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KEY
INGREDIENTS
TO MAKE



A STELLAR

Screenplay

@FORMER.STARVING.ARTIST

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Screenwriting “Rules”

Structure

Classic screenplay feature structure comes from Syd Field's book, "screenplay". The book where I first learned. Apparently, they're teaching 4 Act structure in film school now where the 2nd act is broken into two (which makes more sense to me).

There's a TON of books about structure in both feature and television, but this is a simple guide, where I give you the *MUST HAVES!*

ACT 1

PG. 1-30

ACT 1:

Introduction to:
world
hero
characters
tone.

What does the hero want and what is in their way of getting it? What is a big character flaw/fear that is stopping them?

ACT 2

PG. 30-90

ACT 2:

Series of obstacles

MIDPOINT:

Where there's a big shift in direction hero (sometimes with protagonist) take.

New series of obstacles from new direction

ACT 3

PG. 90-120

ACT 3:

Major block from mission.

Hero is forced to deal with what they've been avoiding the entire time in order to get what they want. Do they want something else as result of journey?

Structure

let's break this down

This outline is taken from bits I learned from ScreenwritingU, Mini Movie Method and Save The Cat. This is what made most sense to me but again, please read as much as you can about structure because it is the skeleton on your story!

Opening

The first 3 pages of your script are CRUCIAL. You need to hook the reader in, begging for more. Use excitement, curiosity, humour, suspense and have the reader loving your characters.

INCITING INCIDENT

The *moment* that happens to your protagonist. Something happens - got fired, broken up with, kidnapped - the big thing that starts their engine for the ride of their lives.

DEBATE/WE GET IT

Now that the incident happened, your hero has a choice to make on what to do next. By now, we get who the characters are and what the movie is about.

End of Act 1

The big take off for your protagonist's new adventure. They know exactly what they want (or what they think they want). You need them to be catapulted in a way that's tied into your genre and theme.

Aww man....

Uphill battle.
Relationships build

*Same thing between Midpoint and end of Act 2

MIDPOINT

The moment your protagonist makes a 180 in their plans. Things aren't working and they switch gears. This also works in a collaboration with their antagonist. They decide to work together to accomplish their goal.

TURN OF ACT 2

Transition from end of Act 2 and going into Act 3. Major uh-oh's have happened. Whatever your protagonist wanted was so close... but now is snatched away. A big twist happens and your protagonist was not prepared.

CLIMAX

It. Gets. So. Much. Worse!

Your protagonist is feeling helpless... but then the lesson comes. The thing they needed to learn this entire time FINALLY gets through to them.

CONCLUSION

Your protagonist is forever changed.

TV PILOT

Again, if you're brand new, go into a deep dive and read all about TV pilots. It was really tricky for me to switch from feature to TV pilot.

Something to keep in mind, a PILOT is different from a TV episode. A pilot is less exciting because you are introducing the world and characters. Keep it to only main characters in the pilot, remember, we're meeting them all for the first time.

With streaming, there's been less act breaks written in the scripts, but I still recommend it. It's great practice to end each act on a cliffhanger (aka commercial break)

HALF HOUR COMEDY - 25 pages (give or take)

Teaser (2-3 pages)

A funny moment that does or doesn't have to do with the plot of the show. For the **pilot** it should be an intriguing intro of the main character and plot.

ACT 1

Introduce to lead characters and main conflict (inciting incident). Depending on show, you want B & C story intro.

ACT 2

Same as feature. Obstacles for lead character. The character's decisions leads the conflict.

ACT 3

A big uh-oh moment where the lead makes a total mess of everything. Conclusion along with story B & C. They learn a lesson, but don't change.

TV PILOT

Reminder, end of each act should have a cliffhanger. **Teaser** for a drama is the main hook about the show (murder, medical injury etc)

ONE HOUR DRAMA - 45 pages (give or take)

ACT 1

Introduction to lead characters and an ordinary look into their lives. The end of the act is when they're brought into the main problem.

ACT 2

A, B and C story are rocking and rolling. Problems come up. Information to be used for later.

ACT 3

Lead characters are losing hope. Bad stuff keeps happening and they feel stuck in a corner.

ACT 4

Character is about to give up - but is enlightened by a "call back" to something that was brought up earlier. They use that information to solve their problem. They learn their lesson - until another problem shows up..

ACT 5

Optional to have an epilogue to tease the reader about the next episode.

Theme



The theme is your north star of your movie. It's what the movie is about. The message you want the reader to leave with. It's what makes them finish your script feeling satisfied. You could write the “perfect” script, but without a clear theme, it leaves us feeling empty and asking, “what was the point”?

Even the most action of action movies need a theme.

That being said, if you don't have a theme from the get-go, don't panic! Usually when you write your first draft, you have an *idea* of what it is, but as you begin writing, things come up and what you want to say can change. Don't be married to your first ideas.

Logline Breakdown

What's the point of a logline?

A logline is your elevator pitch. Describe your story in 1-2 sentences that gives a full picture of the movie/tv show.

Example: After a simple jewelry heist goes terribly wrong, the surviving criminals begin to suspect that one of them is a police informant.
Can you guess?

Logline Must-Haves & Have-Nots

CLEAR conflict: Using words like, “journey, trouble, problem, situation” is way too vague. We need to know exactly WHAT the exact (vague) is.

Contradictions: Having contradictions builds instant intrigue. The above example has criminals & police informant.

ONE adjective: Keep it simple describing your main character and use it wisely.

Tone

I wouldn't get so bogged down on this. When you're first starting out, the point is to practice. You want to get your reps in to where writing with structure becomes habit.

Once you have that, your own writing style starts to dictate the tone. You could have the exact same story and outline as another person, but they write more snarky and sarcastic while your version is more serious. Imagine **Juno** being written like a serious teen pregnancy movie...

Tone is difference between *basic* and *Oscar*.

Character Archetypes



Protagonist/Hero

Doesn't matter if they're good, bad, lame, cool - we want to watch them and root for them.



Antagonist/Villain

They challenge your protagonist and causes the most change in them.



Side Kick

Your hero's biggest cheerleader. Even a frenemy gives them inside a nudge to keep going when they're feeling down.



Love Interest

Your hero's confident, the apple of their eye. Usually the reason or the person who gives them the most strength.



Teacher

The one who offers wisdom and acceptance.

Character Development

Protagonist:

Your lead has to be the perfect match for your story. If you want to write a story about a space crew getting attacked from the inside by an alien, your perfect protagonist is Ripley. She's the smartest in the room and the most underestimated.

When you hear producers say the character isn't "likeable" it doesn't mean they have to be "good". They just have to be interesting enough for us to root for them. The story is about *them* and we want *them* to win! Even when the lead is a horrible protagonist like Tony Montana in *Scarface*, we are rooting for him! He has a simple rule that allowed the audience to cheer for him. No hurting women and children. Dexter had a rule. These "moral" rules allow the audience to root for them. I know, the bar is low.

Your lead has to *want* something. In every scene they strive towards their goal. It doesn't have to be as obvious as Rudy wanting to play football, it can be as simple as wanting to be accepted. They seek it everywhere and in everyone.

Antagonist:

The Antagonist is the person who is the opposite of your protagonist that challenges them towards their goal. This could be in a buddy-cop comedy, hero/villain, romantic-comedy etc. You're always playing with opposites attract.

Whoever you create as your protagonist, think of an opposite that will push your lead to their limit.

We all have that person that knows how to push our buttons. Your antagonist is THE button pusher (which is why they're usually more fun).

Think of their life's philosophy or politics that your lead is against or questions.

The entire point of the story is to have our lead be a changed person. It's the antagonist's job to push them to that change by whatever they deem necessary.

TV Characters

Leads

Big difference in television characters from film characters is, they never change. At least in episodic television (same formula over and over) whereas in serialized shows, they slowly transform because of the ongoing plot.

What brings an audience back to a show are the characters. You want to have very interesting, fun to watch, characters that bring the show to life. The story and plot are secondary.

When building your lead characters in a pilot, it's important to have them want something but also be massively flawed. It's their flaws that will drive the story in each episode, but they are THE person we are committed to. It's tricky to build a flawed character that you want to root for and stick around for each week - so find strengths that will put them above the rest in a unique way.

Supporting characters: They challenge the lead ALL THE TIME. Dig really deep into the relationships and HOW THEY FEEL about each other. The relationships between characters will build the world and keep people wanting more.

Get To Know Your Characters!

Write a bio for your main characters. Some questions to ask:

- What happened to them in their childhood that gave them a certain complex, “I’m not good enough, I’m not smart enough...etc”
- What was the relationship with their parents like (mommy, daddy issues?)
- What hill will they die on? What is their core belief?
- Are they loyal? Scared to get close to others?
- What animal would they be?

Dialogue

Oh yeah, time for the fun stuff!

Dialogue is another thing that gets easier over time. When you're first starting out, you'll get this note all. the. time.

“Show, don't tell”.

I'll tell you right now what that means:



Your characters are speaking in exposition!

You want your dialogue to be as close to real life conversation as possible. Not *exactly* like real life, because real life conversations are boring - you still can add literature flair.

Remember this, people don't say what they mean. Just like real life, what people tell you on the surface is NOT what they're really telling you. When you ask someone how their day is and they say, “fine”. They just said a whole lot. You as the writer KNOWS the truth, but you have to cover up what they're saying in a way the reader can understand, “fine” means “I'm ready to crawl into a hole”. I know... not easy.

EXERCISES

- Eavesdrop on people's conversations. Grab a seat at a coffee shop, public transportation, office - wherever people are and start writing in your notes app their conversations. Oh, the gems I've heard!
- Make a list of real-life characters you know. People in your life that maybe push your buttons or people who have strong personalities you can hear in your head.
- Before you write the scene ask yourself, "what does my character want" and refer to your character bio of their "hang ups". It's your subconscious issues that do the talking.
- First crack at the scene right the dialogue "on the nose" meaning very surface. Then give each line an alternative choice that represents their fear.

Example: character says, "I wish you would tell me you love me" alt "is that all you have to say?"

Action Description

You might think the action is the boring part where you just state where we are, what we see and what's going on... yes AND...

It's also an excellent opportunity to use the action as your own little narrator with their own unique voice and (here's that word) TONE!!

If you're writing a comedy, make the action funny - with purpose! If it's a horror, make your reader's heart pound in anticipation with your descriptions of what is going on. The action is the window to your writing capabilities. Make the reader FEEL.

My action lines used to be SO BORING! It was like I was writing a to-do list instead of bringing someone into my world.

That being said... some ground rules...

There are some screenwriting gurus who are really uptight about the format and action. I personally, don't care about any of the rules if the writing is awesome.

Believe me, there's enough AWFUL scripts that follow the rules but if someone reads your script and it makes them laugh, cry, think, FEEL all the feelings - they won't be thinking at all about the rules you broke.

Let's get to it!

RULES:

Directing From The Page

-It's your job to tell us what we see and hear because you're describing a visual medium. What *isn't* cool, is over using camera angles as a way to explain what's going on. I don't care once in a while, but if it's used as a crutch to tell the story, you lose us.

Example: PAN UP to HERO. vs He looks up to see... HERO.

Firsts

When we first meet a character, ALL CAPS. After that, no need.

FADE IN/OUT beginning and end only

Order of things:

Slug line, Action, Dialogue

Character Descriptions

When we first meet a character, think of an actor reading the description to give themselves an idea of how to play it or even how they would go into an audition.

What would they want to know? Clothes are important. Jeans and t-shirt vs a suit tells a lot. How can you describe their vibe in a few words? Example:

She turns to see JUSTIN. A Disney prince in the flesh.

Remember to only describe what WE CAN SEE. We won't know their background unless it's revealed in dialogue.

Where/What Time

Dependant on how we follow the story, tell us the time of day in the slug line. Example:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

This is typical, but if we're trying to follow along where the TIME is essential to understanding where we are in the story, here's your options:

INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

INT. LIVING ROOM - EARLY AFTERNOON

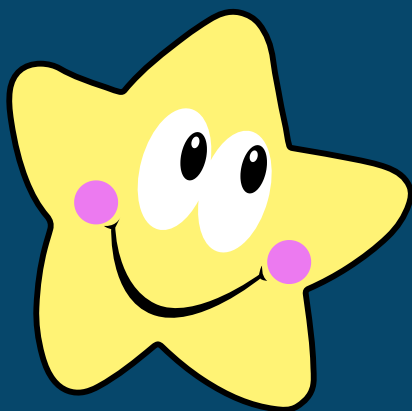
Don't be "subtle"

Please, I beg you! I need you to spell it out in the action. Whenever we think we're being subtle, 99% of the time it leads to confusion.

A reader will **love** a boring script they can follow over an "interesting" confusing script.

Any second of hesitation KILLS the flow. If your reader has to go back and read something over and couple times to understand what's going on, you lost them and it's game over.

Keep the action paragraph to MAX 4 lines if you can. That being said, don't OVER explain and don't make it TOO short... make sense? Cool.



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