

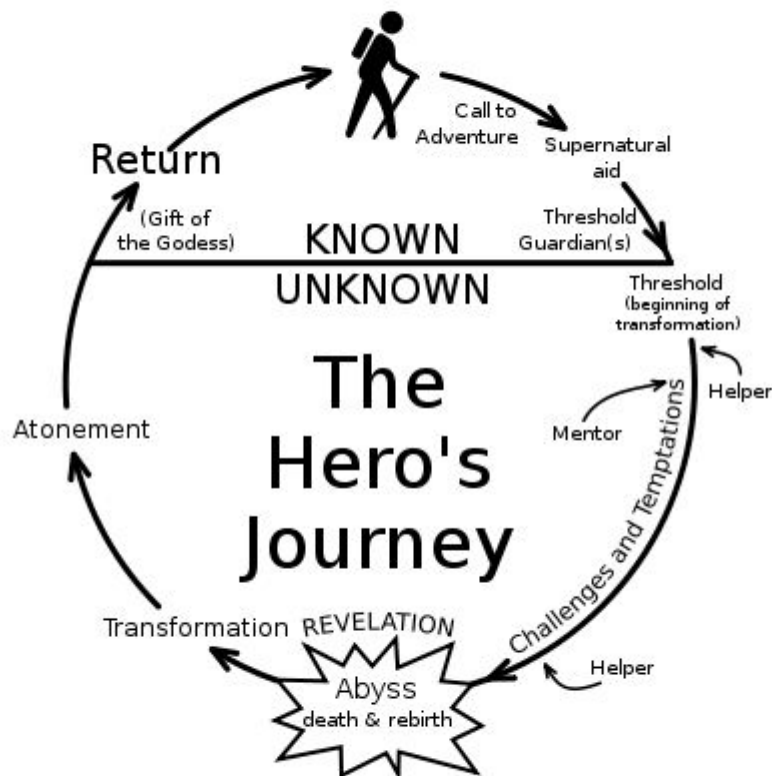
the Three Act Structure in Screenwriting

Storytelling has been a part of humanity since we began to communicate with simple images and sounds. Centuries before anyone thought of writing a screenplay stories were being passed on. In early civilizations there were actually people known for their skill in storytelling that would attract huge crowds wherever they may be.

Though there is not one true way to tell a story, the most common and effective way most commonly used in screenwriting is the Three Act Structure.

The three act structure is essentially the way in which the a story is given a beginning, middle and end. This format is found across different storytelling mediums and is familiar to audiences who know how to relate to it. It is a good starting point not only for anyone new to screenwriting, but also experienced writers who can use this structure as the foundation to get the main story down.

As the acts are mini stories in and of themselves, they benefit from having a beginning, middle and end (SCRIPTCEPTION : Three acts, within each of the three acts).



First Act: Beginning

The beginning of the story is set up in the first act. This first act can be the set up of the entire film, as it ends only when the film's parameters and goals have been set up for the audience. What the first act should accomplish first is the presentation of the **main character** and **the general location and situation**. Though the character's entire back-story does not have to be told it should be established enough so you have a good sense of who they are and what their motivation is.

The main presentation of the problem that must be resolved over the course of the screenplay, should be set-up in the first act. This can be considered the disruption of the main character's life that they are then inspired to resolve or an issue that they have to go out and repair. Joseph Campbell often refers to this as the Call to Adventure in his "Hero's Journey," but really is where the main character is drawn into a series of challenging situations. The point when they finally decide to take action, or we see they are going after that action, is often the conclusion of the first act. Most main characters should be introduced in this first act, as well as any major flaws, conditions, and strange limitations that may play into the story-line.

When you look at some big budget blockbusters where 3 movies are expected to be made, when viewed in their entirety the Trilogy can be seen as 3 separate acts. In the least the division of the 3 acts will change in each movie. (Think of how much actual time was spent in the actual matrix during the first movie of the trilogy)

Second Act: Middle

The second act is the bulk of the screenplay where the main action takes place. This is where many of the failures of the character's main goal occur, challenges that happen, as well as doubts and intersections. Sometimes referred to as the confrontation, this is where our main character challenges the problem and where your chosen story specifics will explain how it plays out.

The Second act is commonly the most self contained part of the screenplay as it contains the main action of the story, which leads into the second plot point, that is usually the film's major turning point.

The problem set up in the first act should be solved in the second act. This then leads into the conclusion which is the third act.

In the Matrix : Reloaded, the second movie of the trilogy. The war between man and machine has been set up and the movie focusses on how Neo and the humans can stop the machines from discovering and destroying Zion, and as a second plot point Neo tries to save Trinity from her envisioned demise.

Third Act: Ending

If a screenplay was a meal, the first act would be the appetizer, the second act the entree then the third act would be the dessert. Set-up – Confrontation – Conclusion. The third act is the climax of everything that has been set-up in the previous acts. As you have already taken the audience through 2 independent acts, the third act should be a climactic and eventful act with resolution(s) and closing action(s). (remember it should still include a beginning, middle and end.

Remember to draw together the main points set up in the first 2 acts in a captivating fashion whilst remembering to keep the general tone of the story. It is the last thing you leave audiences with, and what they will remember most of the story.

Ratio of the Three acts

As previously stated there is no set rule on how long each of these acts should be but the general content ratio found in stories is **1:2:1**.

Writing a Script to a Short Film

Animating in and of itself is about timing. Storytelling is also governed by time. With short films you have less time to hit your major plot points so one should find way to get to the core of the matter in the fastest way possible. Knowing what details should be included or left out is key when making animated shorts.

Think of the The Lord of the Rings Trilogy. Consider the challenge of condensing the any 3 books into movies. You can view deleted scenes or directors cut editions to see sections of the story that they thought were not essential in order to keep the movies at a manageable running length. How many other book – movie stories have you watched and read? Would you have included some scenes that were left out? Have you read any books that were based on movies?

Typical feature film scripts run from 100 to 120 pages, which means that each page averages one minute of screen time.

Characters

Almost all scripts have a main character, a problem that occurs, and the eventual resolution of that problem. With the time constraints of short animations, you will want to avoid an ensemble cast and stick to one main character, whom you should introduce in the first scene and have them get to the initial problem in the first scene of the short and on the first page of the script. In the first act of the story (pages 1-3 of a 10 page script) you should also introduce all the primary characters and establish their relationship to each other (the way they interact with characters or story elements, not necessarily 'familial' relations).

Structure

Though the three act structure, with its clear beginning, middle, and end, is the basis for can be used to write a short film script, it is not always the best choice. You can try a 2 act where one act introduces the characters, locations and problems and the other concludes the issue(s). In this 2 act structure, the lengths of the setup and conclusion can be changed depending on the situation and story. The important thing is to tie all scenes together in an interesting way and have it stand as a finished piece in its entirety.

From a Production Standpoint

One must remain practical when writing a script for a short film. Scripts for shorts are intended to be made, whereas feature length scripts can be sold or used as inspiration for other forms of entertainment, such as books or video-games.

First, you need to consider the overall length. Given the standard screenwriting equation that a page means about a minute of screen time, you have to consider how long you want your short film to be. Between ten and eighteen minutes tends to be a good length for short narrative films, as this length plays well with audiences whilst giving sufficient time to actually get something done.

Next, you have to consider the budget of the film. Intricate backgrounds, complicated special effects, an excess of props, and other production elements can end up costing too much to be practical on a low budget. Since most short films are unfunded, low funded, or student films, it is hard to maintain a script that has things that are financially prohibited. Instead of forgoing more time consuming/costly elements, go through the script and identify what you have chosen to use. See why you chose it and if it is central to the story, think of cheaper/easier ways to create the same effect.

When trying to make an typical 22 minute series, you would start most writers will start with a 10 minute short to get people interested.

Shots vs Scenes

There's a notion of "scene" and "shot" that we need to understand. In traditional film, a "scene" consists of all of the "shots" at a location. A script has one scene with multiple shots.

Think of a shot as everything between turning the camera on and turning it off. The shot can include panning, trucking, zooming, in fact any type of movement but it ends when the camera is turned off.

The field size (along with the specific amount of perspective distortion) greatly affects the narrative power of a shot. There are a number of standardized field sizes, the names of which are commonly derived from varying camera-subject distances while not changing the lens. The four basic kinds of field sizes (see gallery above) are:

- the long shot (often used as an establishing shot),
- the full shot (also figure shot, complete view, or medium long shot),
- the medium shot,
- the close-up.

Duration

The length of shots is an important consideration that can greatly affect a film. The purpose of editing any given scene is to create a representation of the way the scene might be perceived by the "story teller." Shots with a longer duration can make a scene seem more relaxed and slower paced whereas shots with a shorter duration can make a scene seem urgent and faster paced.

(long take / long cut)

Shots with extremely long durations are difficult to do because any error in the shot would force the filmmaker to restart from scratch, and are thus only occasionally used. In animation however, this effect is immensely easier to produce. Two examples of long cuts include Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* in which the entire first scene is a long take featuring Bonasera describing the assault of his daughter and Joss Whedon's feature film *Serenity* introduces the main characters with a long take.

SCRIPT IN MORE DETAIL

Story Goal Questions To Consider

1. Is this script for a short, feature, video, advertisement or series?
2. What is your goal in finishing this story project? To get a job, to win an award, to make money or raise awareness about an issue?
3. If you are planning on making the film yourself which style of animation are you planning to use Stopmotion, 2D, 3D or combinations?

Basic Three Act Story Structure Sentence

It is a story about a protagonist (lead character) who wants something (plot goal) that forces him/her to take action. He/she meets with an escalating array of conflicts (obstacles) leading to a climax and resolution.

Brainstorming for Characters

In general you will find 2 archetypes in most stories:

- Protagonist: Lead character and focus of the plot. Usually the first character you see. get your audience attached to this character and worried about their well being.
- Antagonist: Character or thing standing in the way of the protagonist accomplishing his or her goals. Make the audience very afraid of this thing or character.

Film World Settings

Favorite Subjects

What are your top Favorite Subjects or areas of interest. Make sure these are subjects you would love to see in a film.

Story Flavors & Genres

List your top Favorite Genres using the list below to help you come up with ideas. Think also of combining Story Flavors such as an mythical supernatural comedy or a romantic crime thriller.

- Animation: Far-out or surreal visual elements with objects that can turn into other things. These stories usually show us something real actors or sets cannot do as easily, such as talking animals or living toys. (an animation can be realistic, as a genre you can say *Beauty and The Beast* was an animated animation.)

Animation Techniques.

Even if you are just writing a story or script and do not plan on making the film, try picking what production style would best match the story.

Basic Story Sentences

By this point you have your characters, settings, subjects, genres and animation technique decided. Begin to put them together to develop simple sentences

Pick a Plot Goal

In animation (and film as well) the more enticing the goal is both in description and as a visual, the better you'll keep the audience involved. In the above example the Goal would be **to fit in**. The more relatable the goal the better.

Pick an Antagonist

Who or what is standing in the way of you character accomplishing the plot goal you just chose?

Theme

Choose one word or phrase to that is the theme for your story then explain how you are going to make it original and specific, such as desire leads to suffering. Remember to list ways to show story events being controlled by the theme in your story.

Theme	Symbolic Image Description in Script
Treasure the little things in life	Character eating fresh pie savoring every bite.
Alienation of youth	Young character looking out of place at grownup party.
Desire leads to suffering	Character getting beat up trying to get what he wants.
Exploration of character	Searching for meaning of last word uttered on deathbed.
The blurry line between sanity and insanity	Show all the characters acting crazy but functional.
Violence as cost of individuality	Hip, artsy, unique criminal characters.
Cost of deception	Pet cat found hanging on clothesline by antagonist.
Power of love can change fate	Character screaming so loud that he wins game of chance to save lover.
War changes people	Main characters all experience extreme changes as result of war. Some characters die, some become very scarred and others get very resourceful.

Character Traits

A character trait is anything that determines the way a character sees the world and how the character thinks, speaks, and acts.

Possible Best Traits	Traits	Traits	Possible Worst Traits
Champion	Intelligent	Airhead	Insane
Professional	Fake	Athletic	Addicted
Master	Aloof	Activist	Fearful
Top	Affectionate	Moody	Worrywart
Beatnik	Middle class	Dead inside	Mean
Model	Corporate	Gypsy	Alcoholic
Warrior	Negative	Hippie	Thief
Beautiful	Positive	Intuitive	Poor
Courageous	Cool	Dork	Annoying
Rich	Well educated	Perfectionist	Depressed
Charming	Funny	Loving	Hot tempered
Talented	Peaceful	Irresponsible	Playboy
Prodigy	Worldly	Tough	Stubborn
Survivor	Burned out	High strung	Stressed

Select 2 of the common character archetypes for the list below and give each of them one best trait, one worst trait and five others:

- Protagonist
- Antagonist
- Mentor
- Sidekick
- Love Interest

Plot Points

Write 1-3 sentences for what happens at each of the 9 basic plot points for your story idea:

1. Hook:
2. Setup:
3. Journey Into Unknown:
4. Investigation:
5. Twist:
6. Final confrontation:
7. Climax:
8. Resolution:

Conflict & Obstacles

Choose 1-3 conflicts or obstacles your characters face at each of the 9 basic plot points:

4 Basic Types Of Conflict:

1. Inner - different beliefs, desires, voices in the head or goals that are in opposition.
2. Personal - How well do your main characters deal with other people?
3. Social - Conflicts with school, work, church, law, politics, businesses, justice or organizations.
4. Environmental - Conflicts with urban city environments (gangs, cars, crowds) nature, diseases, disasters, mystical forces or difficult to get through locations.

The fifth type could be considered to be any combinations of the above conflict ideas.

Adding Plot Twists

Think of one big twist that happens in the middle of your story to shift the plot goals and any little twists you can add to each scene.

Setups & Payoffs

Any information, phrase, event or object introduced early in the story, that may seem unimportant at the time, which turns into a key payoff element later.

Setups need to be carefully presented in way that audience does not suspect they are being given key story information. Audiences should flash back to the earlier setups during payoff moments and put the information together in a new way.

Using Symbols & Metaphors

Metaphor = Action/Sound. Visual or auditory representation of a separate action, experience, or idea. A character blows out (action) a candle in a bedroom to show death of a loved one.

Symbol = Object/Sound. Visual or auditory representation of another object. The candle (object) is in the shape of a ballerina to show grace and beauty.

Symbolic Settings: Location as character

What does the setting say about the mood of each scene? A conversation in garbage dump has a different context than one at the sitting in the back of a luxury car.

Creating Suspense

How many suspense and ticking clock ideas can you add to your film idea?

Adding Humor

How many funny moments or gags can you add to your film idea?

Final Story Idea

Add all of the new ideas you just came up with from conflicts, twists, setups, symbols, suspense and humor to your basic plot points.

The main Plot Effects are as follows

1. Conflicts/Obstacles:
2. Scene/Plot Twist:
3. Setups/Payoffs:
4. Symbolic Objects:
5. Metaphorical Activities:
6. Suspense:
7. Ticking Clocks:
8. Humor Ideas:

At this point rewrite the 1-3 sentence scene description for what happens at each plot point.

- 1) Hook:
- 2) Setup:
- 3) Inciting incident:
- 4) Journey Into Unknown:
- 5) Investigation:
- 6) Twist:
- 7) Final Confrontation:
- 8) Climax:
- 9) Resolution:

CAMERA DIRECTIONS IN YOUR SCREENPLAY

Even when writing the most basic of scripts you may want to include some visual commandments that give direction as to the placement and behavior of the camera. Though the final say of what happens is usually up to the director (if there is one), feel free to include some basic directions.

Positioning

The main focus of this will be movement in the camera's general position. Much of this will be indicated by the basic headings, where it states whether the camera is in an interior or exterior, marked INT. and EXT.

Shot Types, Angle, Transitions and more.

For basic camera directions in a script, you are going to describe the angles. This is done by shortening common camera directions to their base letters. Medium Shots become MS, Extreme Close Up becomes ECU and Over The Shoulder becomes OTS. From here, you put a statement about the type of angle before the description of a shot or series of dialogue. This can be in a simple statement independent of the prose passage, or included.

ASSIGNMENT : SCRIPT.

1. Create a Basic Script form the material and examples that have been discussed in class.
2. Complete any of the exercises on the handout.