



WRITING A SCREENPLAY (The Syd Field Paradigm)

by Jim Soto

It is almost impossible to envision a good film with a bad screenplay. Syd Field, the “Father of Structure” and author of *Screenplay* once said, “You can never make a good movie out of a bad screenplay.” Indeed, it is possible to have a good script with poor production values and eventually a poor film, but try to see it the other way around. A screenplay is the foundation of a movie. This idea seems the strongest support for the idea that it is the most pertinent piece of an entire film.

A screenplay is different from a novel or a stage play. Film is a visual medium that dramatizes a basic story line. The nature of the screenplay deals in pictures, and if we wanted to define it, we could say that a screenplay is a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure.

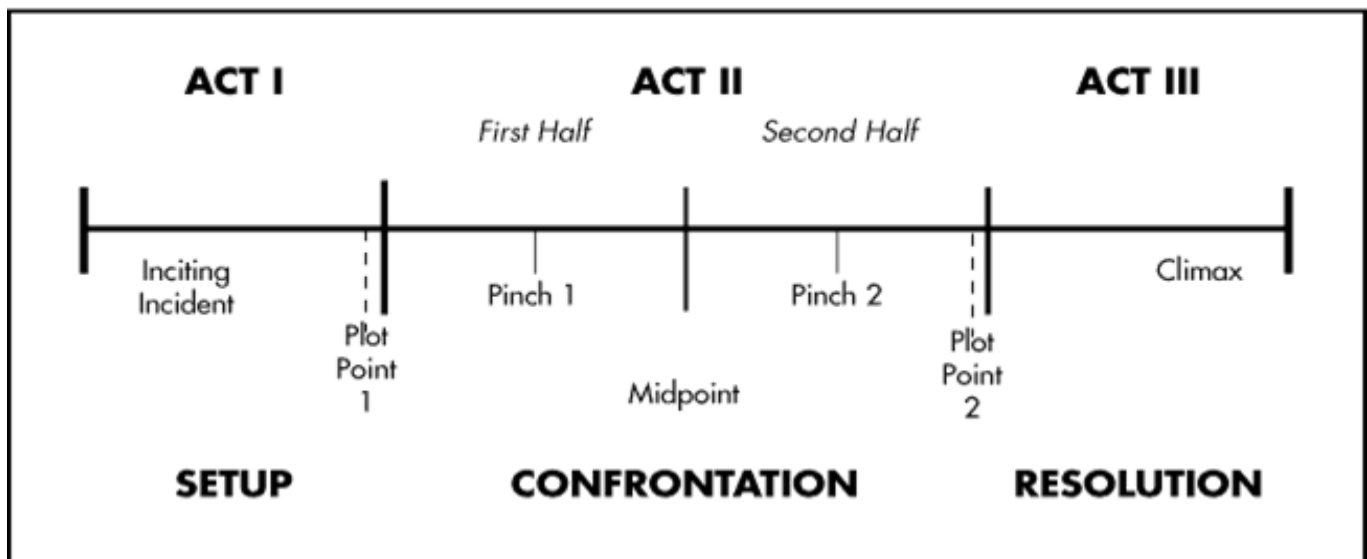
Screenplays have a basic linear structure that creates the form of the screenplay because it holds all the individual elements, or pieces, of the story line in place.

A story is the whole and the elements that make up the story—the action, characters, conflicts, scenes, sequences, dialogue, action, Acts I, II, and III, incidents, episodes, events, music, locations, etc.—are the parts, and this relationship between the parts and the whole make up the story.

Structure is the **glue** that holds the story in place; it is the base, the foundation, the spine, the skeleton of the story. And it is this relationship between the parts and the whole that holds the screenplay together. It is the paradigm of dramatic structure. A paradigm is a model, example, or conceptual scheme.

If we took a screenplay and hung it on a wall like a painting, it would look like this:

The Syd Field “Paradigm”



THE PARADIGM

According to Field, screenplays follow a three-act structure, meaning the standard screenplay can be divided into three parts: Setup, Confrontation, and Resolution.

Act I comprises the first quarter of the screenplay. (For a two hour movie, Act I would last approximately 30 minutes.)

Act II comprises the next two quarters of the film. (For a two hour movie, Act II would last approximately 60 minutes.)

Act III comprises the final quarter of the film. (For a two hour movie, Act III would be the final 30 minutes.)

The "Plot Point"--According to Field, the 3 acts are separated by 2 plot points. A plot point, often called a reversal, is an event that thrusts the plot in a new direction, leading into a new act of the screenplay. Later screenplay gurus have built on Field's theory by stating that Plot Point #1, which leads into Act II, is the moment when the hero takes on the problem.

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT I?

Act I Important Elements

- **Exposition**
- **Main character**--the person in the story who has a need/objective to fulfill and whose actions drive the story
- **Dramatic premise**--what the story's about
- **Dramatic situation**--the circumstances surrounding the action
- **Inciting Incident**

What happens in Act I (Setup)?

ACT I

Opening Image: The first image in the script should summarize the entire film, especially its tone.

Exposition: Provides some background information to the audience about the plot, characters' histories, setting, and theme.

Inciting Incident: Also called the catalyst, this is the point in the story when the Protagonist encounters the problem that will change their life. This is when the detective is assigned the case, where Boy meets Girl, and where the Comic Hero gets fired from his cushy job, forcing him into comic circumstances.

Plot Point 1: The last scene in Act One, Plot Point 1 is a surprising event that radically changes the Protagonist's life, and forces him to confront the Opponent. In Star Wars, Luke finds his family killed by the Empire. He has no home to go back to, so he joins the Rebels against Darth Vader.

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT II?

- **Act II** comprises the next two quarters of the film. (For a two hour movie, Act II would last approximately 60 minutes.)
- **Obstacles**--In the second act, the main character encounters obstacle after obstacle that prevent him from achieving his dramatic need.
- **First Culmination**--a point just before the halfway point of the film where the main character seems close to achieving his or her goal/objective. Then, everything falls apart, leading to the midpoint.
- **Midpoint**--a point approximately halfway through the film where the main character reaches his/her lowest point and seems farthest from fulfilling the dramatic need or objective.

What happens in Act II (Confrontation)?

ACT II

Pinch 1: A reminder scene at about 3/8 the way through the script (halfway through Act 2a) that brings up the central conflict of the drama, reminding us of the overall conflict. For example, in Star Wars, Pinch 1 is the Stormtroopers attacking the Millennium Falcon in Mos Eisley, reminding us the Empire is after the stolen plans to the Death Star R2-D2 is carrying and Luke and Ben Kenobi are trying to get to the Rebels (the main conflict).

Midpoint: An important scene in the middle of the script, often a reversal of fortune or revelation that changes the direction of the story. Field suggests that driving the story towards the Midpoint keeps the second act from sagging.

Pinch 2: Another reminder scene about 5/8 through the script (halfway through Act 2b) that is somehow linked to Pinch 1 in reminding the audience about the central conflict. In Star Wars, Pinch 2 is the Stormtroopers attacking them as they rescue the Princess in the Death Star. Both scenes remind us of the Empire's opposition, and using the Stormtrooper attack motif unifies both Pinches.

Plot Point 2: A dramatic reversal that ends Act 2 and begins Act 3, which is about confrontation and resolution. Sometimes Plot Point 2 is the moment when the Hero has had enough and is finally going to face the Opponent. Sometimes, like in Toy Story, it's the low-point for the Hero, and he must bounce back to overcome the odds in Act 3.

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT III?

- **Act III** comprises the final quarter of the film. (For a two hour movie, Act III would be the final 30 minutes.)
- What happens in Act III (Resolution)?
- **Climax (Second Culmination)**--The point at which the plot reaches its maximum tension and the forces in opposition confront each other at a peak of physical or emotional action.
- **Denouement**--The brief period of calm at the end of a film where a state of equilibrium returns.

ACT III

Showdown: About midway through Act 3, the Protagonist will confront the Main Problem of the story and either overcomes it, or come to a tragic end.

Resolution: The issues of the story are resolved.

Tag: An epilogue, tying up the loose ends of the story, giving the audience closure. This is also known as denouement. In general, films in recent decades have had longer denouements than films made in the 1970s or earlier.

RECAP PAGES

PURPOSE

RECAP	PAGES	PURPOSE
Act 1	first 25%	Setup All main characters and their surrounding situation should be introduced here. What is the hero's goal - externally and internally? Who are the supporting characters. The first act ends with plot point 1 - an incident that turns the plot in a new direction.

Conflict

The protagonist fights for his goal encountering one obstacle after the other. It ends with plot point 2 which puts him into a situation where it is almost impossible to succeed.

Because the second act is very long, Syd Field suggests three orientation points for the writer. One is the midpoint - it's in the middle of the movie. You knew that, right? Often this is the point where the hero and his enemy clash directly for the first time. Kind of a point of no return, the last chance for reconciliation has passed.

Act 2 next 50% It's not easy to fill 30 pages with meaningful action that drives the plot towards its goal. So Field introduced two more orientation points: pinch 1 and pinch 2. Pinch 1 occurs half way between plot point 1 and the midpoint. Pinch 2 occurs half way between midpoint and plot point 2. The second act ends with plot point 2 - also called the crisis. Here the hero faces a situation that seems impossible to solve. We certainly don't want to be in his shoes here, but would really like to know what he does now.

Resolution

Act 3 final 25% At the beginning the hero is in the pits, approaching the crisis. Except in tragedies he wins over all adversities and gets back on top, using everything she learnt and accomplished in act 1 and 2.