

# Screenwriting Tips

*Notes courtesy of J. Hoxter, Professor at SFSU at the Department of Cinema*

## Show Don't Tell

- Film is a visual medium
- Write only what is seen
- Viewers cannot see internal motivation and dialogue
- Try not to have characters tell us things that we can see on screen

"They're eating her—and then they're going to eat me! Oh my God!"

## Never Waste Anything

*Making fists with your toes*—In the movie *Die Hard*, John McClane takes a flight to Los Angeles and meets a passenger who tells him that making fists with his toes relieves stress. This scene seems kind of pointless at first—that is until McClane sits down and finally takes off his shoes to try it out. Why is it important? McClane has to run circles around the bad guys with guns, in a building full of broken glass, in his bare feet. Nothing wasted.

## Exposition

- Disguise information
- Actions can do more than one job at the same time
- Give your audience work—your audience loves work!

*The Ipcress File*—this 1960s British espionage film is a great example of exposition. I recommend watching the first 7 minutes. See how much you can learn about Harry Palmer (Michael Caine) just by his morning routine.

## Development

These documents are a really good way to plan your story and you can start one at any time in the process.

### Pitch/Logline

- One or two sentences that explains the concept

Imagine you are in an elevator with a studio executive and you have 30s to convince him/her to produce your idea. This is called the “elevator pitch”.

You can also start with: (Your title) is a (genre) about a (description of protagonist) who must (surface goal) or (bad things will happen)

## Treatment

- The spine
- Write out all of the "best bits" of the story

## Outline

- Complete work-through of the story
- All the parts in-between

## Breakdown

- Pre-production document
- Props, cast, locations, etc.

## Beat Sheet

- Pin down all the key events
- Step by step
- Every action & reaction

## Screenplay

- 2 or more drafts

## Plot, Theme, Story

*The Plot* is the external mechanism used to tell the story

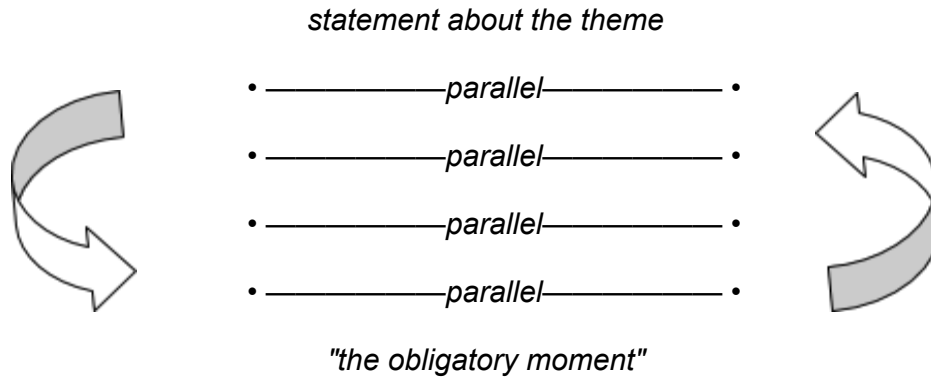
*The Theme* is the organizing challenge or problem the protagonist must face up to and attempt to overcome (like rejection to acceptance)

*The Story* is about the internal challenges as your protagonist attempts to resolve the theme

### *Story Structure: Ring Composition*

*The Ring Composition is a tool used to organize a story according to the changes in the relationship between a protagonist and his/her theme. In this story structure, there are parallels between moments at the beginning and moments at the end of the story. In the movie Brave for example, there is a parallel moment between the action of Merida tearing the tapestry and mending it together. The theme was separation to connection.*

*The Obligatory Moment is the moment right before the third act when the protagonist gathers his/her resolve and finally ties up all the loose ends in his/her story.*



### Story Structure: The "W" Model

*This story structure typically applies to a full length script but it is still useful to understand. Watch How to Train Your Dragon for an example of the Three Act structure.*

### Story Structure: Three Acts

#### Act One: *Recognition*

- Primary Exposition
- Desire Beat: What does the protagonist want?
- Debate: What is in the way?

#### Act Two: *Bookending Change*

- About Character Development: Becoming a functional character

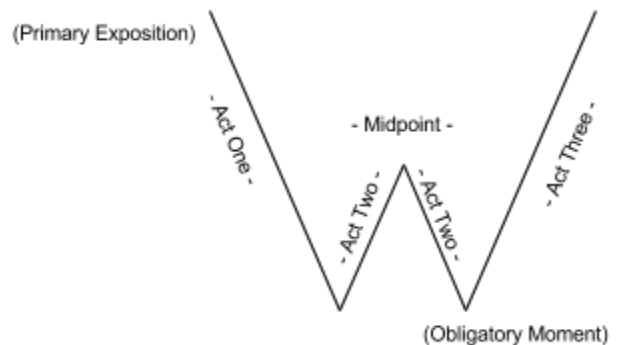
#### *Avoidance*

- Things get harder until the midpoint
- Moving forward but avoiding what the real goal is
- Pushed to the limits

#### *Commitment (Midpoint)*

- From leap to crisis: As soon as the protagonist finds his/her resolve, the problem becomes do or die
- From crisis to revelation

#### Obligatory Moment



- A reversal tied to the theme of the story

*Act Three: Resolution*

- Plan and pushback
- Resolution and its meaning