

8 Simple Rules for Storytelling for the Screen

STORYTELLING FOR THE SCREEN – AN OVERVIEW

What is a Screenplay?

- * A story told with pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure
- * Like a NOUN - about a person (or persons), in a place (or places), doing his (or her) thing
 - * Character and action
- * Has a beginning, middle and end (though not always in that order)

The 8 Rules

1. An ounce of reality is worth a pound of dreams
2. Write Simple Stories & Complex Characters
3. Write with Authenticity
4. Identify & Articulate the Film's Spine
5. Identify & Articulate the Character Spines
6. There's Nothing New Under the Sun –
The 36 Dramatic Situations
7. The Foundation -The 3 Act Structure
8. Don't Break the Rules Just Because They Are
Difficult to Follow

1. An Ounce of Reality

- * It ain't literature
 - * No market for published scripts
- * The final product is a film - a collaboration of writer(s), director, actors, DP, etc
- * The final product needs to communicate your ideas & engage an audience
 - * So the script needs to clearly communicate those ideas/concepts to the director, etc
 - * What isn't clearly communicated doesn't get seen

2. Write Simple Stories & Complex Characters

- * Let your audience easily understand what's going on
- * Let your characters make them care
- * Plot shouldn't overshadow characters
- * People made your last visit to Perkins interesting, not the process of ordering and preparing your meal

3. Write with Authenticity

- * Truth vs Authenticity
 - * Truth is a statement
 - * Authenticity is a process
- * Authenticity:
 - * Of the story –
 - * the journey and the destination need to feel unified
 - * Of character actions –
 - * Unity of actions, motivations and outcomes
 - * Helps avoid Deus Ex Machina - “God Out of the Machine”
- * Comes from an organized, disciplined writing process

4. Identify & Articulate the Film's Spine

- * The unifying force behind the story
– thematic unity
- * Keeps the story on track
- * Provides a foundation for the character's spines (wants/goals)
- * Indicates the end of the film

4. Identify & Articulate the Film's Spine

Examples:

- * 8 ½ - to lead an authentic life
- * Long Day's Journey Into Night – to probe within oneself for the lost “something”
- * Mr. Bean's Holiday – to achieve ones goals overcoming all obstacles
- * Chinatown – if you have enough money, you can get away with murder

5. Identify & Articulate the Character's Spines

- * Brings authenticity to your characters behavior
- * Helps the audience to care
- * Reduces the “Steven Segal” Factor
- * Drives character arc – Creates dramatic tension/conflict

5. Identify & Articulate the Character's Spines

Examples:

- * 8 ½ -
 - * Guido – to live a life without a lie
 - * Guido's Wife – to have a marriage that is not a lie
 - * Carla – to be loved (by Guido and her husband)
- * Long Day's Journey into Night
 - * Tyrone – to maintain his “fatherhood”
 - * Mary – to find her bearings - her “home”
 - * Edmund – to discover or understand the truth
- * Mr Bean's Holiday
 - * Mr Bean – to get to the beach
 - * Carson Clay – to be recognized as a great filmmaker
 - * Sabine – to become a great actress
 - * Stepan – to get back to his father
 - * Emil – to recover his son

6. The 36 Dramatic Situations

- * History

 - * 1926

 - * Georges Polti

 - * Survey of all literature

- * Conflict (or dramatic tension)

- * Book and Summary available in electronic format

7. The Foundation

The 3 Act Structure

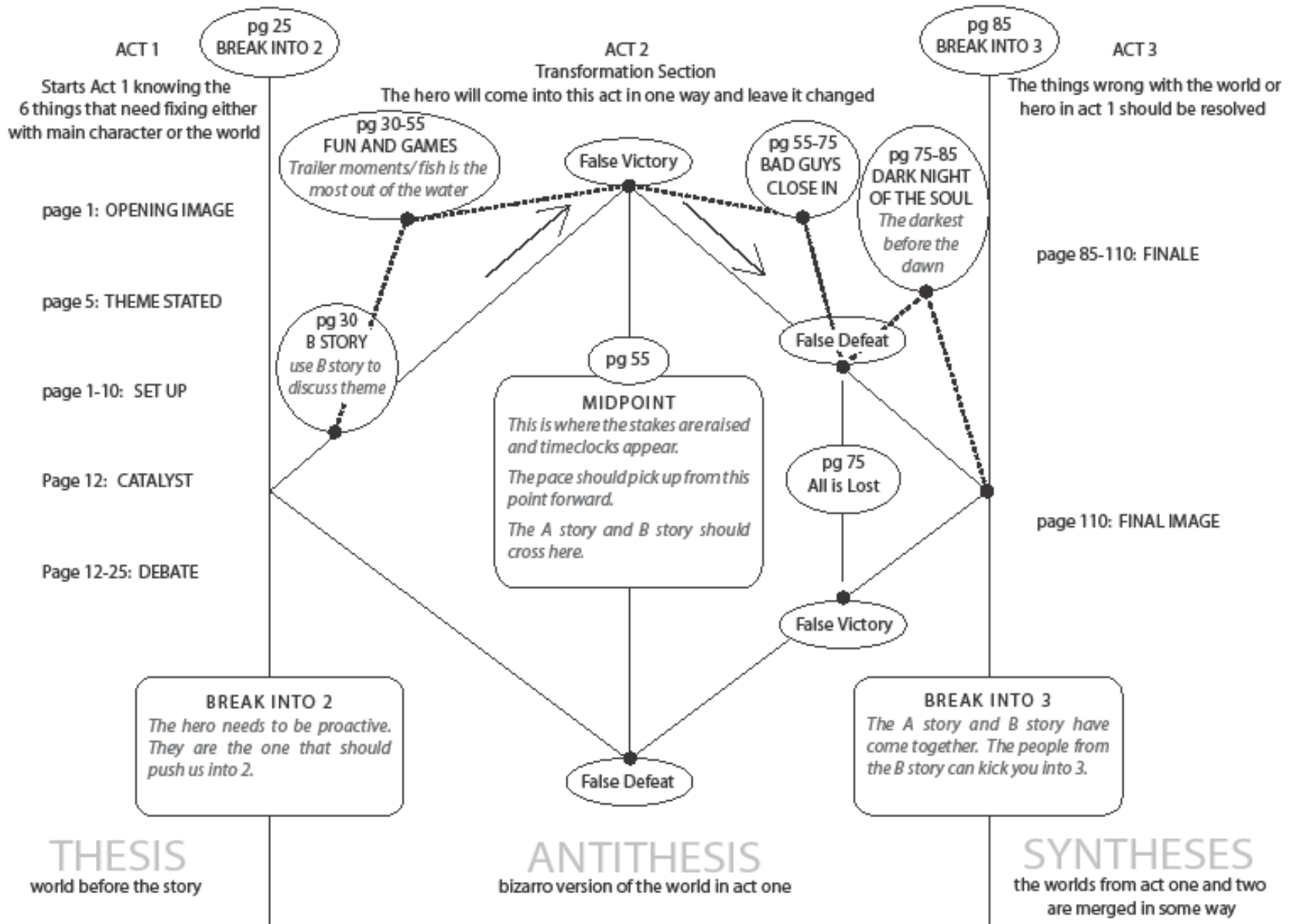
- * Basis for 90+% of screenplays & other storytelling methods
- * Framework for the writer
- * It's a rule because it works
 - * Fulfills an unconscious expectation of the audience
 - * A method to manage audience interest and involvement

7. The Foundation

The 3 Act Structure – cont'd

- * The Acts
 - * Plot Points are throughout the script – they move the story forward toward the resolution
 - * The Plot Points at the ends of acts are anchors of the storyline and hold the paradigm in place
 - * ACT 1 - Beginning (the Set Up/Situation/Idea)
 - * Pp. 1 – 30
 - * 1st 10 pages – intro the main character, dramatic premise (what it's about), dramatic situation (circumstances surrounding the action)
 - * Plot Point at pp. 25-27 – hooks into the action and spins it into another direction
 - * ACT 2 - Middle (the Complications/Confrontation)
 - * Pp. 30 – 90
 - * Plot Point at pp. 85-90 – hooks into the action and spins it into another direction
 - * ACT3 – End (the Conclusion/Climax/Catharsis/Wrap Up/Resolution)
 - * Pp. 90 - 120

SCRIPT STRUCTURE



8. Don't Break the Rules Just Because They are Difficult to Follow

- * Discover all the rules of film making
- * Understand them – why they work and what they do
- * Practice using them until you are an expert
- * Then break them if you need to

Conclusion

- * 90% perspiration / 10% inspiration
- * Rules are made to be understood – then broken if it makes a point
- * Dramatic tension (conflict)
- * The “Art” is in the sum of all the contributions to the project, not any one part
- * The goal is a completed film

Homework – Watch a Movie

Write Down:

- * Title, Director, Screenwriter
- * Spines
 - * What was the film's spine
 - * What were the main character's spines
- * Plot driven or character driven – and why
- * Authenticity – was it believable and why

Homework – Watch a Movie

* 3 Act Structure

* Act 1 (Set Up)

- * In the first 10 minutes, did they:
 - * Intro the main character
 - * Show what the film is about
 - * Identify the circumstances surrounding the action
- * What was the plot point at the end of Act 1 (25 – 30 min)

* Act 2 (Confrontation/Complication)

- * What was the confrontation or complication in Act 2
- * What was the plot point at the end of Act 2 (85 – 90 min)

* Act 3 (Resolution):

- * Does it resolve the film's spine
- * How did you feel about the resolution and why