

Three Act Structure:
Screenplay Structure Simplified

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Introduction

This book tutorial focuses on writing a screenplay in three-act structure, the industry standard, which has a tried and true history of accomplishing the task of writing a movie script. It will take the reader from formulating an idea to turning it into a treatment and screenplay. For the sake of this discussion, the method will be called the Three Act Structure in Screenwriting. Developed long ago in Hollywood, California, the structure still serves as the basis for most movies produced by large American studios and most independent filmmakers in the United States and abroad.

Note that this is a lesson in the method of constructing a story into a script and not the actual mechanics of screenwriting. While it will consider some of the mechanics of screenwriting, the reader should consult any of the many fine manuals on screenwriting mechanics that are available. One of the best is *The Screenwriter's Bible* by David Trottier. That said, know this fact: if you put in the groundwork for developing a screenplay and take the time to lay a foundation, the actual writing will be much easier. Note that I did not say easy, but easier. In the end, it always comes down to hard work and creativity.

The Great Idea

“I have a great idea for a screenplay.”

I have heard this often, and it is often true. As the owner and a screenwriter for hire at <http://ScreenwriterForHire.com>, I'm often approached with what some consider the perfect offer. They will supply this wonderful idea, and all I have to do is write the script. In other words, they have a concept for a story. It is usually a sentence or two, maybe a paragraph. But it is far from a story and even further from a script. Many writers are offered a great idea from a friend, family member, or a complete stranger who somehow learned that the person is a writer. “All you have to do is write it, and we can share the credit,” the offer goes. Great concepts are easy to find, and that is all well and good, but it is merely a starting point – like the seed of a California Redwood. But without all the right ingredients, it will not grow. As a screenwriter for hire, my team and I turn those ideas into a completed screenplay.

The reality is that every at least semi-serious screenwriter has a computer hard drive, a file folder, or a notebook filled with concepts. In fact, writers often gather and brainstorm ideas for stories. They throw around potential thoughts, form them into loglines, and even propose a paragraph or two of how the story might flow. It is called “riffing” and a good scriptwriter has a plethora of riffs just waiting develop. Therefore, if you want your idea to be more, you will have to do the work to turn it into a marketable screenplay.

Ah, but you never thought about doing it on your own before because you have no idea where to start. In fact, you do not even have the software to write a screenplay. Good news, and more to come: you do have the tools to shape an idea. The screenwriter just needs a pen and pad, imagination, time, and an understanding of screenplay structure. Or you might have my preferred method, a computer and word-processing software. And after reading this tutorial, you will then have the knowledge. At the same time, even the best screenwriters

(especially the best) understand the value of collaborating with other screenwriters to improve their draft.

Skeleton of the Outline

Whether you like using a low-tech notepad and pen or word-processing software, lay out the skeleton of the outline as you find it in this chapter of the tutorial to help visualize the process. As the development of the script progresses, fill in each section along the way. Starting with drafting the outline is the best way to prevent skipping any steps. The notebooks, file cabinets, and computer hard drives of writers everywhere are filled with incomplete story ideas that did not progress into scripts. This is both good news and bad news. It is good news in that writers have outlines with holes they could not fill, so they moved on to something else, realizing that there were questions they could not answer, so why waste time writing what would turn into an incomplete script?

Other writers foolishly pressed on, even though they were unable to fill in one or more parts of the outline, putting in hours of work trying to write a screenplay, only to fall short. There is nothing wrong with starting an outline, discovering that there are holes, and setting it aside. You can put the outline away and return to it at a later date when inspiration arrives. But by doing the ground work first, you will have only invested time in outlining, as opposed to spending countless hours of fruitless screenwriting simply to come up empty and incomplete.

Below is what the outline structure should look like:

Logline:

The Protagonist:

The Antagonist:

The Protagonist's Three Goals:

Act One Goal:

Act Two Goal:

Act Three Goal:

The Antagonist's Goal:

Synopsis:

Treatment Outline:

Act One

Sequence One (pages 1-12)

Critical Decision

Sequence Two (pages 13-25)

Plot Point One – Critical Decision

Act Two

Sequence Three (pages 26-38)

Critical Decision

Sequence Four (pages 39-51)

Midpoint – Critical Decision

Sequence Five (pages 52-64)

Critical Decision

Sequence Six (pages 65-77)

Plot Point Two – Critical Decision

Act Three

Sequence Seven (pages 78-90)

Critical Decision

Sequence Eight (pages 91-103)

And yes, you want to put in the page counts and critical decisions as a reminder so that once the writing process starts, you will know and hit your targets. It is near to impossible to *hit* your targets if you do not *know* your targets.

Logline

The next step in any screenplay project is to begin at the top of the outline and fill in the blanks. First, define the central idea with what is called the logline. If you cannot communicate that great idea you had in one sentence, it is not that good of an idea. Conversely, if you can and it fits the criteria for an excellent logline, which will be discussed later, then you are on your way to creating a screenplay.

A good logline is a one-sentence description of the film. Often, novice writers think in terms of the first and third acts, but the central idea primarily takes place in the second act. Therefore, the essence of the logline is what will happen in act two. It answers the question, “What is the film about?” A logline can sometimes be expanded into two sentences, but this is often a sign of a beginner. Hone the skill of making your logline one sentence of no more than about 30 words.

Known as the quick pitch or the elevator pitch, there are four essential elements to the logline: the genre, the protagonist, the protagonist’s goal, and the conflict. Sometimes included in the logline, but not necessary, are the antagonist and the antagonist’s implied goal. That said, the four key elements of any good logline are indispensable, not optional.

The most often forgotten part in a logline is the genre. By including the genre, you will be immediately defining the story in the mind of whomever you are pitching it to. Is it a comedy or a drama? Is it an action film or thriller? Do not leave the person guessing; nothing good can come from that.

While there are several sub-genres and each genre can be qualified, the following are the basic genres in which every film will fall: Action/Adventure, Comedy, Crime/Mystery, Drama, Dramedy, Fantasy, Horror, Musical, Romance, Romantic Comedy (RomCom), Science Fiction (Sci-Fi),

Thriller/Suspense, and Western. Defining the primary genre of the movie in the logline eliminates confusion about the true nature of the story.

Ideally, the logline begins with the protagonist that is the hero of the story. The term protagonist does not mean that the individual is a good person or will become a good person. What it means is that the film is that person's story; they are pushing it to its resolution by the choices that they make along the way, which are called critical decisions. As a principle, there is only one major protagonist in every movie, even in a buddy picture. This one key character carries the story along, and it is important to know who that character is from the start.

Along with the protagonist is his or her goal. More will be discussed about the goals of the protagonist, but the logline represents the central idea of the movie. The central idea takes place in act two; therefore, the protagonist's second act goal is the goal used in the logline.

Finally, in the logline, there is the conflict. Conflict is the most essential element of a story. Without conflict, there can be no story. Consider carefully what conflict will arise by the protagonist attempting to accomplish his or her goal. This can occur from several sources and from several directions and is the force of forces that tries to prevent the protagonist from succeeding. It will be repeated again and again that conflict should be a part of every scene. In the logline, the conflict needs to be as strong as possible. As an example, an evil empire threatening violence is weak conflict. An evil empire attacking a peaceful people is strong conflict. A woman scorned is weak conflict. A woman out for revenge is strong conflict. Within the conflict of a logline is the implied goal of the antagonist or antagonistic force. Nevertheless, defining the antagonist and the antagonist's goal in a logline makes it stronger.

Examples of Loglines:

Action/Adventure – An American Army captain leads his unit to find the last survivor of five brothers during the Battle of Normandy in World War II.

Science Fiction – A young man leaves his frustrated life on a lonely planet to rescue a princess from an evil empire.

Comedy – An unethical lawyer cursed by his son's birthday wish and unable to speak anything but the truth for an entire day must try to do his job while unable to lie.

Drama – A German industrialist risks his life and fortune to save his Jewish workers from the Nazi death camps.

Dramedy – An egotistical TV weatherman is forced to relive Groundhog Day over and over in the small town of Punxsutawney until he can determine how to stop the endless cycle.

Romantic Comedy (RomCom) – A dysfunctional woman traveling to France to win back her fiancé is unwittingly drawn into a thief's attempt to smuggle a stolen necklace into the country.

A well-defined logline keeps the story on track and helps to avoid straying into a completely different story than what you want to tell. It saves time in the future writing process. Also, an idea that cannot be communicated in one concise sentence will fall apart when the writer attempts to move on in the writing process too quickly.

A common mistake is to rush on to the next steps and fail to compose a tight but completely descriptive logline. As this will be the central idea of the film and is frequently the first chance a writer has to present the story idea to a producer or director, it should be worked and reworked to perfection. Write and rewrite the logline until it expresses the fundamental idea of the story as clearly as possible. Tell it to a friend and get their reaction. Ask for feedback. What

was their reaction? When you think that the logline articulates your image of what the film should look like, you are ready to move on. But it goes without saying that if you cannot formulate a logline that adequately conveys the idea you have for a movie, do not try to go further.

Critical Characters – Creating Conflict Between the Protagonist and Antagonist

The two critical characters in a screenplay are the protagonist and the antagonist. The conflict between these two characters will provide the story. Above all, these two individuals should be compelling, with sharp conflict separating them. The more pronounced the differences between these two characters, the easier the story will flow. Take the time to think through what you believe they will look like both internally and externally.

Define the protagonist in a paragraph or more. As already noted, the protagonist is the hero of the story – the reason there is a story. At seven critical points, the protagonist will make a choice – one choice ends things right then and there, and you do not have a complete story; the other moves it to the next chapter. He or she faces a challenge, and the story revolves around how that person will deal with that challenge. As you write about this person, determine his or her conflict and include their backstory and at least four personality traits. Implement at least one of the characteristics in every one of the protagonist's scenes. The four characteristics are the dominating personality traits, and this is called a character diamond. Having a character diamond for each major character prevents them from running together. Duplicate characters with similar traits reduce the conflict. Characters with opposite traits will rub against each other and create conflict. Conflict is good. Lack of conflict is boring.

The protagonist must have a personality strong enough to push the story continually along. There will be occasions when the antagonist will seem to force the protagonist into making decisions, but it is always the protagonist's choice. Even a helpless protagonist makes decisions. Shakespeare's Hamlet is a good example. While events pushed him along, he still had to make critical

decisions to move the story forward. As part of the protagonist's description, show the arc that you expect the character to take. The choices a protagonist makes in the beginning will be different from those he or she makes in the later part of the story. Represent these choices in the critical decision. To do so, make sure you know who the main character is at the start of the story and who he or she will become in the end. These character changes are called the character arc.

The protagonist might be a mousy secretary at the beginning of the story who becomes a valiant crime fighter at the conclusion. A young army officer learns to be a confident leader. A callous schoolteacher grows compassionate towards her students. A self-centered egotist risks his life to save a group of people from evil. Climb inside the protagonist's head and ask why.

One of the traps many screenwriters repeatedly fall into is creating a protagonist with few or limited flaws to overcome. The writer knows what he wants his protagonist to become and will start the protagonist out that way. However, the weaker or less prepared the protagonist appears at the beginning of the story, the greater his or her arc will be, which can make the story stronger. Consequently, it makes the writing phase easier because a protagonist with large flaws can logically fail or wimp out when things get tough.

As previously noted, there is always one main protagonist – even in a buddy film or a story with an ensemble cast of characters. There is always one standout character the story revolves around. Where circumstances require two characters seemingly working together or a group of people with the same external goal, one must be singled out as the primary character. Even in some ensemble stories where all the characters seem to be on equal standing, there is one who is the catalyst.

An example is in the movie *The Breakfast Club*. Five students gather for a day of detention. However, it is the “criminal” who provokes the other

characters into actions, which they are not inclined to take, and he is the one who makes choices that push the story forward. In *Independence Day*, an ensemble of people gather together in Area 51 to defeat the alien invaders, but it evolves into a buddy movie as two of the main characters fly a spacecraft into the mother ship. Nevertheless, one character – the computer genius – is the one whose choices along the way push the film at every turn to its completion.

Write the same type of definition for the antagonist character. Go into as much detail as you did with the protagonist. Keep in mind that his or her purpose in the story is to prevent the protagonist from accomplishing the protagonist's goal. In some cases, the antagonist is a force, not a person, but there is always some human or being that gives this antagonistic opposition a face. In the cases where the antagonist is a machine or alien, it is important to assign some human qualities. Otherwise, the audience will not care about the characters and will lose interest in the story as a whole.

The dynamic between the protagonist and antagonist is essential to the conflict and, ultimately, the entire plot. The antagonist must have a goal strong enough to carry the story from start to finish because once the protagonist defeats the antagonist's goal, the story is over. The rest is just postscript. A good antagonist is the opposite of the protagonist and appears too formidable for the hero to defeat. Describe the antagonist's goal and the potential consequences if they succeed. These are the stakes if the protagonist fails and the antagonist triumphs. Knowing the goal, the stakes, and the potential consequences will provide the conflict needed to form a good story. A tendency to avoid in screenwriting is to make all of the major characters similar in style, tone, and personalities, which are then expressed in their dialogue, causing them to all sound alike. By describing them by way of the four traits, they can take on different personas and be given a reason to exist in the story.

The next part of the outline is the protagonist's three goals.

An excellent idea can quickly fade if the writer does not stay on point. The primary reason a film wanders off course is because the protagonist stops pushing the story, or the antagonist is too weak to provide a challenge to the protagonist. There are so many interesting paths a story can take, but if it stops being about the protagonist, then it will eventually fail or fall apart. To keep the protagonist (and the writer) on track, and the story moving toward a conclusion, establish definable goals for the protagonist. Each of these three goals will drive the three acts. The goal changes from act to act as the protagonist makes decisions and begins a journey to arc into the hero who succeeds or fails at the conclusion of the movie. Therefore, the goal in the first act will more than likely be the complete opposite of the third act goal. Likewise, the protagonist's motivation in the third act may likely be the polar opposite of their motivation in the first act.

By having a strong protagonist and antagonist, you will be well on your way to writing a powerful three-act screenplay. These characters should drive the plot. As such, it is usually best to begin with the characters and let them determine the plot by putting them in a situation that will test their character.

First Goal – Plot Point One

The first goal takes the protagonist from the beginning of the film to Plot Point One, the end of act one. The goal is normally personal – achieving a promotion, living a quiet life, making money, and getting the girl. This goal will either be interrupted or, if successfully accomplished, the celebration of success will be disrupted by the antagonist's goal. The protagonist is on track for a promotion when the antagonist thwarts it from happening. She wants the boy when the antagonist comes along and steals him away. A man wants to live in peace when the bad guys show up and ruin his life. All of these situations prompt the protagonist to establish another goal.

Second Goal – Plot Point Two

The second goal is brought on by the actions of the antagonist and propels the protagonist through the meat of the story, which starts with act two and culminates at Plot Point Two. The protagonist will be carried along by conflict with the antagonist as the antagonist tries to accomplish his or her goal. If the logline was well written, the protagonist's second goal is already defined.

Third and Final Goal – Story Resolution

The third and final goal carries the protagonist to the story's resolution. This goal is dependent on what happens with the second goal of the protagonist at the end of the second act. If the protagonist succeeds in accomplishing the third act goal, then the antagonist is defeated. If the protagonist does not accomplish his or her goal, then the antagonist succeeds and wins.

As an example of how the protagonist and antagonist goals play out in a hypothetical film, consider the story of the young prince and his princess.

The young warrior prince learns that there is a princess in a faraway kingdom, and he goes in search of her. His act one goal is to find the princess. However, the evil antagonist has the princess, so her kingdom is in trouble. The antagonist's goal is to have the princess and her kingdom for his own. So the prince must save her, which becomes his second act goal. He accomplishes his goal and rescues the princess. However, even though she is safe, her kingdom is still in the hands of the antagonist. If the prince chooses to do nothing, the story is over, and there would not be a movie. But he chooses to go with the princess into battle for the sake of her kingdom; therefore, freeing her kingdom becomes his third act goal. Whether or not the protagonist achieves the third act goal will determine the conclusion of the film. For the sake of our film, the prince and princess succeed, the antagonist loses, and the kingdom is saved.

As the synopsis and treatment take form, revisit these three goals. Do not be afraid of refining or even changing the protagonist's goals, especially the third act goal. But in every aspect of the process, keep the focus on the protagonist and on the actions of the protagonist. He or she must remain the driving force of the story at all times. And the point at which they accomplish their goal needs to fit within the three-act structure sequences.

The Synopsis

You established the protagonist and antagonist, and now you understand their goals. The next step is to describe the basics of the film. It's time to write a synopsis/summary. Writing a screenplay synopsis will directly affect the quality of your screenplay.

The synopsis is the story – the movie from beginning to end. A good synopsis will eventually be a one-page, three-paragraph description of the complete narrative, around 450 to 1,000 words. When it is time to pitch the film to a producer or director, the synopsis serves as that vehicle, along with the logline. Therefore, it is important to note every major event, as well as the conclusion. Never leave the end in doubt when writing the synopsis, especially when pitching the idea. A producer or director should never have to ask how the movie would end.

As with the logline, redefine and rewrite the synopsis. Constantly return to it as the treatment/outline takes shape to reshape it into the image of the final version of the film. Eventually, you will want to have a nice, tight synopsis to use in pitching the project. However, the initial purpose of the synopsis is to provide the framework for the treatment. So, write out the story in the three-paragraph form using the three goals of the protagonist and the goal of the antagonist as though imagining the movie on the page. The first few drafts of the synopsis will easily exceed one page. Let the ideas flow, and worry about editing later. Include details and ideas that may or may not be a part of the final story or the finished synopsis. You thought that you had a great idea. Now it's time to see how well you plotted your story idea. Holes in the story will

As I always tell my clients, it's a lot easier to rewrite and plot a treatment and summary than it is an entire screenplay. Rather than writing page after page of scenes that are not structurally sound, make sure you have the entire

screenplay plotted and planned in advance. In screenwriting, following the three-act structure and proper sequencing is crucial. To write a good screenplay, spend a bit more time during the planning phase to save a lot of time and frustration writing the screenplay.

As the story takes shape, the goals of the protagonist can be refined, or even changed, if they do not work. Most writers know the beginning and the end of the story, act one and act three, the first and third paragraphs. So, compose them first. And do not become hung-up on inconsequential like the names of the characters, unless you already know them or they are important to the overall story. Use simple terms for the characters without names – the Protag, the Antag, the Biker Girl, The Underestimated, The Wild Card, etc. as needed. Using simple character titles for now instead of names allows you to put the entire idea on paper without distractions. Allow yourself to ramble; “free-writing,” it is called. If you have two directions a story could take, write them both. Unsure where a character is going? Fine. Write that you do not know and keep going. You can come back later and fill in the blanks.

Not surprisingly, the first and third acts are the easiest to write. Expect the second act to go slower and provide the most frustration. The hardest part of the process is to get to the second act and discover that the story completely fails as an idea. The choice is then to abandon the concept and move on to another or make corrections. But these difficulties are the reason this process exists.

After you have all three acts on paper, refine the synopsis. You are still not worried about the length, even though your eventual goal is a one-page document. The entire story is on paper. You do not think that there are any gaps. Now is an excellent time to receive feedback. Now that you have summarized and planned the story, read it to a friend, tell it to a group, or pay for professional screenplay coverage services for feedback. Pitch the synopsis

and seek an honest response to it. The chances are that others will have different takes on every aspect of the story; note them. But, if you are confident with the initial story, different ideas on where to go with the story should be cast aside. The importance of pitching the synopsis to friends is that someone else may spot holes and gaps that you missed. There are also amateur screenwriting groups across the country. Find one near you where you can pitch your synopsis and have it critiqued.

Once again, this is a very good place to make the necessary adjustments before getting too far into constructing the story-writing process. Using the feedback, revise the synopsis, but it is still not time to hone it into a one-page document. Any and all details are necessary for the treatment/outline step.

Overview of the Eight Sequences

The eight sequences of screenwriting are paramount to three-act screenplay structure. Think of them as chapters in a story. As each chapter comes to a close, the protagonist must make a critical decision. Each of the eight sequences has a purpose and will run from 10 to 15 pages in length. Divide the three paragraphs into their eight sequences.

Paragraph one; the first act is the first two sequences. Split the paragraph in half at the point in which the protagonist makes the first critical decision.

The second paragraph (act two), is the next four sequences and the third paragraph (act three) is the last two sequences.

In the treatment, include every detail and major plot point about the story. You want to be as detailed yet concise as possible. Add research notes, background information, backstories, and potential dialogue. The more information you add, the smoother the actual writing process will be. There is a temptation to begin writing the script before you have completed all the footwork. Delving more deeply into the details of the story and the characters while developing the sequences is a method for preventing premature writing.

The final treatment can range from 5 to 20 typed pages or more. When completed, it will be clear if the idea has the potential to become a screenplay.

Pay close attention to act two. The second act is the story. If you do not have this act written out in detail, you will struggle later to write a good script.

As the screenwriter considers the final manuscript and marketing the script that emerges, it is important to remember that the treatment is essentially the blueprint and plan for the longer screenplay. Treat it as a precious commodity. With a well-organized and written treatment/outline, a capable screenwriter will be able to create the story that was in the mind of the treatment's

composer. Therefore, make every effort to protect the treatment. In marketing, use only the logline and edited one-page synopsis to pitch the story.

A script is the interpretation of an idea. Eventually, a producer or director will ask to see at least a portion of the screenplay. Registering it online with the Writer's Guild or U.S. Copyright Office can protect the script.

As a general rule in planning each sequence, divide them into paragraphs. Each paragraph represents a scene. Some may be single sentences and others long and drawn-out. It will allow you or another writer to see the structure of the script take shape. Include backstory, notes, and potential dialogue, as well as character descriptions, which might aid in later writing the scenes.

Remember that this is a working document for the writer and so anything that helps in the writing process is important. If this is a scene where the protagonist expresses a certain emotion or drops a key clue, make that note. What are the characters thinking? What might they be doing while the dialogue is taking place? Think about how to convey the visual images while the verbal is taking place. For each major character in each scene, choose traits from the character diamonds.

Begin and End Scenes with Conflict

A word on content and it cannot be overstated: every scene should begin and end with conflict. It might be subtle, or it could be aggressive. Nevertheless, if a conflict does not exist, then the scene is unnecessary to the story and should be eliminated. One or more characters should experience some form of change at the end of the scene, which might be physical, mental, or emotional. It is the conflict that causes the change. And that change can be good or bad for the character, positive or negative.

The protagonist and changes in the characters push the story forward. Whenever possible, enter a scene late and get out of it fast before it is over. Do not draw out scenes. Constantly trim them to their absolute necessary length. Let it accomplish its purpose, then move on as quickly as possible.

Looking ahead to act one, there is a crucial element for which the writer must plan. It is the Inciting Incident, which is the point in the story in which the protagonist's world is upset, the status quo changes, and he or she faces an unanticipated problem. The Inciting Incident is the event that shifts the protagonist from their act one goal to their act two goal. It is that which causes the disruption in the protagonist's world to the point that his or her life changes from the norm and they take action that moves the plot forward. It is the catalyst for everything that happens in the story.

The Eight Sequences in Detail

Act One, Sequence One (pages 1-12) is the Status Quo Sequence, which contains the Inciting Incident.

Consider the opening sequence carefully because it is the most important sequence in the script. Imagine that the screenplay arrives at the office of a potential producer. A young, inexperienced reader has been assigned to read the script and write a coverage document to be passed on to the next person in the process. Bore that reader and the reader will not recommend it. Consequently, the opening scenes should contain some of the best material in the story for hooking the interest of that reader. The first sequence of the summary is the first half of the first paragraph.

When we say that this sequence is about the introduction, we do not mean to have the characters walk about and introduce themselves to each other. In fact, minimize as much as possible what we refer to as the “handshake introduction” of characters. We need to learn the names of the important characters. That does not necessarily mean having the characters use verbal introductions such as “My name is John,” which can seem unnatural and be a waste of time and the actors’ talents.

An excellent example of character name introduction is in *Romancing the Stone*. In the film, we are introduced to Jack and the evil villain early on, but do not learn their names until well into the story. The audience sees Joan’s lonely life and her lack of romance. The character is a romance writer, and in the opening scenes this is shown rather than told. Part of the introduction is to establish the world in which the story will take place, the status quo. The protagonist’s status quo is the world before he or she is forced to make decisions that move the story forward.

You are trying to capture the reader's attention and draw him or her into the story. An impulse of new writers is to have a page or more of colorful description of the world, the protagonist, and his smaller world. However, you are writing a screenplay, not a novel. Another mistake of new screenwriters is to have a lot of exposition, usually employing a narrator or a narrative scroll. The term for this type of writing is "lazy writing." Yes, there are numerous scripts that begin using both of these methods and are made into films. But you want your material to stand out and appear new and fresh. A creative writer will find interesting ways to present information the reader needs to visualize the world and what is happening. Think creatively. Film is a visual medium, which requires communication of essentials to the audience through images. The temptation is to explain everything to the reader instead of creating visual word pictures, which is more conducive to intriguing, on-screen imagery.

For the first act, introduce the world you are fashioning. Show the norm for the protagonist and let the audience know the protagonist's goal. Somewhere in the first five to seven pages, make known the basic want of the protagonist. The want is the external goal of our hero as opposed to what he or she needs, which is an internal struggle. For instance, the protagonist wants fame and fortune, but what they need is to learn to live with the resources that they have and not seek notoriety. The protagonist wants to win the beautiful person with all the right physical features, but what they need is to find his or her ideal companion.

However, the antagonist shakes the protagonist's wants and world. The protagonist may not yet know that the antagonist is disrupting his or her world, but the protagonist does know that unpleasant or uncomfortable things are happening. The story line will dictate when the antagonist first appears in the story. Nevertheless, the goal of the antagonist should bump up against the want of the protagonist in this sequence. To begin, the audience at least needs to

recognize who or what this person or force is and what danger the antagonist poses for the protagonist's world.

The eternal debate rages among screenwriters over when the inciting incident should occur. Nevertheless, the prevailing belief is that it must occur in the first act, and it should happen as a natural part of the story. Therefore, it can occur as early as in the opening scene or the last scene of the second sequence.

Regardless, Sequence One ends with the first critical decision made at some point by the protagonist. As already mentioned, critical decisions are choices the protagonist must make to move the story forward. A certain choice would cause the story to end; another choice will wittingly or unwittingly propel the protagonist into the next sequence. The movie *The Matrix* illustrates this well. The protagonist must choose between two pills: a red pill or a blue pill. If Neo chooses the blue pill, his memories of the real world will be wiped away, and he will return to the ignorant bliss of believing that the world created by the antagonistic force is real. However, if Neo takes the red pill, he will become part of the movement that knows the painful reality. In short, if he chooses the blue pill the movie is over, but if he chooses the red pill Neo pushes the story forward to the next act.

If the inciting incident has not yet taken place, the first critical decision at the end of the introduction sequence will lead to it.

Act One, Sequence Two (pages 13-25) is the Predicament Sequence. In this sequence, the predicament central to the story is established. The Predicament Sequence is also known as the Setup, as it establishes the motivation for the protagonist in the second act. This sequence is the second half of the first paragraph of the synopsis.

Some person, people, or force is about to disrupt the protagonist's first act goal. Circumstances and motivations force the protagonist into a new, unwanted direction. The protagonist stays on this new course in order to

accomplish the overall objective. Obstacles are hinted at or begin to become clear.

Sometime during this sequence, the protagonist voluntarily or involuntarily makes a new objective, leading to the main story goal. The protagonist's second objective will carry the story through act two. In *Star Wars*, the Empire kills Luke Skywalker's aunt and uncle. There is nothing left for him on his planet so that he will accompany Obi-Wan Kenobi. When the Death Star captures their ship, Luke's new goal is to rescue the princess.

The primary tension starts as the sequence ends with Plot Point One, also known as The Opt-Out Decision. At this point in the story, the protagonist has a significant critical decision to make. If the protagonist chooses one decision, then the story cannot go forward. However, whether the protagonist willingly makes the decision or is forced to make it, the decision that advances the story into the second act is made – blue pill, red pill. Now the protagonist is locked into a course of action and cannot easily change direction.

Act Two; Sequence Three (pages 26-38) is the First Obstacle and Raising of the Stakes Sequence. The protagonist shifts to his or her new goal and the central part of the story begins.

Without this screenwriting process for organizing a screenplay, somewhere between sequences three and four is where most “great ideas” falter. Many scripts die here.

Novice writers who start writing the screenplay before fleshing out sequences three through six using this process will find the story stalling. They had the beginning and the end, but a story has three parts – a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Be prepared to work very hard. You will stare out the window because staring at a screen that has not changed or a notebook with blank pages can be

frustrating. But a dedicated, hard-working screenwriter will push on to the second act.

The second act involves the complex development of the plot. The writer is doing more than preparing the way for the resolution. If you do not have a clear picture of where the story is going, the middle section will be confounding. In many cases, this happens because the writer had a great beginning and a smashing ending and thought the middle would write itself when he or she arrived at that point. Wrong. It bears being repeated: the second act is the story and, therefore, the midpoint is a key to telling that story. Understand that the second act is not filler. Keeping the audience invested and interested until the end is the reason for making the film. It is the essence of three-act structure. For all the brilliance of the beginning and end of great films, they would not be great films without an impressive second act.

Think of it in these terms: two scared little robots are on a spaceship being attacked. A pretty princess gives them plans for destroying a huge wicked battle star; the robots then deliver the plans to the Rebellion, and they blow the Death Star up. That was not a story. The middle sequences make the above description the beginning and the end of a great story.

Act two of the screenplay is where most screenplays fall apart. Act two contains sequences three, four, five, and six. If you think that you have a great idea, you are about to enter the critical phase of developing the concept into a story. Consider the second act structure carefully. These four sequences are vitally important to the process. Do not cut corners. What happens in this part of the script will determine if the concept can become an actual movie.

Diving into the third sequence, the protagonist has the new objective but hits the first of the obstacles that will make achieving that goal harder. Since the protagonist is locked into a course of action, there is no backing out. The price of failure is laid out, along with the exposition that was left unfinished

from the first act. With this new information, the protagonist realizes how difficult the new goal is going to be to accomplish. Now the protagonist knows that he or she is in serious trouble. When we say exposition, it does not mean that some character gives a speech about the problem or the danger, which is the plot of the antagonist. Once again, there is that word “creativity.” If the protagonist fails, find interesting ways to demonstrate or convey the consequences whenever possible. If the writer does not have time to explain what will happen if the antagonist wins, that job of explanation is given to a character to do through dialogue. But if you want your script to stand out from others, find a way to minimize exposition.

In the paragraph describing the protagonist, you defined the arc the hero will take to becoming a different person. In the second act, that change starts to happen. However, do not try to rush the protagonist into that new persona. Unfortunately for the protagonist, he or she should still be making decisions the same way they did at the beginning in the first two sequences, and it only makes things worse instead of better. If the protagonist was a law-abiding citizen, he continues to obey the law, yet things do not improve. A protagonist who does things against the grain continues to fight the system, and that only gets him or her into more trouble. Those old thought patterns just do not work. It is the definition of insanity, doing the same thing repeatedly, but expecting different results. It appears that the protagonist is not big enough, strong enough, or smart enough to solve the problem, defeat the antagonist, or conquer the situation. The protagonist and all those who are relying on him or her are in trouble.

There are usually subplots that begin with the third sequence. The screenwriter might allude to them in the first act, but setting them up is part of the function of this section. At this point in the story, another character or the

antagonist frequently forces the critical decision the protagonist makes, which brings the sequence to a conclusion for him or her.

Act Two; Sequence Four (pages 39-51) is the First Culmination and Midpoint Sequence.

The essence of the midpoint is this: the story was going in one direction through sequence three and four, and now the writer must turn it around to go in another direction toward the conclusion. It could be that the protagonist has received a piece of information that rocks the world.

Some discovery or the injury or death of another character shakes the protagonist. The protagonist's world is in chaos. The protagonist was making decisions and acting in his old manner, but is learning that the old stuff does not work. It is time to change and you, as the writer, must show how the protagonist reaches this new epiphany. Be creative. As a movie is visual, showing the change in the protagonist is much, much better and preferred over a character telling the audience how it happens.

The protagonist knows to make a change in tactics and is on the arc to a new persona, which starts by making decisions in a new way. It could mean that the protagonist decides to take the fight to the antagonist instead of passive resistance. He tried to obey the law; now he will break a few laws. The rebellion is going to attack the evil empire; the good guy challenges the bad guy to a duel, or the hero decides he is no longer going to run away. However, the pursuit of a new course of action will stretch the protagonist, and that raises the stakes as he or she enters into uncharted territory. The antagonist might feel that they are beyond their skill level, but this is the point of no return. The main character faces the choice to do or die or succeed or fail.

It is time for a midpoint critical decision, and the protagonist chooses to put the new plan in place. He has set the story on that new course.

With sequences three and four completed, the main portion of the story plot is set. But we are not going to rush to the end just yet. The protagonist still has much to learn and the plan never goes quite as planned. The protagonist has one final goal to set for the third act, so the last two sequences will move him or her toward making it.

Act Two; Sequence Five (pages 52-64) is the Subplots and Rising Action Sequence.

The protagonist may have a new plan to take on the antagonist or the antagonistic force, but it will take time for preparation, training, or accumulating the resources to make the plan work. During this sequence, the subplots play through. Most subplots are resolved by the seventh sequence. They might be a love story, reconciliation, or a chance for the hero to recover from a wound. Minor characters are momentarily taking the focus off of the protagonist. Sometimes, this can be a rest from the action that lulls the audience into relaxing and taking a breath so that you can set up an even more intense action or drama for the next sequence.

Nevertheless, the tension remains and the action continues to rise, albeit more slowly through these pages.

As the protagonist deals with the wound that has plagued him or her, we will discover if it will heal or persist to the end. If the protagonist will succeed, then the wound is dealt with in a manner in which it will no longer pose a problem. If the protagonist fails, the wound is only partially healed or the protagonist ignores or hides it. The critical decision the protagonist makes will take the script to the sixth sequence. It usually involves one of persevering in the new course of action or making decisions in a new way.

Act Two, Sequence Six (pages 65-77) is the Culmination and End of Act Two Sequence.

The pause is over, and the protagonist returns to the main story and the new plan with gusto, as does the antagonist. The writer is setting up the ending.

Although the protagonist may ultimately be successful, at this moment all seems to be lost. The plan is failing, and all hope is fading quickly. The protagonist is at the lowest point against the highest obstacles. Frequently the mission appears impossible during these pages. All is lost for the hero and his band of warriors. But within the potential unfolding disaster, they discover the key to the resolution.

For a tragic resolution, everything appears to be going according to plan during this sequence. The main character will accomplish what he or she set out to do. The protagonist has reached the highest point in the story. Success is within reach. The audience may not yet know this, but the writer places the hints within this sequence. The story has reached Plot Point Two, where the protagonist has all that is needed to be the catalyst by which the story will arrive at a conclusion. The end of act two is usually the polar opposite of the ending of the film.

The second plot point is the second turning point and should be like an explosion, launching the story into act three. The protagonist establishes a new goal after either completing his or her second act goal or determining that the goal or at least the way of reaching the goal is unattainable. The protagonist must regroup and find a new approach.

Act Three; Sequence Seven (pages 78-90) is the New Tension and Risk Sequence, often called the False Resolution Sequence.

With the new goal, the protagonist moves to defeat the antagonist or escape the coming calamity. But while the protagonist thought that success was imminent, the plan falls apart. The unforeseen happens and the protagonist faces a series of obstacles, which seem destined to crush the plan. Tension reaches its highest point; will the protagonist fail or succeed?

Or the protagonist is in a position to win. The plan is working, and the antagonist is on the ropes. For a brief moment, the audience is deceived into believing success is only a few scenes away.

The scenes in this sequence should be simple, rapid, and short, with nothing elaborate setting them up. The audience is on the edge of their seats waiting, anticipating what will happen next.

Then there is the unforeseen twist; the unexpected happens. This is the point where you can surprise the audience. They are expecting one outcome, but you give them another. You want the audience to think that the hero has failed or is going to fail because a companion or friend has betrayed him or her. In a well-written script, the audience will be fooled into thinking that the end is in doubt, even if they know intellectually that it is not.

Then the protagonist makes one final critical decision and pushes the story into the eighth and final sequence. Typically, the last critical decision is one the hero would not have made at the start of the film. Remember that the protagonist has changed or arced so he or she now thinks and acts differently. The hero acts in a manner completely opposite of how the protagonist would have acted.

Act Three; Sequence Eight (pages 91-103) is the Resolution Sequence and the Coda.

Having made the last critical decision, the protagonist barrels toward the climax. This is where the writer can write that sensational ending that motivated him or her to plan and write the screenplay in the first place.

The resolution should be the opposite of the false resolution. The main character uses what he or she has learned during the character arc in order to succeed. In the case of a tragic ending, the hero makes a noble sacrifice or, despite changing, still fails because the odds were against him or her. Ideally, the protagonist will be able to do or say whatever he or she was unable to do or

say in the beginning the story. However, in the case of a tragic resolution, the main character's failure might stem from an inability to achieve a positive arc. That breakdown then results in the heartrending conclusion.

The story resolves all subplots and ties up all loose ends. Clarity is important for the audience. Why was the protagonist successful? More importantly, if the protagonist fails, the audience needs to understand why. Having just invested time and emotion in the story, they need to know why you arrived at your great ending. This is only possible if the writer knows why the resolution happened as it did and can communicate that idea. Otherwise, be prepared for negative feedback.

If you have done the work, you now have a story. The resolution occurs, and we reach the conclusion; the story is over. There remains one final task for the writer, which is to take the completed treatment/outline and write the script, begin with FADE IN, and write until FADE OUT. To better understand how we can flesh out the treatment, let's consider a few movie examples every potential screenwriter should have watched.

Back to the Future

Back to the Future is the classic protagonist-driven movie. By analyzing it in terms of its sequences, we will be better able to understand screenplay structure. The screenwriter places the protagonist in a situation where only he can solve the problem, and his life depends on its resolution. He makes all the critical decisions and has a definable arc.

LOGLINE: Comedy/Adventure – A teenager who is accidentally sent 30 years back in time teams up with a scientist to make sure his teenage parents unite in order to save his existence and go back to the future.

ACT ONE GOAL: Marty McFly wants to escape for a weekend with his girlfriend, Jennifer Parker.

Act 1, Sequence 1: *Back to the Future*

FADE IN:

The screenwriter introduces Marty McFly, a teenager who likes to skateboard, play the electric guitar, and hang out with Dr. Emmett Brown. Marty arrives at Doc's lab in search of the scientist. Doc asks Marty to test one of his newest inventions at the shopping mall later that night. Marty accepts, but then has to rush off to school, as he is late. However, when his girlfriend Jennifer tries to help him sneak in, the principal, who tells Marty that no McFly has ever amounted to anything in Hill Valley, catches them both. Marty assures the principal that history is about to change. Nevertheless, Marty and his band fail to qualify to play at the big dance and a dejected Marty frets that he might become a failure just like his father.

Jennifer tries to encourage him but has to go to her grandmother's house. She writes her grandmother's phone number on the back of a leaflet about the lightning strike on the town's tower clock so he can call her later. The clock tower incident is an important part of Hill Valley's history, and there are those who want to preserve the clock in its nonfunctioning state. At Marty's home, the story introduces Marty's loser brother, sister, father, and alcoholic mother. The old high school brute named Biff bullies George McFly, and Lorraine McFly tells the children about the night she knew that she was going to marry George when they kissed on the dance floor. Later that night, Marty is woken by a phone call from Doc, and he makes his **FIRST CRITICAL DECISION** to go to the mall and assist Doc in his experiment.

Act 1, Sequence 2: *Back to the Future*

Marty arrives at the mall with a video camera and we learn that Doc has transformed a DeLorean car into a time-traveling machine. While the car operates on regular gasoline, the time machine is nuclear and powered with plutonium stolen by Libyan terrorists in exchange for building them a bomb. However, Doc kept the plutonium and gave them a fake bomb. The time machine is tested by remote control using Einstein, Doc's dog, as the guinea pig. It takes the animal one-minute into the future and back. They put on radiation suits and load the time machine for a second trip – one shot of plutonium, one trip. However, before Doc can go into the future, the Libyans show up with guns. In the INCITING INCIDENT, Doc Brown is killed, and Marty is forced to flee in the DeLorean with the terrorists on his tail. For his SECOND CRITICAL DECISION that moves PLOT POINT ONE, Marty hits 88 miles-per-hour and unwittingly blasts into the past. When Marty discovers that he is in the past, and the car no longer works, he begins walking toward Hill Valley.

ACT TWO GOAL: Marty wants to maneuver his parents so they fall in love and then he can go back to the future.

Act 2, Sequence 3: *Back to the Future*

While Marty searches for the address to Dr. Brown's home, he meets his father as a teenager. As in the future, a young Biff and his posse bully the George of the past. When Marty follows George, he learns that George is a "Peeping Tom" who perches himself in a tree with binoculars to look into women's windows. Then George falls from the limb and Marty has to save him from being hit by a car. In the process, the car hits Marty and knocks him out. Marty wakes up in Lorraine's bedroom. It seems the driver who hit him is his grandfather, and now his mother has a teenage crush on him.

After experiencing his mother's family, Marty rushes out before she makes a pass at him. His next stop is the house Doc Brown lived in at the time, which is 1955. Doc is a frustrated inventor who has yet to invent anything useful. At first, he does not believe that Marty is from the future. But Marty tells him the story the future Doc recounted about how he fell, hit his head, and came up with the idea for the flux capacitor, which is what makes time travel possible.

Marty and Doc bring the DeLorean back to Doc's garage and play back the video of the time machine in action. Doc is horrified at what he hears his future self say. There is no way that he can generate the power necessary to make the flux capacitor function. But when he mentions that a bolt of lightning could accomplish the job, Marty has the answer with the leaflet Jennifer gave him giving the exact time of just such a strike. Through a photograph Marty has of himself and his brother and sister, Doc determines that Marty has done something to endanger his future. In particular, Doc notices that the images are beginning to fade and disappear. Unless Marty sets history back on course, he will not exist. The **THIRD CRITICAL DECISION** for Marty is that he will have to make sure his parents go with each other to the big dance, where they will kiss for the first time and fall in love.

Act 2, Sequence 4: *Back to the Future*

Marty and Doc go to the high school, where Marty sees his parents as teenagers. George is more pathetic as a teen than he is as an adult and Lorraine is more of a flirt than she told her children that she was. The principal, who tells him he is a slacker, further demoralizes George. Doc cannot understand how Lorraine could fall in love with such a wimp. In fact, Lorraine is infatuated with Marty, while Marty encourages George to ask Lorraine out. But George does not have the self-confidence. As an example of his lack of self-esteem, George writes stories but will not show them to anyone for fear that they will ridicule him. Besides, George thinks that Lorraine wants to go with Biff. The bully is trying to force Lorraine into dating him with his bumbling attempts to grope her. Marty has to step in to protect his mother and is about to be pummeled by the bigger Biff when the principal's presence saves him from a beating. The result is that Lorraine is even more in love with Marty. At this MIDPOINT, everything is worse than it was when Marty arrived, and the situation seems hopeless. In his FOURTH CRITICAL DECISION, Marty determines to take more drastic measures to convince George to ask Lorraine to the big dance.

Act 2, Sequence 5: *Back to the Future*

Marty invades George's house at night dressed in his radiation suit and helmet, pretending to be an alien. Playing loud rock music, he orders George to ask Lorraine out and the next day Marty is pleased when George is ready to try. He coaches George in technique. They go to the soda shop to find Lorraine and her friends, but once again Biff interferes. And once again, Marty saves his mother but is forced to flee the angry bully on a makeshift skateboard. In the ensuing chase, Marty escapes by causing Biff to crash his car into a manure truck. Lorraine ignores George and even tracks Marty down at Doc's house, where he learns that George still has not asked her out, and she wants Marty to do so. She thinks a man should fight to protect the woman he loves, just like Marty did for her. With Lorraine now more madly in love with him, Marty's FIFTH CRITICAL DECISION is to devise a plan to take Lorraine to the dance. There he will fabricate an incident that will allow George to rescue her, and the two will fall in love.

Act 2, Sequence 6: *Back to the Future*

Marty briefs George on the plan. He will make a pass at Lorraine in the car, and George will dramatically save her, and then she will fall in love with George. However, the plan comes apart when Biff shows up instead, looking for payback for the damage done to his car. But he has his posse take Marty to the back of the school while he forces himself on poor Lorraine. Helplessly, she fights him when George finally shows up. Biff orders George to go away, but he refuses, so the bully decides to teach the wimp a lesson. All appears lost until Biff pushes Lorraine as she tries to come to George's aide. That infuriates George, and he knocks Biff out with one big punch, then the two lovers head for the dance. With the assistance of the dance band, Marty gets away from Biff's posse but discovers that he is still not in the clear, as his parents have not yet kissed. So Marty fulfills one of his dreams by playing with the band because the lead guitarist injured his hand helping Marty and cannot play. His parents kiss on the dance floor, and Marty is saved. With his parents' relationship on track, Marty also decides to try to rescue the future Doc. His SIXTH CRITICAL DECISION, the SECOND PLOT POINT, is to try to prevent Doc from being shot by the Libyans.

ACT THREE GOAL: Marty wants to save Doc Brown from being killed by terrorists in the future.

Act 3, Sequence 7: *Back to the Future*

Marty hurries downtown, where Doc is preparing the wire to send the power from the lightning strike into the flux capacitor of the DeLorean. Marty composes a note explaining what happened on the night he went back into the past, but Doc tears it up without reading it. Before Marty can tell him about the incident, a limb falls and severs the power line to the clock. Panic ensues, as the storm is nearing, and they will only have one shot at this. Doc has to climb to the tower to reconnect the wire, so Marty is still unable to warn him about the future. As the clock ticks away, Marty is forced to pull the car to the starting line while Doc manages to reconnect the wire on the top of the clock tower. Then Marty realizes that he is in a time machine. The SEVENTH CRITICAL DECISION for Marty is that he will use the time machine to return to the future in time to warn Doc Brown so that the Libyan terrorists do not kill him. He resets the time machine to arrive earlier than when he left. For a moment, the car does not start, but Marty manages to turn over the motor.

Act 3, Sequence 8: *Back to the Future*

In reconnecting the wire, Doc pulls apart the connection on the ground. While Marty speeds down the street, Doc slides down the wire and reconnects it. When the lightning hits, Marty is propelled back to the future. Unfortunately for Marty, the DeLorean stops running when he returns to his time, and he is still in downtown Hill Valley. He has to race to the mall to save Doc, but he is too late and watches the Libyans shoot Doc Brown again. Racing down to the scene after the Libyans crash into the photo booth, he discovers to his surprise that his friend is still alive. The Doc of the past taped together the letter Marty wrote, and future Doc took precautions by wearing a bulletproof vest. Doc takes Marty home and goes back to the future. The next day, Marty awakens to find that his entire family has changed. His brother and sister are successful, and his father and mother are hip, modern people who are very much in love. Also, George McFly has just received copies of his first book as an author and Biff has been reduced to a meek auto detailer. Marty even has his dream truck to take Jennifer on their weekend excursion. Then Doc reappears in the DeLorean. Marty and Jennifer have to return to the future with him to save their kids from harm. Only now, the time machine has hover capabilities they use as they blast back to the future.

FADE OUT.

The Goonies

The Goonies is a classical ensemble picture. As with stories involving a group of people, there is always one primary character, a main protagonist. He makes a majority of the critical decisions. However, many of them are made with the assistance of his companions, and all of the characters have arcs as the story moves to its conclusion.

LOGLINE: Action/Adventure – Two brothers and their gang of friends go on an adventure in search of pirate treasure that could save their homes from foreclosure.

ACT ONE GOAL: Mikey Walsh wants to convince his friends to go on an improbable search for pirate treasure to save their homes.

Act 1, Sequence 1: *The Goonies*

FADE IN:

Meet the Fratellis, a ruthless crime family. Mama Fratelli and son Francis Fratelli help the other son, Jake, to escape from jail in the town of Astoria, Oregon. During the ensuing car chase with the bad guys and the police, the kids – soon to be called the Goonies – are presented: Andy, Data, Stef, Mouth, and Chunk. Finally, there is the group's leader, Mikey Walsh. He is in denial about losing his home and fighting with his older brother Brand. The INCITING INCIDENT has already happened. A pair of developers recently bought a neighborhood the kids refer to as the Goon Docks, and everyone has to move out. They planned to enjoy their last weekend before being evicted from their homes, which are set to be demolished to make way for a golf course. Unfortunately, Brand flunked his driver's license test, so they are stuck at home and bored. Mikey does not want to believe that they are going to lose the house. Data, Brand, Mouth, and Chunk decide to go into the attic, where Mr. Walsh keeps excess items from the museum. Mikey tries in vain to convince them to leave all the stuff alone. Then Mikey finds a framed painting that looks like a map. Mikey's FIRST CRITICAL DECISION is to have Chunk hold the painting. He knows that his friend is clumsy and will drop it, which Chunk does. They discover that the painting contains a map.

Act 1, Sequence 2: *The Goonies*

The map details the location of long-lost Spanish treasure captured by a pirate named One-Eyed Willy. Mikey recites the entire story as his father told it to him. At the end of the tale, Willy retreated to a cave that the British fleet bombarded, sealing Willy inside. Willy surrounded the treasure with booby traps and then killed all his men. But the other boys do not believe in the story until Chunk strikes again. He trips over a newspaper story about a recluse scavenger who claimed to have the key to One-Eyed Willy's treasure. Mikey gets the idea that they should go in search of it, but none of the other kids wants to go on any more of Mikey's adventures. In the meantime, Mr. Perkins, the developer, arrives with papers for Mr. Walsh to sign to sell the Walsh house. This rattles Mikey with the reality of losing the house, and now he really wants to go after the treasure. Brand was told by their mother to keep his brother in the house, and so as not to be grounded, he intends on doing just that. He has a date with Andy and does not want it disrupted. In Mikey's **SECOND CRITICAL DECISION**, he convinces Data, Mouth, and Chunk to join him on his treasure hunt. They fasten Brand to a chair using his muscle-building equipment and ride off to set up **PLOT POINT TWO**.

ACT TWO GOAL: Mikey wants to find the Spanish treasure of One-Eyed Willy so he can save his neighborhood from the developers.

Act 2, Sequence 3: *The Goonies*

Mikey, Data, Mouth, and Chunk head for the coast on their bicycles. Mrs. Walsh returns home to find Brand tired up and releases him, then sends him to find his brother. However, the boys let the air out of his bike tires, so he steals the smaller bike of a neighbor girl. Unfortunately, Brand encounters bully Troy Perkins driving his sports car with Andy and Stef. Troy drags Brand and his little bike, then runs him off the road. Meanwhile, Mikey, Data, Mouth, and Chunk find the first landmark on the map that leads them to an old derelict seaside restaurant. In a barn on the property, Chunk sees the Fratelli's ORV car, riddled with bullet holes, and knows it was the prison escape vehicle. But before he can warn the others, they enter the restaurant, where they are intercepted by Mama and Jake Fratelli.

On a pretense to go to the bathroom, Mikey slips away to look for the treasure, but discovers Sloth instead. Sloth is the third Fratelli son. A deformed giant of a man, he is still a child mentally. That causes Mama Fratelli to kick the boys out of the place. Brand joins them as they watch the restaurant where the Fratellis stuff a big bag in the SUV and drive away. Brand, Data, Mouth, and Chunk want to go home at this MIDPOINT where nothing has gone right, and no one believes but Mikey. But to Mikey, there is no more home for them if they do not succeed in finding the treasure. Everything may be going wrong, but Mikey's THIRD CRITICAL DECISION is to continue with the treasure hunt, even though there is a scary being in the restaurant basement.

Act 2, Sequence 4: *The Goonies*

Stef and Andy join the boys. They blew off Troy because he was being a jerk. First Mikey, Data, Mouth, and Chunk go back inside the restaurant. Then Brand, Stef, and Andy enter. However, they cannot find an entryway below until Chunk drops a large container of water and they trace the flow to a drain. At the same time, Data locates a printing press turning out fifty-dollar bills.

When Chunk follows his nose for ice cream into a freezer, the kids are confronted with a dead body that has a hole in the head. They cannot run away because the Fratelli family has returned. There is no place to go but the drain and the caverns below. The other kids do not realize that Chunk is not with them, but still trapped in the freezer, until it is too late. When he finally catches up to them, they decide to send him for help, but unwittingly flags down the Fratellis' car and they capture him. In the caverns, the Goonies decide to shake the pipes in the ceiling, hoping to attract attention. Instead, they break them and are forced into the **FOURTH CRITICAL DECISION** made as a group, which is to move further into the caverns, where they are faced with scarier situations.

Act 2, Sequence 5: *The Goonies*

The Fratellis interrogate Chunk as he spins a tale they do not believe. Down in the cavern, the Goonies stumble upon a skeleton they believe is Chester Copperpot, which implies they are on the right trail, but Mikey unwittingly releases some bats and then sets off a series of booby traps. The bats fly to where the Fratellis are threatening to torture Chunk. The bad guys realize where the kids are and follow them after they put Chunk in with Sloth. Deep in the caverns, the kids come to a place where there are a lot of coins scattered around and realize that they are under the town's wishing well.

They have not yet found the treasure. Bad boy Troy is above at the well and lowers a rope to rescue the kids. Nevertheless, Mikey's FIFTH CRITICAL DECISION is to go on in the hunt and not up to safety. The rest of the kids do not agree with him, especially Andy. She wants to leave and go home. Yet Mikey challenges them with the reality that the next time they see the sky, it will be over another town. He repeats the phrase that it is their time and to go up is to surrender. Andy sends her coat up the rope to Troy as a sign that she is now a Goonie.

Act 2, Sequence 6: *The Goonies*

Chunk and Sloth are trapped together, and they are starting to bond while the Fratellis are hot on the trail of the Goon Doc kids in the caverns. The Goonies continue to follow the clues and use a key they think will open a door, but it releases another booby trap. However, it also leads them to another room. Meanwhile, Chunk tries to call the police on the phone, but the cop does not believe him because of his past exaggerated stories, so he and Sloth also go down into the caverns. The Fratellis catch up to the kids and force them to flee further into the caverns, where Data leaves an oil slick on a log across a chasm. When Francis crosses, he slips and falls and then Jake tries to help, only to fall victim as well. The kids come to a dead end with an organ made of human bones and notice that there are musical notes on the map, but it says that one wrong note will result in death. Andy plays the notes. They have no choice. She plays them correctly, or they will die. The music causes a wall to open, but a few wrong notes have placed the kids in peril when the floor falls away. However, she plays the last note, and an escape appears in the form of a waterslide. With the Fratellis close behind them, the Goonies make the **SIXTH CRITICAL DECISION** to take the extreme slide that leads to **PLOT POINT TWO**, before falling into a large underground room.

ACT THREE GOAL: Mikey wants to take the treasure back with them to save their homes and neighborhood.

Act 3, Sequence 7: *The Goonies*

In the cavern room, there is a lagoon where One-Eyed Willy's pirate ship, the Inferno, lies waiting and filled with skeletons, including One-Eyed Willy and his treasure. Mikey acknowledges the pirate as the first Goonie, and then the kids fill their pockets with treasure. But Mikey makes one final and SEVENTH CRITICAL DECISION. He does not let the other kids take the treasure on a set of scales that belonged to One-Eyed Willy. He fills up his marble bag with jewels. But the Fratellis catch up to them and take away all their riches. Then the Fratellis make the Goonies walk the plank until Sloth and Chunk come to their aid. Sloth holds off his family while the kids escape from the ship.

Act 3, Sequence 8: *The Goonies*

With the children no longer on the ship, the Fratellis gather up the treasure, including the share of the treasure Mikey left for One-Eyed Willy. The scales tip and set off a final booby trap, causing the cave to begin collapsing. The only escape for the kids is a hole in the wall that Sloth strains to prevent from closing by wedging his back in it long enough for the Goonies to get out. Sloth sacrifices himself for his new friends and especially for Chunk. The kids wash up on a beach where two passing policemen spot them and call in for help. Their parents and families arrive for the reunion. Then the Fratellis come out of the water and are arrested, but the kids stop them from taking Sloth to prison. However, Perkins puts a damper on things by demanding that Mr. Walsh sign the papers to turn over their home. Mikey laments that they had the future in their hands, but gave it up to save their lives. Mr. Walsh is about to sign when the maid discovers Mikey's marble bag where he put some of the jewels. Mr. Walsh estimates that it is enough to save the neighborhood. As they celebrate, they see the unmanned pirate ship *Inferno*, now free of the cave, sailing away.

FADE OUT.

Jaws

Jaws is an antagonist-driven film, and you can see that represented in the logline with the antagonist given the recognition normally reserved for the protagonist. The antagonist, in this case, is the shark, and all the critical decisions spring from the antagonist's actions. The protagonist and his two companions are always waiting for and reacting to an attack by the creature.

LOGLINE: Thriller/Suspense – When a gigantic great white shark begins to menace a small island community, a police chief, a marine scientist, and an old fisherman set out to stop it.

ACT ONE GOAL: Brody wants to close the beaches to protect the public, against the wishes of the local leaders.

Act 1, Sequence 1: *Jaws*

FADE IN:

The INCITING INCIDENT happens as the story begins. Late one night, on a beach along Amity Island off the coast of New England, local teenagers throw a bonfire party. Chrissie leads Tom away from the frivolities towards the water, where she begins to strip down. She goes skinny dipping, but he is too drunk to undress on the shore. Inebriated, Tom collapses and passes out on the sand while a shark attacks Chrissie before pulling her underwater.

Then the water is still. This is the introduction to the antagonist, the great white shark who will drive the story right to the end. Next is the introduction of the protagonist, Martin Brody. Immediately there is tension. His wife does not like their home, but Brody came to the island to escape life and responsibility, as the story will reveal. He has surrounded himself with something he hates, water. He thinks it will protect him from the dangers of life beyond the island, but the irony is that the danger comes from the water.

Tom, who reports Chrissie missing, calls the new Chief of Police to the scene of the attack. They stumble upon Chrissie's mangled corpse, and the coroner calls it death by a shark attack. Brody does not hesitate; he wants to close the beaches. But the island's mayor and business owners convince him not to do it because it will hurt the local economy, so in his FIRST CRITICAL DECISION he amends the report to a probable boating accident. He fails to do what he knows he should and is forced to watch the water anxiously. The locals misunderstand his apprehension because everyone knows that Brody does not swim, and they chide him about his apparent fear of water.

Act 2, Sequence 2: *Jaws*

The shark then kills a young swimmer with everyone watching. Brody runs to the water's edge but does not go in as he orders everyone out. Later, the mother of the dead boy offers \$3,000 to anyone who catches and kills the shark. At a meeting with the business leaders, Brody tells them that he intends to close the beach, but the mayor insists it be only for 24 hours, which surprises Brody. He does not agree with the decision, but once again, he does not do what he knows must be done. Then in the meeting, local fisherman Quint offers to catch the shark for \$10,000 with the threat that if they do not hire him, they will all be hurt economically. Quint quietly leaves with a wry smile on his face. Brody's SECOND CRITICAL DECISION is to close the beaches temporarily, and he does not even want his kids to go into the water. That night, two enterprising men try to hook the shark, only the shark pulls apart the pier to which they have the big hook chained, and they barely escape the beast. However, Brody's decision leads PLOT POINT ONE, where fortune seekers come to the island to catch the shark and claim the money.

ACT TWO GOAL: Brody wants to do whatever is necessary to kill the shark but has the mayor and business leaders working against him.

SECOND CRITICAL DECISION and PLOT POINT ONE

Act 2, Sequence 3: *Jaws*

The news of the attack has changed the atmosphere of the community. Brody has a ticking clock; the local leaders want the problem taken care of before the 4th of July holiday. As people stream in to try to catch the shark for the reward money, Brody's problems increase. However, one newcomer is Matt Hooper from the Oceanographic Institute. He is escorted by Brody to examine and give his professional opinion on Chrissie's remains. He states defiantly and angrily that she was not killed in a boating accident.

Shark hunters bring in a large shark they claim to be the attacking shark. Brody wants to believe that it is the shark, but Hooper is certain it is not because the bite radius is not the same. Hooper wants to cut open the shark to see if the remains of the boy are in the stomach, but the mayor resists. Then the mother of the boy shows up and slaps Brody, accusing him of knowing a shark was out there, but doing nothing about it. The mayor assures the chief that she is wrong, but Brody says that she is right. He knows that he failed to accomplish his goal of protecting the people.

Hooper visits Brody's home, where the chief is struggling with what to do. Hooper confirms that the shark will probably continue to feed in the island's waters until there is no more food. That pushes Brody to his **THIRD CRITICAL DECISION**. He decides that Hooper should make sure they have the right shark. He and Hooper cut open the shark and find everything but the remains of a little boy. Brody plans to call the mayor and close the beaches, but Hooper insists that he has a bigger problem. There is a big fish out there with a large mouth. That means they have to go out and look for the creature, despite Brody's fear of the water.

Act 2, Sequence 4: *Jaws*

Against his better judgment but drunk enough to fight his fears, Brody goes out with Hooper to track the shark. With sonar equipment installed on his boat, Hooper drives the boat into deeper waters until the sonar detects a large object, the half-submerged boat that Brody recognizes as one that belongs to a local fisherman.

Hooper dives underwater to take a closer look and soon locates a gaping hole in the side, embedded with a tooth. He looks closer and sees the ghostly head of the fisherman. Hooper panics and drops the tooth as he swims back to his boat. Brody and Hooper try to convince the mayor to close the beaches, but he refuses.

The mayor returns to the same old argument that they cannot close the beaches because of economic concerns. The 4th of July arrives, and the mayor convinces people to go into the water. Brody is helpless to do anything of value in protecting the tourists, but insists that his son only sail his new boat in the area called the pond, where he thinks the kids will be safe. All is well until a fin appears and chaos ensues as people scramble for shore. But the fin is simply a prank by two kids. Then another shark fin is spotted heading for the pond, and Brody's wife reminds him that his son is boating there.

The shark attacks a guy in a rowboat and tips over the boat with Brody's son. Brody's son is shocked by the guy's death. Things are very much worse, as the summer is over for the local businesses. At the hospital, Brody's **FOURTH CRITICAL DECISION**, as the **MIDPOINT** arrives, is to insist that the mayor sign the papers to hire Quint to kill the shark.

Act 2, Sequence 5: *Jaws*

Quint's home displays his obsession with killing sharks and should be a warning to Brody. Hooper wants to go with Quint, but the fisherman resists. Quint even suggests that he will go alone. It is a challenge to Brody's fear of the water. The chief thinks about it, but decides that all three of them have to go out, and Quint finally relents. Brody says goodbye to his wife, who is afraid of him. She asks what she should tell the kids, and he replies that she should tell them that he has gone fishing. Once out on the water, Brody is given the lousy, stinking job of spreading the chum and almost causes a problem with the compressed air tanks.

Hooper explains that the tanks could blow up if mishandled, a setup for the final scene. Then Quint's reel begins to move, and he realizes the shark is near. He prepares for battle. But the fish on the other end of the line gets away. Then, while Brody is tossing chum into the water, the shark appears in an iconic moment and Brody recites the classic line of the film: they will need a bigger boat.

What Brody means is that he wants to go back to shore and get help. But Quint makes the FIFTH CRITICAL DECISION for Brody. They are going to stay and fight the shark with what they have. He is a man possessed and beyond reason.

Act 2, Sequence 6: *Jaws*

As the shark circles, Brody's wife calls the boat, but Quint intercepts the radio call and blows her off by telling her that everything is fine, and they will be home by dark. Then Quint harpoons the shark with a barrel at the end of the rope to force the shark to the surface. But the shark has disappeared, and the sun is setting. Brody still wants a bigger boat, but Quint's decision is to wait for the barrel to bring the big fish up. Darkness falls, and Quint and Hooper drink and compare scars and stories. That is when Brody notices that Quint had removed one of his tattoos.

Quint served on the USS Indianapolis during World War II. He tells the two men about the horrors of the 1,100 men who survived the Japanese attack on the ship only to be attacked by sharks while they awaited rescue in the water. Only 316 men came out of the water, which is why Quint will never wear a lifejacket again. What they do not know while they sing and bond is that the shark is attacking the boat. They rush to start the engines, but they are dead in the water. The next day, the barrel appears and so does the shark. Brody makes The SIXTH CRITICAL DECISION by attempting to call the Coast Guard for assistance; however, Quint smashes the radio. As such, PLOT POINT TWO is that the three men will have to go after the shark alone.

ACT THREE GOAL: Brody wants to survive when he becomes the prey, and the shark becomes the hunter.

Act 3, Sequence 7: *Jaws*

Brody is upset that Quint has isolated them, but the old fisherman is now like Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* seeking the White Whale, obsessed to the point of insanity. Then Hooper points out that the shark is coming back after them and Brody has no choice but to fight it with the other two men. Quint harpoons the creature with another barrel attached and they chase after it. But there is a shift in the plot.

The shark is now hunting them, so Quint decides to head for shallow waters where they can attempt to down the shark as it follows them. However, the engines fail and they become stranded on the water. Hooper makes the SEVENTH CRITICAL DECISION for the three men. He will go underwater and try to poison the beast. Brody is not a big fan of the new plan, but Hooper insists that they have no other option.

Act 3, Sequence 8: *Jaws*

While Hooper is in the cage, the shark surprises him and he drops the stick with the poison needle on it, then gets into a fight with the shark. Meanwhile, in the boat, Quint and Brody try to bring the cage to the surface, but by the time they do, it is empty. They do not know that Hooper has escaped and swam to the bottom, away from danger. Nevertheless, they have no time to think about him as the shark leaps up on the stern of the boat and attacks Quint. It slowly chews him up while Brody is helpless to do anything to save the fisherman.

The damaged boat is sinking as the shark comes back for the chief. Brody tries to fend it off with a gas cylinder he jams in its mouth. With the shark circling for another attack, Brody climbs to the top of the mast with a harpoon and a rifle. He loses the harpoon in the shark attack, and then resorts to shooting at the gas cylinder still in the creature's mouth. After several shots, he hits the tank and blows up the shark. Surprisingly, Hooper surfaces still alive, and the two men swim for shore.

FADE OUT.

Writing a Screenplay

Feeling creative? Hopefully, after reading this tutorial, you are. What is in your mind? What story needs to escape? You now know how to release it, but will you?

If you have followed the steps above, you or any good screenwriter will be able to take your material and compose a script for it. Yes, screenwriting is difficult, even with a well-composed treatment/outline, but the process is easier when the story is known from start to finish before even typing FADE IN.

One final note: a good script is all about preparation and rewriting. Yes, you put a lot of work into the treatment, and you managed to create a screenplay using your hard work. But a first draft is just that, a first draft. Once you have the story completed, it is time for shaping. However, be proud you have a script to rewrite; many great ideas never reach this point. At this point, you may be too close to your script to see anything you overlooked to improve, which is why effective screenwriters seek feedback from professional screenwriters during the rewriting phase.