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Creative Writing

The Three Act Movie Structure

After the huge success of the blockbuster movies of the 1970s and 1980s, Hollywood studios began relying on the three act plot structure of screenplays as a recipe for successful movies. The three act structure is the idea that films should follow certain plot points throughout three acts to create both character development and keep audiences interested in the story. Over the past four decades these formulaic films with easy to grasp concepts have come to be known as “in the box” movies.

Act I: is the most important act. In this act you must grab the reader’s attention, set up the exposition quickly, and create the conflict of the story. This act has three very important structure points:

Big Opening: Your opening segment (collection of scenes) does not necessarily have to floor the reader, but it does have to set up your character or theme. Think about the opening segment of the following movies: JAWS, RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, ANCHORMAN, THE GODFATHER.

Catalyst: Somewhere in the first ten to seventeen pages of your script, something should happen to give your main character a goal, desire, mission, need, or problem. Basically, when your story begins, life is in balance. Even if your character has a problem at the beginning of your movie (AS GOOD AS IT GETS), it’s a problem he always had. The catalyst kicks things out of balance and gives the central character a new problem, need, goal, desire. The rest of the movie is spent getting things back into balance.

Big Event: This occurs at the end of act one and is a result of the catalyst. It is the big event that propels the story forward into the second act. The big event tends to be *bigger* than the catalyst. (However, I should note that this is not always the case. Keep in mind that this structure acts as a guideline and not hard-and-fast rules.)

Act 2: this act tends to be the most difficult to write. Act 2 can be so difficult that many writers split the act into two separate acts, creating a four act structure. In Act 2 the story rises (rising action) and it focuses primarily on the conflict and complications of the story. The central character emerges from act one with a desire to do something about the difficult situation created by the Big Event. His action will likely fail, forcing him to take new actions. There will be many set backs in Act 2 and some breakthroughs or temporary triumphs.

It is important to remember that Act 2 focuses on *rising action*. Your reader will lose interest if the conflict merely repeats itself. Strong subplots that crisscross with the main plot will help you avoid repetitive conflict.

Act 2 has two critical plot points:

The Mid-point: This occurs about half-way through your screenplay (around page 55 - 60). It is a huge event, twist, or turn that is critical to the character's plight. In *GHOST* it is when Patrick Swayze learns that it was his best friend who had him killed. In *THE GODFATHER* it is when Michael Corleone takes the plunge into the mob world by killing Solozzo and the Police Chief. In *ANCHORMAN* it is when Veronica becomes Ron Burgandy's co-anchor.

The Crisis: This happens at the end of Act 2. Often it is simply the low point in the story, the moment when all look lost, or when the lovers are separated. This usually occurs around page 75 - 85. In *OLD SCHOOL* it is when the Dean informs our heroes that they are being kicked out of their house (this on the heels of Blue dying and Frank's wife wanting a divorce).

Act 3: this act mainly serves to wrap up the story. In this act, we see the character understand what needs to be done to solve his problem and set out to do it.

Act 3 has two major plot points:

The Showdown: Commonly called the climax, this is when the central character and opposition character (or forces) square off. It's the final battle in *STAR WARS*, the outing of the Dean in *OLD SCHOOL* – and Frank's fight/chase. In *GROUND HOG'S DAY* it is when everything finally clicks for Phil and we see his total emergence in the town as a revered hero. This case is different than your typical showdown because the opposing force is not another character, but himself.

The Realization: Just after the showdown, or during it, or occasionally before it, the audience realizes that your central character has grown, changed, or figured something out. This is when the Scarecrow asks Dorothy what she has learned.