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THE BARE BONES GUIDE TO

# *Screenplay Writing*

An introduction to writing your first screenplay

# 1 THE PROCESS: FROM IDEA TO FINISHED SCRIPT

How do you write a screenplay?

How do you eat an elephant? One mouthful at a time.

Let's consider the process in simplified form.

## Firstly, you need a good idea

It doesn't have to be a very complicated idea. In fact, if you can reduce it to a single sentence, that would be a very good way to start. This is called **the logline**.



- The logline for *Jaws*, for instance, might be: A landlubber sheriff tries to kill a giant shark to protect his family and seaside resort town.
- The logline for *The Godfather* might be written as: The aging patriarch of an organized crime dynasty transfers control of his clandestine empire to his reluctant son.
- The logline for *American Beauty* could be: Lester Burnham, a depressed suburban father in a mid-life crisis, decides to turn his hectic life around after becoming infatuated with his daughter's attractive friend.

## What makes a good idea?

Difficult to tell. But the first and most important characteristic of a good idea is that it **sets your blood racing**.

If you're not **passionate** about the idea that's occurred to you, then you'll not be able to turn it into a compelling screenplay.



## The story

Then you develop your story over **three acts** in outline form. (We'll get into this in a little more detail in due course.)

Briefly, though:

- The first act sets up your story;
- the second act complicates it;
- and the third act resolves it.

Simple.

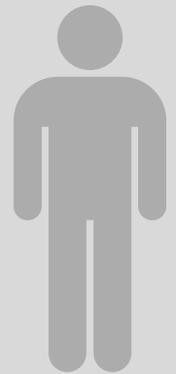


## Develop your characters

At the same time, you'll be developing your major characters:

- **the Protagonist**
- **and the Antagonist**

If a Protagonist is going to earn our respect, then he needs an Antagonist of the highest caliber. A stupid Antagonist is easily overcome. A devilishly clever Antagonist requires an inspired Protagonist. (More on this later, too.)



## The beats of your story

When you're happy with your outline (you might have written many drafts before you are happy), you develop a much more explicit idea of what you could call the beats of your story.

Every beat is a necessary step on the dramatic ladder: it takes the story forward and it tells us more about your characters as it does so. Beats might be stand alone scenes, or sequences of scenes that together constitute **a single dramatic event**.

## Write the screenplay



And when you're happy with your beats, you can start writing the screenplay, scene by scene.

A typical screenplay might consist of between **seventy five and a hundred and fifty scenes**.

## Write a couple more drafts

You'll never be happy with your screenplay.

But you'll try to improve it by **rewriting** it and **editing** it and **tweaking** it.

And then it'll be done and you'll have a screenplay to your credit.

As to getting it produced, well, that's another story.



# 2

## THE PROTAGONIST



The Protagonist is the character through which the writer takes the audience on an exploration of a premise, theme and central question.

He or she is **the hero** – even if nothing he or she does is particularly heroic.



The Protagonist of any screenplay should **want something** desperately.



The Protagonist should have both **virtues** and **flaws**, vulnerabilities with which the audience can empathise.



Their most telling character flaw should **reflect the premise** of the story.

So, if they're a surgeon charged with saving the life of the president, and if their flaw is their secret alcoholism, then that impacts directly on their capacity to perform the life-saving operation.



The Protagonist typically makes **two journeys** through the course of the movie.

The first is his mission to right the wrong, win the girl, achieve the impossible, etc.

The second is the inner journey the Protagonist makes to overcome his fears, restore his self-confidence, learn from his failures.



Protagonists are almost always **active agents**.

They tackle the problems they face. They take on the opposition. It's less important that they win, than that they try.

# 3

## THE ANTAGONIST



Behind every good Protagonist there's an Antagonist waiting to get out.

Antagonists – or in the broadest sense, the forces of antagonism – constitute **the obstacle to your Protagonist** getting what she wants.



The **“forces of antagonism”** can be any impersonal entity against which the Protagonist has to pit his wits:

- a volcano,
- a tornado,
- Mt Everest.

Some characters play this role. Think of Anton Chigurh, played by Javier Bardem in No Country for Old Men. He was less mean-spirited or psychopathic killer than force of nature.



Whatever the “external” antagonist is, however (The Fixer, The Wicked Witch of the West, Hannibal Lector), there is almost always also an **Internal Antagonist**: the flaw in your Protagonist that threatens to trip him up, or seduce him away from his quest, or cause such doubt to set in that he falters in his endeavours.



**External Antagonists** should be as entertaining as possible, even when they're evil as the devil himself.

And by entertaining we mean really bad, but in a stylish way; or really bad, but so clever in their badness that we cannot help but admire them; or really, really bad, but charming. You get the idea.



Challenge your Protagonist by giving your Antagonist the best arguments.

**In Act One, you establish the world in which your story takes place; you introduce us to your major characters; and you set the story in motion.**



The very **opening minutes** of every screenplay should be as compelling as possible, both to catch the attention of the producer and, ultimately, of your audiences.

Think of the opening of any of the more recent 007 movies. They start with the climactic end of his previous assignment, usually featuring a frenetic chase and culminating with a beautiful blonde. All this before the story starts – but it’s an attention grabber. And it works.



**Act One introduces your Protagonist.** (In a romcom, it introduces both your male and your female leads.) It does so as inventively or dynamically as possible. It also establishes what your Protagonist wants – even if, at this moment, he’s not aware of what he lacks.



**Act One also introduces the Antagonist**, although his true nature might not yet be apparent. In some stories, the existence of the Antagonist is simply foreshadowed, or hinted at.



The first act also contains the catalyst for the story, the so-called **Inciting Incident**.

Just as a pebble tossed into a pond creates ripples that reach across the water, so the Inciting Incident kicks the story into life, rippling across the fabric of the next hour and a half of your story.

- In *The Wizard of Oz* the Inciting Incident is the tornado that whirls Dorothy out of Kansas and into the Land of Oz.
- In *Tootsie*, the Inciting Incident is Michael Dorsey being told that he’ll never land another acting job because of his cantankerous personality.
- In *The Godfather*, the attempt on Don Corleone’s life sets the story in motion.



And finally, Act One sees the **Protagonist accepting the challenge** presented by the Inciting Incident. He might do so only after doubting his abilities to take on the journey, but, reluctant or not, he eventually makes a commitment.



Act one usually takes up **20 to 30 minutes of screen time** – which is to say, more or less the same number of pages of your script.

**The Second Act of any screenplay is a much more difficult proposition than Act One.**

**It involves the Protagonist actively pursuing his goal, and the Antagonist attempting to prevent him from achieving his goal.**



From the moment the Protagonist accepts the challenge presented by the Inciting Incident, from the moment, in other words, that he accepts the **“invitation to adventure”**, he must fight for the satisfaction of his burning hunger.

- In *The Fugitive*, Dr Richard Kimble devotes himself completely firstly to evading the US Marshal, then to identifying his wife’s killer. The Marshal is a formidable Antagonist, even after he becomes convinced of Kimble’s innocence. The actual killers of his wife then try to sabotage his efforts to find them.



In his **hunt for solutions** to his problem, the Protagonist is likely to choose the worst option first.

He fails.

He throws himself back into the fray, choosing a different tactic.

He fails again.



At a certain point in the story – usually more or less midway through the second act, the Protagonist is ready to throw in the towel.

But then something persuades him to **commit himself anew** to the struggle.

Leaner and meaner, he returns to the field of conflict.



The writer keeps the Protagonist under constantly **increasing pressure** as he takes on the Antagonist – or a series of Antagonists – through this act.

The Antagonists try unrelentingly to devise new threats to the Protagonist’s wellbeing.

The tension and suspense created by this rising action keeps your audiences glued to their seats.



Act Two ends in a **climactic duel** between Antagonist and Protagonist which the Protagonist loses.

In the first Star Wars movie, (*Star Wars Episode IV - A New Hope*) Obi Wan Kenobi is cut in half by the light sabre of Darth Vader. Could things get worse?



Act Two generally spans **60 minutes** or so – fifty to sixty pages.

**In Hollywood, the conventional wisdom has it that writers should spend eighty per cent of their time on devising and perfecting the third act, since memories of this act is what your audiences will take away with them, and tell their friends about.**

**Boxoffice success is said to depend unusually, therefore, on the success of Act Three.**



The third act is often the shortest of all the acts. If the first act is 25 – 30 minutes long, and the second 50 – 60, then the third act is **15 to 20 minutes** in length.

This suggests that it is fast moving, well organized, and that there are no new characters.



The business of Act Three is the **resolution of the story**.

This is where the ending is revealed and where loose ends are tied up.



There can be an **air of inevitability** about the events of Act Three.

Your Protagonist has done battle (whether it's a romcom or a thriller) all through Act Two. Now he resorts to the only tactics he has left.



Your **Protagonist completes his character arc** in this act. If he was complacent and smug in Act One, then by Act Three he must be something very different: sharp and disillusioned, perhaps.



Once your **Protagonist has achieved his goal** – once Gary Cooper has shot the outlaws in High Noon – the story is over. The tension that sustained it throughout three acts (will he get what he wants and needs?) has been released, and it's time to bring down the curtain on the movie.

Do so as quickly as possible. (In High Noon, the story's over when Gary Cooper shoots down the surviving outlaw – and within a minute and ten seconds the final credits are rolling.)



The **final twist** in your story should be unpredictable (except in hindsight!) but motivated by character and the foreshadowing you've carefully introduced at earlier points in the story.

In High Noon, Gary Cooper's bitter rejection of the fickle inhabitants of Hadleyville, is the final surprise of the story – but it's totally explicable in terms of his character.

**And then, once your hero's journey is done,  
there's nothing you can do more usefully than type  
THE END**