

SCRIPTWRITING FOR VIDEO, BROADCAST, AND DIGITAL MEDIA



Noemi Zeigler
Laney College

Scriptwriting for Video, Broadcast, and Digital Media

This text is disseminated via the Open Education Resource (OER) LibreTexts Project (<https://LibreTexts.org>) and like the thousands of other texts available within this powerful platform, it is freely available for reading, printing, and "consuming."

The LibreTexts mission is to bring together students, faculty, and scholars in a collaborative effort to provide an accessible, and comprehensive platform that empowers our community to develop, curate, adapt, and adopt openly licensed resources and technologies; through these efforts we can reduce the financial burden borne from traditional educational resource costs, ensuring education is more accessible for students and communities worldwide.

Most, but not all, pages in the library have licenses that may allow individuals to make changes, save, and print this book. Carefully consult the applicable license(s) before pursuing such effects. Instructors can adopt existing LibreTexts texts or Remix them to quickly build course-specific resources to meet the needs of their students. Unlike traditional textbooks, LibreTexts' web based origins allow powerful integration of advanced features and new technologies to support learning.



LibreTexts is the adaptable, user-friendly non-profit open education resource platform that educators trust for creating, customizing, and sharing accessible, interactive textbooks, adaptive homework, and ancillary materials. We collaborate with individuals and organizations to champion open education initiatives, support institutional publishing programs, drive curriculum development projects, and more.

The LibreTexts libraries are Powered by [NICE CXone Expert](#) and were supported by the Department of Education Open Textbook Pilot Project, the California Education Learning Lab, the UC Davis Office of the Provost, the UC Davis Library, the California State University Affordable Learning Solutions Program, and Merlot. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1246120, 1525057, and 1413739.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation nor the US Department of Education.

Have questions or comments? For information about adoptions or adaptations contact info@LibreTexts.org or visit our main website at <https://LibreTexts.org>.

The LibreTexts name, logo, and book covers are trademarked by LibreTexts, Inc. (a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization) and protected against unauthorized use.

This text was compiled on 09/10/2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

Author's Note

Introduction

1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

- 1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke
- 1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY

2: Story Beats- The DNA of Story

- 2.1: Story Beats- The DNA of Story
- 2.2: Beats in Short Films
- 2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS

3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme

- 3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme
- 3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE

4: Loglines- Your Story's North Star

- 4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star
- 4.2: WORKSHEET- BUILDING AND TESTING YOUR LOGLINE

5: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story

- 5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story
- 5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS

6: Character and the World of Story

- 6.1: Character and the World of Story
- 6.2: WORKSHEET- BUILD YOUR CHARACTER AND WORLD

7: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down

- 7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down
- 7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding
- 7.3: WORKSHEET- MAP YOUR CHARACTER'S JOURNEY

8: Building Your Beat Sheet

- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet
- 8.2: Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot
- 8.3: WORKSHEET- TURN YOUR IDEA INTO A BEAT SHEET

9: Formatting

- 9.1: Screenplay Formatting Essentials
- 9.2: Special Formatting Situations
- 9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE

10: The Anatomy of a Scene

10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene

10.2: Sample Scene from His Girl Friday

10.3: WORKSHEET- WRITE A SCENE WITH DRAMATIC ARC

11: Dialogue

11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact

11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques

11.3: WORKSHEET- APPLY THE TOOLS

12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience

12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?

12.2: Working Within Genre

12.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITE YOUR LOGLINE FOR DIFFERENT GENRES

13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes

13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes

13.2: Representation and Perspective

13.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITE A TROPE

14: Writing a TV Series

14.1: What Makes a TV Pilot Different?

14.2: Building Your Series Bible

14.3: TV PILOT WORKSHEET

15: Rewriting

15.1: Writing is Rewriting

15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script

15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE

Index

Glossary

Detailed Licensing

Detailed Licensing

Licensing

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](#).

You are free to copy, share, and adapt this material for any purpose, even commercially, as long as you give appropriate credit to the author.

*A detailed breakdown of this resource's licensing can be found in **Back Matter/Detailed Licensing**.*

Author's Note

I've been teaching film, media, and storytelling for more than twenty years, and here's the most important thing I've learned: students don't develop their voices by memorizing theory. They learn by doing: trying something, reflecting on it, and then trying again.

My goal isn't for you to write like me or anyone else. I want to help you find your own voice on the page. That's why this book doesn't focus on strict rules. Instead, I ask direct questions and give clear, practical feedback to help you improve and express what makes your writing unique.

I earned my MFA in Film Directing from the American Film Institute, one of the most competitive programs in the country. I studied alongside filmmakers like Mark Waters (*Mean Girls*), Darren Aronofsky (*Requiem for a Dream*), Rob Schmidt (*Crime and Punishment in Suburbia*), and Frank Reynolds, editor of *Tromeo and Juliet*. As a film teacher, I've had the chance to work with hundreds of creative, talented and inspiring upcoming writers and filmmakers. I'm still humbled that I even got to teach a young filmmaker named Ari Aster (*Midsommar*, *Hereditary*). Or, at least, that I didn't mess him up. 😊

All those filmmakers had one important thing in common: they knew exactly what they wanted to say. They didn't chase trends or try to be commercial. Their work was original, personal, and honest. We'll look at examples from them and others as we go through this book.

I really believe good writing doesn't begin with trying to make a hit. It starts with wanting to say something honest.

Right now, I'm turning my one-woman musical comedy *You've Been Served* into a feature screenplay after performing it around the world. This process reminds me of what I always tell my students: mastering short forms, such as a joke, a TikTok story, or a short film, is harder than it seems. But when you do it well, it can really stand out. So let's start small, get the basics down, and build from there.

AI tools were used as part of the writing process to support research, outline development, and revision. The author remains fully responsible for the content, structure, and pedagogical approach of this textbook.

Epigraph

"If you have something to say, write it, and say it as clearly as you can."

— **Billy Wilder**, writer-director (*Sunset Boulevard*, *Some Like It Hot*)

Introduction

Long before screens, people gathered around fires to share stories about who we are, why we struggle, and what we hope for. Now, we gather around the glowing screens in our hands. The technology is different, but our need to tell stories hasn't changed.

Storytelling is how people connect. It's how we share experiences, teach values, and help each other feel understood. That's why it's important to support many different voices, including women, Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and creators from all backgrounds. Every new perspective helps us imagine more and brings our community together.

When you stop to watch a TikTok or a short film, you're taking part in an old tradition. You pause, pay attention, and look for connection. The pace of life has changed, but our need for meaning remains the same. Whether you're working on a three-act feature film, a thirty-second viral clip, a brand video, or a big series, the core principles of telling a compelling story never change.

1: STORYTELLING STARTS WITH A JOKE

1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY

This page titled [1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

When Tragedy Gets a Laugh

When I was an undergraduate film student, I wanted to be the next Ingmar Bergman. His films are moody, poetic, and existential. In *The Seventh Seal*, a knight bargains for his life by playing chess with Death, who wears a white face and black cloak. For my 16mm film, I re-imagined Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from Ophelia's perspective.

The film was accepted into the prestigious Ann Arbor Film Festival, which felt like a dream come true. But when it screened at the historic Michigan Theater, something completely unexpected happened. Everyone laughed. What I intended as tragedy played like dark comedy. It took me years to understand that my voice as a filmmaker naturally bends toward irony and humor.

Since then, I have embraced that truth as both a performer and storyteller. I have toured my one-woman show *You've Been Served* internationally, exploring heartbreak and midlife transformation through musical comedy. Through creating and performing *You've Been Served*, I learned that laughter doesn't cheapen emotion. It illuminates it.

Every story, whether tragic or funny, begins with the same fundamental pattern: setup, expectation, and surprise.

The First Film Joke

One of the earliest films ever shown to a paying audience was *L'Arroseur Arrosé* ("The Sprinkler Sprinkled"), directed by the Lumière brothers in 1895.

L'Arroseur Arrosé

L'Arroseur Arrosé (also known as *The Waterer Watered* and *The Sprinkler Sprinkled*) is an 1895 French short black-and-white silent comedy film directed and produced by Louis Lumière and starring François Clerc and Benoît Duval. It was first screened on June 10, 1895.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



The film lasts less than a minute. A gardener waters his plants while a mischievous boy secretly steps on the hose. When the water stops flowing, the gardener looks into the nozzle to investigate. The boy lifts his foot, and water sprays the gardener directly in the face.

The joke works because it follows a simple pattern. First, the film establishes a situation. Then it creates an expectation about how that situation should work. Finally, it breaks that expectation with a surprise.

The gardener waters plants. The water stops. The gardener gets sprayed.

More than a century later, storytellers still rely on this same rhythm. The technology has changed. Human psychology has not.

Stories Follow the Same Pattern

Whether it is a joke, a TikTok, a commercial, a music video, or a feature film, audiences stay engaged because expectations are created and transformed.

Stories create questions.

Stories delay answers.

Stories surprise us.

That surprise may make us laugh. It may make us cry. It may make us nervous or curious. The emotional response changes, but the underlying structure remains remarkably consistent.

Example: *Who TF Did I Marry?*

A modern example comes from Reesa Teesa's viral TikTok series *Who TF Did I Marry?*, which attracted hundreds of millions of views.

The series begins with what appears to be a familiar relationship story. Reesa describes a charming, successful man who seems eager to build a future with her. As viewers listen, they naturally begin forming expectations about where the story is headed.

Then the contradictions begin.

A job does not exist. A financial claim falls apart. A story fails to add up.

Each revelation breaks an expectation established moments earlier. Even though the series unfolds across dozens of short videos, the storytelling engine remains the same. Every installment creates a question, answers it, and introduces a new surprise that keeps viewers watching.

The platform is new. The storytelling principle is ancient.

Music Video Example: *When the Party's Over*

Not every setup, expectation, and surprise is designed to make us laugh. The same pattern can create sadness, wonder, fear, or emotional revelation.

A powerful example appears in Billie Eilish's music video "*When the Party's Over*" (2018), directed by Carlos López Estrada.

When the Party's Over

Music video by Billie Eilish performing When the Party's Over. © 2018 Darkroom/Interscope Records

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



The video begins with Billie sitting alone in a stark white room. A glass filled with black liquid sits in front of her. Eventually she lifts the glass and drinks. At first, the moment feels quiet and contemplative.

Then something unexpected happens.

Black ink begins streaming from her eyes.

The surprise transforms a simple action into a visual metaphor. What begins as a person taking a drink becomes an image of emotional pain spilling outward. The power of the scene comes from the shift between what we expect and what actually occurs.

The structure is the same as the gardener joke. Only the emotion has changed.

Key Takeaway

Setup, expectation, and surprise are the smallest building blocks of storytelling.

A joke uses them.

A TikTok uses them.

A music video uses them.

A feature film uses them.

A TV series uses them.

The scale changes, but the underlying pattern remains the same.

Setup, expectation, and surprise are not just tools for comedy. They are how stories hold our attention. Every time a storyteller creates curiosity, delays an answer, or reveals new information, they're using this pattern. Learning to recognize it will help you write stronger scenes, stories, videos, and social media content.

In the next chapter, we will build on this idea and explore how stories are constructed from many small moments of change called beats.

References

L'Arroseur Arrosé. Directed by Louis Lumière and Auguste Lumière, Lumière Company, 1895.

When the Party's Over. Performed by Billie Eilish, directed by Carlos López Estrada, Darkroom and Interscope Records, 2018.

Teesa, Reesa. *Who TF Did I Marry?* TikTok series, 2024.

1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY

Writing Your First Joke

Every great story begins with a shift in expectation. Jokes are the purest form of that principle. In this exercise, you'll build a joke using the classic rhythm: setup - expectation - surprise. Then you'll practice translating that rhythm into visual storytelling.

Part 1. Build a Three-Beat Joke

Step 1. Setup

Write a simple statement that establishes a situation.

Step 2. Expectation

Write something that creates a predictable pattern for the audience.

Step 3. Surprise

Break the pattern in an unexpected yet connected way.

Part 2. Turn Your Joke Into a Visual Gag

Rewrite your three beats using only action. No dialogue.

Show what the audience sees.

Step 1. Visual Setup

Step 2. Visual Expectation

Step 3. Visual Surprise

Part 3. From Joke to Movie Premise

Expand your gag by asking, "What if this behavior defined a character's life?"

Write a one-sentence movie premise based on the logic or chaos of your joke.

Your Movie Premise

Part 4. Reflection

What type of humor feels most natural to you: absurd, dark, awkward, self-deprecating, physical, or something else?

This can reveal the tone and voice you bring to storytelling.

Your Reflection

This page titled [1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

2: STORY BEATS- THE DNA OF STORY

2.1: Story Beats- The DNA of Story

2.2: Beats in Short Films

2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS

This page titled [2: Story Beats- The DNA of Story](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

2.1: Story Beats- The DNA of Story

Finding the Story in the Beats

When I was a directing student at the American Film Institute, I learned this lesson the hard way. I was given a large crew to work on a twenty-minute script I had written. I had only shot films under 10 minutes with at most a few other crew members, and I mostly shot by instinct. This was intimidating.

On the first day of the shoot, we achieved dramatic lighting, expressive camera moves, and a stunning dolly shot that took so long to execute that the cinematographer threatened to walk off the set. But when we screened the film in front of the entire class, everyone was confused. The program's director, Desz  Magyar, identified the problem: we never saw the protagonist make a choice. The character drifted from one well composed shot to another, but the emotional throughline was missing.

That experience changed everything. I realized the story was not in the images alone. The story was in the moments where the character wanted something, faced an obstacle, and changed. In other words, the story lived in the beats.

When I made my next film, I sat down and wrote out every beat before I picked up the camera. *What does she want in this moment? What is stopping her? What does she do next?* That simple shift transformed the way I worked.

What Is a Beat?

A beat is the smallest unit of dramatic action.

A beat occurs whenever something changes. The change might involve a new objective, a new tactic, new information, a shift in power, or higher stakes. What matters is that the situation is different from what it was before.

Imagine a character entering a room smiling. She sees her ex. Her expression drops. She turns and leaves.

Each shift is a beat.

The character's behavior changes because her circumstances change. If nothing changes, the story doesn't move forward.

Beats Connect to Setup, Expectation, and Surprise

Chapter One introduced the rhythm of setup, expectation, and surprise.

Beats follow the same principle.

A character wants something.

The audience forms an expectation.

Something changes.

The story moves forward.

Not every beat is dramatic. Some are small, and some are enormous. But every beat creates a shift that pushes the audience into the next moment.

Beats Build Scenes

One beat is a shift.

Several beats create a scene.

Several scenes create a story.

Learning to identify beats helps writers understand why scenes work, where they stall, and how tension builds over time.

Beats in Action: *Poor Cinderella*

A useful example comes from *Poor Cinderella* (1934), a Betty Boop cartoon directed by Dave Fleischer.

At the beginning of the film, Betty dreams of attending the royal ball while her stepsisters treat her like a servant. We understand what she wants almost immediately. She longs for something larger than her current life.

As the story progresses, new obstacles appear. Her stepsisters leave her behind. Her goal seems impossible.

Then the fairy godmother arrives.

Suddenly, a new possibility opens up.

Each of these moments is a beat. The situation changes. The character's options change. The audience's expectations change.

That is what beats do. They push a story forward one shift at a time.

Poor Cinderella (1934)

In her only color cartoon, Betty Boop goes to the ball thanks to the good fairy; Once there, she takes the fancy of Prince Charming but has to flee as the clock strikes midnight.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



References

Poor Cinderella. Directed by Dave Fleischer, Fleischer Studios, 1934.

2.2: Beats in Short Films

Beats in Short Films

The principles of beats can be seen throughout film history.

In *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), scientists travel to the moon expecting discovery and adventure. Their expectations are disrupted when they encounter hostile moon creatures. The story advances because the situation changes.

A Trip to the Moon

[A Trip to the Moon](#) (Le Voyage dans la Lune) is a 1902 French adventure film directed by Georges Méliès.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



In *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), outlaws successfully rob a train and attempt to escape. New beats emerge as pursuit and conflict complicate their plans. What seemed easy becomes dangerous.

The Great Train Robbery

Considered the first narrative film, "The Great Train Robbery" was directed and photographed by Edwin S. Porter, a former cameraman for the Thomas Edison Company.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



A more contemporary example appears in *Hair Love* (2019), directed by Matthew A. Cherry. The film begins with a father trying to help his daughter style her hair. He struggles repeatedly, creating obstacle after obstacle. Later, we discover the deeper emotional reason why this moment matters. The revelation transforms our understanding of everything that came before it.

Hair Love

Oscar®-Winning Short Film (Full) | Sony Pictures Animation.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



Although these films differ in style, era, and length, they all rely on the same principle. Characters encounter obstacles. New information emerges. Expectations shift.

The story moves forward because the beats move forward.

Key Takeaway

Story beats are the DNA of narrative.

Every beat creates change.

Every scene is built from beats.

Every story is built from scenes.

As writers, our job is to understand what changes, when it changes, and why it matters.

In the next chapters, we will build on these beats to create stronger characters, scenes, and complete stories.

References

A Trip to the Moon. Directed by Georges Méliès, Star Film Company, 1902.

Cherry, Matthew A., director. *Hair Love*. Sony Pictures Animation, 2019.

The Great Train Robbery. Directed by Edwin S. Porter, Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903.

This page titled [2.2: Beats in Short Films](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS

Before you write a scene or even a logline, you can learn a lot by sketching the first few beats of your story. These opening beats help you clarify your character's desire and the forces working against them. Keep each beat to one or two sentences. Stay visual and simple.

Step 1. Opening Image

Who is your protagonist, and what visual tells us about their life before the story begins?

Step 2. Setup of Want

What does your character want at the beginning? What emotional or practical desire shapes their first actions?

Step 3. First Obstacle

What prevents them from getting what they want? This can be a person, a situation, or a belief.

Step 4. Catalyst

What event changes their situation or challenges their beliefs? This can be a twist, a surprise, or an interruption that propels the story forward.

3: YOU AS A STORYTELLER- STORY, PLOT, STAKES, AND THEME

3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme

3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE

This page titled [3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme

A story is a chain of meaningful actions that comes from character, conflict, and consequence. In this chapter, you'll learn about story, plot, stakes, and theme. Here's the big question: Who are you as a storyteller? When you understand what moves you, and what you return to again and again, you can write scripts that are clear, emotional, and compelling. Most of all, this helps you create stories that feel honest, specific, and unmistakably your own.

What Is Story?

Robert McKee describes a story as a sequence of causally connected events that lead to an ending you can't predict, but that feels inevitable.

- A story is not just "*and then this happened, and then this happened.*"
- A story is "*because this happened, that happened.*"

Stories are driven by loss and gain, hope and fear, choice and consequence. Each beat pushes the character toward a transformation they're not ready to face.

A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. But the real end, but the deeper structure is psychological. At its heart, a story is really the record of a character's internal struggle, shown through their actions and conflicts expressed through external conflict.

What Is Plot?

If story is the emotional journey, plot is the machinery that carries it.

Plot is the series of actions the character takes to pursue their goal. Plot is what we see and hear on the screen.

Here is the difference between Story and Plot:

- Story is the meaning and psychological change. It asks: *What change is taking place within the character?*
- Plot is the external events and actions. It asks: *What is happening and why?*

Both must be clear. If the plot is confusing, the audience cannot follow the story. If the story is weak, the plot feels empty.

What the Character Wants and What They Need

The central engine of story is the tension between what the protagonist wants and what they need.

- A want is external. This could be the job, the relationship, the fame, or the victory.
- A need is internal. This involves healing, self-worth, courage, honesty, or belonging.

The want drives the plot. The need drives the story.

Often, the character's core flaw grows out of their grand passion. When they want something intensely, they may take that desire too far, and it becomes a problem. That problem shapes the conflict.

You Can't Always Get What You Want

In class, I sometimes start singing the Rolling Stones lyrics:

"You can't always get what you want... But if you try sometimes... You get what you need..."

I'm never sure if I am embarrassing my students or myself. Usually both.

But the point lands every time.

Characters chase what they want because they *think* it will fix their lives. But what they need is almost always something deeper and harder to face. The story exists to push them toward what they have avoided.

The want moves the plot forward. The need creates the transformation.

When those two collide, you get drama.

What Are Stakes?

Stakes are what the character stands to lose if they fail.

- If the stakes are low, the story is weak.
- When the stakes rise, the story deepens.

Stakes can be:

- **Practical:** losing a job, losing a home.
- **Emotional:** losing love, losing self-respect.
- **Moral:** becoming someone they fear becoming.
- **Physical:** life or death.

Great writing raises the stakes every time the character makes a choice.

High Stakes in Comedy

Stakes are not just for drama. Comedy often becomes funnier when the stakes feel enormous to the characters.

In *I Love Lucy*, Lucy Ricardo constantly schemes to get into her husband Ricky's nightclub act because she desperately wants attention and recognition.

I Love Lucy

[Lucy and Ethel Work a Candy Factory Assembly Line.](#)

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



In *The Office*, Michael Scott wants his employees to love and admire him, even when his behavior pushes them away.

In *The Bear*, the pressure of running a struggling restaurant turns ordinary kitchen problems into emotional warfare.

The stakes feel huge to the characters. Their desperation, fear, and emotional investment help create the comedy.

A Personal Story: Raising the Stakes in Performance

When I performed *You've Been Served*, I included a scene with a charismatic, manipulative record producer and spiritual guru named Rama. My character believed he might sign her to his label. He gave her drugs, exploited her vulnerability, and filmed her without consent.

In rehearsal, Rama felt flat. I played him aloof and detached, which made him feel too clean.

My director, David Ford, told me the stakes were missing. Rama thrives on gaslighting. The more upset my character becomes, the more power he feels. Once I understood his motive, the scene shifted. My character's rage made sense. The stakes grew higher. The conflict sharpened.

This is why want, need, flaw, and stakes must be crystal clear. Without them, scenes collapse.

Theme: The Meaning Beneath the Plot

Theme is the core idea your story explores. It answers the question, "What is this story really about?"

Theme emerges through action, not speeches.

Examples of Plot and Theme

Jaws is a 1975 thriller directed by Steven Spielberg and written by Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb about a police chief trying to stop a great white shark terrorizing a beach town.

Plot: A shark terrorizes a town.

Theme: You can't let fear control your life.

Get Out is a 2017 horror film written and directed by Jordan Peele about a young Black man who uncovers a disturbing secret while visiting his white girlfriend's family estate.

Plot: A man visits his girlfriend's family and discovers a horrifying secret.

Theme: Evil hides inside friendly faces.

Get Out

The Sunken Place Scene.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this Interactive Content online](#)



Theme in *Poor Cinderella*

We can analyze *Poor Cinderella* using these elements:

- **Plot:** A girl wants to go to the royal ball but is blocked by her stepsisters.
- **Story:** A girl who believes she is unworthy discovers she deserves joy.
- **Stakes:** If she fails, she remains invisible and powerless.
- **Want:** She wants to attend the ball.
- **Need:** She needs to believe she is worthy of love.
- **Catalyst:** A fairy godmother changes her circumstances.
- **Transformation:** The slipper fits. She becomes seen for who she truly is.
- **Theme:** Self-worth transforms fate.

Poor Cinderella

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



More About Theme and Who You Are as a Storyteller

We often dream of writing a blockbuster or winning awards. But chasing commercial appeal too early can cause writers to imitate rather than discover their honest voice.

Great writing speaks to people because it is specific, vulnerable, and truthful. A fresh voice moves and inspires because only *you* could have written it.

This chapter invites you to look inward. Your fears, your dreams, your defining moments, your purpose. These reveal who you are as a storyteller and shape what you offer your audience.

References

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.

Get Out. Directed by Jordan Peele, Universal Pictures, 2017.

Jaws. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Universal Pictures, 1975.

Poor Cinderella. Directed by Dave Fleischer, Fleischer Studios, 1934.

Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2005.

The Rolling Stones. "You Can't Always Get What You Want." *Let It Bleed*, Decca Records, 1969.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. 4th ed., Michael Wiese Productions, 2020.

Weston, Judith. *Directing Actors*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2021.

Zeigler, Noemi. *You've Been Served*. Stage play.

3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE

Your Personal Story Seeds

Answer in simple, honest sentences to uncover the themes you are meant to explore and the emotional truths that shape your voice.

Write down the movie premise you wrote in Chapter 1

Do you notice a recurring image, attitude or theme?

What key event has shaped your life experience?

What are you afraid of?

What do you hope for? What do you dream about?

What are you passionate about sharing with an audience?

What is your unique point of view on the world?

4: LOGLINES- YOUR STORY'S NORTH STAR

4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star

4.2: WORKSHEET- BUILDING AND TESTING YOUR LOGLINE

This page titled [4: Loglines- Your Story's North Star](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star

A logline is a one to two-sentence summary of your story. It's used to pitch, sell, and quickly communicate what your project is about. But its most important function is not marketing. It's clarity.

An experienced writer knows that a strong logline can save weeks, or even months, of writing without direction. Before you commit to a screenplay, the logline forces you to define the core of your story: who the protagonist is, what they want, and what stands in their way. A good logline keeps you honest.

A clear logline becomes a filter for every creative decision that follows. It helps you know when a scene belongs and when it doesn't. It reveals weak stakes and exposes vague objectives. When the logline works, the script has a spine. When it doesn't, the story tends to wander.

In this chapter, we'll break down what makes a logline effective, how it connects to character, conflict, and stakes, and how to use it as a practical tool while you write, revise, and pitch your work.

Why Loglines Matter

Years ago, I took a class with documentary producer and distributor Mitchell Block, founder of Direct Cinema Limited. Mitchell produced many acclaimed documentaries, including *Carrier* (2008), a ten-hour Emmy-winning PBS series, and the Oscar-winning short film *No Lies* (1973). He had a sharp mind, a big personality, and a gift for cutting through fog.

One thing he said has stayed with me ever since:

"If you can't sell your film on the pitch level, then don't bother to make it."

He explained that a strong story reveals itself in its simplest form. A logline is not just marketing; it's a diagnostic tool. If the heart of your story collapses when you reduce it to one sentence, then the project is not clear enough yet.

Over the years, I keep coming back to his words and realizing how right he was. A logline isn't something you throw together to pitch your script at the end. It's something you build early, revise constantly, and rely on to stay focused.

(Mitchell passed away in 2024. I will always remember his generosity as a mentor to many filmmakers, including myself.)

What a Logline Does

Before we break down the ingredients, it's helpful to understand what a logline is meant to do.

A strong logline:

- Defines your protagonist.
- Reveals their flaw.
- States their goal.
- Identifies their obstacle or antagonist.
- Suggests the stakes.
- Hints at the tone, genre, and world.
- Makes us lean in and want more.

A weak logline usually hides behind vague language, broad themes, or mood words that don't communicate story.

Remember: A logline is not a tagline. A tagline goes on a poster. A logline goes into the DNA of your story.

The Essential Ingredients of a Logline

Every effective logline contains a few core elements. These are not rigid rules, but if one is missing, the story usually feels thin or unfocused.

Protagonist With a Clear Identity: A logline must identify who the story is about. Not “a person” or “a young woman,” but something specific.

Examples: An anxious violin prodigy, a jaded divorce lawyer, a lonely cab driver. Specificity creates curiosity.

Character Flaw: The flaw should grow out of the protagonist’s core desire. It’s not random.

For example: A character who needs validation may become manipulative. A character who seeks fairness may become rigid or controlling. The flaw humanizes the protagonist and sets up their transformation.

External Goal: The protagonist must want something that can be filmed.

Examples: Win custody, solve a murder, escape the island, publish the exposé, or get to the audition on time.

Obstacle or Antagonist: This is the force pushing back.

It can be: A person, a system, a secret, an inner demon expressed through behavior, or a ticking clock.

Stakes: What happens if the protagonist fails? If the answer is “nothing much,” the story is not a story. Stakes can be practical, emotional, moral, or physical, but they must feel urgent.

Tone, Genre, and World: You do not need adjectives like “darkly humorous.” The **situation** communicates tone.

Example: “He must babysit his ex-wife’s new husband during a hurricane” already tells us a lot.

What Makes the Story Timely: A detail can hint at why this story matters now. Culture, technology, identity, politics, or social shifts can all be implied without explanation.

How Structure Affects Your Logline

Changing point of view can completely change the meaning of a story.

Taxi Driver

A 1976 psychological drama directed by Martin Scorsese and written by Paul Schrader.

From Travis Bickle’s Perspective: A lonely and unstable taxi driver becomes fixated on saving a teenage sex worker.

From Iris’s Perspective: A teenage girl trapped in exploitation meets a volatile taxi driver who becomes determined to rescue her.

In *Taxi Driver*, Travis is the protagonist, so the first version more accurately reflects the story structure. Your logline should follow the character who drives the central action of the film.

Poor Things

A 2023 dark fantasy film directed by Yorgos Lanthimos and written by Tony McNamara.

Stylized stories often benefit from loglines that evoke the tone and world of the film.

World-Building Version: After being reanimated by an unorthodox surgeon, a naive young woman ventures into society where pleasure, danger, and male authority collide.

Satirical Version: After a radical medical experiment brings her back to life, a woman enters a grotesque Victorian society where sexual freedom, scientific arrogance, and male entitlement are treated as progress.

The world-building version emphasizes the protagonist's journey and world. The satirical version foregrounds satire and thematic tone.

Poor Things

Poor Things Movie Clip - Dancing Scene (2023)

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this Interactive Content online](#)



Scarface

A 1983 crime film directed by Brian De Palma and written by Oliver Stone.

A protagonist does not need to transform from “bad” to “good.”

Crime Saga Version: A ruthless Cuban immigrant claws his way up Miami's cocaine trade.

Character-Driven Version: A ruthless Cuban immigrant claws his way up Miami's cocaine trade, but as his empire expands, his own violent impulses threaten everything he has built.

The character-driven version reveals the protagonist's internal self-destruction and suggests a tragic arc.

Good vs. Weak Loglines

Weak: A woman must find herself after her life falls apart.

Better: A newly divorced woman travels cross-country to confront the woman her husband left her for, only to uncover the deeper wound she has been avoiding. (Specificity creates story.)

What to Reveal and What Not To

You must reveal:

- Protagonist and their flaw
- Goal and main conflict
- Stakes and unique hook

You don't need to reveal:

- The ending
- Every twist
- Every subplot

Reveal enough to prove the story is worth writing.

References and Suggested Viewing

Poor Things. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, screenplay by Tony McNamara, Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

Scarface. Directed by Brian De Palma, screenplay by Oliver Stone, Universal Pictures, 1983.

Taxi Driver. Directed by Martin Scorsese, written by Paul Schrader, Columbia Pictures, 1976.

4.2: WORKSHEET- BUILDING AND TESTING YOUR LOGLINE

Answer in short, specific sentences.

Part One: Clarifying the Story

Who is your protagonist and what do they want?

What is their core flaw?

What is their internal need?

What is at stake if they fail?

Who or what opposes them?

What belief will be challenged?

What will they sacrifice?

What irreversible outcome does the story lead to?

Part Two: Writing the Logline

Write one sentence using character, goal, obstacle, and stakes.

Part Three: Testing Variations

Rewrite the logline by:

Changing the protagonist:

Raising the stakes:

Shifting genre:

Emphasizing a different theme:

Adding specific world details:

This page titled [4.2: WORKSHEET- BUILDING AND TESTING YOUR LOGLINE](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

5: THREE-ACT STRUCTURE AND THE SHAPE OF STORY

5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story

5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS

This page titled [5: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story

Every story needs a shape. Without structure, scenes may be well-written, but the audience will struggle to understand what the story is about or why it matters. In this chapter, we look at the three-act structure not as a rigid formula, but as a practical way to make sure your story moves clearly, escalates meaningfully, and lands with emotional impact.

The Moment of Choice

When I was a directing fellow at the American Film Institute, I worked on my first major project with a full crew. At AFI we had strict limits on production time. I cared about beautiful shots and making every frame look cinematic. Plus, with such fancy dolly equipment and a whole camera department, I assumed I was supposed to make use of everything. On the third hour of our slow dolly push-in to the actors, the cinematographer threatened to walk off the set. I was humiliated.

I didn't prioritize the shots I needed to tell the story.

When my film screened for the entire program, the room was confused. People saw the images but they could not describe the character's journey. Deszo Magyar, the head of the directing program, told me we never saw the protagonist make a choice on screen. He said a story moves when the character commits to an action that can't be undone. We had filmed behavior, not story.

It was painful to hear, but it was the lesson I needed. I realized that structure is simply a path that guides the audience through a character's emotional experience. Structure forces characters to make decisions in the right order so we can follow their internal struggle through the plot. The plot is the sequence of events. The story is the emotional throughline that gives those events meaning.

After that class, I wrote out every beat of my next film. I asked what the protagonist wanted. I asked what stood in her way. I wrote down the moment she made a choice that pushed the story forward and the latest moment where she's furthest from achieving her dreams. It changed everything about how I approached writing and directing.

This is why we learn structure: it gives emotion a shape.

What Three-Act Structure Does

Three-Act Structure is a map. It helps you place the major turning points that shape a story. It mirrors the pattern we explored in Chapter One: Setup, Expectation, Surprise. Only now the beats unfold on a larger scale.

- **Act One** introduces the world, the protagonist, the want, and the catalyst.
- **Act Two** builds conflict and raises the stakes.
- **Act Three** delivers crisis, transformation, and resolution.

Films use it. Television episodes use it. Podcasts use it. Even TikTok series use it. The form changes, but the structure remains the same. It organizes the character's choices and creates meaning.

Act One: The Launch

Act One introduces the protagonist in their ordinary world. We learn what they want. We see their flaw. We meet the people or systems that oppose them. Then something disrupts the world. This event is the Catalyst.

The act break arrives when the protagonist makes a choice. That choice sends them into a new situation. The audience does not follow passive characters. They follow characters who want something and are willing to act.

Act Two: The Struggle

Act Two is where the protagonist tries and fails, then tries again. Obstacles rise. Relationships shift. Stakes grow. The Midpoint reveals new information or raises the danger. It forces the protagonist to see the problem in a new way.

Act Two collapses when the character avoids action. It works when the character keeps making choices that dig them deeper into trouble. Their flaw becomes active. Their want becomes more urgent. Their world becomes more complicated.

Act Three: The Consequence

Act Three begins with Crisis. This is the All Is Lost moment. The protagonist confronts the truth they have been avoiding. They must choose between the want (external) and the need (internal). The need forces growth.

The Climax is the final test. Protagonist and antagonist collide. Someone wins, someone loses. The protagonist gains insight, even if the outcome is painful.

The Resolution shows the transformation. The closing image echoes the opening image through a new lens. We see what has changed and what it cost. We understand who the protagonist has become.

Three Acts Are Big Beats

The three-act structure is a larger version of the pattern we explored in jokes and scenes. A setup expands into Act One. Expectation becomes confrontation as the protagonist moves toward their goal in Act Two. Surprise becomes the resolution of Act Three. The structure grows, but the principles stay the same.

Three-Act Structure Example: *Sorry to Bother You* (2018)

Written and directed by Boots Riley

Sorry to Bother You is a surreal satire set in Oakland that still follows a clear three-act structure.

Logline: A young Black telemarketer discovers that using a “white voice” leads to rapid success at a shady corporation, forcing him to choose between personal advancement and the human cost of his work.

Act One: Cassius Green struggles financially and takes a telemarketing job to avoid eviction. When he learns to use a “white voice,” his sales skyrocket and he is invited into the company’s inner circle.

Sorry to Bother You

White Voice Scene.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this Interactive Content online](#)



Act Two: Cassius is promoted to an elite floor where employees sell morally disturbing services. He is pressured to ignore the consequences of his labor, distance himself from friends, and accept corporate language that masks exploitation. The company increasingly dehumanizes workers while rewarding Cassius for compliance.

Act Three: Cassius can no longer separate success from harm. When the company’s true agenda is revealed, he must decide whether to protect his career or expose the system, even if it costs him everything.

This structure shows how a clear want drives the plot while escalating ethical stakes force the character toward a final choice.

Troubleshooting Three-Act Structure

If Act One feels weak, the protagonist's want may be unclear or the catalyst may not force a real choice. The character may be observing instead of acting.

If Act Two feels flat, the obstacles may not escalate. The protagonist may be reacting instead of deciding. Raise the stakes. Increase pressure. Make inaction costly.

If Act Three feels rushed, the crisis may be missing. The protagonist may not confront the truth they have been avoiding.

If the ending feels empty, return to the opening image. If nothing has changed, the story has no arc. This usually means the want, need, or stakes were unclear at the start.

When a script isn't working, the problem is often structural, not stylistic. Fix the spine before rewriting scenes.

From Idea to Script: Synopsis, Treatment, and Screenplay

Before a script exists, most stories pass through a few key forms.

Synopsis: A short summary of the entire story, usually one to three pages for a feature. It is written in present tense and describes only what we can see and hear. It includes the ending and focuses on actions and consequences.

Treatment: A longer version of the story, usually five to fifteen pages. It reads like a short story but stays cinematic. Dialogue is minimal or implied. Treatments are often used to develop the story or share it with collaborators.

Screenplay: A feature screenplay is typically 90 to 120 pages. One page roughly equals one minute of screen time.

- Act One is usually about 25 to 30 pages.
- Act Two is usually about 45 to 60 pages.
- Act Three is usually about 20 to 30 pages.

Each form builds on the one before it. Skipping these steps often leads to structural problems later.

Expanding Your Story Concept Into a Synopsis

A synopsis is where you first practice holding plot and story together. It forces you to track cause and effect across the entire film.

Write in present tense. Describe behavior, actions, and outcomes. Avoid explaining thoughts or feelings. Let the choices reveal the character.

Three-Act Structure in *Poor Cinderella* (1934)

Act One: Cinderella works in her stepmother's house. She wants to attend the royal ball but is left behind. A fairy godmother appears and transforms her clothes. Cinderella chooses to go to the ball.

Act Two: Cinderella enters the palace, dances with the prince, and hides her identity. The connection grows, but the clock strikes midnight. She panics, runs, and loses one slipper.

Act Three: The prince searches for the owner of the slipper. It fits Cinderella. She leaves her old life behind. Her want and need align.

Examples of Bad Synopses

Telling Feelings Instead of Showing Choices: *Cinderella feels sad and unloved. She feels hopeful. She feels afraid.*

Vague and Generic: *Cinderella wants love, and destiny brings her happiness.*

Internal Monologue Disguised as Plot: *Cinderella believes she is unworthy and learns she is enough.*

These fail because they describe thoughts instead of actions.

References

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Malcolm Heath, Penguin Classics, 1996.

Field, Syd. *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. Delta, 2005.

Fleischer, Dave, director. *Poor Cinderella*. Fleischer Studios, 1934.

McKee, Robert. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. HarperCollins, 1997.

Riley, Boots, director. *Sorry to Bother You*. Annapurna Pictures, 2018.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. 4th ed., Michael Wiese Productions, 2020.

5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS

Now that you understand the shape of the three-act structure, use this worksheet to outline your story in a clear, visual way. You are not writing a script yet. You are practicing holding plot and story together.

Write in the present tense.

Describe only what we can see and hear. Avoid internal thoughts unless they are expressed through action.

Keep each answer concise and specific. This is not prose. It is not a novel so think in actions, decisions, and consequences.

ACT ONE: SETUP

Who is the protagonist?

What does the protagonist want at the start of the story?

What flaw shapes how they go after what they want?

What disrupts their ordinary world?

What choice does the protagonist make that pushes them into Act Two?

ACT TWO: CONFRONTATION

What new world does the protagonist enter?

What obstacles arise and complicate the goal?

How does the protagonist change tactics as pressure increases?

What happens at the midpoint that shifts the story?

How does the protagonist's flaw make the situation worse?

What choice or event pushes the protagonist into Act Three?

ACT THREE: RESOLUTION

What is the crisis or all is lost moment?

What truth must the protagonist face?

What action leads to the climax?

How does the central conflict resolve?

How does the final image echo or contrast the opening image?

6: CHARACTER AND THE WORLD OF STORY

6.1: Character and the World of Story

6.2: WORKSHEET- BUILD YOUR CHARACTER AND WORLD

This page titled [6: Character and the World of Story](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

6.1: Character and the World of Story

Learning to Be Myself in the Room

When I first started teaching filmmaking and directing, I believed I had to walk into the classroom as an infallible authority figure. I thought I needed to present myself as someone who had all the answers and had the vibe of a guru. The problem was that I was not a guru. I was goofy, self-deprecating, vulnerable. A student pointed out that I laughed at my own jokes. I worried that my humor and honesty would undermine my credibility.

But the more I relaxed into who I was, the more the room opened. Conversations got richer. Students had fun and took risks. They took ownership of their ideas. And they invited me into their creative process.

One semester, I made a music video called *Feminem* with students from my directing class. Michael Cotton helped me produce the song with a beat created by Jno Gair. My class built the sets and costumes. They acted in the video. They helped shoot it. The project was born from collaboration. The premise was simple: A professor tries to win the approval of her students by imitating Slim Shady, Nicki Minaj, Lady Gaga, and Madonna. She discovers she can only earn their respect when she is true to herself.

The video later appeared in the *Huffington Post*. But the important part was not the recognition. It was the reminder that a story becomes alive when a character enters a world that challenges them. For me, the classroom became a special world. It pushed me. It exposed my flaw. It urged me to grow. I had to bring my true self into it.

This chapter is about how characters and worlds shape each other, and how the world of your story pushes your protagonist toward transformation.

(Cross reference: For how this transformation becomes part of mythic structure, see Chapter 7 on The Hero's Journey.)

This chapter draws examples from several well-known films that explore how characters are shaped by the worlds they enter. *Mean Girls* is a teen comedy directed by Mark Waters and written by Tina Fey about a homeschooled teenager navigating the social hierarchy of high school. *The Wizard of Oz* is a fantasy film directed by Victor Fleming about a young girl transported from Kansas into the magical world of Oz. *Some Like It Hot*, directed by Billy Wilder and written by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond, follows two musicians who disguise themselves as women after witnessing a mob murder.

What a Character Wants

A character's want is the external goal that drives the story. It is the thing they actively pursue. They believe that when they get it, their life will improve.

Cady wants to fit in.

Dorothy wants to go home.

Joe and Jerry want to survive.

Wants are concrete. They are filmable and usually involve action.

What a Character Needs

A character's need is internal. It is the emotional or psychological shift required for the story to resolve in a meaningful way. Often, the character does not know what they need.

Cady needs integrity and self-respect.

Dorothy needs to value the love already around her.

Joe and Jerry need to move beyond fear-based survival and assume responsibility toward others.

The want drives the plot. The need drives the transformation.

The Flaw Grows Out of the Grand Passion

Pixar says a flaw is the “grand passion taken too far.” This perspective is helpful because the flaw is not random; it grows from the thing the character wants most.

Cady's grand passion is belonging. Her flaw is people-pleasing that grows into manipulation.

Joe and Jerry's grand passion is survival. Joe's flaw is opportunism and impulsive scheming, and Jerry's flaw is avoidance and going along with trouble rather than confronting it.

Dorothy's grand passion is feeling valued and understood. Her flaw is running away from problems and believing the solution lies elsewhere.

The Wizard of Oz.

[Somewhere Over the Rainbow.](#)

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



More Examples:

A student wants to excel so badly that they resort to cheating.

A mother's deep desire for her kids' safety makes her controlling.

A hero wants justice so deeply that he becomes ruthless.

The flaw and the want should point to the same emotional center.

The Spine of the Character

Judith Weston uses the term "spine" to describe the overarching desire that drives the character. It's sometimes called the super objective. It is the thing your character is always doing:

Seeking connection.

Avoiding shame.

Proving worth.

Finding belonging.

The spine stays consistent even as the character changes.

The Antagonist and Pressure

An antagonist is anything that pushes against the character's goal. It doesn't have to be a villain, though it should be external. It can be a person, a system, a belief, or the world itself.

Mean Girls: Regina George and the culture of the Plastics.

The Wizard of Oz: The Wicked Witch of the West.

Some Like It Hot: Spats Colombo and his mob crew.

The antagonist forces choices. Choices reveal character.

Characters in Their Worlds

A character does not exist separately from their world. The world pressures them, exposes their flaw, and forces them to change.

Your job is to design a world that challenges your protagonist in the exact way they need to grow.

Cady Heron discovers that her new high school is loud, hierarchical, and full of unspoken rules. This special world intensifies her longing to belong, exposing the flaw in her grand passion for acceptance, and forcing her to choose between imitation and authenticity.

Mean Girls

Cady Sits with the Plastics.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this Interactive Content online](#)



Dorothy leaves dusty, black-and-white Kansas and enters the vivid, rule-driven world of Oz. This new world challenges her beliefs about home, courage, and belonging. Oz exposes her longing and reshapes her understanding of herself.

Joe and Jerry disguise themselves as women and enter a world with completely different social rules. The world forces them to see themselves and others in a new way.

Symbolic Objects

Symbolic objects reveal inner life without dialogue. They carry emotional weight and help the audience track transformation.

The Crown in *Mean Girls*: The Spring Fling crown represents social power and the illusion that only one girl can “win.” When Cady breaks the crown apart, the action symbolizes dismantling the hierarchy and rejecting the false value system.

The Ruby Slippers in *The Wizard of Oz*: They symbolize agency, possibility, and a power Dorothy does not yet understand she has. They remind her that the strength she needed was within her all along.

Costumes in *Feminem*: Each persona the professor adopts reflects a pressure to imitate cultural icons. The shifting costumes show her struggle between imitation and authenticity.

Archetypes: Jung, Pearson, and Campbell

Characters are often built from universal patterns. These are masks, and a character can shift masks across the story.

- Hero
- Mentor
- Shadow
- Trickster
- Shapeshifter
- Innocent
- Explorer
- Caregiver
- Creator

(Cross-reference: Chapter 7 will explore how archetypes function inside the Hero's Journey.)

Production Design and the World

Production design is the architecture of your world. It includes sets, props, colors, costumes, and environments.

Ask Yourself:

What does the Ordinary World look like?

What does the Special World look like?

What values do these worlds express?

What objects carry meaning?

The world is not just a backdrop. The environment often reflects the internal state of the protagonist.

References

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.

Jung, Carl G. *Man and His Symbols*. Dell Publishing, 1964.

Pearson, Carol S. *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By*. HarperOne, 1998.

Mean Girls. Directed by Mark Waters, written by Tina Fey, Paramount Pictures, 2004.

Some Like It Hot. Directed by Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond, United Artists, 1959.

Weston, Judith. *Directing Actors*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2021.

The Wizard of Oz. Directed by Victor Fleming, screenplay by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allan Woolf, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939.

Additional Influence

Pixar Story Trust. Internal storytelling lectures and development materials.

This page titled [6.1: Character and the World of Story](#) is shared under a license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

6.2: WORKSHEET- BUILD YOUR CHARACTER AND WORLD

Write in simple, visual sentences. Only describe what we can see on screen.

Part 1. Character Bio

Name, age, physical presence

Background (family, environment, upbringing)

Job and feelings about the job

Core relationships (family, friends, rivals)

Grand passion (what they care about most)

Flaw (how the grand passion creates problems)

Fear (something they avoid or dread)

Core wound (a past event that still shapes them)

Want (the external goal we can film)

Need (the internal growth required for resolution)

Part 2. Ordinary World

Describe the character's starting environment. Keep it visual.

Five visual details of the daily environment

Social rules or expectations that shape life here

One symbolic that reveals flaw or longing

Draw or describe a storyboard panel of this world

Part 3. Special World

Describe the contrasting world the character will eventually enter.

Visual description of the new environment

Rules of this new world

Object, tool, or costume piece the character adopts

Draw or describe a storyboard panel of this world

Part 4. Connection Between Worlds

Identify the thematic contrast between worlds.

The Ordinary World teaches my character to believe that...

The Special World challenges that belief by...

Transformation becomes visible when the character...

Part 5. Synthesis

Describe how the character and world reflect each other by the end.

How the character brings something back from the Special World

How the Ordinary World looks different once the character changes

7: THE HERO'S JOURNEY- ORDINARY, SPECIAL, AND UPSIDE DOWN

7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down

7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding

7.3: WORKSHEET- MAP YOUR CHARACTER'S JOURNEY

This page titled [7: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down

The Problem With a Perfect Hero

One of my students at Cal State East Bay, animator Aidan Carrillo, made a short film about a superhero with super speed named Orb. Orb's mission is to defeat a giant, destructive robot named Bolt. Aidan's animation style is bold and distinct. His characters are funny and specific. His action sequences are tight and dynamic. In an early cut of the film, Orb takes down Bolt almost effortlessly.

That was the problem.

When a hero wins too easily, there is no story. If there's no flaw, there's no journey. We went back to the drawing board and looked again at Orb's want, flaw, and wound. Once Aidan realized that Orb doesn't just want to save the day, he wants to belong, and he needs to uncover the truth about his mysterious origin, the film changed. Suddenly, Orb had something real at stake. The battle with Bolt was no longer just a cool fight scene; it became a test of who Orb really is and what he is willing to risk.

(Cross-reference: For how flaws grow out of the world and the grand passion, see Chapter 6.)

Why the Hero's Journey Matters

Joseph Campbell studied myths from around the world and observed that they share an emotional pattern. A character begins in a familiar world, is thrust into a new one, and undergoes trials that expose their flaw. Those trials change them, and when they return, they are not the same person.

The Hero's Journey is not a rigid formula. It is a way of understanding how characters actually grow. When you use it well, it helps you keep your story rooted in emotional movement instead of just a string of events. It has lasted so long because it reflects real life. All of us resist change. All of us go through ordeals. All of us return to our lives a little different from before.

(Cross-reference: See Chapter 6 for building a flaw that can support this transformation.)

A Simple Breakdown of the Journey

These steps show the emotional arc behind the structure.

You aren't required to use every step, but understanding them will deepen your storytelling across genres.

Ordinary World

We see the character's familiar life. This world protects them from changing. The flaw fits comfortably here.

Call to Adventure

An event disrupts the ordinary world. Something new pulls the character forward.

Refusal

The character hesitates. They cling to the old self. Their fear shows itself clearly.

Entrance Into the Special World

Often, a mentor figure nudges, pushes, or prepares the hero to cross the threshold. Or, the world may simply force its hand. The character enters an unfamiliar world where the rules change, and they must adapt.

Tests

The world challenges them. They meet allies and antagonists. Their flaw becomes visible.

The Ordeal

The deepest crisis. Something breaks open. The character loses something important or is forced to confront a truth.

Transformation

The character chooses new behavior aligned with their deeper need.

Return

They come back to the ordinary world. But they come back changed. The world they return to is not the same because they are not the same.

Sacrifice and Change

In every version of the Hero's Journey, transformation requires a sacrifice. The character must give up something old. A belief. A behavior. A false identity. A lie they have been living inside.

The sacrifice allows the new self to emerge. If nothing is sacrificed, nothing is gained.

Ordinary and Special Worlds

These two worlds allow the audience to track the transformation visually.

Ordinary World

Safe, familiar, and often stagnant. The character's old strategies still work here.

Special World

Unfamiliar. Demanding. The character cannot rely on old habits.

This world exposes the flaw that the Ordinary World allowed them to hide.

Return

The character brings insight back and reshapes their relationship to their world.

Cross-reference: Chapter 6 discusses how production design and objects can reinforce these worlds.

Hero's Journey Archetypes

These are patterns, not formulas. Use them when they help illuminate relationships and pressure.

- Mentor: Offers wisdom or tools but cannot complete the journey for the hero.
- Shadow: Represents the dark side of the hero. Forces the hero to confront their flaw.
- Shapeshifter: Uncertain motives. Creates tension and instability.
- Ally: Supports the hero and reveals aspects of their nature.
- Threshold Guardian: Tests readiness to enter the special world.

These archetypes appear in comedies, dramas, thrillers, and fantasies. They support transformation by shaping what the hero must face.

How the Journey Helps You Write

Think of this chapter as a lens. Use it to understand emotional movement inside your plot.

Ask:

- What does my character cling to?
- What fear holds them back?
- What world will push them into growth?
- What ordeal will break them open?
- What new truth will they return with?

These questions give your story spine.

The Heroine's Journey

Writers such as Maureen Murdock and Kim Hudson offer alternative frameworks for stories centered on internal healing, integration, and reclaiming inner authority. Instead of conquering an external world, the heroine often restores balance between her inner and outer worlds.

This pattern is especially useful for stories where the emotional journey is not about defeating an enemy but integrating fractured parts of the self.

References

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.

Hudson, Kim. *The Virgin's Promise*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2010.

Murdock, Maureen. *The Heroine's Journey*. Shambhala, 2020.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. 4th ed., Michael Wiese Productions, 2020.

This page titled [7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down](#) is shared under a license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- [7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding](#) has no license indicated.

7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding

How the Hero's Journey Deepens Character Transformation

The Hero's Journey is not just a fantasy structure about quests and magical worlds. It's a storytelling framework that helps us understand how characters change through pressure, conflict, and transformation. Across many genres, protagonists leave an ordinary world, enter an unfamiliar environment, face trials, and return changed by what they experience.

These patterns appear not only in adventure stories, but also in comedies, dramas, romances, and coming-of-age films. Beneath comedy or satire, there is often a deeper story about identity, fear, belonging, and transformation.

Case Study: Mean Girls

Ordinary World and Special World

Cady begins in the freedom and isolation of homeschooling in Africa. Her special world is the rigid social hierarchy of suburban high school life.

Mean Girls

"Get in Loser, We're Going Shopping."

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this Interactive Content online](#)



Flaw and Transformation

Cady wants to belong so badly that she slowly abandons her integrity. As she becomes absorbed into the world of the Plastics, she loses her sense of self.

Ordeal and Return

Her ordeal arrives when her double life collapses and the damage she caused becomes public. Her return happens when she reclaims her authentic voice and rejects the hierarchy she once admired.

Hero's Journey and Heroine's Journey

The film combines Hero's Journey structure, including tests, ordeal, and return, with Heroine's Journey themes involving identity, belonging, and self-acceptance.

(Cross-reference: For how worlds create pressure, see Chapter 6.)

Case Study: Some Like It Hot

Ordinary World and Special World

Joe and Jerry begin in the dangerous Prohibition underworld of Chicago and enter the "special world" of the all-female band, where disguise becomes a survival strategy.

Masks and Shapeshifting

Their disguises reflect Campbell's idea that characters wear masks while navigating unfamiliar worlds. Joe and Jerry constantly shift identities because adaptation becomes necessary for survival.

Shadow Archetypes

Spats Colombo and his gang embody the Shadow archetype. They represent danger, violence, and the consequences chasing the protagonists from their former world.

Transformational Objects

The wigs, dresses, and makeup become tools of transformation. They provide temporary protection while also forcing Joe and Jerry into greater vulnerability and self-awareness.

Return with Knowledge

By the end of the film, Joe and Jerry realize that survival alone is not enough. Returning from the special world leaves them with a deeper understanding of honesty, friendship, gender performance, and love.

Archetypes Across Both Films

Both films use archetypes to guide character transformation, even though one is a teen comedy and the other is a farce about gangsters and disguise.

Mean Girls

- Hero / Heroine: Cady
- Shadow: Regina George
- Tricksters: Janis and Damian
- Shapeshifter: The Plastics and the shifting rules of popularity

Some Like It Hot

- Heroes: Joe and Jerry
- Shadow: Spats Colombo and the mob
- Shapeshifter: Joe and Jerry themselves through disguise
- Trickster: Joe's constant improvisation and deception
- Helpers: Sugar Kane and Osgood help guide the protagonists toward emotional change

Archetypes aren't rigid categories. Characters often shift between archetypal roles as the story evolves.

References

Mean Girls. Directed by Mark Waters, written by Tina Fey, Paramount Pictures, 2004.

Some Like It Hot. Directed by Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond, United Artists, 1959.

The Wizard of Oz. Directed by Victor Fleming, screenplay by Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allan Woolf, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939.

This page titled [7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding](#) is shared under a license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

7.3: WORKSHEET- MAP YOUR CHARACTER'S JOURNEY

Part 1. Ordinary World

Describe three images that show the character's everyday life.

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

Part 2. Call and Refusal

What disrupts the ordinary world? This is also known as the catalyst.

What fear makes the character resist?

What mentor or event pushes them to cross the threshold into the special world?

Part 3. Special World

Describe the visual contrast between the ordinary and special worlds.

List the rules of this new world

Describe a symbol or costume piece the character adopts.

Part 4. Ordeal and Transformation

Describe what breaks the hero open.

Describe what belief or habit dies.

Describe what new behavior or understanding emerges.

Part 5. Return

Describe how the hero changes the world they return to.

Describe the final image that ends the story.

This page titled [7.3: WORKSHEET- MAP YOUR CHARACTER'S JOURNEY](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

8: BUILDING YOUR BEAT SHEET

8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

8.2: Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot

8.3: WORKSHEET- TURN YOUR IDEA INTO A BEAT SHEET

This page titled [8: Building Your Beat Sheet](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

Finding the Story in the Beats

Documentary filmmaker and editor David Timoner has spent his career shaping stories in both nonfiction film and television. He co-founded Interloper Films, edited the Sundance Grand Jury Prize-winning documentary *Dig!*, and later edited television shows including *Dancing with the Stars*.

David describes editing reality television as a constant search for the story hidden inside hundreds of hours of footage.

While working on *Dancing with the Stars*, he and the producers would begin each week by watching rehearsal footage and asking questions. Is the celebrity improving or struggling? Are the partners getting along? Did someone get injured? Did a disagreement change the relationship?

As new footage arrived, the story often changed. A single fall, argument, breakthrough, or injury could completely reshape the narrative.

What David was really looking for were beats.

A beat happens whenever something changes. A new obstacle appears. A character changes tactics. The stakes rise.

Whether you're editing a reality show, writing a feature film, creating a documentary, or producing social media content, storytelling happens one beat at a time.

DIG! XX – an expanded reimagining of the original cut rockumentary about two Gen-X bands and their journey to alt-rock glory. Directed by Ondi Timoner. Edited by David Timoner.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this Interactive Content online](#)



Building Your Beat Sheet: The Spine of Your Story

As introduced in Chapter 2, beats are the smallest units of dramatic action. A beat occurs when something changes. Power shifts. New information is revealed. Pressure forces a choice.

A beat sheet helps you identify those moments of change before you begin writing scenes. It reveals the spine of your story and shows how one moment leads to the next.

When your beats are working, your story's structure becomes much easier to see because you've mapped out the major turning points before writing every scene. I often return to my beat sheet after finishing a draft to figure out why certain scenes aren't working. Usually, the problem is that one beat doesn't lead to the next. If I can remove a beat and the story still moves forward, then either the stakes aren't high enough or that beat isn't causing what happens next.

The twelve-beat structure below draws inspiration from several storytelling traditions, including classical dramatic structure, the Hero's Journey, and Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!*. Like any storytelling framework, it's a tool, not a formula. Use what helps your story and adapt it as needed.

A Twelve-Beat Story Structure

1. First Impression of the World

The first image or sound that introduces the story world. It establishes tone, mood, and theme while giving the audience an initial impression of the protagonist's life.

2. Situation and Character Setup

We meet the protagonist in their everyday world. We see their routine, behavior, flaw, and the gap between who they are and who they need to become.

3. Early Empathy Moment

The audience needs a reason to care about the protagonist. This moment reveals their humanity through a choice, vulnerability, or behavior.

4. The Disruption

Something breaks the character's normal pattern. A threat, invitation, mistake, opportunity, or crisis throws life off balance.

5. Hesitation and Resistance

The protagonist resists change. They cling to their old identity, habits, or worldview.

6. Commitment to the New Path

The protagonist makes a choice. They take a risk and step into unfamiliar territory.

7. Exploration of the New World

The character experiences the central promise of the story. These are often the moments audiences expect when they buy a ticket to this particular film.

8. Midpoint

A major event changes the direction of the story. Stakes rise and the protagonist can no longer continue as before.

9. Pressure Builds

Obstacles intensify. The protagonist's flaw creates new problems. Old strategies stop working.

10. Collapse of Hope

The protagonist reaches their lowest point. They appear farther from their goal than ever.

11. Awakening and Change

The protagonist gains new insight and chooses a different way of behaving. This is often the emotional turning point of the story.

12. Final Reflection of the World

The protagonist confronts the central conflict and resolves it based on what they have learned. The final image reflects how the character or world has changed.

Plot and Emotional Logic Must Work Together

A beat sheet is not simply a list of events. It's a map of emotional logic. Each beat should reveal both what the character does and why it matters emotionally.

Plot without emotional movement feels mechanical. Emotion without action can't be filmed.

A strong beat lives where behavior meets meaning.

Remember that a beat sheet is a planning tool. Some stories compress beats, rearrange them, or emphasize certain moments more than others. The goal is not to force your story into a formula. The goal is to identify the major moments of change that shape your protagonist's journey.

References

Timoner, David. Personal interview and correspondence, 2026.

Timoner, Ondi, director. *Dig! XX Official Trailer*. YouTube, uploaded by Interloper Films, 22 Aug. 2017.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. 4th ed., Michael Wiese Productions, 2020.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New World Library, 2008.

Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2005.

This page titled [8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet](#) is shared under a license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- [8.2: Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot](#) has no license indicated.

8.2: Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to *Some Like It Hot*

The following breakdown applies the twelve-beat structure to *Some Like It Hot* (1959), directed by Billy Wilder and written by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond.

Joe and Jerry accidentally witness a mob murder and disguise themselves as women to escape. The film demonstrates how beats create escalating pressure, shifting identities, and character transformation.

Some Like it Hot

Film: *Some Like It Hot* (1959)

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](https://youtu.be/bxTfUAvaIMw?si=Tk-4oMZvOH1S0qrM&t=9)



Click on the link above, or here, to open on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/bxTfUAvaIMw?si=Tk-4oMZvOH1S0qrM&t=9>

As you watch, identify the twelve beats described below.

1. First Impression of the World

A hearse races through Chicago streets during Prohibition, pursued by police. Hidden inside the hearse is a coffin full of bootleg liquor.

2. Situation and Character Setup

Joe and Jerry perform in a speakeasy disguised as a funeral parlor. They are talented but broke musicians constantly looking for their next opportunity.

3. Early Empathy Moment

When the speakeasy is raided, Joe and Jerry help each other escape. Their loyalty establishes the friendship at the center of the story.

4. The Disruption

They witness Spats Colombo and his men execute a group of rivals in a parking garage.

5. Hesitation and Resistance

Joe hopes they can simply hide in Chicago. Jerry realizes the mob will never stop looking for them.

6. Commitment to the New Path

They disguise themselves as women and join an all-female band traveling to Florida.

7. Exploration of the New World

Josephine and Daphne adapt to life in the band, befriend Sugar Kane, and struggle to maintain their disguises.

8. Midpoint

Joe, posing as a millionaire, begins pursuing Sugar, while Daphne receives a marriage proposal from Osgood.

9. Pressure Builds

Spats arrives in Florida. The disguises become harder to maintain and the danger grows.

10. Collapse of Hope

The mob discovers Joe and Jerry's identities and pursues them through the hotel.

11. Awakening and Change

Joe finally drops his disguises and tells Sugar the truth. Jerry refuses to abandon his friend despite the danger.

12. Final Reflection of the World

Joe, Jerry, Sugar, and Osgood escape together. Sugar accepts Joe despite his deception, and Osgood responds to Daphne's revelation with the famous line, "Nobody's perfect."

The film ends not with exposure and punishment, but with acceptance, friendship, and transformation.

References

Some Like It Hot. Directed by Billy Wilder, screenplay by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond, United Artists, 1959.

8.3: WORKSHEET- TURN YOUR IDEA INTO A BEAT SHEET

Write in simple sentences. Focus on visible dramatic action, not thoughts or psychology.
Use the present tense. Describe only what we can see or hear on screen.

Step 1. First impression of the world

Describe the first image or sound that introduces your story world.

Step 2. Situation and character setup

Describe your protagonist's everyday world and the actions that show their routine before the story disrupts it.

Step 3. Early empathy moment

Describe one clear action that helps the audience understand or care about your protagonist.

Step 4. The disruption

Describe the event that breaks the protagonist's pattern and throws their life off balance.

Step 5. Hesitation and resistance

Describe how the protagonist avoids, delays, or resists moving forward.

Step 6. Commitment to the new path

Describe the moment when the protagonist chooses to act, takes a risk, or steps into a new world.

Step 7. Exploration of the New World

Describe the new world or situation the protagonist enters and the actions that express what this world is like.

Step 8. Midpoint

Describe the major event that changes the direction of the story and raises the stakes.

Step 9. Pressure builds

Describe escalating obstacles that make the protagonist's situation more difficult.

Step 10. Collapse of hope

Describe the lowest moment in which the protagonist appears farther from their goal than ever.

Step 11. Awakening and change

Describe the action the protagonist takes that reflects new insight or growth.

Step 12. Final reflection of the world

Describe the final image or moment that shows how the protagonist or the world has changed.

9: FORMATTING

9.1: Screenplay Formatting Essentials

9.2: Special Formatting Situations

9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE

9.1: Screenplay Formatting Essentials

Write So Your Reader Can See the Movie

Every semester, at least one student proudly hands me a 150-page screenplay on the first day of class. I always admire the enthusiasm. Then I gently explain that most industry readers would stop reading long before page 150.

By the end of the semester, something shifts. Students begin cutting unnecessary description, breaking up long speeches, and replacing vague ideas with clear visual action. They discover that screenwriting is not about putting everything on the page. It is about choosing the right details and removing the rest.

Formatting is part of that process. It is not about following arbitrary rules. It is about helping the reader see the movie clearly and move through the script effortlessly.

Why Formatting Matters

Screenplay formatting helps readers:

- visualize the movie
- understand the rhythm of scenes
- distinguish action from dialogue
- identify locations and characters quickly
- read the script efficiently

Most writers use screenwriting software such as Final Draft, Fade In, WriterDuet, or Celtx. These programs handle formatting automatically, allowing you to focus on storytelling.

Before we break down the individual elements of screenplay format, I recommend opening the [Sample Scene PDF](#). Seeing a complete scene first will make the formatting conventions easier to recognize as we discuss them.

Scene Headings

Scene headings tell us where and when a scene takes place.

Examples:

INT. SCHOOL – DAY

EXT. APARTMENT BALCONY – NIGHT

A scene heading includes:

**INT. (interior) or EXT. (exterior)
the location
DAY or NIGHT**

Scene headings orient the reader instantly.

Action Lines

Action lines describe what the audience can see and hear.

Use:

- simple present tense
- active voice
- concise visual language

Example:

Students rush through the hallway as the bell rings.

Action lines should always pass the "We See / We Hear" test. If the audience cannot see or hear it, consider rewriting it.

Character Introductions

The first time a character appears, write their name in ALL CAPS, followed by their age and one brief essence trait.

Examples:

LEILA, 16, meticulously dressed.
JORDAN, early 20s, disheveled.
NORA, 20s, perky.

Only include physical details that matter to the story or reveal character. Extra details can limit casting and distract from what matters most.

After the first introduction, do not use all caps again.

Dialogue

Dialogue appears beneath the character's name.

Example:

LEILA
We need to hurry. The meeting starts in ten.

Keep dialogue clear and purposeful. Break up long speeches with action whenever possible so the reader continues to see the scene.

Parentheticals

Parentheticals appear beneath the character name and before the dialogue.

Use them sparingly.

Example:

LEILA
(whispers)
Do not look behind you.

Only include a parenthetical when the meaning of the line would otherwise be unclear.

OS and VO

OS means **Off Screen**. The character is nearby but not visible.

Example:

JORDAN (OS)
Are you coming in or not?

VO means **Voice Over**. The audience hears the voice, but the speaker is not physically participating in the scene. Voiceover is often used for narration, memories, letters, or commentary.

Example:

JABAL (V.O.)
I never expected the day to go this way.

9.2: Special Formatting Situations

Phone Calls

Format phone conversations clearly.

INTERCUT PHONE CONVERSATION

JABAL
(into phone)
I'm almost there.

JORDAN
Where are you really?

Text Messages

Use a clear label.

ON SCREEN – TEXT MESSAGE
JORDAN: Outside.

Flashbacks

Label the scene clearly.

FLASHBACK – EXT. BEACH – DAY

Fantasies and Dreams

Label the sequence clearly.

FANTASY – INT. OFFICE – DAY

Montage

Use short visual beats.

MONTAGE – LEILA TRAINING
– Leila runs up the hill.
– Leila collapses.
– Leila gets up and runs again.
END MONTAGE

Keep montages simple and visual.

Title Page

A screenplay title page usually includes:

Centered:

TITLE OF SCRIPT

Written by

Your Name

Lower left:

email

phone number

address (optional)

Do not include a copyright symbol or draft number unless specifically requested.

Putting It All Together

If you have not already done so, open the [Sample Scene PDF](#) to see all of these formatting elements working together in a complete screenplay scene.

Open the [Title Page Template PDF](#) to see standard screenplay title page formatting.

Recommended Screenwriting Software

Popular options include:

- Fade In
- Final Draft
- WriterDuet
- Celtx

These programs automatically handle margins, spacing, and formatting so you can focus on writing.

References

Final Draft, Inc. *Final Draft Formatting Guides*. Final Draft, Inc.

Riley, Christopher. *The Hollywood Standard: The Complete and Authoritative Guide to Script Format and Style*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2009.

Trottier, David. *The Screenwriter's Bible: A Complete Guide to Writing, Formatting, and Selling Your Script*. 7th ed., Silman-James Press, 2021.

9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE

Practice using proper formatting by beginning a scene from the story you've been developing throughout this book.

Start Writing Your Scene

This scene may become the opening of your screenplay, so focus on clearly establishing the world, situation, and tone. Help the audience quickly understand where they are and what is happening. The scene does not need to be complete.

Your draft should include:

1. A correct scene heading (slugline)
2. An opening action line that clearly establishes the setting and visual situation
3. At least one character introduction using:
 - ALL CAPS
 - age
 - one visual essence trait
4. At least five lines of dialogue
5. Action lines that break up long dialogue
6. At least one OS (Off Screen) or VO (Voice Over) moment
7. A phone call, text message, or other digital communication format
8. The "We See / We Hear" test:
 - Only include things the audience can see or hear
 - Avoid unfilmable thoughts or emotions

Write out your scene here, or enter it into a screenwriting program for proper formatting.

Scene Reflection

Briefly reflect on your draft:

1. What conflict or situation is beginning to emerge?
2. What does the main character seem to want?
3. What questions might the audience have after reading this scene?

In the next chapter, you will either revise this scene or write a new one by first planning its dramatic structure.

10: THE ANATOMY OF A SCENE

10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene

10.2: Sample Scene from His Girl Friday

10.3: WORKSHEET- WRITE A SCENE WITH DRAMATIC ARC

This page titled [10: The Anatomy of a Scene](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene

What Is a Scene?

A scene is the basic building block of a script. It's a small story with a beginning, middle, and end, and it always involves change. A scene begins when two forces collide. Someone wants something, but an obstacle stands in the way. Pressure builds to a climax, where the character either gets what they want or fails to get it. Either way, something changes, and the scene is over.

The Emotional Engine of a Scene

In my Directing Actors for Film and TV course at Laney College in Oakland, my student Ehret Fieldhouse acted in a scene from the film *Network*, directed by Sidney Lumet. In the scene, Howard Beale tries to explain to his boss that he has achieved a kind of mystical enlightenment, even as his boss is preparing to take him off the air.

[Howard Beale's Enlightenment.](#)

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



Ehret first approached the scene by trying to play Howard as unhinged. He chased the emotional result. He tried to appear wild, desperate, and manic.

I told Ehret to forget the emotional result and focus on the objective. Writers and actors get into trouble when they play a feeling instead of an intention. Emotion can't be acted. It has to be revealed. It shows up truthfully when a character is fighting for something specific in the moment.

As we talked through the scene, Ehret realized that Howard's objective was not simply to keep his job. He desperately wanted his boss to understand what he had discovered. Howard believed he had seen a deeper truth about the world and wanted to wake other people up to it.

Once Ehret connected the scene to that objective, everything shifted. He stopped trying to act crazy and started trying to persuade another human being. The scene became more sincere, more vulnerable, and ultimately more emotional. The emotion emerged naturally because he was fighting for something he believed in.

This also highlights an important principle for writers and actors: avoid judging the character. Howard does not believe he is crazy. He believes he has discovered an important truth and needs others to understand it. When actors judge a character, they often play the label rather than the objective. When they approach the character with empathy and fight for what the character wants, the performance becomes more truthful and complex. The audience can decide what to think. The actor's job is to understand the character from the inside.

That's the power of a strong objective.

Objectives, Beats, and Emotional Events

An objective is what a character wants in a scene. It should be active and playable, not emotional or vague. Characters pursue objectives through tactics, often expressed as action verbs such as persuade, intimidate, seduce, provoke, comfort, manipulate, or expose.

As resistance increases, tactics change. These shifts in dramatic action create beats.

As discussed in Chapter 2, beats are the smallest units of dramatic action. A beat occurs when something changes: a new tactic, a reversal, a discovery, a shift in power, or a change in understanding.

As beats accumulate, they build toward an emotional event.

Judith Weston, building on ideas from teachers such as Konstantin Stanislavski and Uta Hagen, emphasizes that every scene should contain a clear emotional event. An emotional event is the central emotional change taking place between characters. It may involve a confession, betrayal, apology, seduction, power struggle, reconciliation, or secret revealed.

The emotional event is what makes the scene matter. By the end of the scene, the relationship, power dynamic, understanding, or emotional situation has changed in some way.

As the writer, your job is to understand the emotional event underneath the scene and shape the beats so the audience can experience that change unfolding.

What Every Scene Needs

A Clear Situation

The audience should quickly understand who is present, where they are, and what is happening.

A Clear Objective

The protagonist of the scene must want something specific and urgent. The objective should affect another character and be expressed as an action.

"To think" is not an objective.

"To cry" is not an objective.

Crying is a result, not an action.

Strong objectives are active and playable. They require the character to try to change another person, gain something, hide something, or influence a situation.

Examples:

- To persuade someone to stay.
- To convince a parent to give permission.
- To hide a secret.
- To get a promotion.
- To seduce a romantic interest.
- To expose a lie.
- To intimidate a rival.
- To win forgiveness.
- To get someone to reveal information.
- To stop someone from leaving.
- To avoid being caught.
- To secure a loan.
- To recruit an ally.
- To break up with a partner.
- To convince someone that you are innocent.

Notice that each objective can be observed through behavior. The audience can see the character actively pursuing it.

A useful test is to ask: **Can another character resist this objective?** If the answer is yes, you probably have a playable scene objective.

For example:

- "To feel loved" is difficult to play.
- "To convince my daughter to visit me" is playable.
- "To be happy" is vague.
- "To get the lead role in the school play" is playable.

Conflict

Someone or something blocks the objective. This may be another character, the environment, or an internal struggle expressed through behavior.

An Emotional Event

There should be a specific moment when something meaningful shifts. A secret is revealed. A relationship changes. A decision is made. A power dynamic flips.

Change

Something must be different by the end of the scene than it was at the beginning. A relationship shifts. New information is revealed. A decision is made. The protagonist gains or loses ground.

If the scene can be removed and the story still makes sense, the scene probably does not belong. Every scene should either move the plot forward, deepen character, escalate conflict, or ideally do more than one of these at the same time.

Start Late, Leave Early

Earlier in the book, documentary filmmaker and editor [David Timoner](#) described how he searches for story by identifying moments of change. He also offered a simple piece of advice for screenwriters: "Start scenes in the middle of the action and leave as soon as the dramatic purpose of the scene has been fulfilled."

Many beginning writers spend pages showing characters arriving, sitting down, making small talk, ordering coffee, paying the bill, and leaving. Real life contains these moments. Drama usually does not need them.

Imagine a breakup scene.

You probably don't need to watch a character park the car, walk into the restaurant, order a drink, discuss the weather, and browse the menu.

The scene usually begins much later:

"I don't think I love you anymore."

Now the scene is alive.

Likewise, once the emotional event has occurred, the scene is often over. Unless the aftermath reveals something important, we don't need to watch characters gather their belongings and walk to the parking lot.

Strong scenes enter at the last possible moment and leave at the earliest possible moment. They focus on conflict, change, and emotional events rather than routine behavior.

As you watch this sequence from *Network*, pay attention to how each scene starts near the emotional turning point and ends as soon as its dramatic purpose has been fulfilled.

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



A Button

A button is the final moment that brings a scene to a satisfying end. By this point, the character has either achieved what they wanted or failed to get it. Either way, they leave the scene with a new objective or a new understanding of what comes next.

A button doesn't always provide closure. Sometimes it's a cliffhanger, a surprising revelation, an unanswered question, or simply a striking image that makes you want to see the next scene. The key is that the scene feels complete while still pulling the story forward.

In sitcoms and comedies, the button is often a joke. A character spends an entire scene bragging about their intelligence, only to walk into the wrong room. The joke lands, and the scene is over. In *The Office*, Jim might spend an entire scene setting up one of his pranks on Dwight. The button comes when Dwight finally falls for it, giving the audience one last laugh before the scene ends.

In a drama, the button might be a revelation. A character finally decides to trust someone, only to discover a text message proving they've been betrayed.

In a thriller, the button might be a cliffhanger. A detective opens a file and realizes the suspect is someone they know personally.

A good button leaves the audience feeling that something has changed and gives them a reason to keep watching.

References

Network. Written by Paddy Chayefsky, directed by Sidney Lumet, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and United Artists, 1976.

Timoner, David. Personal interview and correspondence, 2026.

Weston, Judith. *Directing Actors*. Michael Wiese Productions, 2021.

This page titled [10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- [10.2: Sample Scene from His Girl Friday](#) has no license indicated.

10.2: Sample Scene from His Girl Friday

Below is an excerpt from *His Girl Friday*, written by Charles Lederer and adapted from the hit 1928 Broadway play *The Front Page* by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. The script, selected for educational analysis, is in the public domain. Read the full [His Girl Friday screenplay PDF](#).

In this iconic scene, tough newspaper editor Walter Burns goes head-to-head with his ex-wife and star reporter, Hildy Johnson, in a chaotic press room. Walter throws everything he has at her: professional flattery, guilt, appeals to her ego, and constant reminders of her talent. His goal is simple: stop Hildy from quitting the newspaper business to marry a very ordinary insurance salesman.

As you read, pay attention to how Walter's objective and the conflict between them drive the scene forward. Using Judith Weston's framework, the emotional event of the scene occurs when Hildy's professional addiction pulls her back in. On the surface, the characters are discussing a news story. Beneath the surface, the real shift is happening inside Hildy. She moves from insisting she is done with the chaos to becoming re-energized by the thrill of the scoop and Walter's influence. That shift breaks her emotional distance and pulls her back into the intense world they share.

INT. PRESS ROOM MED. SHOT AT HILDY'S DESK

Schwartz is reading Hildy's interview to the other boys, who are grouped around. Bensinger is at his desk, a book open, but listening.

SCHWARTZ

(reading)

"But the State has a production for use plan, too. It has a gallows and at seven A.M., unless a miracle occurs, that gallows will be used to separate the soul of Earl Williams from his body. And out of Molly Malloy's life will go the one kindly soul she ever knew --"

(he stops)

That's as far as Hildy got. But, I ask you, can that girl write an interview?

BENSINGER

I don't think it's very ethical reading other people's stuff.

ENDICOTT

Don't give us that ethics stuff. You'll be the only one who'll swipe any of it.

SCHWARTZ

I still say anybody that writes like that ain't going to give it up permanently to sew sox for a guy in the insurance business. Now I give that marriage three months and I'm laying three to one. Any takers?

HILDY'S VOICE

I'll take that bet.

They turn. Hildy comes into the scene.

HILDY
(going to her phone)
It's getting so a girl can't step
out of the room without being
discussed by a bunch of old ladies.
(into phone; her voice
assumes a silken
quality)
Hello, Post... Mr. Walter Burns,
please.

CLOSE SHOT SCHWARTZ

SCHWARTZ
(embarrassed)
Well, Hildy, we were only saying
that a swell reporter like you
wouldn't give this up so easily.

MED. SHOT FEATURING HILDY

HILDY
(into phone)
This is Hildy Johnson...
(to Schwartz)
Oh, I can give it up all right.
Without a single quiver. I'm going
to live like a human being -- not
like you rats.
(into phone)
Oh, is that you, Walter dear? Oh, I
didn't mean "dear." That was just
habit, I guess. Oh, be yourself,
Walter. I've got some news for you...
Yes, I got the interview, but I've
got some news that's more important.

The others are listening, suspecting a scoop.

HILDY
Better get a pencil out and write it
down. All ready?
(then with a sudden
change of pace)
Get this, you double-crossing
chimpanzee, there ain't gonna be any
interview and there ain't gonna be
any story... Huh? That certified
check of yours is leaving with me in
twenty minutes. And if I ever see
you again, it's going to be just too
bad... Eh?... Oh, you don't know
what I'm angry about, do you? If you
come over I'll be very glad to tell
you the story of Louie's watch. I
dare you to come over, you -- you --
skunk in sheep's clothing! And bring
that bodyguard of yours, too -- you'll
need him.

QUICK CUTS OF REACTION FROM OTHERS

CLOSEUP HILDY

HILDY

...And I just want you to listen to
one more thing.

She gets her story out of typewriter, applies it to
transmitter and tears it up.

HILDY

Hear that? That's the interview I
wrote... Yes, I know we made a
bargain. I just said I'd write it --
I didn't say I wouldn't tear it up.
Yes, it's all in little pieces now,
Walter, and I hope to do the same
for you some time!

She hangs up.

MED. SHOT FEATURING HILDY

She reaches under her desk, pulls up bag, talking all the
time. The others are too startled to do anything but listen.

HILDY

And that's my farewell to the
newspaper game. I'm going to live a
normal life and have a home.

She reaches into the drawer of desk and gets some stuff which
she puts into bag.

HILDY

I'm going to be a woman, not a
newsgetting machine. I'm going to
have babies and nurse them and love
them and give 'em cod liver oil and
worry about their new teeth -- and
the minute I catch one of them even
looking at a newspaper, I'm going to
brain him! Where's my hat?

Someone points to her hat. She rises and goes toward it. Her
bag is still open. Her phone rings. Schwartz answers it.

SCHWARTZ

(subdued tones)

Hello, Mr. Burns. Yes, she's still
here.

HILDY

(stopping midway to
her hat)

I'll take it.

(she comes over to
phone)

What's the matter, Mr. Burns -- don't
you understand English? -- Why, your
language is shocking, Mr. Burns --
positively shocking! I don't mind
because I was married to you and
know what to expect, but suppose
Central is listening in... Oh, did
you hear that, Central? We ought to

report him, don't you think?... Oh,
fooeey on you!

She pulls the phone out of the wall, walks toward window and
tosses it out of the window. She waits for the crash, turns
back and says:

HILDY
Now where was that hat? Oh, yes.

She starts toward it.

References:

His Girl Friday. Directed by Howard Hawks, screenplay by Charles Lederer, Columbia Pictures, 1940.

10.3: WORKSHEET- WRITE A SCENE WITH DRAMATIC ARC

Plan the dramatic arc of your scene before you begin writing. This may be a continuation of the scene from Chapter 9 or a completely new scene. Follow each step carefully.

Write in the simple present tense and use active voice. Describe only what the audience can see or hear.

You may type your scene using the formatting principles from Chapter 9 or handwrite it if that helps you draft more freely. It does not need to be perfect.

PART ONE: Identify the Core Elements of the Scene

The Situation

State the situation of the scene, including who is present and where it takes place.

The Protagonist

Identify the protagonist of the scene.

The Objective

Write the protagonist's objective as a clear action verb (to persuade, to expose, to charm, to intimidate, to soothe, etc.).

The Obstacle

List what or who is blocking the objective.

The Emotional Event

Identify the emotional event that happens in the scene (a confession, negotiation, betrayal, decision, power shift, secret revealed, etc.).

Stakes

What does the protagonist have to risk, lose, or give up in pursuit of what they want?

PART TWO: Draft the Scene

Write the scene in screenplay form as best as you can using what you learned in Chapter 9: *Screenplay Formatting*. You may write your scene directly on this page or use a screenwriting program.

Focus on behavior, action, sound, and image rather than thoughts or internal emotions.

Write Your Scene Here

PART THREE: Scene Reflection

Objective

Did your protagonist achieve the objective of the scene? Explain.

Teeing up the Next Scene

How does this scene set up the next beat of your story?

Emotional Event

Does the scene include a clear emotional event?

Revisions

Rewrite any part that does not show clear behavior on the page. Write notes below.

11: DIALOGUE

11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact

11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques

11.3: WORKSHEET- APPLY THE TOOLS

This page titled [11: Dialogue](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact

Dialogue is rhythm, conflict, behavior, timing, and intention. It's never random or simply a transcription of natural speech. Real people ramble, interrupt, repeat themselves, trail off, contradict themselves, or make no sense at all. Screen dialogue should feel natural while still functioning with precision. Every line should reveal character, advance conflict, or deepen tension. Anything else can usually be cut.

Dialogue is strongest when it's connected to emotional behavior and subtext. Characters rarely say exactly what they feel. Instead, they often use speech to hide, redirect, or negotiate their emotions. Subtext is what's being communicated underneath the lines. It can be understood through what characters want, what they avoid saying, and how they try to affect the other person in the scene.

Before we look at dialogue techniques, here's a story about dialogue used sparingly and powerfully.

Dialogue Follows Behavior

I recently rewatched Rob Schmidt's film *Crime and Punishment in Suburbia* (2000). Rob and I were in the directing program at the American Film Institute together. One thing his work makes clear is that dialogue only works when it's grounded in behavior and beats. He trusts behavior to carry a scene, often allowing subtext to do so much of the work that dialogue becomes almost unnecessary.

Near the climax of the film, the daughter, Roseanne (Monica Keena), and her boyfriend, Jimmy (James DeBello), walk into the house where her abusive stepfather, Fred (Michael Ironside), has passed out drunk in an armchair. Roseanne kicks Fred's chair and barks, "Hey," jolting Fred awake. He immediately reaches for his drink, knocks it back, gets up, and greets them as if everything is normal. There's tension in the air. He's oblivious to what's coming, and we aren't sure either.

Roseanne interrupts him: "Hold him." Jimmy does. With that, the whole dynamic shifts.

The violence that follows is sudden, jarring. Roseanne stabs Fred in the chest. The film lingers on her shock, then on Fred's stunned reaction, staring at the knife in his chest, then back to Roseanne and Jimmy. Fred tries to stand, stumbles, and finally lunges at Jimmy.

After an intense struggle, Fred, badly wounded, staggers toward the front door, leaving a smear of blood behind. There's a darkly comic beat when Jimmy apologizes. "I'm sorry." It's as if he's seeking forgiveness at the worst possible moment.

Then comes a moment involving an electric kitchen utensil that tips the whole scene into something surreal and deeply unsettling.

What makes this scene work is that the dialogue follows behavior. It's the long, silent reaction shots, the careful pacing, and the sense of history between the characters that carry the scene, with dialogue used only sparingly. It reminds me of the way Sergio Leone stages violence in his films, such as *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Dialogue is minimal because meaning is carried through ritual, pacing, and behavior. When the violence finally arrives, it's fast and decisive.

That's what makes dialogue work: it only has power when behavior and beats are doing the real storytelling.

Crime and Punishment in Suburbia - Trailer (2000).

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this Interactive Content online](#)



References

Crime and Punishment in Suburbia. Directed by Rob Schmidt, United Artists, 2000.

This page titled [11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact](#) is shared under a license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- [11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques](#) has no license indicated.

11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques

Below are the major concepts we will explore, along with examples and practice tasks. These are essential tools for crafting dialogue that flows, reveals character, and drives the scene forward.

Writing Dialogue From Want

Every line of dialogue grows from what a character wants right now in the scene. The want creates tension, conflict, and movement.

If you write a scene without a clear objective, the dialogue will feel disconnected from action.

Example

Situation: A professor refuses to grant a student an extension.

What the student wants: More time.

What the professor wants: Accountability.

INT. OFFICE – DAY

MARA stands in the doorway, gripping her half-finished essay.

MARA
I just need one more day.

PROFESSOR LEVY
You've had two weeks.

MARA
I know. But my mom—

PROFESSOR LEVY
You're asking me to make an exception.
Why should I?

Here, every line is an attempt to persuade or resist. The want shapes the dialogue.

Dialogue Follows Emotional Behavior

Dialogue comes after behavior, not before. If a character is hurt, angry, embarrassed, or hiding something, their actions reveal it first.

Example

INT. KITCHEN – NIGHT

ALEX scrubs the same plate again and again.

JORDAN
You okay?

ALEX
Fine.

The scrubbing tells us everything. “Fine” is a lie.

This is grounded dialogue. Not “floating.” It sits on top of visible emotion.

Contrasting Voices

Each character should speak differently. Their vocabulary, rhythm, humor, grammar, attitude, and emotional temperature should be distinct.

You should know who is speaking even if the dialogue tags are removed.

Example

Scenario: Two roommates discover the rent has increased.

SAM
They want how much? This is robbery.
I’m writing a letter.

LEO
A letter. Wow. Yeah, that’ll fix
capitalism.

Sam is earnest and dramatic. Leo is cynical and sarcastic. The voices create contrast and humor.

Two Characters, One Situation, Two Reactions

Characters reveal themselves by how they respond.

Example

Situation: A waiter spills coffee.

MARA
Oh my God, are you okay?

JASON
Great. Perfect. This day keeps
getting better.

Same event. Two totally different personalities.

Never Answer the Question

Realistic dialogue often avoids directly answering the other character's question. People dodge, deflect, lie, redirect, or reveal something unexpected.

Example

EMMA
Did you go to the interview?

NOAH
Ya think we can afford to move this
year?

Emma asks for accountability. Noah changes the subject, revealing fear and avoidance.

Subtext (What's Not Said)

Subtext is the meaning beneath the words. Characters, like people, rarely say what they mean.

Example

INT. LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

TARA
Did you eat already?

BEN
Are these leftovers still good?

What they mean:

Tara wants to know where he was.

Ben wants to avoid the conversation.

The tension lies beneath the words.

Dialogue Pacing and Rhythm

Dialogue that is too fast can exhaust the audience. Dialogue that's too slow can drain energy. Great pacing varies rhythm.

Silence is also part of pacing. Pauses can reveal shame, fear, desire, attraction, hesitation, or rage.

Example (Silence)

LENA
So? How'd the interview go?

DAVID stares at the floor.

LENA
David.

DAVID
I'm gonna need your help with my resume.

The silence speaks louder than the dialogue.

References

McKee, Robert. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. HarperCollins, 1997.

11.3: WORKSHEET- APPLY THE TOOLS

Write or rewrite a scene from the script you are developing in which you do the following:

1. Give each character a clear want.
2. Use behavior first, dialogue second.
3. Include at least one moment of subtext.
4. Show contrasting voices.
5. Use question dodging.
6. Give two characters different reactions to the same event.
7. Use silence meaningfully.
8. End your scene with a strong visual action line.

Character Ideas

If it's easier to write a new scene for this exercise, you may build your scene around two or more of the following character ideas:

- a worried teenager
- a bored DMV worker
- a self-important influencer
- a kindergarten teacher

As you write, pay attention to how each character's voice, behavior, and objectives shape the scene.

Write Your Scene Here

12: WRITING FOR GENRE- EXPECTATION, SURPRISE, AND AUDIENCE

12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?

12.2: Working Within Genre

12.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITE YOUR LOGLINE FOR DIFFERENT GENRES

This page titled [12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?

Genre is a promise you make to the audience. When a viewer clicks on a horror film, they expect fear. When they choose a romantic comedy, they expect charm and connection. Understanding genre will make you a stronger storyteller and help you communicate your project more effectively to audiences, collaborators, and industry professionals.

Some writers resist genre because they fear it will limit their creativity. In practice, the opposite is usually true. Understanding genre gives you tools to build a relationship with your audience. It teaches you how to deliver tension, humor, fear, mystery, longing, wonder, and catharsis in clear and powerful ways.

Before we get into definitions and examples, I want to share a personal story.

Ari Aster and the Power of Genre

Back when I was a visiting lecturer at the College of Santa Fe, I had the fortunate opportunity to teach film student Ari Aster. He was smart, knew who he was as a storyteller, and was deeply committed to his craft. Ari and his friends shot films regularly, developing camaraderie around their passion for filmmaking.

Ari understood that genre is not just a style. It's a psychological and emotional contract with the audience.

His early short films leaned into disturbing family dynamics, dark humor, and emotional discomfort. Later, when he made *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, he built on those instincts and sharpened them. His films use the structure of horror, but they also explore grief, ritual, codependence, group psychology, and identity.

Ari's work demonstrates that genre can hold complex emotion, elevate metaphor, and help a filmmaker build a recognizable creative voice. Horror audiences show up expecting dread, emotional rupture, symbolism, and unforgettable imagery. Ari delivers those things, but always in his own way.

His evolution is a reminder to embrace genre as a creative ally rather than a limitation.

[Midsommar - Group Screaming Scene](#)

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



What Is Genre?

Genre helps signal:

- the tone of your story
- the emotional experience the audience will have
- the dramatic patterns the story will follow
- the expectations audiences bring with them
- the marketing lane your project fits within

Genre gives you a blueprint for expectation and a playground for surprise.

Genres are flexible. They evolve, overlap, and hybridize. But each carries recognizable rhythms and conventions.

In this chapter, we'll explore major genres, examine common pitfalls, and look at ways writers can blend genres to create

something fresh.

Major Genres and How They Work

Comedy

Comedy is built on contrast, rhythm, surprise, status shifts, and the gap between what characters want and how they behave. Comedy characters often pursue simple goals in the most complicated ways possible.

Common comedy tools include:

- contradiction between self-image and reality
- escalation
- misunderstandings
- physical behavior
- characters who are their own worst enemies

Comedy works best when the audience cares about the people making mistakes.

Drama

Drama explores inner conflict, emotional stakes, relationships, and moral pressure.

Most dramas contain:

- a character with a wound
- a desire that is blocked
- an inevitable confrontation
- a transformation

The more specific the emotional stakes, the more deeply audiences engage.

Horror

Horror follows fear. It is not simply about monsters.

Horror explores:

- who did it
- why they did it
- what clues appear
- when information is revealed

Horror includes many subgenres, such as psychological, folk, body, supernatural, and social horror.

Horror works best when the underlying metaphor is clear.

Thriller

Thrillers revolve around danger and suspense. The protagonist is often forced to stay one step ahead of an antagonist or threat.

Common thriller elements include:

- a puzzle
- a chase
- rising stakes
- ticking clocks
- reversals

The audience leans forward because something terrible could happen at any moment.

Mystery

Mystery is built on questions and answers.

Common mystery elements include:

- who did it
- why they did it
- what clues appear
- when information is revealed

Mysteries reward audiences for paying attention.

Romance

Romance depends on chemistry, vulnerability, and obstacles. Two people want to connect, but something stands in the way.

Romance is built on:

- longing
- vulnerability
- reversals
- emotional release

Think of romance as an emotional dance between two people trying to understand each other.

Science Fiction and Fantasy

Science fiction often explores ideas. Fantasy often explores myth.

Science Fiction and Fantasy require:

- consistent world rules
- imaginative production design
- thematic questions about humanity

Science fiction frequently asks, "What if?" Fantasy often asks, "Why do we believe?"

Both genres work best when grounded in authentic emotion.

Action and Adventure

Action is visual storytelling at its purest. Characters reveal themselves through behavior under pressure.

Strong action stories depend on:

- geography
- stakes
- clear goals
- escalating challenges

Every action sequence should reveal character or force adaptation.

Film Noir

Film noir is defined by moral ambiguity. The protagonist often wants something simple but becomes trapped by desire, circumstance, or corruption.

Key noir elements include:

- fatalism
- shadows and contrast
- seduction and betrayal
- flawed characters
- crime as metaphor

In noir, tone is often as important as plot.

Western

The Western remains one of the foundational American storytelling forms. At its core, it explores moral ambiguity, frontier justice, and characters forced to define their own code.

Common Western elements include:

- vast or isolated landscapes
- outsiders, loners, and drifters
- showdowns and moral confrontations
- communities struggling between order and chaos

Modern Westerns can take place almost anywhere. Western energy is a moral landscape, not just horses and deserts.

References

Hereditary. Directed by Ari Aster, A24, 2018.

Midsommar. Directed by Ari Aster, A24, 2019.

This page titled [12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?](#) is shared under a license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- [12.2: Working Within Genre](#) has no license indicated.

12.2: Working Within Genre

Now that we've explored the major genres, let's look at how genre functions in the marketplace, how writers avoid clichés, and how contemporary films often blend multiple genres together.

Why Genre Matters

Whether you are pitching to a studio, submitting to festivals, or releasing your film independently, genre communicates:

- who the audience is
- what emotional experience viewers can expect
- how the project may be marketed
- where it fits on streaming platforms
- the kinds of stories and characters audiences anticipate

A producer will often ask, "What is it?" Genre is part of the answer. If the genre is unclear, the project becomes harder to describe, market, and sell.

Genre Expectations and Common Pitfalls

Every genre comes with recognizable conventions. Audiences often enjoy these conventions. Problems arise when a convention becomes predictable or replaces meaningful character, conflict, or theme.

Strong writers understand genre expectations and then personalize, deepen, or subvert them.

Horror

Common Pitfall: Characters make irrational choices simply to create scares.

Try Instead: Ground decisions in psychology. Connect choices to a character's want, fear, or flaw.

Examples: Hereditary, The Babadook, Get Out

Thriller

Common Pitfall: The villain explains everything in a final monologue.

Try Instead: Reveal motive through behavior and choices.

Examples: No Country for Old Men, The Silence of the Lambs

Mystery

Common Pitfall: Convenient clues appear exactly when needed.

Try Instead: Plant information early and allow discoveries to emerge naturally.

Examples: Knives Out, Chinatown

Science Fiction

Common Pitfall: Long speeches explaining the technology.

Try Instead: Let the audience learn through action and observation.

Examples: Arrival, Blade Runner 2049, Ex Machina

Fantasy

Common Pitfall: Prophecy replaces character choice.

Try Instead: Give characters agency and meaningful decisions.

Examples: Pan's Labyrinth, The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

Action and Adventure

Common Pitfall: Spectacle without emotional stakes.

Try Instead: Let action reveal character and alter relationships.

Examples: Mad Max: Fury Road, Raiders of the Lost Ark

Romantic Comedy

Common Pitfall: Miscommunication is the only obstacle.

Try Instead: Build conflict from deeper fears, flaws, and desires.

Examples: When Harry Met Sally..., The Big Sick, Crazy Rich Asians

Drama

Common Pitfall: Characters explain their feelings directly.

Try Instead: Let subtext and behavior do the work.

Examples: Manchester by the Sea, Moonlight

Coming-of-Age

Common Pitfall: One lesson changes everything overnight.

Try Instead: Show growth through small, uneven steps.

Examples: Lady Bird, The Perks of Being a Wallflower

Western

Common Pitfall: Simplistic heroes and villains.

Try Instead: Explore ambiguity, history, and identity.

Examples: *The Power of the Dog*, *Unforgiven*, *True Grit*

Film Noir

Common Pitfall: A femme fatale with no complexity beyond seduction.

Try Instead: Give every character agency and competing desires.

Examples: *Double Indemnity*, *Drive*, *Brick*

Hybrid and Genre-Bending Stories

Many contemporary films combine multiple genres. Examples include:

- *Get Out*: Horror + social satire
- *Parasite*: Thriller + dark comedy + family drama
- *Everything Everywhere All at Once*: Science fiction + martial arts + absurdist comedy + family drama
- *Pan's Labyrinth*: Fantasy + war drama
- *Birdman*: Drama + magical realism + satire
- *Her*: Science fiction + romance
- *The Shape of Water*: Fantasy + romance + thriller
- *Sinners*: Southern Gothic horror + period drama + crime film + musical

The strongest hybrids still satisfy the core expectations of at least one primary genre while adding new layers of tone and meaning.

Experimenting With Genre

One way to discover new possibilities is to rewrite your logline in different genres.

If you are writing a drama, try imagining it as:

- a horror film
- a comedy
- a science fiction story
- a thriller

Changing genre can reveal new conflicts, themes, metaphors, and audiences. It may even help you discover a stronger version of the story.

This exercise is not about abandoning your project. It is about exploring what else it could become.

References

Get Out. Directed by Jordan Peele, Universal Pictures, 2017.

Parasite. Directed by Bong Joon Ho, CJ Entertainment, 2019.

Everything Everywhere All at Once. Directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, A24, 2022.

Pan's Labyrinth. Directed by Guillermo del Toro, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2006.

The Shape of Water. Directed by Guillermo del Toro, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

12.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITE YOUR LOGLINE FOR DIFFERENT GENRES

Write the current logline for the script you have been developing throughout this book. Then rewrite the logline in three different genres: one that feels like an obvious fit, one that feels like a stretch, and one that seems completely unexpected.

Revise Your Logline

Original Logline

Genre 1 Revision

Genre:

Logline:

Genre 2 Revision

Genre:

Logline:

Genre 3 Revision

Genre:

Logline:

Reflection

Consider the following questions:

- Does the emotional core stay the same across all four versions?
- Which version feels the most exciting?
- Which version feels the most marketable?
- Does one version reveal a theme you had not considered?
- Does changing the genre suggest new characters, conflicts, or worlds?

Now return to the version of the project you are currently developing and ask:

- Does the genre match the emotional experience you want the audience to have?
- Does the genre help communicate and market the project clearly?
- Is there another genre that might express the same emotional core more effectively?

13: WRITING BEYOND TROPES AND STEREOTYPES

13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes

13.2: Representation and Perspective

13.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITE A TROPE

This page titled [13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes

Breaking Out of the "Voice of Reason" Box

I had a hard time relating to the sitcom wives and girlfriends who were written as the grounded voice of reason. They were practical and usually sarcastic, but ultimately served as the straight character to the lovable husband with big dreams. I could never see myself in them. I am not the voice of reason in my own life. I am driven by curiosity, big feelings, artistic impulses, and a sense that the world is stranger and more emotional than those women ever got to be.

For years, I subconsciously wrote myself into that box. When I wrote women who were flawed, impulsive, or messy, I sometimes heard that they were "unlikeable." The implication was that unless a woman was patient, supportive, or morally grounded, she was not a suitable protagonist. I internalized those messages without realizing it.

Working on *You've Been Served* changed that. I wrote openly about feeling inadequate in my marriage. I admitted I did not know how to cook and joked onstage that "my idea of gourmet food preparation is microwaving a frozen tamale from Trader Joe's on both sides." The audience laughed not because I fit into a trope, but because the honesty was human.

It wasn't just that I had been writing myself into a stereotype. The stereotype itself was too small. Thankfully, expectations about what makes a female character acceptable have evolved. Increasingly, characters are allowed to be messy, layered, impulsive, insecure, funny, and real.

This chapter is about writing characters who feel specific, complex, and fully human.

Why Tropes Matter

Tropes shape expectations and influence how audiences see entire groups of people. When writers repeat unexamined tropes, they often weaken both character and story.

Your goal is not to eliminate every trope. Tropes are tools. The goal is to understand what a trope does, why it exists, and how to move beyond its limitations.

Stereotypes vs. Archetypes

A stereotype is a simplified assumption about a group of people.

An archetype is a universal storytelling pattern.

For example, a Mentor is an archetype. A "wise mystical Asian master" is a stereotype.

A Hero is an archetype. A "chosen one" whose entire personality is defined by a cultural cliché is a stereotype.

Archetypes help us understand dramatic function. Stereotypes flatten people into predictable categories.

Common Tropes and How to Avoid Them

The Grounded "Voice of Reason" Woman

She exists primarily to stabilize a man's story rather than having one of her own.

Fix: Give women flaws, humor, contradictions, agency, and goals that drive the plot.

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl

Coined by critic Nathan Rabin, this is the quirky woman who exists solely to help a brooding man embrace life.

Fix: Give her her own goals, flaws, relationships, and emotional journey.

The Magical Black Character

A wise Black character exists mainly to help a white protagonist grow.

Fix: Give Black characters independent objectives, contradictions, strengths, and flaws.

The Gay Best Friend

Supportive, funny, and always available, but rarely given a full life of their own.

Fix: Give LGBTQ+ characters meaningful goals, relationships, and agency.

The Disabled Inspirational Figure

A disabled character exists primarily to inspire non-disabled characters.

Fix: Write disabled characters with goals, flaws, humor, relationships, and storylines beyond disability.

The "Fiery Latina," "Docile Asian Woman," and Other Ethnic Templates

These are Hollywood constructions rather than real people.

Fix: Focus on specific backgrounds, motivations, experiences, and contradictions.

The Noble Native

An Indigenous character exists mainly as a spiritual guide, moral compass, or symbol of harmony with nature.

Fix: Write Indigenous characters as individuals with specific histories, goals, flaws, and cultural contexts.

The White Savior

A privileged protagonist becomes the hero of someone else's story.

Fix: Center the people most affected by the conflict and allow them to drive solutions.

The Bechdel Test

Cartoonist Alison Bechdel popularized a simple test for representation.

A film passes if:

- two named women

- have a conversation
- about something other than a man

This is a minimal standard, not a measure of quality. However, it reveals how often women are marginalized in storytelling.

References

Zeigler, Noemi. *You've Been Served*. Stage play.

Rabin, Nathan. "The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown's Manic Pixie Dream Girl." *The A.V. Club*, 2007.

Bechdel, Alison. *Dykes to Watch Out For*. Firebrand Books, 1986.

This page titled [13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#) is shared under a license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- [13.2: Representation and Perspective](#) has no license indicated.

13.2: Representation and Perspective

As writers, we do more than create characters. We decide whose experiences matter, whose perspectives shape the story, and how audiences are encouraged to see the world.

The following concepts can help you think more critically about representation.

The Male Gaze

Film scholar Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the male gaze.

The male gaze describes storytelling and visual choices that position women as objects viewed through a heterosexual male perspective. Women become bodies, rewards, fantasies, or symbols rather than fully developed subjects.

Ask yourself:

- Does the audience experience this character's perspective?
- Or are they mainly being looked at?

The Female Gaze

The female gaze shifts attention toward emotional experience, subjectivity, empathy, and agency.

Rather than asking how a character looks, it often asks what a character feels, wants, fears, and experiences.

The female gaze is not simply "stories made by women." It is a way of prioritizing interiority and perspective.

Intersectionality

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality.

Identity is layered. People experience the world through multiple overlapping identities.

A Black disabled queer woman does not experience life the same way as a white able-bodied straight woman. A working-class immigrant man experiences different pressures than a wealthy man from the same ethnic group.

Good storytelling reflects this complexity.

Tokenism

Tokenism occurs when a character is included to create the appearance of diversity without meaningful depth or agency.

Ask:

- Could this character be removed without affecting the story?
- Do they have goals of their own?
- Do they make meaningful choices?
- Do they influence the plot?

If not, they may be functioning as a token rather than a character.

Revising Beyond Tropes

When revising your script, ask:

- What does this character want?
- What is their flaw?
- Do they have an arc?
- Do they make meaningful choices?
- Are they driving the story or merely reacting to it?
- Is their identity shaping their worldview, or is it being used as decoration?

The solution to stereotype-based writing is not perfection. It's specificity. The more clearly you understand a character's wants, fears, contradictions, and worldview, the less likely they are to become a trope.

References

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.

13.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITE A TROPE

Choose a trope you recognize in your own writing. Then complete the steps below.

Step 1

Identify the trope your character currently falls into. State it clearly.

Step 2

List your character's specific objective, flaw, backstory, and stakes. Make each detail concrete.

Step 3

Write a short paragraph describing the character as a full human being. You might explore their worldview, strongly held beliefs, quirks and idiosyncrasies, hopes, fears, dreams, hobbies, and/or contradictions.

Step 4

Remove stereotyping adjectives and replace them with precise, personal details.

Step 5

Write a new version of the character's introductory scene. Show their objectives and contradictions through action.

Step 6

Add one moment where the character surprises you. This helps break the mold of the trope.

14: WRITING A TV SERIES

14.1: What Makes a TV Pilot Different?

14.2: Building Your Series Bible

14.3: TV PILOT WORKSHEET

This page titled [14: Writing a TV Series](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

14.1: What Makes a TV Pilot Different?

When you pitch a television series, you usually need two things: a pilot script and a series bible.

The pilot is the first episode. The series bible explains the larger vision of the show, including the world, characters, tone, and future episodes.

A feature film tells one complete story. A television pilot begins a story that must continue generating episodes.

The Two Most Common Types of TV Series

Most television series fall into one of two broad categories: the half-hour comedy and the one-hour drama.

Half-Hour Comedy

Half-hour comedies are usually about 22 to 35 minutes long, depending on the platform. Traditional network sitcoms often run about 22 minutes without commercials, while streaming comedies may be longer.

Examples include:

- *The Office* (2005)
- *Abbott Elementary* (2021)
- *30 Rock* (2006)
- *Parks and Recreation* (2009)
- *Hacks* (2021)

A half-hour pilot is often around **25 to 35 pages**.

Many comedies use a three-act structure, though streaming formats are often more flexible. A cold open typically introduces the tone and central conflict before the title sequence.

One-Hour Drama

One-hour dramas are typically 42 to 60 minutes long, depending on whether they are written for network television, cable, or streaming.

Examples include:

- *Breaking Bad* (2008)
- *Severance* (2022)
- *The Bear* (2022)
- *The Last of Us* (2023)
- *Killing Eve* (2018)

A one-hour pilot is often around **50 to 65 pages**.

Many dramas use four or five acts with major turning points at the end of each act. They often begin with a teaser that establishes the world, raises a dramatic question, or introduces a mystery.

The exact format varies across networks and streaming platforms, but both half-hour comedies and one-hour dramas rely on the same storytelling principles you have already studied: clear objectives, escalating conflict, turning points, and meaningful change.

A Strong Series Engine

The series engine is the situation that creates ongoing stories.

In *Abbott Elementary* (2021), the engine is an underfunded public school that forces teachers to solve new problems every week.

In *Breaking Bad* (2008), the engine is Walter White's double life as a chemistry teacher and meth manufacturer.

A good series engine creates conflict repeatedly.

A Clear World

Television is often world-driven. Audiences return week after week because they enjoy spending time in a particular environment.

The workplace in *Abbott Elementary*.

The music scene in *Atlanta* (2016).

The divided reality of *Severance* (2022).

The world should have its own rules, rhythms, values, and visual identity.

Character Arcs That Can Stretch

Film characters often experience one major transformation.

Television characters evolve more slowly.

They resist change.

They relapse.

They make progress and then backslide.

A television protagonist needs enough complexity to sustain many episodes.

Series Loglines vs. Pilot Loglines

A series logline describes the ongoing premise of the show.

A pilot logline describes the story of a specific episode.

Example: Abbott Elementary (2021)

Series Logline:

A group of dedicated teachers struggle to make a difference in an underfunded Philadelphia elementary school.

Pilot Logline:

A new teacher's optimism collides with the realities of a struggling public school.

Breaking Bad (2008)

Series Logline:

A struggling chemistry teacher enters the methamphetamine trade, leading him deeper into the criminal underworld.

Pilot Logline:

After being diagnosed with cancer, a chemistry teacher partners with a former student to cook meth in hopes of providing for his family.

Television Structure

Television episodes are usually divided into acts separated by major turning points.

A **cold open** or **teaser** appears before the title sequence and grabs the audience's attention.

Each act escalates the conflict and pushes the story in a new direction.

A **tag** is a brief scene after the final act. In comedy, it often delivers one final joke. In drama, it may introduce a new mystery or set up the next episode.

Whether you are writing a sitcom, a prestige drama, or a streaming series, the structure is built from the same storytelling tools explored throughout this book: beats, turning points, escalation, climax, and resolution.

References

Abbott Elementary. Created by Quinta Brunson, ABC, 2021.

Atlanta. Created by Donald Glover, FX, 2016.

Breaking Bad. Created by Vince Gilligan, AMC, 2008.

Hacks. Created by Lucia Aniello, Paul W. Downs, and Jen Statsky, Max, 2021.

Killing Eve. Created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, BBC America, 2018.

Parks and Recreation. Created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, NBC, 2009.

Severance. Created by Dan Erickson, Apple TV+, 2022.

The Bear. Created by Christopher Storer, FX on Hulu, 2022.

The Last of Us. Created by Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann, HBO, 2023.

The Office. Developed by Greg Daniels, NBC, 2005.

30 Rock. Created by Tina Fey, NBC, 2006.

This page titled [14.1: What Makes a TV Pilot Different?](#) is shared under a license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- [14.2: Building Your Series Bible](#) has no license indicated.

14.2: Building Your Series Bible

A series bible helps readers understand the long-term potential of your show. It demonstrates that your idea can generate stories beyond the pilot episode.

A simple series bible includes the following elements:

Series Logline

A one-sentence description of the ongoing premise of the show.

Unlike a pilot logline, which describes a single episode, a series logline describes the engine that can generate many stories.

World and Tone

Describe the setting and emotional feel of the series.

What makes this world unique?

What are its rules, values, pressures, and rhythms?

A viewer should immediately understand what kind of experience the show offers.

Severance

Official Opening Title Sequence (2022)

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



This sequence won an Emmy for Outstanding Main Title Design.

Main Characters

Write brief descriptions of your major characters.

Include:

- their core want
- their core wound or flaw
- their role in the story
- their relationship to the protagonist

Focus on the emotional conflicts that will generate future episodes.

Future Episode Ideas

List one or two examples of stories the series could generate beyond the pilot.

These do not need to be detailed outlines. A sentence or two is enough.

The goal is not simply to prove that you have one good pilot. The goal is to demonstrate that your series engine can continue generating stories long after episode one ends.

Season Arc

A television season often follows the same broad dramatic shape as a feature film.

The protagonist begins with a want, flaw, wound, or problem. As episodes progress, the conflict grows more complicated. New obstacles appear. Relationships shift. The protagonist makes choices that create new consequences.

Many successful television seasons build toward two major climactic episodes.

The Penultimate Episode (Second-to-Last Episode)

This is often the protagonist's lowest point or biggest setback.

Secrets are revealed.

Plans fail.

Relationships collapse.

The antagonist gains the upper hand.

The protagonist may lose the thing they care about most.

This episode often functions like the **All Is Lost** moment in a feature film.

The Season Finale

The finale is usually the season's climax.

The protagonist confronts the central conflict.

They make their biggest choice.

The season's major question is answered, at least temporarily.

At the same time, the finale often introduces a new problem, mystery, or cliffhanger that creates anticipation for the next season.

Thinking of a Season Like a Feature Film

Many television seasons follow a pattern similar to this:

- Early Episodes: Introduce the world, characters, and central problem.
- Middle Episodes: Escalate conflict and deepen relationships.
- Penultimate Episode: Rock bottom, major reversal, or All Is Lost moment.
- Finale: Climax, resolution, and setup for future stories.

The exact structure varies from show to show, but television still relies on the same storytelling principles you have studied throughout this book: setup, escalation, turning points, climax, and resolution.

A television season is essentially a larger version of the story structures you have already studied. Episodes are made of beats. Seasons are made of episodes. The same principles apply at every level.

Before writing your pilot, ask yourself:

- Can this idea generate ten episodes?
- Can it generate fifty?
- Can the conflicts continue evolving?
- What is my protagonist's season-long goal?
- What is their biggest setback?
- What choice must they make in the finale?
- What question will make viewers want to watch season two?

If you can't answer these questions, your series engine may need strengthening.

References

Severance. Created by Dan Erickson, Apple TV+, 2022.

14.3: TV PILOT WORKSHEET

Creating Your Television Series

This worksheet will help you develop the foundation of a television series. Keep your answers concise. Focus on story, character, and conflict.

Part 1: Series Bible

Series Concept

Series Title:

Genre:

Series Logline:

World and Tone

Describe the setting and emotional feel of the series in 3 to 5 sentences.

Where does the series take place?

What makes this world unique?

What kind of experience should the audience expect?

World and Tone:

Main Characters

For each major character, identify: Name, Role in the story, Core want, and Core wound or flaw

Protagonist

Name:

Role:

Core Want:

Core Wound or Flaw:

Character Two

Name:

Role:

Core Want:

Core Wound or Flaw:

Character Three

Name:

Role:

Core Want:

Core Wound or Flaw:

Series Engine

What situation generates ongoing stories?

Why can't these characters simply walk away?

What recurring source of conflict will continue creating episodes?

Series Engine:

Future Episode Ideas

Write one sentence for two possible future episodes.

Episode Two:

Episode Three:

Season Arc

Describe your protagonist's journey across Season One.

What do they want?

What is their biggest setback?

What choice must they make in the finale?

Season Arc:

Part 2: Pilot Episode

Pilot Logline

Write one sentence describing the story of the pilot episode.

Pilot Logline:

Cold Open or Teaser

Describe the opening image or event that grabs the audience's attention.

Cold Open:

Pilot Beat Outline

Act One

Introduce the protagonist, world, and central problem.

Act Two

Escalate the conflict.

Act Three

Push the protagonist toward a difficult choice.

Finale or Tag

End with a moment that launches future episodes.

15: REWRITING

15.1: Writing is Rewriting

15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script

15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE

This page titled [15: Rewriting](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler ([Media Communications](#)).

15.1: Writing is Rewriting

Writing is rewriting. Every screenplay evolves. Even experienced writers know that the first draft is often a discovery draft, a map of what the story might become rather than its final form. Revision is where writers sharpen intention, clarify structure, deepen character, refine dialogue, and strengthen theme.

Many writers fear rewriting because it forces them to confront what is not working. But rewriting is not simply about fixing mistakes. It is about discovering the strongest version of the story and removing what distracts from its core.

Learning to Rewrite

Wendy Kram, a producer and writing consultant known for projects like *Mad Money* (2008), optioned one of my feature scripts. We ended up developing several projects together, and her guidance changed the way I think about rewrites.

Wendy encouraged me to ground my comedy in emotional truth rather than leaning too hard into broad humor. She helped me see that the most memorable stories are rooted in a character's deeper wound, longing, or fear. She also reminded me that one reason she chose to work with me was my persistence and willingness to keep going.

She often says that overnight success is rarely overnight. It's the result of continuing to write, revise, rethink, and reimagine.

Working with her taught me that rewriting is not a punishment. It's the privilege of becoming a better storyteller.

[Wendy Kram - Rewriting The Second and Third Drafts of a Screenplay](#)

This interactive element is not available in this format. Visit the link or scan the QR code to access it online.

[View this YouTube Video online](#)



Rewriting Means Letting Go

Rewriting is not just fixing typos or polishing dialogue. It often means being willing to:

- rethink the spine of a scene
- combine two characters into one
- cut a favorite joke or sequence
- question assumptions about structure
- ask whether the story you wrote is the story you intended to tell

A rewrite requires courage. Sometimes you will dismantle entire sections. Sometimes you will remove material you love because it no longer serves the larger story.

Before beginning a major rewrite, read the script aloud or organize a table read. Hearing the script performed often reveals problems with pacing, dialogue, tone, and clarity that are difficult to notice silently on the page.

Ask yourself:

What story is my script actually telling?

Is that the story I want to tell?

Rewriting is about protecting the integrity of the whole story, not preserving every page you have written.

References

Kram, Wendy. Personal conversations and story development notes, 2025–2026.

This page titled [15.1: Writing is Rewriting](#) is shared under a license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts.

- [15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script](#) has no license indicated.

15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script

One of the hardest truths for screenwriters to accept is that many structural problems begin much earlier than they appear.

If Act 2 feels unfocused, the setup may be unclear.

If the midpoint collapses, the protagonist's goal may not be strong enough.

If the climax feels rushed or unearned, the emotional problem introduced earlier in the story may not have been fully developed.

When a screenplay struggles, return to the foundation:

- the protagonist's objective
- the flaw or wound
- the world of the story
- the inciting incident
- the central dramatic question
- the tone and genre promise

If these elements are unclear, the rest of the screenplay will struggle to hold together.

A Practical Rewrite Process

1. Read the script straight through.

Experience it like an audience member. Avoid stopping to make edits.

2. Summarize the story honestly.

Write a short summary of what the script actually communicates, not what you intended it to communicate.

3. Compare the summary to your logline.

If they no longer match, the screenplay may have drifted.

4. Track the emotional journey.

Where does the protagonist begin emotionally? Where do they end? Is the transformation visible and earned?

An earned transformation grows out of the protagonist's choices. The character should not simply be rescued or changed by events happening around them. They must actively make decisions, face consequences, and participate in solving their own problem. When the story ends, the audience should be able to trace the character's growth back through the choices they made along the way.

5. Examine scene purpose.

Every scene should advance plot, deepen character, or escalate conflict. If a scene does none of these things, consider cutting or combining it.

As you revise, pay attention to whether the antagonist applies increasing pressure, whether the stakes escalate, and whether the climax meaningfully resolves the problem introduced earlier in the story.

Rewrite visually whenever possible. Replace explanation with behavior, image, sound, and action.

Do not spend time polishing dialogue before solving major structural problems.

Step Away From the Script

One of the most useful rewriting tools is distance.

After spending weeks or months on a screenplay, it becomes difficult to see it clearly. You know every scene, every joke, and every line of dialogue. Your brain begins filling in information that may not actually be on the page.

When possible, put the script away for a few days or even a few weeks before beginning a major rewrite. Working on another project can be especially helpful. A short film, a new screenplay idea, a music video, or even a journal entry can help reset your perspective.

When you return, you will often notice problems and opportunities that were invisible before. Scenes that felt essential may suddenly seem unnecessary. Solutions may become obvious. Distance helps you read the script more like an audience member and less like the person who wrote it.

Sometimes the fastest way forward is to step away for a moment.

Finding Feedback

Screenwriting is often solitary, but rewriting does not have to be.

One of the best ways to improve a script is to hear how it affects other people.

A table read is a gathering where actors, friends, classmates, or collaborators read the screenplay aloud. The goal is not performance. The goal is to hear the script. Dialogue that seemed clever on the page may feel awkward when spoken. Scenes that felt exciting may drag. Characters may sound too similar.

Writers can also benefit from joining writing groups, attending screenwriting conferences, or seeking professional feedback.

Organizations such as these are known for bringing together writers, filmmakers, producers, managers, and educators. Many conferences offer workshops, script feedback, panels, and networking opportunities.

Screenwriting competitions, fellowships, and labs can also provide valuable notes. Even when feedback is difficult to hear, recurring comments often reveal areas that deserve closer attention.

You do not need to follow every note you receive. Your job is to listen carefully, look for patterns, and decide which suggestions strengthen the story you want to tell.

The Long Game

A screenplay is not finished simply because you typed "Fade out."

Most writers do not succeed with their first screenplay. Many build careers after years of rewriting, experimenting, failing, and improving.

Your goal is not to write one perfect script. Your goal is to become the kind of writer who can consistently create strong stories.

Rewriting is part of that growth.

15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE

Rewriting is where your screenplay becomes a screenplay. Use this worksheet as a structured guide for your rewrites. You should apply each task to the script you have been developing throughout this book.

Revisit Your Logline

Step 1. Current Logline

Write your current logline here.

Step 2. Logline Promises

Briefly identify what your logline suggests about each of the following:

Protagonist

Central Problem

Stakes

Transformation

Step 3. Revised Logline

Rewrite your logline in one clear, specific sentence. Make sure your entire script aligns with this sentence.

Diagnose the Script Structure

Step 4. Five Essential Beats

Write one sentence for each beat.

Setup

Catalyst

All Is Lost

Climax

Resolution

Step 5. Problem Solve

Answer the following questions:

- Is the protagonist's wound or flaw clear in the first ten pages? Describe it briefly.
- Does the protagonist embrace a clear and measurable goal by the end of Act 1?
- Does tension escalate as the protagonist faces off against the antagonist in Act 2?

- Does your climax pay off the problem established in Act 1? Explain briefly where the payoff works or where it may be missing.
- Does the protagonist change by the end of the script? What do they learn, overcome, heal, or sacrifice?

Final Revision Goal

Step 6. Map Out Your Vision

In one paragraph, describe the version of the script you want after the next rewrite cycle. Address tone, clarity, emotional arc, and story focus.

INDEX

A

action lines

- 9: *Formatting*
- 9.1: *Screenplay Formatting Essentials*

American theatre

- 10.2: *Sample Scene from His Girl Friday*

anecdotes

- 1: *Storytelling Starts with a Joke*

antagonists

- 6: *Character and the World of Story*

archetypes

- 13.1: *Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes*
- 7: *The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down*
- 7.1: *The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down*

Ari Aster

- 12.1: *What Is Genre and How Does It Work?*

audience

- 12: *Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience*
- 12.1: *What Is Genre and How Does It Work?*
- 12.2: *Working Within Genre*
- 14.1: *What Makes a TV Pilot Different?*

audience engagement

- 14.3: *TV PILOT WORKSHEET*
- 2.1: *Story Beats- The DNA of Story*
- 8.1: *Building Your Beat Sheet*
- 9.3: *WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE*

audience expectations

- 2: *Story Beats- The DNA of Story*

audience_connection

- 3.2: *WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE*

B

beat sheet

- 8: *Building Your Beat Sheet*
- 8.1: *Building Your Beat Sheet*

beats

- 2.1: *Story Beats- The DNA of Story*
- 2.2: *Beats in Short Films*
- 8: *Building Your Beat Sheet*

behavior

- 11.2: *Dialogue Tools and Techniques*

Betty Boop

- 2.1: *Story Beats- The DNA of Story*

building

- 8: *Building Your Beat Sheet*

C

case

- 8: *Building Your Beat Sheet*

catalysts

- 2.3: *WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS*

central problem

- 15.3: *WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE*

challenges

- 5: *Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story*
- 7: *The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down*

character

- 11.2: *Dialogue Tools and Techniques*
- 3: *You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme*
- 3.1: *Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme*
- 4: *Loglines- Your Story's North Star*
- 6: *Character and the World of Story*
- 6.1: *Character and the World of Story*

Character Analysis

- 10.2: *Sample Scene from His Girl Friday*

character arcs

- 14: *Writing a TV Series*
- 14.1: *What Makes a TV Pilot Different?*

character bio

- 6.2: *WORKSHEET- BUILD YOUR CHARACTER AND WORLD*

character creation

- 14.3: *TV PILOT WORKSHEET*

character desire

- 2.3: *WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS*

character desires

- 2: *Story Beats- The DNA of Story*

character development

- 1.2: *WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY*
- 10: *The Anatomy of a Scene*
- 10.1: *The Anatomy of a Scene*
- 11: *Dialogue*
- 11.1: *Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact*
- 13: *Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes*
- 13.1: *Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes*
- 13.2: *Representation and Perspective*
- 14.1: *What Makes a TV Pilot Different?*
- 14.2: *Building Your Series Bible*
- 15: *Rewriting*
- 15.1: *Writing is Rewriting*
- 15.2: *Diagnosing and Revising Your Script*
- 15.3: *WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE*
- 2: *Story Beats- The DNA of Story*
- 2.1: *Story Beats- The DNA of Story*
- 2.2: *Beats in Short Films*
- 2.3: *WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS*
- 5.1: *Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story*
- 5.2: *WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS*
- 7.1: *The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down*
- 8.1: *Building Your Beat Sheet*
- 8.2: *Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot*

character flaw

- 4.1: *Logline- Your Story's North Star*

character flaws

- 7: *The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down*

character growth

- 5: *Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story*

character introduction

- 9.3: *WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE*

character introductions

- 9: *Formatting*
- 9.1: *Screenplay Formatting Essentials*

character objectives

- 10: *The Anatomy of a Scene*

character transformation

- 6.2: *WORKSHEET- BUILD YOUR CHARACTER AND WORLD*
- 7: *The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down*
- 7.2: *How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding*
- 8.2: *Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot*

characters

- 12.2: *Working Within Genre*
- 13.1: *Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes*

cinema studies

- 8.2: *Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot*

cinematic techniques

- 2.1: *Story Beats- The DNA of Story*
- 2.2: *Beats in Short Films*

clarity

- 9: *Formatting*

classic film

- 8.2: *Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot*

comedy

- 1.1: *Storytelling Starts with a Joke*
- 12: *Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience*
- 12.1: *What Is Genre and How Does It Work?*
- 14.1: *What Makes a TV Pilot Different?*
- 8.2: *Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot*

conflict

- 10: *The Anatomy of a Scene*
- 10.1: *The Anatomy of a Scene*
- 10.2: *Sample Scene from His Girl Friday*
- 11: *Dialogue*
- 11.1: *Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact*
- 11.2: *Dialogue Tools and Techniques*
- 14.1: *What Makes a TV Pilot Different?*
- 2: *Story Beats- The DNA of Story*
- 2.2: *Beats in Short Films*
- 3: *You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme*
- 3.1: *Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme*
- 5: *Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story*
- 9.3: *WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE*

conflict resolution

- 14.3: *TV PILOT WORKSHEET*
- 5.2: *WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS*

conflicts

- 12.2: *Working Within Genre*

consequence

- 3.1: *Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme*

contrasting voices

- 11.3: *WORKSHEET- APPLY THE TOOLS*

conventions

- 12.2: *Working Within Genre*

creative process

- 1.1: *Storytelling Starts with a Joke*

creative writing

- 15.1: Writing is Rewriting
- 4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star
- 5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS

creative_writing

- 3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE

creativity

- 1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY
- 12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience
- 6.1: Character and the World of Story

Crime and Punishment in Suburbia

- 11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact

D

dark humor

- 1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

David Timoner

- 10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene
- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

desires

- 6: Character and the World of Story

Development

- 6: Character and the World of Story

dialogue

- 10.2: Sample Scene from His Girl Friday
- 11: Dialogue
- 11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact
- 11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques
- 9: Formatting
- 9.1: Screenplay Formatting Essentials
- 9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE

dialogue refinement

- 15.1: Writing is Rewriting

Dig

- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

Dig documentary

- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

Dig!

- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

directing

- 6.1: Character and the World of Story

direction

- 2.1: Story Beats- The DNA of Story

distinct voices

- 11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques

documentary

- 8: Building Your Beat Sheet
- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

drama

- 12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience
- 12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?
- 14.1: What Makes a TV Pilot Different?

dramatic action

- 10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene

dramatic arc

- 10: The Anatomy of a Scene

dramatic structure

- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet
- 9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE

dreams

- 9.2: Special Formatting Situations

E

editing

- 8: Building Your Beat Sheet
- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

emotional

- 12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience
- 6.1: Character and the World of Story

emotional arc

- 2.1: Story Beats- The DNA of Story
- 7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down

emotional arcs

- 7: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down

emotional behavior

- 11: Dialogue

emotional conflict

- 14.2: Building Your Series Bible

emotional depth

- 2: Story Beats- The DNA of Story

emotional events

- 10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene

emotional experience

- 12.2: Working Within Genre
- 13.2: Representation and Perspective

emotional experiences

- 13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes

emotional impact

- 5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story

emotional journey

- 3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme
- 5: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story

emotional response

- 1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

emotional revelation

- 2.2: Beats in Short Films

emotional shifts

- 10: The Anatomy of a Scene

emotional truth

- 15: Rewriting

environment

- 6: Character and the World of Story

episode ideas

- 14.2: Building Your Series Bible

episodic structure

- 14.3: TV PILOT WORKSHEET

essential beats

- 15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE

examples

- 1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

expectation

- 1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke
- 1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY

expectations

- 12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience

F

fantasies

- 9.2: Special Formatting Situations

fears_and_hopes

- 3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE

female characters

- 13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes
- 13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes

female gaze

- 13.2: Representation and Perspective

feminism

- 13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes

film

- 12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?

film analysis

- 11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact
- 2.2: Beats in Short Films
- 8.2: Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot

film structure

- 9.1: Screenplay Formatting Essentials

filmmaker

- 12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?
- 8: Building Your Beat Sheet

filmmaking

- 1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke
- 12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience
- 2.1: Story Beats- The DNA of Story
- 6.1: Character and the World of Story
- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

first draft

- 15.1: Writing is Rewriting

flashbacks

- 9.2: Special Formatting Situations

flaws

- 6: Character and the World of Story

format

- 14: Writing a TV Series

formatting

- 9: Formatting
- 9.1: Screenplay Formatting Essentials
- 9.2: Special Formatting Situations

G

gag

- 1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY

genre

- 12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience
- 12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?
- 12.2: Working Within Genre

goals

- 4: Loglines- Your Story's North Star

growth

- 6.1: Character and the World of Story

H

hero

- 7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down

hero's journey

- 7: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down
- 7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down
- 7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding

His Girl Friday

- 10.2: Sample Scene from His Girl Friday

historical context

[8.2: Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot](#)

horror

[12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience](#)
[12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?](#)

Howard Beale

[10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene](#)

humor

[1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke](#)
[1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY](#)

I

identity

[7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding](#)
[8: Building Your Beat Sheet](#)

Ingmar Bergman

[1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke](#)

instructional

[9: Formatting](#)

intersectionality

[13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#)
[13.2: Representation and Perspective](#)

introspection

[3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme](#)

J

journey

[7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down](#)

Judith Weston

[10.2: Sample Scene from His Girl Friday](#)

L

learning

[6.1: Character and the World of Story](#)

life_experience

[3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE](#)

logline

[12.2: Working Within Genre](#)
[15: Rewriting](#)
[15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE](#)
[4: Loglines- Your Story's North Star](#)
[4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star](#)

M

main characters

[14.2: Building Your Series Bible](#)

male gaze

[13.2: Representation and Perspective](#)

marketing

[12.2: Working Within Genre](#)

Mentor

[7: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down](#)
[7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down](#)

Midsommar

[12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?](#)

montage

[9.2: Special Formatting Situations](#)

mystery

[12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?](#)

N

narrative

[11: Dialogue](#)
[14.1: What Makes a TV Pilot Different?](#)
[15: Rewriting](#)
[2.2: Beats in Short Films](#)
[3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme](#)
[4: Loglines- Your Story's North Star](#)
[5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story](#)
[6.1: Character and the World of Story](#)
[8: Building Your Beat Sheet](#)
[8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet](#)

narrative beats

[2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS](#)

narrative clarity

[4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star](#)

narrative outline

[2: Story Beats- The DNA of Story](#)

narrative progression

[2: Story Beats- The DNA of Story](#)

narrative structure

[1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke](#)
[10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene](#)
[11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact](#)
[14.2: Building Your Series Bible](#)
[2.1: Story Beats- The DNA of Story](#)
[7: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down](#)
[8.2: Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot](#)

narrative technique

[14.3: TV PILOT WORKSHEET](#)
[5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS](#)

narrative techniques

[15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script](#)
[9.1: Screenplay Formatting Essentials](#)

need

[3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme](#)

Network

[10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene](#)

O

obstacles

[2.2: Beats in Short Films](#)
[2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS](#)
[4: Loglines- Your Story's North Star](#)

Ondi Timoner

[8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet](#)

ordeal

[7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding](#)

ordinary world

[6.2: WORKSHEET- BUILD YOUR CHARACTER AND WORLD](#)
[7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding](#)

outline

[5: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story](#)

P

pacing

[11: Dialogue](#)
[11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact](#)
[11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques](#)
[15.1: Writing is Rewriting](#)

passions

[6: Character and the World of Story](#)

personal transformation

[7: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down](#)

personal_story_seeds

[3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE](#)

Perspective

[13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#)

phone calls

[9.2: Special Formatting Situations](#)

pilot episode

[14.3: TV PILOT WORKSHEET](#)

pilot script

[14: Writing a TV Series](#)

pitch

[4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star](#)

plot

[3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme](#)
[3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme](#)
[5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story](#)
[8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet](#)

plot development

[10: The Anatomy of a Scene](#)

plot outline

[5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS](#)

protagonist

[15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script](#)
[15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE](#)
[2: Story Beats- The DNA of Story](#)
[2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS](#)
[3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme](#)
[4: Loglines- Your Story's North Star](#)
[4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star](#)
[5: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story](#)
[5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS](#)

Q

question dodging

[11.3: WORKSHEET- APPLY THE TOOLS](#)

R

recurring_theme

[3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE](#)

reflection

[1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY](#)

representation

[13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#)
[13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#)
[13.2: Representation and Perspective](#)

revision

[15.1: Writing is Rewriting](#)

revision process

[15: Rewriting](#)

rewriting

- 15: Rewriting
- 15.1: Writing is Rewriting
- 15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script
- 15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE

rhythm

- 11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques

Rob Schmidt

- 11: Dialogue
- 11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact

romantic comedy

- 10.2: Sample Scene from His Girl Friday

S

sacrifice

- 7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down

scene

- 10: The Anatomy of a Scene
- 10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene
- 9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE

scene headings

- 9: Formatting
- 9.1: Screenplay Formatting Essentials

scene purpose

- 15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script

screenplay

- 15: Rewriting
- 15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script
- 9: Formatting
- 9.1: Screenplay Formatting Essentials
- 9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE

screenplay writing

- 5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS

screenwriting

- 15: Rewriting
- 2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS

screenwriting software

- 9.2: Special Formatting Situations

script

- 10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene

script development

- 15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script

script structure

- 15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE

scripts

- 13.2: Representation and Perspective

season arc

- 14.2: Building Your Series Bible

self_exploration

- 3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE

series bible

- 14: Writing a TV Series
- 14.2: Building Your Series Bible
- 14.3: TV PILOT WORKSHEET

series development

- 14.3: TV PILOT WORKSHEET

series logline

- 14: Writing a TV Series

setting

- 9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE

setup

- 1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

Shadow

- 7: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down

Sidney Lumet

- 10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene

social media

- 1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

Some Like It Hot

- 8.2: Case Study- Twelve-Beat Structure Applied to Some Like It Hot

special world

- 6.2: WORKSHEET- BUILD YOUR CHARACTER AND WORLD
- 7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding

spine

- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

stakes

- 15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE
- 3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme
- 3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme
- 4: Loglines- Your Story's North Star
- 4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star

stereotypes

- 13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes
- 13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes

story

- 2.1: Story Beats- The DNA of Story
- 3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme
- 4: Loglines- Your Story's North Star
- 5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story
- 6: Character and the World of Story

story arcs

- 8.1: Building Your Beat Sheet

story beats

- 2: Story Beats- The DNA of Story

story structure

- 2.2: Beats in Short Films
- 2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS
- 4.1: Logline- Your Story's North Star
- 5: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story
- 5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS

storytelling

- 1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke
- 1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke
- 1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY
- 12: Writing for Genre- Expectation, Surprise, and Audience
- 2: Story Beats- The DNA of Story
- 2.2: Beats in Short Films
- 3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme
- 3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE

storytelling principles

- 14.2: Building Your Series Bible

storytelling techniques

- 2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS

structural elements

- 1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

structure

- 10: The Anatomy of a Scene
- 14: Writing a TV Series
- 14.1: What Makes a TV Pilot Different?
- 15.1: Writing is Rewriting
- 15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script
- 5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story
- 8: Building Your Beat Sheet

study

- 8: Building Your Beat Sheet

subtext

- 11: Dialogue
- 11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques
- 11.3: WORKSHEET- APPLY THE TOOLS

surprise

- 1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke
- 1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY

suspense

- 11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact

synopsis

- 5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story

T

teaching

- 6.1: Character and the World of Story

television

- 14.1: What Makes a TV Pilot Different?
- 14.3: TV PILOT WORKSHEET

television series

- 14: Writing a TV Series

television writing

- 14.2: Building Your Series Bible

tension

- 11: Dialogue
- 11.1: Minimal Dialogue and Maximum Impact
- 11.2: Dialogue Tools and Techniques

text messages

- 9.2: Special Formatting Situations

thematic contrast

- 6.2: WORKSHEET- BUILD YOUR CHARACTER AND WORLD

theme

- 15: Rewriting
- 3: You as a Storyteller- Story, Plot, Stakes, and Theme
- 3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme

themes

- 12.2: Working Within Genre

three act structure

- 5.2: WORKSHEET- OUTLINE YOUR STORY IN THREE ACTS

thriller

- 12.1: What Is Genre and How Does It Work?

title page

- 9.2: Special Formatting Situations

tokenism

- 13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes
- 13.2: Representation and Perspective

tone

- 9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE

tragedy

- 1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke
- 1.1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke

transformation

[15.3: WORKSHEET- REWRITING WITH PURPOSE](#)

[3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme](#)

[5: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of Story](#)

[7.1: The Hero's Journey- Ordinary, Special, and Upside Down](#)

treatment

[5.1: Three-Act Structure and the Shape of a Story](#)

trials

[7.2: How the Hero's Journey Deepens Our Understanding](#)

tropes

[13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#)

[13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#)

TV pilot

[14: Writing a TV Series](#)

U

unique_perspective

[3.2: WORKSHEET- DISCOVER YOUR STORYTELLING VOICE](#)

V

viewer engagement

[14.2: Building Your Series Bible](#)

visual

[1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY](#)

visual storytelling

[1: Storytelling Starts with a Joke](#)

[2.3: WORKSHEET- YOUR OPENING BEATS](#)

W

want

[3.1: Story, Plot, Stakes, Theme](#)

wendy kram

[15.1: Writing is Rewriting](#)

world

[6: Character and the World of Story](#)

writing

[1.2: WORKSHEET- FROM JOKE TO STORY](#)

[13: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#)

[13.1: Writing Beyond Tropes and Stereotypes](#)

[15: Rewriting](#)

[9.3: WORKSHEET- BEGIN A SCREENPLAY SCENE](#)

writing craft

[15.2: Diagnosing and Revising Your Script](#)

writing process

[15.1: Writing is Rewriting](#)

writing techniques

[10.1: The Anatomy of a Scene](#)

[11: Dialogue](#)

GLOSSARY

A

- Act 1 Setup** | The foundational section that introduces character, world, conflict, tone, and genre promise.
- Act Break** | A moment of escalation at the end of an act.
- Act One** | The section that introduces the protagonist, their world, their want, and the event that disrupts their life.
- Act Three** | The section where the protagonist faces the crisis, makes a defining choice, and resolves the story.
- Act Two** | The longest section of the story where obstacles rise, stakes increase, and the protagonist is tested.
- Action Line** | Visual description in the present tense.
- Action Verb** | A verb that describes dramatic behavior such as to persuade, to charm, or to provoke.
- Active Voice** | Subject performs the action.
- All Is Lost Moment** | A pivotal low point near the end of Act 2 where the protagonist faces defeat or despair.
- Antagonist** | The force that opposes the protagonist's want and reflects their flaw.

B

- Beat** | A unit of change in dramatic action, which shifts behavior or emotion.
- Beat** | A small unit of dramatic action defined by a shift or escalation.
- Beat** | A small unit of storytelling with a shift in action or emotion.
- Bechdel Test** | A simple test measuring whether women in a story talk to each other about something other than a man.
- Button** | The final moment of a scene that gives it closure.

C

- Call to Adventure** | The event that disrupts the ordinary world.
- Catalyst** | The event that disrupts normal life and launches the story.
- Catalyst** | The event that launches the main story.
- Change** | The transformation that occurs within the scene based on action and conflict.
- Character Flaw** | A behavioral limitation that grows from the character's core desire.
- Cold Open / Teaser** | Short scene before the title card. Creates immediate interest.
- Comparable Titles ("Comps")** | Existing films or shows whose tone or audience resembles your project.
- Conflict** | The force that blocks the character's objective.
- Contrasting Voices** | Each character has a distinct verbal style, rhythm, and worldview.
- Courier 12 pt** | Required screenplay font.

D

- Dialogue from Want** | Dialogue shaped by what the character wants in the scene.

E

- Elevator Pitch** | A spontaneous verbal pitch delivered in casual settings.
- Emotional Behavior** | Physical actions that reveal emotional truth beneath dialogue.
- Emotional Event** | A moment that shifts a relationship or situation, such as a confession, negotiation, or revelation.
- Emotional Event** | The dramatic shift at the core of a scene, such as a confession, confrontation, or reversal.
- Expectation** | The continuation or reinforcement of that pattern.
- EXT** | Exterior.

F

Feature Script | A screenplay typically between 90 and 120 pages, formatted according to industry standards, with roughly one page equaling one minute of screen time.

Female Gaze | A framing that emphasizes character subjectivity, emotional perspective, and humanity rather than objectification.

Flaw | The behavior caused by the grand passion taken too far.

Flaw | A behavioral obstacle that grows out of the character's grand passion taken too far.

G

Genre | A category of storytelling defined by emotional experience, tone, and narrative pattern.

Grand Passion | The deep desire that fuels the character's behavior.

H

Heroine's Journey | A pattern centered on internal healing, integration, and reclaiming authority.

Horror | A genre designed to provoke fear or dread.

Hybrid Genre | A story that blends more than one genre.

I

INT | Interior.

Intersectionality | The idea that identity is multi-layered, and those layers interact to shape experience.

L

Logline | A one-sentence summary of the story using character, goal, obstacle, and stakes.

Logline | A one-sentence summary capturing the protagonist, goal, obstacle, and stakes.

M

Male Gaze | A visual and narrative framing that objectifies women by positioning the camera from a heterosexual male perspective.

Montage | A short sequence showing time passing.

Mystery | A story built around solving a puzzle or uncovering truth.

N

Need | The internal shift or healing required for transformation.

Need | The internal transformation required for growth.

Need | The internal truth or transformation the character must accept in order to grow.

Noir | A genre defined by moral ambiguity, shadows, and emotional pessimism.

O

Objective | What a character wants in the moment.

Objective | What the character wants in the scene, expressed as an action that affects another character.

Objective Camera | Neutral and observational.

Obstacle | Anything that blocks the character's desire.

Obstacle / Antagonist | The force that prevents the protagonist from achieving their goal.

Opening Image | The visual that introduces the world and tone.

Ordeal | The crisis that forces the hero to confront their flaw.

Ordinary World | The character's starting environment, where their flaw feels normal or protected.

OS | Off Screen.

P

Parenthetical | Small direction under character name.

Pilot Logline | A sentence describing only the plot of episode one.

Pitch Deck | A concise visual document that introduces the world, tone, characters, and market identity of a project.

Plot | The external sequence of actions driven by the protagonist.

Premise | The central idea or concept of a story that drives the action.

Protagonist | The character whose decisions drive the story forward.

PSA | Public Service Announcement.

Q

Question-Dodging | When a character avoids answering directly.

R

Reaction Shot | A moment showing a character's nonverbal response.

Refusal | The visible hesitation or avoidance that reveals fear.

Resolution | The closing section where the story's central conflict resolves emotionally and narratively.

Return | The moment the character brings new insight home.

Reversal | A sudden change in the direction of a scene's power dynamic.

Rewrite | A process of revising structure, character, pacing, and theme, not just polishing dialogue.

Rhythm | The pacing of speech, pauses, and emotional shifts.

Romance | A genre focused on love, longing, and emotional connection.

S

Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

Scene Heading | Location and time of scene.

Series Bible | A detailed written guide for a TV show that outlines characters, arcs, themes, and future episodes.

Series Engine | The element of a show that generates ongoing stories.

Series Logline | A sentence describing the long-term premise of the show.

Setup | The initial situation or pattern that creates audience expectation.

Setup / Expectation / Twist | Basic structure of short storytelling.

Shooting Script | A technical production document with shot numbers, camera cues, and scene numbers.

Short Form | Any video under 40 minutes designed for rapid emotional or comedic impact.

Show | Write visual actions instead of explaining emotions.

Show Bible | A document explaining the characters, world, arcs, episode ideas, and long-term trajectory of the series.

Silence | A deliberate pause that creates tension or meaning.

Situation | The who, where, and what of a scene.

Sound Bridge | Audio that overlaps between scenes, implied through context.

Spec Script | A script written for submission, using only what the audience can see or hear.

Special World | The new environment that disrupts comfort, exposes the flaw, and forces change.

Spine |

The overarching desire or super objective that drives the character across the entire story.

Stakes | What the protagonist stands to lose.

Stakes | The consequences the character faces if they fail.

Story | The emotional and psychological transformation expressed through conflict.

Subgenre | A specialized branch within a genre, such as folk horror or romantic comedy.

Subjective Camera | Storytelling that reflects a character's emotional experience without using POV instructions.

Subtext | Unspoken meaning beneath spoken dialogue.

Surprise | The twist or reversal that breaks the pattern.

Synopsis | A short prose summary of the entire story, written in present tense, that reveals the full plot.

T

Tag | Short ending scene after the final act.

Theme | The core idea the story explores.

Theme | The deeper idea or question the story explores beneath the plot.

Three-Act Structure |

A storytelling framework that divides a narrative into setup, confrontation, and resolution.

Thriller | A story built around danger, suspense, and tension.

Tone | The emotional flavor or attitude of the story.

Treatment | A longer narrative outline that expands the synopsis with more detail, tone, and structure, usually written in paragraph form.

Treatment | Short prose explanation of a music video concept.

Trope | A repeated narrative device that becomes cliché when used without depth.

Turning Point | A beat that changes direction in the story.

Turning Point | A moment where the story shifts direction due to a character's choice or new obstacle.

Twist | A surprising visual, emotional, or comedic turn.

V

Visual Gag | A joke told entirely through image and timing rather than dialogue.

VO | Voice Over narration.

W

Want | The external goal that drives the whole story.

Want | The external desire the protagonist pursues.

Want | The external goal the character actively pursues in the story.

We See Test | If you can add "We see" and it still works, it stays.

We See Test / We Hear Test | If adding "We see" or "We hear" makes the sentence collapse, it is not filmable.

Workshop | A collaborative environment where writers receive constructive critique from peers or mentors.

World | The environment, rules, culture, and visual identity in which the story takes place.

World Building | Constructing the rules, logic, tone, and environment of a story.

DETAILED LICENSING

Detailed licensing information for this resource is not available at this time.

This page titled [Scriptwriting for Video, Broadcast, and Digital Media \(Zeigler\)](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler.

DETAILED LICENSING

Detailed licensing information for this resource is not available at this time.

This page titled [Scriptwriting for Video, Broadcast, and Digital Media \(Zeigler\)](#) is shared under a [CC BY 4.0](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Noemi Zeigler.