

CHAPTER THREE

THE ELEMENTS OF SCREEN STORY

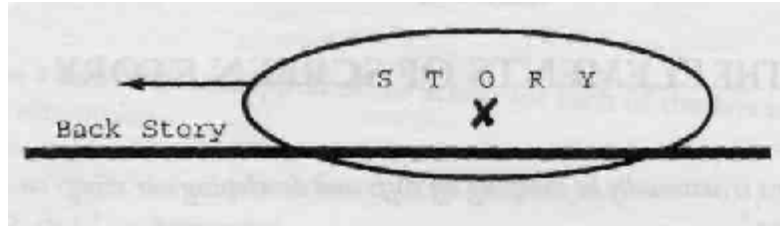
"We have to continually be jumping off cliffs and developing our wings on the way down."

— Kurt Vonnegut

To continue the architectural analogy of story structure as the standard three-act pattern, no matter how stable the framework is, our pyramid will crumble if it's assembled from flimsy materials. Virtually every story is constructed from certain building blocks that are necessary to establish the main character, the character's world, the problem that is at the core of the dramatic conflict, the possible solutions for that problem, and ultimately what the main character must do to overcome the obstacles and resolve the conflict.

Now, the exact order in which these building blocks are arranged is the craft of creative writing. In fact, often the blocks are chopped into smaller pieces and spread throughout the structure. In certain kinds *{genres}* of stories some of the building blocks may be larger or heavier or more prominent than others, while in a different variety of story those same blocks may be practically inconspicuous. Nevertheless, every well-constructed screen story will use *all* of these elemental building blocks because the elimination of any of them will weaken the overall structure and inevitably leave a gaping hole in the pyramid.

So, with the understanding that these elements of story do not have to come in the following order (although very often they will), let's examine the fundamental blocks that make up our edifice.



1. Back Story

If the story of significant change we want to tell occurs within the bounds of a selected and limited time, then obviously, something happened *before* this story began. Of course, many things happened, but in this case the *back story* refers to those events which establish the circumstances and setting for the current story that we are watching. Shakespeare's Prince Hamlet returns to Denmark, for instance, only to be confronted immediately by the ghost of his father, who tells Hamlet that his own mother and uncle are murderers, and commands Hamlet to avenge his death

One of the most common errors which many beginning screenwriters make is that they feel compelled to include far too much back story in their screenplays. While the murder of the king and the scheming, illicit affair between Hamlet's mother Gertrude and his uncle Claudius may be interesting, Shakespeare wisely tells us only enough of that back story to establish the conditions for the play we are about to watch} We really don't need to know any more about the back story than is absolutely necessary for the far more interesting story of how Hamlet goes about resolving the dramatic conflict presented to him by the ghost.

(Certainly you as the writer need to have a clear and sometimes even explicit idea of the back story, but the audience rarely needs much detail at all. We can be launched into the contemporary story with

only the barest minimum of information, and often without any immediate back story information at all.

Depending on the genre and particular story a writer is telling, back story may be as obvious as Hamlet's dilemma or as complex and deliberately puzzling as the multiple back stories in Robert Towne's brilliant script for *Chinatown*. Although the detective story of *Chinatown* starts off simply enough with Jake Gittes accepting a routine divorce case, it escalates into a tangled maze of several back stories that twist around on each other. Jake himself has a personal back story; Evelyn Mulwray another; her father Noah Cross another; and even the City of Los Angeles comes with a contorted history all its own. But screenwriter Towne and director Roman Polanski feed the audience only bits and pieces of the necessary back stories as parts of the puzzle Jake must solve. This kind of continuous back story exposition is, in fact, a hallmark of detective films. It is the hidden back story that the detective must unravel in order to answer the puzzle presented by the dramatic conflict he's actually trying to resolve.

On the other hand, stories in some genres such as action-adventure often have very simple, uncomplicated back stories that can be presented in a line or two of dialogue. The opening voice-over narrative of James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* flatly states that there's a bad terminator coming to kill John Connor and a good terminator coming to rescue him: "It was only a question of which one got to him first." That's all we in the audience need to know to get the action started. We don't need a complete, detailed history of the future war or the motivations of the characters. We only need to know why things are about to happen--now let's get on with the show.

(The least efficient and clumsiest way to present back story information to the audience is the *flashback narrative*. All too often beginning screenwriters want to stop the story the audience is watching and drop back in time to tell us a lengthy and usually unnecessary back story. By the time the audience is finished with this back story interruption, it

has forgotten the contemporary story you're telling. Worse, you've lost whatever dramatic momentum you had built up to the point when you went to flashback.

To be sure, some deeply dramatic character dramas may require more back story to explain the complexity of relationships. A skillful screenwriter, however, keeps the back story to an absolute minimum. You should constantly ask yourself:

/ Do we *really* need to know this back story information in order to tell the main story?

/ What is the simplest, least obtrusive way to get the information to the audience?

/ Is there a way I can give the audience the minimum necessary information while something else is happening? Can I keep the exposition in action so that the audience doesn't realize it's getting a back story?

If you examine the answers to these questions mercilessly, chances are you will find that you need much, much less back story than you initially thought you had to have.

2. Internal Need

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of back story: that which is strictly factual information, and that which emphasizes a subjective intuition about the main character. Detective, thriller, and action-adventure films, although also offering some insight into the state of being of the main character, tend to rely on the first kind of back story in order to set the conditions for the tale we are about to watch. More personal, relationship dramas, on the other hand, usually emphasize some missing personal quality that must be acquired by the main character.

In both of these kinds of back story, what is being established is an *internal need* for the main character. In order to be fully alive, the main character needs to come to grips with some personal attribute that he or she may not be completely aware of or may not be acknowledging. Often, in personal dramas, this missing attribute is a quality such as compassion or forgiveness or even self-reliance which the character believes he or she has but does not, or which the character simply does not recognize as necessary. Unknowingly, the character is going to be forced to deal with an internal, *vertical* significant change.

In more action-oriented dramas the quality may simply be courage or, more often, actual commitment to a value that the character has declared but never tested. The audience, however, normally has a sense of this missing personal quality, and part of what keeps us watching the story is the promise that the character will—in fact, *must*—acquire that quality in order for the dramatic conflict to be resolved to the audience's satisfaction.

It is the coming to grips with this internal need that provides more than merely a good tale for the audience. The resolution of the character's inner need provides us with a clarification of our own values and an exposition of our own frailties.

In *Rain Man*, for instance, the character of Charlie Babbitt has, because of events in his past relationship with his father, largely shut out the emotional part of himself. However, the drama we are watching *will force* Charlie to learn about and accept that emotional part of himself which he has been denying. In the classic action-adventure love story *The African Queen*, Charlie Allnut (Humphrey Bogart) has neatly explained away his avoidance of commitment to any person or any cause except himself, but the commencement of World War I and Charlie's love for Rosie (Katharine Hepburn) *will force* him into courageous self-sacrifice.

Beginning screenwriters often ask if the main character cannot simultaneously be the antagonist. The answer is that the main character is

always the antagonist because the character has yet to battle the unknown of the internal need. However, without the pressure of out-side dramatic circumstances and the threat of an external antagonist, the main character will never have to deal with the internal need. That painful battle has been successfully avoided so far, and the character will continue to ignore it unless forced into action by the insistence of the dramatic conflict.

3. **Inciting Incident**

So far we have a *back story* that presents us with a *main character* who has a hidden *internal need*, but nothing has yet happened in the story of significant change that we want to tell. Today must be like no other day in the character's life. Today something extraordinary is going to happen. Perhaps a war is going to start. Perhaps he's going to fall in love. Perhaps his long-lost brother is going to reappear. Perhaps he's going to be accidentally mistaken for someone else. Whatever it is, today there is an *inciting incident*, an unusual event that presents the main character with a problem to solve, challenge to overcome, or adventure to undertake. The main character is inescapably caught up in this inciting incident. The character cannot choose to ignore the consequences of the event and go on with life as if nothing had happened. Moreover, action is required now. The character cannot wait for the problem to disappear or someone else to solve it. Like it or not, the character is compelled to seek a solution to the problem or undertake the adventure that commands personal participation;

4. **External Goal**

The power of the inciting incident focuses the main character on an *external goal*, an action or object that the character believes will solve the problem presented by the inciting incident. At its simplest, the main character wants to achieve the goal in order to make life better. Making life better may be finding that special love, rescuing someone from danger, resolving the conflict with a family member, obtaining

wealth, or saving the character's own life. Whatever it is, the character fixes on the external goal as the answer to the problem and we in the audience recognize the goal as something the character must achieve in order to resolve the dramatic conflict established by the inciting incident.

The timeless thriller *North by Northwest*, written by Ernest Lehman and directed by Alfred Hitchcock, contains the most elegantly simple inciting incident ever written for film. A perfectly unsuspecting advertising executive, played by Cary Grant, happens to stand up accidentally as a hotel page calls out the name of George Kaplan. This simple coincidence starts a chain reaction of mistaken identity, murder, and international intrigue that places the Cary Grant character into deeper and deeper jeopardy until he must take heroic action to extricate himself and the woman he's fallen in love with. It is clearly not a day like any other day, and because of it, the character will emerge from the dramatic conflict greatly changed from the person he was in the beginning.

5. Preparation

Achieving the external goal will not be easy for the main character. If it were easy, there would be no story. Ordinarily, the first thing the main character does is to devise a strategy for achieving the goal, gather resources and equipment, or assemble the necessary forces that will help achieve the goal. Depending on the story being told, the character may seek help from friends and family, professional helpers like police, or like-minded associates such as fellow soldiers. In *The Dirty Dozen*, for instance, the bulk of the film is about preparing a bunch of criminal misfits to act together as a military unit in order to achieve the goal. Conversely, the element of *preparation* may be strictly individual as well. In the original *Rocky*, Rocky Balboa undergoes intense, solitary physical and mental training for his upcoming fight with Apollo Creed, and in both *Ordinary People* and *Good Will Hunting*, the main characters prepare for their upcoming battles through difficult revelations in psychotherapy.

No matter what kind of story you are telling, though, the period of preparation must be dramatic; that is, the preparation itself has a profound effect on the main character, and may be the element which causes the character to come to grips with the internal need.

6. Opposition

Just the fact that a character has a problem to solve by reaching a goal does not make the story dramatic, however. Remember that drama is *conflict*. Without opposition, there is no tension or expectation built up for the audience. Every drama requires an outside force that is trying to prevent the main character from reaching his goal. For the most part, this force of opposition takes the form of a personified antagonist—another person who has either the same goal as the main character or a goal that is mutually exclusive.

Moreover, the antagonist is necessarily bigger and more powerful, and has more resources than the main character. If the antagonist is not more powerful than the main character, there is no opposition. The main character simply brushes past the antagonist and reaches his goal with no interference. Antagonists need not always be *evil*, but they have a goal that conflicts with the goal of the main character. Professor Lambeau in *Good Will Hunting* is certainly not evil. In fact he has, he believes, Will's best interest at heart. Nevertheless, he is the antagonist because his goal for Will is contradictory to Will's external goal for himself. Because the antagonist is more powerful than the main character, then, all the main character's planning and preparation necessarily fails. He is *apparently defeated*. All the favorable options have been eliminated. The main character is left with no resources except *himself*.

7. Self-Revelation

It is at this lowest point in the drama that the main character comes to grips with the internal need, and therefore undergoes an internal significant change because of the pressures of the external dramatic conflict.

This revelation may be expressed in dialogue to another character, but it is generally more effective for the audience to see the effect of the self-revelation rather than to imagine the character's internal transformation. In fact, set yourself a rule when writing: A character never *realizes*. The audience realizes based on what the character *does*.



8. Obsession

Now, as a changed person, one who has had some personal revelation, the main character focuses even more intently on the external goal. Remember that the external goal never had anything to do directly with the character's internal need, so whatever was at stake in the original problem is still unresolved. The external goal becomes even more important for both the main character and the antagonist, and unless the main character achieves the goal, a great deal will be lost. That is, the main character is now fighting to achieve the external, lateral significant change ---X--- of the plot that affects the surrounding society, (()) including those of us in the audience.



9. Battle

Compromise between the main character and the antagonist is now impossible. They cannot both obtain their goals, so they *must* fight, and only one can win. Depending on the story you are telling, the *battle* may be a physical confrontation like the gunfight in the dusty western street, or it may be a verbal battle in a courtroom, or perhaps an emotional set-to between estranged lovers or family members. In any case, the only way the original dramatic conflict can be settled, and the audience's tension thereby relieved, is for the protagonist and antagonist to fight *to the death*, whether that death is literal or figurative. It is important to remember here that we have been watching a story about a main character, and it is that main character who must fight for his own salvation. It would be unwise and very unsatisfying to an audience to bring in an outside force at this point to save the main character. He must be responsible for extracting himself from the predicament, or the self-revelation forced by the external events of the drama has been meaningless.

It is also important to recognize as a screenwriter that the audience has invested its emotions and its time in wanting the main character to achieve his goal and win. Often, beginning screenwriters want to kill their main characters, believing that the death of the protagonist is somehow more meaningful. Although there are certainly some great movies in which the main character dies at the end, such as *Saving Private Ryan*, they are stories where the character dies for a noble cause that is more worthy than the original external goal. The audience can be satisfied that while the hero may have been killed, his death served a purpose that made the surrounding society safer or more complete. Generally, however, killing your main character is a very risky technique because it disregards the audience's expectations for the drama and dedication to the main character.

10. Resolution

The main character solves the conflict established by the inciting incident and moves on to a new story. Both the main character and the surrounding society have been *significantly changed* by the events of this story. It is possible that the degree of internal change for the main character is profound while the degree of change for the surrounding society of family and friends is comparatively minor, as occurs in many intensely personal dramas. But more likely, the internal change that the main character has been forced to undergo has allowed that character to make a momentous change in the surrounding society, whether that society is a fragile western town, a country at war, or a threatened civilization. The character may go on to live a sedate life, or he may continue as a champion, but he will never again be the person he was in the beginning of the drama. Because of the character's actions, the surrounding world has been forever altered.

Again, these ten story elements should not be regarded as a formula or a fill-in-the-blanks. They are fundamental principles of storytelling that help create a tight, overall structure. These elements need not inevitably appear in your screenplay in this particular order, nor with equal weight, depending on the particular story you want to tell. However, *all* of these elements will be present in any well-constructed screen story, and as you gain more experience writing, you will internalize these principles so that, although you may not consciously be thinking about them, they will become integral parts of every screen-play you write.

For now, simply use this list as a tool to help you think about the events you need to include in your screenplay. Just listen to your writer's intuition and jot down your thoughts and impressions for each element in the Scribble Exercise that follows without trying to be too detailed.

SCREENWRITING 101 /Hicks

Write a brief statement describing each of the elements of story structure for your screenplay.

Back Story

Internal Need

Inciting Incident

External Goal

