubin's JACOB'S LADDER. In it, Rubin uses sound and images to move us from Vietnam to New York.

  As he spins around, one of his attackers jams all eight inches of his bayonet blade into Jacob's stomach. Jacob screams. It is a loud and piercing wail.

  From the sound of the scream, there is a sudden rush through a long, dark tunnel. There is a sense of enormous speed accelerating toward a brilliant light.

  The rush suggests a passage between life and death, but as the light bursts upon us we realize that we are passing through a subway far below the city of New York.

  This would be followed by INT. NEW YORK SUBWAY, and the scene would continue.

  This kind of transition is the exception rather than the rule. It is important in this screenplay because of the theme. This is the story of how a man comes to accept his own death, very much like Rubin's prior screenplay, GHOST.

  You are not required to link your scenes with transitions. You do this occasionally, when appropriate.

  Transitions can be visual, verbal, thematic, and so on. Is it okay to sharply contrast scenes? Absolutely. If it moves the story forward, use it. Keep in mind that a straight cut from one scene to the next is not only correct, but the norm. The object is not to get fancy but to give the story cohesion.

- Each scene should contain a definite emotion or mood. Focus on that emotion as you craft the scene. Ask yourself: What is my character's intention or goal in this scene? What is my character's feeling? What is my character's attitude? Asking this will help give the scene direction and the dialogue subtext.

- **Focus the scene on a well-motivated conflict.** Even in less-dramatic scenes, a conflict should exist, regardless of how minor or how subtle it is. Often, two people with the same goal will disagree over methods or procedure, or just get under the other's skin: Bones and Spock, James Bond and Q, Butch Cassidy and Sundance, Mr. and Mrs. Incredible, and Mr. and Mrs. Smith (in MR. AND MRS. SMITH). Even in love scenes, there may be some resistance at the beginning. Conflict is one of the tools you can use to build suspense.

- **Each scene should have a definite purpose.** See pages 204-207.

Note: For examples of scenes, see Book IV.

Suspense, comedy, and television

Building suspense is the art of creating an expectation of something dramatic that is about to happen. Since we go to movies to feel vicarious emotion, putting us in suspense simply builds emotion as we anticipate the outcome. Here are ten tools to thrill and manipulate us.

TOOLS FOR BUILDING SUSPENSE

Evoke emotion
Create characters we like. They must be believable since they act as a conduit through which emotion can pass to us. We need to sympathize with them and feel what they feel.

Create conflict
As mentioned earlier, rising conflict creates suspense. Since conflict is drama, two committed forces in conflict will always heighten suspense. Remember grade school? Two boys would start fighting and everyone would make a circle around them. No one tried to stop the fight. (This is very irritating if you're the smaller boy.) No one stopped it because we were all in suspense, wondering if blood would squirt out someone's nose, and betting on who would win.

Provide opposition
Give your central character a *powerful opposition*; then force your character to battle this foe. The opposition should be in a position of strength, capable of doing damage.

In STAR TREK II, Khan serves as an excellent example, because he is superior to Kirk physically and mentally. We all go through the extreme mental duress of wondering how Kirk is going to survive, let alone defeat, this "giant."

The "giant" in FATAL ATTRACTION is Glenn Close, the lover. She is in a position to do damage to Michael Douglas.

The formidable foe in MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING is Kim, the fianceé. She has the emotional leverage on Michael, Julianne's best friend. Besides, she's adorable. How can Julianne compete with that?

In THE SIXTH SENSE, the dead people seem infinitely more powerful than little Cole. Since we know so little about the aliens in SIGNS, they seem formidable. And Otto Ottavias is made more powerful when Spider-man appears to be losing his powers. It creates an expectation of trouble, our next point.

Build expectation
Create an *expectation for trouble.* Do you recall the baby carriage in THE UNTOUCHABLES? In this scene, Elliot Ness must face off with Capone's boys at the train station. He's ready and in position, but a woman is having difficulty moving her baby carriage up the stairs. We get nervous—we just "know" she is going to get in the way. The suspense builds.

Consider also the scene from FATAL ATTRACTION where Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas) returns home and finds his wife conversing with his lover. There is an expectation that the wife might realize that this blonde she is talking to is actually a woman who is having an affair with her husband. In this case the jeopardy is emotional, not physical. When the wife introduces the lover to Dan, the subtext is powerful because they have already met. The lover says such lines as, "Don't I remember you?" "We've definitely met." "I never forget a face." The subtext is, *You're not getting away from me. I'm going to make you pay.*

At the Showdown of GHOSTBUSTERS, our heroes confront the goddess Gozer. Gozer tells them that the Destructor will come in whatever form they choose with their thoughts. Dr. Stantz (Dan Aykroyd) has obviously thought of something, and the other characters try to figure it out because they, and the audience, know the Destructor is coming, but they don't know what form it will take. Comedic suspense builds as Stantz points to his head and says, "It just popped in there." What just popped in there? We catch glimpses of something huge and white moving past the buildings, but we still don't know what it is. Stantz babbles, "It can't be, it can't be." The anticipation peaks and finally Stantz admits, "It's the Stay-Puft [sic] Marshmallow Man." And then we see the huge figure lumbering down the avenue.

Increase tension

Put the audience in a *superior position*. Take, for example, a couple we care about. While they are out to dinner, someone sneaks into their apartment and places a bomb under their bed. Later, our happy couple returns and they hop into bed. We know the bomb is there, but they don't. We, the audience, are in a superior position.

Imagine a small child playing in the yard. The mother steps inside the house. The child wanders toward the busy street. We are in a superior position to the child and to the mother. We are the only ones who are aware of the danger, and that builds suspense.

In THE GREEN MILE, a tremendous amount of tension is created when Percy purposely doesn't wet the sponge prior to the execution of an inmate in the electric chair. We know the sponge is dry, but no one else in the movie realizes it until it is too late.

Use surprise

Throw in an occasional nasty twist, or sudden turn of events. The first surprising appearance of a dead person in THE SIXTH SENSE creates a great deal of suspense. The sudden collapse of the house in LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS puts us on edge.

In PSYCHO (the classic 1960 version), Norman Bates kills Marion Crane early in the now-famous shower scene. This nasty twist serves the purpose of creating an expectation of *more* violence. Indeed, Hitchcock once remarked, "At this point I transferred the horror from the screen to the minds of the audience." Interestingly enough, there is only one more violent act in the entire movie, and yet we are held in suspense throughout.

Create immediacy

When *something vital is at stake* for the character, that *something* becomes vital to us, the audience, as well. It can be the physical safety of the world or the moral redemption of a juvenile delinquent. It can be the emotional fulfillment of two lovers who find each other, the protection of a secret document, or the triumph of a value. In SPIDER-MAN 2, it is both the safety of Mary Jane and New York. The higher the stakes, the more intense the suspense.

Establish consequences

Closely related to the above is the establishment of terrible consequences if the central character does not achieve her goal. When the Challenger space shuttle exploded, there was a lot of grief and sadness. A couple of years later, we sent up another shuttle. Do you recall the suspense you felt as the countdown proceeded on this later shuttle mission? That heightened suspense was due to the prior establishment of terrible consequences.

Limit time

Put a ticking clock on it. "You have only 24 hours to save the world, James. Good luck." Deadlines create suspense because they introduce an additional opposition—time. You can probably think of a dozen movies where a bomb is about to explode, and the hero must defuse it before the countdown reaches zero. The torpedo-firing sequences in THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER were particularly thrilling because of the element of time.

Likewise, when the wicked witch in THE WIZARD OF OZ captures Dorothy, she turns over the hour glass. "This is how long you have to live, my little pretty." Although we are never told how Dorothy is going to die, we still worry. Apparently, Hitchcock was right when he said that "the threat of violence is stronger than violence."

You can easily create an artificial deadline. The damsel is tied to the railroad tracks. Can Dudley Do-Right save the damsel before the train runs over her? Here you have an implied deadline. Other effective uses of the ticking clock include HIGH NOON, the rose petals in Disney's BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, and the prediction that John Anderton (Tom Cruise) will murder someone in 36 hours in MINORITY REPORT. In TITANIC, can Rose reach Jack and get him out of his handcuffs before the room fills with water?

Maintain doubt

Finally, if there is a reasonable doubt as to how the scene or movie is going to end, the suspense is intensified. How is Cole going to get away from his "dead people" problem in THE SIXTH SENSE, especially if Dr. Malcolm stops trying to help him (as he decides to do in one scene)?

In the opening scene of THE UNTOUCHABLES, one of Capone's boys leaves a briefcase full of explosives in a store. A little girl picks it up and it explodes. At this point, we realize that anyone in this movie can die, and we fret over Elliot Ness's little girl and wife the entire movie. Why? Because this scene has left us in genuine doubt about their safety.

LEAVE 'EM LAUGHING

Have you ever watched a comedy, laughed for about 20 minutes, and then grown restless? The probable reason for this is that the comedy had a weak story structure and poorly drawn characters. The comedy may have relied more on gags than on character and story. Virtually all of the humor in SHREK flows from the characters and the situation, which is one reason the story is so effective.

Comedy is drama in disguise. And there is no comedy without conflict. This means that virtually everything in this book applies to comedy as well as to drama. Here are a few points that apply particularly to comedy.

Comedy requires clarity and good timing—a *sense* of humor.

Love situations and other personal situations are easy for us to identify with and are ripe for comedy. That's one reason the family situation comedy has done so well. As psychologist Abraham Maslow stated, "That which is most personal is most general." Comedy reveals our secret desires and yearnings so that we can laugh at them.

Comedy makes good use of surprise and reversals, in revealing the truth about people, situations, and life.

Comedy generally takes an unusual point of view through use of exaggeration, deception, overstatement, understatement, contrast, parody, a ridiculous point of view, or obsession.

Comedic characters need to present the same contrasts that dramatic characters do. In GHOSTBUSTERS, we have a rational, cerebral type (Harold Ramis); an emotional, enthusiastic child (Dan Aykroyd); and a cool dude who understates almost everything (Bill Murray). This is a good mix. The fourth ghostbuster doesn't really add much to the comedic mix and, thus, is less effective as a comedic character.

Comedy presents people with pretenses or façades, then removes those pretenses one by one or little by little. One scene from PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM features Allan Felix (Woody Allen) preparing for a blind date (a situation we can all relate to—right?). He goes to extremes to impress her. He thinks he can score the first night, and that's his pretense. He impresses her, all right, but not the way he had hoped. It's a reversal of what he expected. He's brought back to earth. And it's funny.

Another example of two characters with a pretense appears in CELEBRITY WEDDING, a screenplay by Yours Truly and Greg Alt. Sam and Natalie pretend not to like each other (that's the pretense). They have just seated themselves on a plane, thinking they have escaped from the bad guy, Novaks.

Immediately, Sam spots Novaks, who hasn't yet spotted them. Somehow, Sam must find a way to hide Natalie's face so that Novaks doesn't recognize her. They have to act quickly. Watch how the pretenses are removed and the truth of their feelings for each other are revealed.

(As you will read in Book III, the dash is normally used for interruptions of thought and the ellipsis for continuation of thought. An ellipsis at the end of a sentence normally means the character did not continue her thought.)

INT. PLANE - DAY

Sam and Natalie quickly throw themselves into two back seats. Sam leans into the aisle and spots Novaks headed their direction, searching the passengers.

SAM
He's coming.

Sam turns to Natalie. Gets eye contact. She responds with a short gasp. He kisses her long and hard, hiding her face from Novaks.

Novaks glances at them in disgust, then turns back.

Sam releases Natalie, who is momentarily paralyzed.

SAM
Ah sorry. I -- ah, couldn't think of anything else.

NATALIE
Right -- I mean, I mean under the circumstances it was good. I don't mean good good, I mean, well....

SAM
We really didn't have any other --

NATALIE
-- Exactly. And if we had --

SAM
-- We certainly would've -- or wouldn't've....

NATALIE
Absolutely.

SAM
(overlapping)
Naturally.

A brief, unbearable silence. Face to face. Instantly, they both reach for the same in-flight magazine.

```
                    SAM AND NATALIE
                (simultaneously)
        Go ahead.

Disgusted with himself, Sam rips the magazine from the seat
pocket and buries himself in it.

Natalie pulls out the emergency flight card and fans
herself.
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In this scene, the kiss comes as a surprise. The situation is readily identifiable in the sense that we've all embarrassed ourselves at one time or another in the presence of someone we were interested in. The scene ends with a visual subtext that implies Natalie is "hot."

TELEVISION

As you can imagine, television comedy writing is less visual than screenwriting, with less action. There may be only one or two locations. And so the emphasis is on interpersonal conflict and dialogue. The best situation for a sitcom is one that forces the characters to be together. They live together, work together, or belong together.

Sitcoms thrive with a *gang of four*, four main characters where each can easily be at cross-purposes with any of the others, creating more possibilities for conflict. In other words, they can play off each other.

Structurally, the sitcom opens with a teaser that says, "Boy, this is going to be really funny. Don't change the channel during the next two minutes of commercials!" Act 1 introduces the secondary storyline and the primary storyline in succession. (Sometimes one of these is introduced in the teaser.) Act 1 ends on a turning point that is either the most hilarious moment in the episode or is very serious. The second act resolves the primary story, then the secondary story. This is followed by a tag at the end that usually comments on the resolution. Some sitcoms present three stories or plotlines.

The hour-long TV drama or comedy also opens with a teaser or prologue. Act 1 establishes what's going on, Acts 2 and 3 develop it, Act 4 pays it off. Most shows add an epilogue. If the show is relationship-driven, an arena is created in which the story can play. The arena for ER is a hospital emergency room.

The *long form*, or Movie-of-the-Week (MOW), contains seven acts and about 105 pages. This means that six turning points must be carefully planned. It might be simpler to write this as a screenplay. In fact, the best way to break into television of any

kind is with a feature script that you can use as a sample. It shows that you can create characters from scratch and write a story around them. Being the next great screenwriter, it's a challenge you can meet.

It goes without saying that the principles of drama that we have covered up until now apply to writing for television as well.

Note 1: For more on television writing, see "How to format TV scripts" in Book III *and "Television and Hollywood's back door" in* Book IV.

Note 2: This is a good time to do Step 5 in the workbook, Book II. *Next, read the formatting and style guide* (Books III and IV). *Then do Steps 6 and 7 in the workbook. Finally, use the marketing plan in* Book V *to sell your screenplay, consulting the resources in* Book VI.

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4TH EDITION
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BY DAVID TROTTIER

SILMAN-JAMES PRESS
Los Angeles

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Trottier, David.
The screenwriter's bible : a complete guide to writing, formatting,
and selling your script / by David Trottier.-- 4th ed., expanded & updated.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Motion picture authorship. 2. Television authorship. I. Title.
PN1996.T76 2005 808.2'3--dc22 2005054119

ISBN 1-879505-84-3 (alk. paper)

Cover design by Heidi Frieder

Printed in the United States of America.

Silman-James Press
1181 Angelo Drive
Beverly Hills, CA 90210