

Start Writing Your Screenplay!

Handout 114: Form and structure

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Form is one consideration when writing; **structure** is another. Stories may be told in any number of forms, including:

- verse and poetry (as in epic poems)
- songs and ballads
- prose (short stories, novellas and novels)
- monologue and dialogue (stage plays, radio plays and screenplays)
- interpretive dance
- sequential images (comic strips or storyboards)

“Romeo and Juliet” has been told as a stage play; a movie set in Verona; a movie set in a trailer park; an opera; a ballet; a musical stage production, with singing and dancing; a movie musical; and a graphic novel. The **form** in each case was different, and sometimes the characters’ names were even different, but the basic underlying story is the same.

Most stories follow along these general lines:

1) The set-up, in which the author establishes the status quo. (Who are your characters before the action starts? Where do they live? What are their lives like? What do we need to know about them, to make the story meaningful?)

2) The inciting incident (sometimes called the precipitating incident). After the set-up, an event occurs which disturbs the status quo and results in conflicts or contradictions that need to be resolved. The inciting incident throws things out of kilter and leads to a series of actions culminating in the story’s climax, which leads to a resolution of the tension, and the conclusion. In some screenplays, the inciting incident is on the bottom of the first page. In others, it might not happen for nine or ten pages. The usual advice for new screenwriters is, the shorter the setup, the faster the inciting incident, the better.

The inciting incident doesn’t have to be earthshaking. It can be as small as someone

stopping to pet a dog on the way to work, dropping an envelope, shoplifting a pack of cigarettes, smiling at a stranger on the street, or falling asleep on a bus.

In *THE WIZARD OF OZ*, we start out by learning about Dorothy's dreary life with her aunt and uncle on a farm in Kansas (the status quo). Then her dog Toto bites a mean-tempered neighbor, who threatens to destroy the dog. To save Toto, Dorothy runs away -- so she's not home in time to get into the safety of the storm cellar when a tornado appears. She runs into the house, which is carried off to Oz -- at which point, she realizes how much she loves Kansas and spends the rest of the movie trying to get home. The dog biting Miss Gulch is the precipitating incident. If it hadn't happened, she would have made it into the storm cellar, she's never get to Oz, and we wouldn't have a story.

In the movie *ALIEN*, a freighter is moving through deep space en route to earth with its inhabitants in suspended animation. Then a signal is picked up by the ship's computer, which sends the freighter to an uncharted planet to investigate what appears to be a distress call. Without the signal, and the automated decision to respond to it, the freighter would have continued its uneventful trip to earth, and again, there would be no story.

In *MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING*, we start by getting to know a bit about the lead female, a food critic, and her relationship problems. We learn everything we need to about her life from watching her have dinner with a gay male friend. Their conversation may seem random at first, but we learn from it that she is listless, isolated, can't keep a boyfriend, and doesn't have a clue about real intimacy. Then her ex-boyfriend calls out of the blue to tell her that he's marrying another woman. The phone call (the precipitating incident) sends her into action, and she spends the rest of the movie trying to stop the wedding.

In *STAR WARS* (the original, made back in the 1970s), we learn in the first few minutes of the movie that a conflict is brewing between rebel forces and an oppressive government in deep space, while the protagonist, Luke Skywalker lives a quiet, meaningless life on a farm planet with his aunt and uncle. (This is our setup, or backdrop, for the action.) Then Princess Leah, who's running from Darth Vader, sends a message to the planet Luke is living on, asking Obi Wan Kinobe for help. The message is intercepted by Luke, and the action starts. This action on Leah's part sets all of the other key events in the movie in motion.

In Disney's *THE LITTLE MERMAID*, the set-up is a peaceful but boring world under the sea where mer-people keep their distance from the surface world and have no contact with humans. The inciting incident is a young mermaid's decision to defy her father and swim to the surface, where she spots the human being she falls in love with.

In *AMERICAN BEAUTY*, we meet the protagonist, who's living a vacuous life and is dead inside -- then his wife takes him to their daughter's cheerleader practice, where he meets a teenaged girl he feels a strong attraction toward. Meeting her shakes him out of his "dead space" and changes his life, for better or worse.

Structurally, a screenplay may be based around a single incident or a series of incidents. But in a story that follows the traditional model, there is always one key incident that sets up the contradictions or conflicts that begin the action, which it's the author's job to resolve.

Again, I'm not saying the inciting incident has to be earth-shaking. It may be as simple as a character getting on the wrong bus, or walking through the right doorway at the wrong time. (Or missing a bus or subway, as in the movie *Sliding Doors*.) Or it can be as extreme as a character dying, blowing up a building, or stealing a nuclear weapon.

3) After the inciting incident, events in the story lead to complications, which in turn lead to a climax...

4) ...which ends in a resolution of one sort or another. The resolution may be uplifting or depressing. It may solve the characters' problems or leave them in a deeper morass. But it does need to resolve the tensions in the story, one way or another.

In *MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING*, the woman who has been trying to break up her ex-boyfriend's wedding in various hidden, secretive ways, finally confronts him, tells him she loves him and asks him to choose her instead of the woman he is planning on marrying.

In *THE WIZARD OF OZ*, Dorothy and her companions kill the wicked witch of the west, then Dorothy processes what she's learned, and realizes she has always had the power to go home. (As Glynda says, she couldn't have just told Dorothy, she had to learn it for herself.)

In *ALIEN*, Sigourney Weaver's character has her final, climactic battle with the alien trying to destroy her, then flushes it out of the airlock and vaporizes it.

Being aware of this traditional structure can help when you're having difficulties with your story. You may feel that something's wrong with it, that it's not going where you want it to, but not be sure where the problem is. Common problems include:

- 1) Stories that ramble on in an endless set-up, exploring characters and situations, without going anywhere (i.e., there is no precipitating incident, so it's questionable if we have a real story.)
- 2) The set-up may take us off into issues or characters who have no importance in the resolution of the key problem.
- 3) Your set-up may be good, but be overly long, losing the viewer's interest.

4) Your set-up may be too short for us to connect with your characters and feel involved with them, before you come in with the inciting incident.

5) Your set-up and inciting incident may be fine, but the story may drag on for too long after the resolution, leaving the reader with the sense that another story is beginning which is never completed.

DOES YOUR CHARACTER CHANGE?

One definition of a lead character is, the one who suffers the most, and is most changed by events in your story. In STAR WARS, Luke goes through hell, and changes from a listless teenager into a Jedi Knight. In THE LITTLE MERMAID, the mermaid Ariel goes through a hell of sorts, after which she is transformed (in stages) into a human being. In ALIENS, Sigourney Weaver's character goes through various hells en route to being transformed from a frightened "victim," afraid to go back into space, into a warrior who kicks butt and takes no prisoners. In AMERICAN BEAUTY, the lead character starts out "dead inside"... comes back to life, and radically changes his lifestyle, when he starts lusting after a teenaged girl.... then goes through a moral transformation at the end, changing from (basically) a sexual predator into a father figure, acting protective toward her instead of trying to seduce her, when he realizes how crazy he's been acting.

If your story isn't satisfying, try asking:

- what is my character like at the beginning?
- What is she or he like at the end?
- How do the events in the story change him or her?

The change doesn't have to be overpowering, but if there's no change, you may not yet have a story.... and if you don't have a story, it's hard to have a screenplay.

TRUSTING YOURSELF

With all of this said, the most important thing is that you trust yourself as a writer. If worrying about the structure starts interfering with your own creativity, just trust your gut and write what you want to. But if your story bogs down or runs into trouble, reexamining its structure may help.