WRITE NOW, RIGHT NOW
(and then Write Again, Right Away!)

The TotallyWrite Guide to Bulletproof
Screenplay Structure

Being the theory adventures and paradigm lessons extrapolated from the
TotallyWrite 3-Hour Screenwriting Crash Course.
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(and then Write Again, Right Away!)

by

Jeffrey Alan Schechter
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WRITE NOW, RIGHT NOW  
(and then Write Again, Right Away!)  
The TotallyWrite Guide to Bulletproof Screenplay Structure

CONGRATULATIONS!

You are now the proud (or at least, hopefully, unremorseful) owner of a revolutionary handbook. Welcome to WRITE NOW, RIGHT NOW, a system of getting your stories from brain to paper in the shortest amount of time possible.

This handbook contains all of the theory and paradigm information contained in the Totallywrite Development Suite software. The TotallyWrite Development Suite is more than another piece of software. It is:

- A central desktop storage facility for all of your flashes of inspiration, half-baked stories, ideas for scenes, snippets of dialog, and action sequences;
- A simple tracking tool to help you log the important dates in the life of your project (when you thought of it, when you finished a draft, who you sent it to, when the OSCAR© ceremony is, etc.)
- An electronic "shoebox" where you can store more detailed information about your three-quarter baked ideas; and finally,
- A simple yet extremely powerful story development tool that steps you through the major plot points you need to write your screenplay from start to finish. This step-by-step structure tool is based on a simple paradigm and has generated MILLION OF DOLLARS IN SCRIPT SALES AND ASSIGNMENTS

I find that I keep the TotallyWrite Development Suite open all the time as I'm writing. I get an inspiration for a story idea and file it away for safekeeping in the Idea Shoebox. A phone call comes in about a project and I'm into the Project Tracker. A funny line pops into my head and the Random Thoughts module is opened.

And then there’s the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm. I can’t imagine going back to writing scripts without a computer (I did it once in 1981 and if I had to do it...
again, I'd go to medical school and finally make my mother happy) and I can’t imagine going back to beating out a story without the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm.

More than yet another screenplay structure theory, the TotallyWrite Development System is a simple yet extremely powerful way of taking an idea you have for a script, determining if it is worth writing in the first place, and then breaking it down into the major plot points that comprise a professional structured screenplay. It is based on simple to understand principles, both creative and scientific. The skinny on the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm is that it works.

Over the years, people have asked me to make available in book form the information from my popular seminar the TotallyWrite 3-Hour Screenwriting Crash Course. Others asked if there was some way they could buy just the User's Guide to the TotallyWrite Development Suite. This handbook serves both goals.

One of the things that makes TotallyWrite the best development system available is that it isn't shrouded in complex ideas. The whole system is built on two basic parts. The first part is the minimum theory you need to determine if the idea you want to write is worth the effort. You'd be surprised at how many aspiring (and established) writers begin writing scripts based on ideas that are so flawed they will never, ever, EVER be able to fix them, write them or sell them. As painful as it might be to abandon an idea (a.k.a., your "baby") before you even start writing it, it's still less painful than dumping it 55 pages in after you realize that you just can't make it work.

The second part of the system is the powerful TotallyWrite Development Paradigm itself. Slightly more complicated than the minimum theory -- but only slightly -- you will be shocked at how quickly you will be able to turn a spark of an idea into a completely filled-out TotallyWrite Development Paradigm beat sheet.

The TotallyWrite Development System is designed to be very rigid. Without this rigidity, I could not make the following claim: if you understand and use the underlying concepts, and you faithfully follow the paradigm that the TotallyWrite Development System uses, you will develop, write and deliver a perfectly-structured
screenplay. Period. And as the great William Goldman says, “Screenplays are structure.”¹

Your dialog might still come out terrible. Your settings, trite. Your characters, wooden. But your structure? Flawless. This is what the TotallyWrite Development System promises. This is what the TotallyWrite Development System delivers.

I know what you're thinking; "What about creativity? What about individuality? Are all my scripts going to read the same?"

No.

This is the powerful secret behind the TotallyWrite Development System: most successful films are structurally the same because that's what made them successful in the first place. They are structured in a way that taps into the human brain's genetic predisposition to recognize a cohesive, well-told story.

Come again?

Let's take an example from the world of music. Imagine listening to two pieces of music, both very similar but with one major difference. The first piece is the glorious final movement from Beethoven's 9th Symphony. The second, a random re-ordering of all the same notes, played by all the same musicians, on all of the same instruments, and with each note lasting exactly as long as it did in the non-random version of the 9th. It's obvious that while the random version of Beethoven's 9th might offer occasional moments of musical interest, as a whole it would be an unsatisfying experience.

The question we must ask is why should your brain prefer one version over the other? This isn't a glib question. If two musical works are composed of the same notes and durations but in two different orderings, why does the brain hear one as "music" and the other as "noise."

The answer is structure. Your brain hears the notes of the 9th Symphony as arranged by Beethoven, and because it has a structure that the brain's "wiring" is genetically able to decode, the brain responds to and accepts what it just heard as the satisfying experience known as hearing music. Even someone who doesn't like classical music (or hip-hop or new age or disco) would rather listen to a type of music they don't

have an affinity for than listen to a discordant, structure-less collection of notes. Okay, maybe not disco. Another way of saying this is that the brain is "hard-wired" to recognize and respond favorably to musical structure. It comes as part of the package deal we call "being human."

Now, if we can accept this idea -- that the brain is hard-wired to detect and respond to musical structure -- is it possible that the brain is also hard-wired to recognize story structure?

I posed this question to Dr. Barry Bank. Dr. Bank is one of them big-brain types. A former honcho at the National Institute of Health in Washington, Dr. Bank is currently working on an early diagnostic tool to detect Alzheimer's Disease. The wiring of the brain is his area of expertise, and the short version of his answer to my question -- is the brain hard-wired to recognize good story structure? -- is an unqualified "yes." The brain is on a never-ending mission to take the data that comes its way through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch and assemble that data into understandable experiences. When it does it with sounds at different frequencies it's called "music." When it does it with plot points and dramatic beats, it's called "story."

Joseph Campbell, in his defining work THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES, noticed that people from different cultures spanning the earth, cultures that had no contact with each other, told very similar stories in very similar ways. Campbell made popular the theory that there is something in the human condition that creates similar stories independent of culture or conditioning. Science has now stepped in to help clarify Joseph Campbell's observation. The human brain looks for and responds to a similar meaningful story structure because that's what it was born to do.

Armed with this information you can now see the power of the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm. What if you were to take the top films of all time ("top" being defined as those films whose stories found the widest possible audience), distill those films down to their common shared elements and codify it all into a system? That's what TotallyWrite is all about. And don't worry that your scripts are going to come out feeling formulaic. What made AMERICAN BEAUTY, STAR WARS, THE SIXTH SENSE, and LIAR LIAR different from each other was not that their structures were different (which they weren’t) but how creative each writer was within the same structure.
It will be your creativity that will make your characters leap off the page. Your creativity will make your settings unique and your dialog soar. Apply it to the nuts and bolts of structure, however, and your creativity might just kill your script in the cradle by rendering the structure unrecognizable by the human brain.

There is plenty of room for creativity when writing. Just don't monkey around with structure. Structure is mechanical. A tool. It is a waste of your time and energy to re-invent structure every time you sit down to write. And because the TotallyWrite Development System takes the guesswork out of “what comes next?” your creativity is actually enhanced; it is freed from the shackles of screenwriting mechanics.

Do all great movies follow the TotallyWrite system exactly? Yes and no. The minimum theory that you will learn in Part I is shared by all of the films in the top 50. The specific story paradigm you will learn in Part II is followed by enough films in enough places to make the point.

This User's Guide is divided into three parts. My main goal is to get you developing your story as soon as possible. That being said, jumping straight into the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm without first understanding some basic theory will likely be a frustrating experience.

In Part I, you will learn the basic theory you need before using the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm. Screenwriting theory is good to a point, however too much theory, like too much pizza, sun, or money, can lead to ruination and despair. But instead of ending up fat, tanned and rich, you will end up hamstrung by story information and unable to write. Part of writing is capitalizing on the early excitement a new idea generates within you, and sitting around for days and days while you pour over elaborate and convoluted theories of writing might give you lots of interesting information about your idea but might also suck the life out of it as well. There is a place for more elaborate screenwriting theory; it’s called my next book.

Part II is a detailed exploration of the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm. Building on the principles learned in Part I, the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm will answer that age-old question of writers as they huddled forlorn over their quills and parchments, "what comes next?"
I've tried every major software package ever developed to help writers structure and plot their screenplays. They all enjoyed a short time in the sun but eventually faded from my desktop. This system, whether done by hand using the attached worksheets or done digitally with the TotallyWrite Development Suite, is the only one that has withstood the test of time for me in my work. At last, there is available to writers everywhere a tool to help beat out stories and create structurally perfect screenplays that people are genetically programmed to understand, and I'm proud to have played a part in developing it.

Ready to get to work? Good.

But first...let’s talk (incredibly briefly) about theory.
PART I

Just Enough Theory
To Be Dangerous

THREE ACTS, FOUR QUESTIONS,
FOUR ARCHETYPES, AND ONE FORMULA
The Three Act Structure; or, Don’t Mess with Aristotle and Syd Field

Boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. Space ship goes up, space ship gets crippled, space ship makes it back home. Cop catches criminal, criminal escapes cop, cop brings criminal back in.

The three act structure has been around since cavemen first sat around campfires and told stories to each other (“Og see mammoth, Og chase mammoth, Og kill mammoth.”) Graphically displayed it looks like this:

ACT 1
Pages 1 - 27

ACT 2
Pages 28 - 81

ACT 3
Pages 82 - 108

I see no reason to discard this handy convention, though I will happily make an additional distinction that one can further divide the 3-Act structure into 4 roughly equal parts, with Act 2 taking up two of those parts:

ACT 1
Pages 1 - 27

ACT 2, pt. 1
Pages 28 - 54

ACT 2, pt. 2
Pages 55 - 81

ACT 3
Pages 82 - 108

If you've ever spent any money on other screenwriting books, went to film school, attended a seminar (other than mine), chatted with other screenwriters, or logged onto a screenwriting website, you're probably figuring that the 108 pages I'm claiming your
screenplay should be is a typo. "One hundred and twenty pages," you're thinking.
"Everyone knows that a screenplay is 120 pages."

Uh-uh. Not yours. Not from now on. And you want to know why? Because you want a career in film and the only way to get one is to get your script read by the studio reader or Creative Executive who has taken your script home in the stack of 15 he or she has to read over the weekend instead of being with his or her spouse/family/kids/dog. This is no joke. The first thing the reader does is flip to the end to see how many pages this read is going to be. They see 108 pages rather than 120 pages and they're thinking "I can do 108 standing on my head." I guarantee you, if you had a stack of scripts to read, you'd happily read a 108 page script rather than that 120 pager you just shifted to the bottom of the stack.

Also, at the rough estimate of a minute per page, a 108 page script gives you just enough material for the average movie. There are many 90 minute movies that began life as 120+ page scripts and had all the fluff taken out in the cutting room. The TotallyWrite Development System aims to be as fluff-less as possible. And despite a recent trend towards longer pictures, your scripts shouldn't be one of them. Not yet.

So once more; three acts, with Act 2 being twice as long as Act 1 and Act 3, all conspiring to last 108 pages.

And, incredible as it seems, that’s all you need to know about the 3-Act structure for the moment.
The Four Questions

The first, great mistake of every failed screenplay can often be traced to one thing - a weak central idea. Many ideas seem like they would make good films at first glance, but when the writer gets somewhere around page 55 or so (the halfway point), the screenplay runs out of juice. How then can a person recognize a strong idea from an inherently weak one before setting out to work on it?

Michael Roberts, a former executive at Disney and one of my absolutely favorite people who never hired me, taught me the four questions that define and clarify all good stories. I don’t know where he learned them. He might have made them up himself because he is that sharp.

They are so simple, yet some of you reading this are moments away from kicking yourselves because you can’t answer them for your own story:

1. Who is your main character?
2. What is he trying to accomplish?
3. Who is trying to stop him?
4. What happens if he fails?

Let’s look at the top 5 films of all time (as of this writing) and see how they answer the four questions.

---

2 I know...I know. I’ve used the masculine pronoun exclusively. Obviously, your main character can be a man or a woman. I subscribe, for non-chauvinistic reasons, to the attitude expressed in Strunk & White’s *Elements of Style* that the constant use of “he or she” is clunky writing and kills the flow of a sentence. “He”, as I use it, is therefore meant to be representative of a genderless mankind-like creature. If this offends anyone, I would like to apologize to him or her, ask for his or her forgiveness, and assure him or her that he or she is welcome to contact me to discuss this or that.

3 Top 5 determined by highest domestic, unadjusted box-office dollars for non-sequel films. I want to learn what works from movies that touched the biggest audiences based on the strength of their stories, not franchises. *STAR WARS* was an original; *THE REVENGE OF THE SITH* had a built in audience.
<table>
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<th>TITLE</th>
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<th>QUESTION #2 What is he trying to accomplish?</th>
<th>QUESTION #3 Who is trying to stop him?</th>
<th>QUESTION #4 What happens if he fails?</th>
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<td>TITANIC</td>
<td>Jack Dawson</td>
<td>Save himself and Rose from the sinking Titanic</td>
<td>Cal Hockley, her fiancé</td>
<td>He and the woman he loves dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STAR WARS</td>
<td>Luke Skywalker</td>
<td>Rescue the Princess and destroy the Death Star</td>
<td>Grand Moff Tarkin</td>
<td>Princess Leia dies and the Rebels are destroyed</td>
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<tr>
<td>E.T.</td>
<td>Elliot</td>
<td>Save E.T.’s life and get him back home</td>
<td>Keys, the scientist</td>
<td>E.T. dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JURASSIC PARK</td>
<td>Dr. Alan Grant</td>
<td>Save everyone’s lives and get off the island</td>
<td>The Dinosaurs</td>
<td>Everyone dies, including the kids and the girl he loves</td>
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Simple enough? Makes sense? Of course, but you’d be surprised at how many people start writing and don’t have an answer to Question #3, “Who is trying to stop him?” Or their answer to “What happens if he fails?” is “nothing much.”

Let’s dig a little deeper and see how these four questions really play into the development of your story.

**QUESTION #1 – WHO IS YOUR MAIN CHARACTER?**

There is so much to be said about writing from character that entire doctoral theses have been written on the subject. At the risk of insulting all those people who squandered their parents money by staying in school for a gajillion years instead of getting real jobs, I will reduce the principles of character development you need to begin writing to a few simple rules.

Generally speaking, your main character is sympathetic. Not only sympathetic, but often he has suffered some form of undeserved misfortune in his life. Not always, but usually. Jack Dawson is poor. Luke Skywalker is an orphan. Elliot has been abandoned by his father and has no friends. Peter Parker is also an orphan. And if there’s no undeserved misfortune, then the main character is both highly individual and highly
admirable. Dr. Alan Grant is a dinosaur researcher; just a big kid really, with an adoring girlfriend and eyes full of wonder.

Another way of making your character sympathetic is a technique I’ve lectured about for years called “pet the dog.” In his recent book on screenwriting, Blake Snyder dubs it “save the cat.” It’s the same technique. If you’re worried about your main character not being sympathetic, just show him “petting the dog,” being nice to either animals, kids, or old people. Conversely, if you want to set up your main character as unsympathetic, show him being nasty to either animals, kids or old people! Ron Shelton used this latter bit of storytelling in his golf movie, TIN CUP, where Don Johnson’s smarmy professional golf player tears into an elderly couple who are holding their young grandson by the hand and their dog on a leash, for coming up to him and asking for his autograph for their grandson. “Can’t you people not see that I’m busy? I’m working. This is my office. Do I come to your office and ask for an autograph? I don’t think so. Jesus, what an ugly dog!” Shelton killed all three birds with one line of dialog!

A brief perusal of the top 50 films doesn’t turn up even one out and out unsympathetic main character. Not even the GRINCH, who was made fun of as a little Grinchette and that’s what made him antisocial (undeserved misfortune.) Not even LIAR, LIAR, because Fletcher legitimately loves his son (pet the dog) and how unsympathetic is that? Not even PIRATES OF THE CARRIBEAN, because what Jack Sparrow really loves about being a pirate is freedom, and there is something endearingly idiosyncratic about him (unless you’re Keith Richards.) All of the main characters have either suffered undeserved misfortune or are highly admirable individuals. And if not, they all get their “pet the dog” moment.

Now look at your idea. Is your main character sympathetic? Has he suffered from some undeserved misfortune? If not, is he highly admirable? Truly unique? If none of these, have you given your main character a “pet the dog” moment? Answer “no” to these and you may want to re-think your main character, particularly if you’re writing for Hollywood and not for the approval of some rich aunt somewhere.

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4 TIN CUP, written by Ron Shelton
QUESTION #2 – WHAT IS HE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH?

The single biggest problem I have as a writer of family films is: does anyone really care if Billy gets the bike? I mean, he wants the bike, he deserves the bike, his parents want him to have the bike and hope they can scrape enough money together by Kwanzaa to get him the bike, but...

...Who cares? Not me. I've got four kids and they don’t always get what they want. If Billy doesn’t get the bike, he’ll get over it. And what’s worse; the audience knows it. No matter how cute Billy is and no matter how desperately you show that he wants the bike, unless he’s going to get on that bike and ride it like a madman through the worst part of town to get to a hospital in order to deliver the serum that will save the President from hemorrhagic fever in time to oversee nuclear disarmament and usher in an era of one thousand years of peace, nobody in the audience is going to care about that blasted bike. “Will Billy get the bike?” is not a compelling goal, and a compelling goal is what’s needed to both hold an audience and drive a film.

Jack Dawson is trying to save Rose from a loveless relationship and get the two of them off the most luxurious (yet, sinking) steamship so they can have a life together. Luke is trying to rescue Princess Leia and destroy the greatest death machine ever invented. Elliot is trying to get the nicest alien and his new best friend back home before it dies. Dr. Alan Grant is trying to rescue himself, his girlfriend and some kids from the most awesome killing creatures ever bio-engineered. Peter Parker is trying to save Mary Jane and the entire city from the insanely diabolical Green Goblin.

Each one of them is doing something that they can’t turn their backs on. Something that, if they don’t do it, it won’t get done and INNOCENT PEOPLE WILL SUFFER. This is crucial, because the suffering of the innocent is the stuff of empathy and drama. The main character is compelled to keep trying to accomplish his goal because if he fails, not only will he suffer, but innocent people will suffer as well.

Make the goal compelling, which is a fancy way of saying that it isn’t enough for your hero to care about what he’s trying to accomplish, the audience has to care as well.
QUESTION #3 – WHO IS TRYING TO STOP HIM?

Just as your main character is committed to accomplishing his goal, you need a MAIN OPPONENT who is committed to accomplishing the opposite goal. Ruthlessly committed. And the more ruthless, the better. Not only that, the main opponent’s goal should be mutually exclusive to the main character’s goal. In that final match up between hero and villain, there can be only one winner.

Who is the villain of TITANIC? I’ve heard it argued that the steamship itself is the villain. Cute, but not helpful. Jack Dawson’s main opponent, the person who is ruthlessly committed to stopping Jack and Rose is Cal Hockley, Rose’s fiancé. The Titanic isn’t committed to making sure that Jack doesn’t get away with Rose. It doesn’t care one way or the other. Cal does. More than that, Jack and Cal want the same thing: Rose. Their goals are mutually exclusive. They both can’t have her. Even if Jack gets Rose off the Titanic, might he still have to face Cal as the ultimate, final obstacle? You bet. Therefore, Cal is the villain.

Who is the villain of STAR WARS? Darth Vader is everyone’s first choice, but the main opponent is really Peter Cushing’s character, the Grand Moff Tarkin.

Luke’s goal is to save Leia which ultimately cannot be done unless he destroys the Death Star. The Death Star is Tarkin’s baby, not Darth Vader’s. If he screws up, it will be Tarkin who will have to face the Emperor, not Vader. Vader’s just Tarkin’s goon. Just think...at the end of the movie when Luke is flying down that gawdawful channel to the exhaust port and the rebels are down to only a few ships left and if Luke blows the shot again it’s all over and Vader is on his tail and says “I’ve got you now” and Han Solo swoops in and knocks Vader’s ship out into space and Luke blows up the Death Star -- if Han Solo was a better shot and Luke was a worse shot, Vader could have been killed by Han and the Death Star still not blown up. Adios, Princess Leia! In STAR WARS, Vader’s a flunky; Tarkin’s the guy in the black hat.

Who is the villain of JURASSIC PARK? The dinosaurs. The goals of the dinosaurs and the people are mutually exclusive, although the dinosaurs aren’t as personally involved as the shark seemingly was in JAWS (who really hated those guys in
the boat). Even so, either Dr. Grant gets everyone off the island or they become brunch. There is no staying on the island and not getting eaten.

In SPIDER-MAN the Green Goblin is hell bent on taking over New York, and to do that he needs to get Spider-man out the way by using Mary Jane. However, the goal of Peter Parker is to save Mary Jane while Spider-man has a duty to protect New York. Spider-man and the Green Goblin are both battling for the fate of New York and Mary Jane.

A mutually exclusive, compelling goal for your main character and main opponent to knock heads together over is an essential part of any good script as well as any good, basic screenwriting theory.

**QUESTION #4 – WHAT HAPPENS IF HE FAILS?**

The simplest of all questions to answer, because there can be only one answer: death.


Death.

The life or death of your main character are the only stakes that you know for sure people will care about, because by the time you get to Question #4, and if you’ve learned from these examples you will already have:

- ...a sympathetic main character, who has probably...
- ...suffered some sort of undeserved misfortune, and...
- ...who is engaged in a compelling goal, against...
- ...a ruthlessly committed opponent.

It is axiomatic that if you have all of the above, any script reader (let's face it, they're the first line of opposition between you and a sale), and if you're lucky enough to get your movie made, *any audience member*, is going to care deeply if this character and the characters surrounding him lives or dies because the whole purpose of Questions 1 through 3 is to make them care!

The death the character faces should be, whenever possible, real physical death. If real death can't be played out in your story (because you're writing a love story, or because you're doing a film for Nickelodeon) then you have to use a figurative death, but it's got to be a type of figurative death that is so strong, it might as well be real death.
Take a look at a list of the top 50 non-sequel films of all time (www.totallywrite.com/top50.html) and flag the movies wherein the stakes aren’t life or death. Checking a recent list, one may have found the following movies to flag: FORREST GUMP, SIXTH SENSE, HOME ALONE, SHREK, HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS, BRUCE ALMIGHTY, MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING, MRS. DOUBTFIRE, WEDDING CRASHERS, CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY, MADAGASCAR, and TOY STORY. Twelve films, leaving 38 out of the top 50 films of all time -- a solid 76% -- having life or death stakes. Pretty compelling support for my thesis, no? If there was a slot machine in Vegas that paid off 76% of the time, there'd be a line around the block to get at it, wouldn't there? At 76%, making your stakes life or death seems like a good way of running with the winners, doesn't it?

There’s only one trouble with our screenplay slot machine...the pay off is really 100% because each of these twelve films also have life or death stakes, they just do it in a more subtle way:

FORREST GUMP – There is only one woman in the world capable of loving Forrest. If Forrest doesn’t somehow get her to learn to love him in return, her life-style will cause her to die (and indeed, that is exactly what happens). The stakes are death.

SIXTH SENSE – If Dr. Crowe doesn’t save Cole, Cole will end up like the homicidal/suicidal young man at the start of the film. Remember the bit of white hair both Cole and the young man had? More than a coincidence, it is a visual cue to let you know that Cole is on his way to becoming this suicidal young man if he isn’t helped. Death.

HOME ALONE - The burglars have been pushed so hard and so far, that they are ready to seriously hurt (read, in kidspeak, "kill") Kevin. Also, if Kevin doesn’t learn to become part of his family, he will never have a healthy relationship with his parents or siblings. Death.

SHREK- Is there anyone else in the world for Princess Fiona and Shrek than each other? NO WAY! If Shrek doesn't save her from marrying the Prince, is both his life and hers basically over? YOU BET! Death.

HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS - If the Grinch doesn't learn to love the holiday, he will suffer the "death of his heart." Death.
BRUCE ALMIGHTY- If Bruce continues to misuse God’s power, he will create unimaginable problems for the world and lose the love of his girlfriend Grace forever. Death.

MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING- If Toula’s father can’t accept her daughter’s fiancé Ian, and if Ian can’t accept Toula’s huge family, their relationship won’t be able to survive. Death.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE – Daniel wants desperately to be with his kids, and in no less than two places in the film says that not being with his kids is death to him. He even goes so far as to say “…the idea of someone telling me I can't be with them...I can't see them every day...well, that's like someone saying I can't have air. I can't live without air and I can't live without them.” Death.

WEDDING CRASHERS- If John can’t explain to Claire the truth about how and why he met her, their relationship could end before it begins, dooming her to marry her completely reprehensible fiancé. Death.

CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY- If Charlie Bucket doesn’t win the grand prize from Willy Wonka, his family will have had to live in poverty and hunger for the rest of their lives, and Charlie will only have a bleak future to look forward to. Death.

MADAGASCAR- If the four animal friends can’t adapt to life in the wild, they may not be able to make it out alive. Death.

TOY STORY – If Woody doesn't save Buzz and get reunited with his friends, he will be separated from his beloved Andy for the rest of his life. And for a toy, being separated forever from the child who owns you is what? Death.

Death, death, death, and death.

So, there you have it; the top 50 films of all time and none get away with their stakes being less than death, either real or figurative.

Have I made my point? I hope so. You are certainly free to make your stakes less than life and death if you want to. Will Chester get the big promotion? Will

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5 This type of "death" was beautifully dramatized by the story of the cowgirl doll, Jesse, in Toy Story 2.
Jocelyn’s new line of cosmetics become a sensation? Will Timmy earn that merit badge in campfire cuisine? Go for it!

Just don’t blame me if nobody gives a rat’s patoodie.
The Four Archetypes

I am a huge fan of a book by Carol S. Pearson entitled *The Hero Within*\(^6\) which explores the six archetypes that real-life people live by: innocent, orphan, magician, wanderer, martyr and warrior. Ms. Pearson's theory is that people make certain choices about how to live their lives and how to respond to various issues based on their defining archetype.

It was pointed out to me by Gilbert Maclean Evans (in a rather stunning realization, I might add) that in every film he could think of, the main character moved through four of the six archetypes from opening moment to final fade. And not only does the main character move through these four archetypes, he does so like clockwork.

A very common note given to screenwriters is “too plot-driven rather than character-driven.” This is an executive’s polite way of saying “This script stinks! The things that happened to your characters came from you being clever, not from the wants, needs or desires of your characters! Get out. Out! OUTTT!”

Sends shivers up the spine, doesn’t it? Shivers of recognition, perhaps, if you too are guilty of trying to *impress* by plot rather than *express* through character.

Understanding how your main character moves through these four archetypes during the course of your story will get you within spitting distance of a character-driven script. Not all the way, but close enough for now; close enough to be considered a professional. And by adding depth to your characters through theme and subtext after you’ve developed around the four archetypes, your characters will grow fuller and take on a grander life.

The four archetypes are: orphan, wanderer, warrior, and martyr and can be charted graphically across the three acts thusly:

![Graphical Chart of Archetypes]

Let’s dig, shall we?

**ORPHAN**

At the start of most films, the main character is already an orphan or is about to become one. Sometimes a real orphan; sometimes a figurative one.

Sometimes the cause of his orphan status is outside of his control. Luke Skywalker is really an orphan, as is Peter Parker. Elliot’s father has abandoned him and the family in favor of a younger woman (he obviously didn’t know that his daughter was going to grow up to be Drew Barrymore). Forrest Gump's father is long gone, and he is an outcast because of his low I.Q.. Woody becomes orphaned from his social group after the arrival of Buzz Lightyear.

Sometimes the main character chooses to be an orphan by distancing himself from family and love because of duty, iconoclasm, selfishness, or emotional reserve. Jack Dawson roams wherever, settling down nowhere for too long; Dr. Alan Grant places himself out in the middle of deserts to dig dinosaurs. And while Dr. Grant has companionship (Laura Dern’s character, Dr. Elli Slater) Dr. Grant is emotionally detached from people in general and kids in particular.

The steps in Act 1 are fairly specific, and more will be said about them later. For now it is enough to know that a crisis happens to your main character towards the end of Act 1, throwing his life out of balance and sending your hero on his journey to answer the Central Question. Remember this term, the "Central Question," for it will soon be very important to your life. The Central Question is the question that, once it is answered
definitively “yes” or “no”, the film is over. Will Luke save the Princess? Will Brody kill
the shark? Will Marty go back to the future?\(^7\)

**WANDERER**

It’s now the first half of Act 2, and your hero has become or has to become a *wanderer* in
order to answer the *Central Question*. He goes hither and yon looking for clues, meeting
helpers, running into opponents, overcoming obstacles. It’s the learning phase where he
picks up the skills and tools he *thinks* he needs to answer the *Central Question*.

Luke goes to Mos Eisley space port, gets past the stormtroopers, has an
altercation in the bar, meets Han Solo, gets to Han’s ship, blasts out of the space port,
jump into hyperspace, practices the force, comes out of hyperspace, chases down a Tie-
Fighter, gets sucked into the Death Star, hides with everyone in the cargo compartments,
disguises himself and Han as Stormtroopers, blasts his way into the control room, and
discovers through R2D2 that Princess Leia is being held in a detention cell. Whew, that’s
to learn the Force, picked up Han Solo and Chewbacca, learned where the Princess is
being held, and is now as ready as he thinks he needs to be to become a...

**WARRIOR**

At the mid-point of the film, page 55 or so, the geographic center of Act 2, your hero has
acquired most of the helpers and all of the skills and items he needs in order to resolve
the *Central Question* in a way favorable to his desire. Or maybe time is just running out.
Either way, it’s now time to act. It is time to become a *warrior*.

Luke actively fights to get to the Princess and save her. Brody goes out on the
boat to fight and kill the shark. Jack Dawson and Rose are in love but must now fight to
get away from Cal and off the Titanic which just struck an iceberg. Fight, fight, fight!
One step forward, two steps back. Things are looking up. Things are looking down.

\(^7\) Curious how Chief Brody and Marty McFly are orphans? Brody is new to Amity Island; it’s his first
summer. He is accused by the townsfolk of not understanding the tourism needs of the island and is even
told that he and his wife will never be considered “Islanders.” Orphan. Marty McFly is the cool son of
horrendously uncool parents. He feels no bond to his family. Orphan. The whole movie is about him
getting back to his family which, because of his actions in the past, is now really cool and he feels
connected to them.
Our hero might be getting bloodied and beaten, but he always has a reserve to tap into. Until near the end of the Act 2, when our hero dies.

What? Dead hero? Where?

The end of the warrior phase is usually built on the hero’s journey to the place of his darkest nightmare. Very often, it’s a cave or enclosed space. Joseph Campbell calls it the “belly of the whale.” Here, in this awful place, the hero “dies” and is reborn into a new hero; the one who understands how to resolve the Central Question once and for all.

In STAR WARS it’s the trash compactor scene; a cave (of sorts) where Luke is pulled underwater by the One-Eyed Thingee that lives there, is presumed dead by his friends, but is released by the O.E.T. and, in a birth-metaphor, comes gasping out of the water and is reborn.

In TITANIC, it’s the holding room where Jack is handcuffed to the pipe as the water rises (rebirth again through water...hmmm? Baptismal...hmmm?) He and Rose both barely escape, but not before there’s a moment where Rose assumes Jack has drowned (several times, if memory serves.)

These are examples of a hero going through his own death and rebirth. There is also precedent for our hero learning something through the death and rebirth of the person he is trying to save.

E.T. is taken into a tented, dare I say “cave-like” room within the house, dies, and then is reborn as the spaceship gets close. In JURASSIC PARK, Joseph Mazzelo’s character Tim is electrocuted on the fence, but Dr. Grant resuscitates him. In both of these films, it is the stakes character (another important term to remember) who dies and is reborn. This causes our hero to redouble his efforts. He lost the stakes character once, and he’ll be damned if he’s going to let it happen again.

This is what forces the hero to switch from being a warrior into becoming a...

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8 Though remember, after E.T. dies, Elliot says that he doesn’t “feel anything” anymore. The condition of not feeling is called...death. Until he sees the flower coming back alive again. Resurrection! E.T. dies and is reborn; Elliot dies and is reborn. Even the flower dies and is reborn. There is a technical name for this type of writing: **good**.
MARTYR

The hero started the film alone, as an orphan. A crisis arose throwing his world out of whack, and he left or was forced out of his orphan status and began to wander in order to learn what was needed to answer the Central Question. Around the midpoint of the story he became a warrior and fought with all his might and cunning in order to answer the Central Question, even to the point of his near-death or the near-death of someone close to him. And still it wasn’t enough. The Central Question remained unanswered.

What action is missing for our hero to take? What more could he possibly do? Sacrifice himself.

Our hero must be willing to die and not be reborn in order to answer the Central Question. He must be willing to be a martyr. Only by a willingness to lose it all can he win it all. Only by giving up what he thought he wanted can he be rewarded with what he needs.

The secret of the martyr beat is that the hero is no longer motivated by the possibility of success. He is motivated solely by the desire to do what is right or what is necessary, regardless of the consequences. And once he gives up the thought of winning, once he embraces the transition from warrior to martyr, fate or nature or God rewards him by giving him what he no longer dared hoped to get. Success. Or maybe...if he’s lucky...what he needed all along.

Luke has to be willing to fly into the Death Star and shut off his targeting computer, showing that he truly believes in the force.⁹ Ripley, in ALIENS, has to be willing to venture into the alien nest in order to save Newt. Oscar Schindler, in SCHINDLER’S LIST, has to use the money he so desperately coveted in order to buy the lives of 1200 Jews.

An interesting variation on the martyr beat is that sometimes it can belong to a character other than the hero, with the hero learning and being motivated from this example of another.

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⁹ Everyone in STAR WARS plays a martyr beat at the end: Han gives up the money to join the battle and save Luke, the Princess gives up escaping the planet to avoid the Death Star, R2D2 sacrifices himself to keep Luke’s X-Wing fighter together. Even Tarkin martyrs himself (foolishly) by refusing to believe that the rebels might exploit a weakness in the Death Star.
In E.T., Elliot and E.T. share a psychic connection to each other. As E.T. is dying, so is Elliot. While the scientists frantically try to save both of their lives, E.T. breaks off the connection. Elliot, freed from the connection, begins to thrive. E.T., freed from the connection, fades and dies. E.T. martyrs himself to save Elliot’s life.

Elliot’s problem, as expressed by his brother early in the film after Elliot reminds his mother that Dad ran off with another woman, is that Elliot has to think about other people’s feelings. That is why the story is constructed so that Elliot “shares” real feelings with E.T. The final lesson Elliot needs to learn; the final lesson E.T. teaches him, is not just how to feel someone’s pain (to borrow an expression from Presidents gone by), but how far a person has to go once he feels this pain. If Elliot’s problem is that he’s inconsiderate of others feelings, E.T. cures Elliot of this through the example of his self-sacrifice.

It is only because E.T. martyrs himself that Elliot regains his strength, the scientists believe E.T. is dead, and now ignore the corpse after it’s put on ice which is exactly what E.T. unknowingly needed to make his escape and rendezvous with the returning space ship. E.T. being reunited with his ship is the final beat in a sequence of events that began with self-sacrifice. As for Elliot -- seeing his friend make the ultimate sacrifice, Elliot is now re-invigorated. He is compelled to live up to E.T.’s selfless example and will now stop at nothing to get E.T. back to the ship and $400 million dollars into the coffers at Universal Studios.


It works in dramas (SCHINDLER’S LIST), it works in comedies (THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY), it works in action films (SAVING PRIVATE RYAN), it works in science fiction (STAR WARS), it works in thrillers (THE SIXTH SENSE), it works in animation (ALADDIN).

It works.

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10 “You know what your problem is?” is one of the most important things a secondary character tells your main character mid-way through Act 1. Stay tuned...
The Formula

Name the following movie: “When an under-appreciated boy is accidentally left behind by his family when they leave for a European vacation, he must learn how to take care of himself and be the man of the house...only to discover that his house has been targeted by bumbling burglars whom he thwarts several times before realizing that they know that he is alone and are coming back, and he must now single-handedly defend the house.”

If you said SENSE AND SENSIBILITY, please close this manual now and donate it to your nearest public library. The tax credit you receive will be about the most income you can expect from your career as a screenwriter.

On the other hand, if you said HOME ALONE...

The log-line above is expressed using one of the handiest formulas I’ve ever run across for breaking down a story. In 60 words or less it gives you the entire scope of the story and lets you deduce what you’re going to need to broad stroke all of the plot points.

The formula goes like this:

“When a TYPE OF PERSON has/does/wants/gets A, he gets/does/tries/learns B, only to discover that C now happens and he must respond by doing D.”

The first thing to notice is that it’s not “When a person...” but rather “When a type of person...” Pick an adjective or a phrase for the person’s “type” that connotes either the highly coveted undeserved misfortune or a character trait your hero needs to overcome; “under-appreciated, eight-year-old boy”, “young woman, trapped in an arranged marriage”, “money-loving German industrialist.” This adjective tells you the arc the hero will travel; the eight-year-old-boy will no longer be unappreciated, the young woman will no longer be trapped, the German industrialist will learn that money isn’t the most important thing.
The next thing to notice is how all the major conflict beats are alluded to in one simple sentence. By structuring the formula properly you will get a grand overview of your entire movie.

Let's look at HOME ALONE again and see where the ideas of the log-line fall out in the movie:

"When an under-appreciated boy is accidentally left behind by his family when they leave for a European vacation..." This is the Act 1 set-up of the family and the boy’s relationship with them. He’s an “orphan” in the sense that his family doesn’t seem to want him and he doesn’t want them. “Under-appreciated” tells you that you better spend some time in Act 1 showing us just how (and more importantly, why) he’s under-appreciated. And then we’re off to the races with our Act 1 crisis (he was left behind by his family) and the first glimmer of the Central Question; when a little boy is accidentally left behind by his family there can be only one question: will he survive being home alone?

"...he must learn how to take care of himself and be the man of the house..." It’s time to start wandering as he learns what it means to be the man of the house. He’s got to get groceries, order food in, and basically take care of the place...none of which he does very well at the start. Remember, he’s just learning right now.

"...only to discover that his house has been targeted by bumbling burglars whom he thwarts several times before realizing that they know that he is alone and are coming back..." Here it is, the mid-Act 2 archetype switchover from wanderer to warrior. “Only to discover” are the vital three words. It implies that something surprising happens; things go off in a new direction. Kevin knew that there were burglars around, knew that they tried to break in, but it is only in the middle of Act 2 that he realizes that they’re coming back.

"...and he must now single-handedly defend the house." This is the true start of the Act 3 action as he acts on his early realization that he is truly the “man of the house” and takes steps to defend it himself. He could run off, find some grown-up to help him, but he won’t...he can’t. Martyr.

What the formula really is, besides a log-line, is a promise to the audience. Contained in this short formula (71 words in the Home Alone example) is the implication
of what your film will be. Once you have an idea for a film about a kid who is left home alone, you need to figure out “and then what happens?” Without that, you don't have a story. Or to be more exact, you only have half of a story.

Look at E.T. for a moment. It is not a story about a lonely boy who finds an alien, because that is merely the "A" statement in the formula. The full log-line of "E.T." can be expressed as follows: When a lonely boy finds a stranded space alien ("A" statement), he decides to keep him as a pet ("B" statement), only to discover that since the alien can't live on earth for too much longer he will try to get it home ("C" statement), but in order to do so he will have to thwart the efforts of a dedicated team of government scientists. ("D" statement.)

Think of any of the films in the top 50. With a little work, you'll find out that they can all be broken down with this formula. The key is in assigning the proper moment to the proper part of the formula, and the way to do this is to ask yourself what is the event the will make your character switch from being an orphan to a wanderer? From a wanderer to a warrior? From a warrior to a martyr? Or said another way...

- The “A” statement is the ORPHAN statement.
- The “B” statement is the WANDERER statement.
- The “C” statement is the WARRIOR statement.
- The “D” statement is the MARTYR statement.

Once more: When a lonely boy finds a stranded space alien ("A" statement / ORPHAN statement), he decides to keep him as a pet ("B" statement / WANDERER statement), only to discover that since the alien can't live on earth for too much longer he will try to get it home ("C" statement / WARRIOR statement), but in order to do so he will have to thwart the efforts of a dedicated scientist. ("D" statement / MARTYR statement.)

Personally, I wouldn’t even dream of starting to write a screenplay without taking the five minutes needed to write down a few words to see if the game is going to be worth the candle.
Minimum Knowledge / Maximum Function

I hope that you’re sitting down. Good. You now have all of the theory you need before beginning to beat out your story with the *TotallyWrite Development System*. A review of what you’ve brought to the party and what I’ve brought to the party up to this point is in order:

You have, presumably, an idea for a film. Greater minds than ours will have to tell you if it’s marketable or not, but right now it’s yours and that’s fine.

You have identified your main character. You know what he is trying to accomplish. You know who is trying to stop him. You know that life or death are the stakes if he fails.

You understand that your main character is probably broken at the start of the film or will shortly become so. Has suffered some undeserved misfortune or is about to. You also know that he’s an orphan or is about to become one. Maybe he has even chosen to be one.

You know to ignore theme or any of that icky advanced theory stuff for the moment, because you will layer it in later.

You know (based on the answer to “what is he trying to accomplish?”) the aroma if not the exact taste of the *Central Question*.

You’re interested in personifying the stakes, so maybe you even know who the innocent person is – *the stakes character* – whose suffering your main character is trying to end or prevent.

You might not know all the specifics, but you know that there is a series of wandering beats coming up, maybe 25 minutes or so, before your main character can start fighting to resolve the Central Question. You know not to be too inventive about what
these wandering beats are, choosing instead to let your character’s personality dictate where his wandering will lead and with whom he will wander.

And when your character has wandered enough (the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm will tell you when that is), your character will make the transitions to warrior and martyr in order to save the innocent and defeat the evil.

Sounds about right? Good. Now…let’s introduce you to your new friend; the TotallyWrite Development Paradigm.
PART II

The TotallyWrite Development System Paradigm

“When forced to work within a strict framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost -- and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom the work is likely to sprawl.”

--T.S. Elliot

“Beat it...Beat it”

--Michael Jackson
How far can you go in copying what works in other movies when looking at screenplay structure before you run the risk of making all your scripts identical?

How much structure is standard for all well-crafted films? What is the greatest number of individual, discreet story-telling units (let's call them "plot points") needed to frame a story in a way that the human brain responds to, without having every screenplay that uses the same number of plot points feel the same?

People get very nervous when I start talking about the formulaic aspects of structure. I think they're worried that if they use a set structure, all of their scripts will start looking and feeling the same. Nothing is further from the truth. All good scripts share a common structure. The key is to find out how much and then not cross that line.

For example, if I said that from now on I want you to make every script you write 108 pages, do you run the risk of having your script be accidentally identical to some other 108 page script? Is there any possibility that you and a friend, working separately, could ever write the identical script merely because both scripts are 108 pages? Of course not.

How about if I said that all of your scripts had to have three acts? Any chance of being a formulaic, plagiaristic hack? Nope. Unless, of course, you want to be.

How about if I said that all your scripts had to be 108 pages comprised of three acts, 129 scenes, have eight characters named Bob, Carol, Ted, Alice, Lenny, Squiggy, Gilligan and the Skipper, and we meet Bob in scene 1, Gilligan in scene 2, they get into a fight over Alice in scene 3...?

Now I've gone too far.
Somewhere between the vague advice of 108 pages/three acts and the way-too-specific dictate of Gilligan and Bob duking it out in scene 3 over Alice, we will find the magic paradigm which guarantees you a well-structured script on one hand while maintaining artistic and creative originality on the other.

So, how many plot points can you have in every script that you write and still have each script feel unique from every other script that uses the same number of plot points?

Forty-four. Forty-four plot points. That's it. That's the number to use to guarantee your well-structured movie.

"Excellent," you may be saying. "Just one thing; what's a plot point?"

A plot point is a discreet, unique and essential chunk of story information. In the hierarchy of scriptwriting it falls out above beats and scenes and just below acts:

To illustrate the difference between beats, scenes, and plot points, let's take a look at the first page and one-eighth from one of the great unproduced screenplays of the twenty-first century: HOUSE SWAP.

EXT. BROWNSTONE - MORNING

Sunrise over the upper Westside of Manhattan. This is the New York of our dreams; vibrant, rich in texture. Alive.

INT. BROWNSTONE - MORNING

The CAMERA SWEEPS through. Upright piano with sheet music open. Paintings and sketches in a sunroom studio. Snippets of half-finished poems on the back of cafe napkins.

INT. BROWNSTONE / BEDROOM - MORNING

TWO different alarms are HEARD from opposite sides of a queen-sized bed. Hands reach out. The alarms are turned off.

JULIE, mid-twenties, cute, frisky, and BEN, late-twenties, serious, studious. They get out of bed from their respective sides. Courteous smile. Nothing more.
INT. BROWNSTONE / MORNING MONTAGE - DAY

Julie and Ben brush teeth at different sinks. Dress on opposite sides of the room. Make different breakfasts. Sit at the same kitchen table and read the front section of the New York Times, but from their own subscriptions.

And when it's time to go to work, Ben hugs Julie, even means it, then leaves.

INT. BROWNSTONE / STUDIO - DAY

Julie is a wedding dress designer. Makes beautiful sketches of wedding dresses on a large foolscap pad.

INT. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART - DAY

Julie wanders through the MET's Victorian Clothing Exhibit. Looks at wedding dresses from years gone by.

A MAN and WOMAN stand nearby. Madly in love. Julie watches as they giggle and cuddle. She begins sketching them.

EXT. OUTDOOR HARBOR CAFE - DAY

Julie sips cappuccino and leafs through her sketchpad. Wedding dresses, lace designs...and finally the giggling couple she saw at the MET.

She bursts out crying. Big, gushy tears. Just like that.

PEOPLE around her turn and look at this spectacle. An OLD WOMAN at a nearby table knowingly offers a napkin.

OLD WOMAN
What's the jerk's name, dear?

Julie looks at her, lip trembling. And then...

JULIE
(busting out)
BENNNNNNN!!!

Now, how many scenes, beats and plot points did you just read?

That page and one-eighth of script is made up of 7 scenes (five in and around the brownstone, one in the museum and one in the café), 14 beats (New York is established, we see art and music in the brownstone, two alarms go off, two people get out of bed, brush teeth, dress, make breakfast, sit and read different newspapers, Ben goes to work, Julie is a wedding dress designer, goes to the museum, sketches the madly in love couple,
bursts out crying while having coffee, and tells the old lady the reason for her problems...Ben), but ONLY ONE PLOT POINT; "Julie has a lousy relationship with Ben and it's making her miserable."

Did the writer need 7 scenes, 14 beats and a page and one-eighth to make that one plot point? Yes. Maybe you could do it with less. Maybe more. And that is why the *TotallyWrite Development System* paradigm works without becoming formulaic. It lays out the 44 plot points you need to tell your story and you get to figure out how many beats and scenes you need to flesh out those plot points.

A question that is often asked when I conduct my seminar is if a person is free to use more or less plot points than 44. I answer rather bluntly (as is my nature) "no." Not that there aren't many successful films that vary from the magic 44, but your script won't because it doesn't need to. Do what I tell you and you'll have a perfectly structured screenplay. Isn't that the goal? If you add to or subtract from the number of plot points I'm preaching, you might jeopardize the structure you're working so hard to create and that I'm guaranteeing you will have.

The 44 plot points are divided over the three act structure in the following way: there are 12 plot points in Act One -- the orphan phase of your script -- followed by the *Central Question*, which is the question that, once it's answered definitively "yes" or "no," the film is over. In the first half of Act Two -- the wanderer phase -- there are 14 plot points. There are another 14 plot points in the second half of Act Two -- the warrior phase -- and finally, there are 4 plot points in the martyr phase, Act Three. Laid out graphically, it looks like this:
Relax...it's not that bad. After you get past the foundation-building of the 12 plot points of Act One, all the rest of the plot points flow so simply from the Central Question that it should be illegal. I'll get to those shortly, but first, let's look at a typical Act One.

**ACT ONE - 12 VERY SPECIFIC PLOT POINTS**

Out of the entire paradigm of 44 plot points, the first 12 are the most important. In a way, it makes perfect architectural sense. If you took a dozen, stylistically very different two-story houses of equal square footage and stripped them down to the foundations, most of those foundations would look very similar. The same is true for scripts. All good scripts are built from solid foundations, and to my great surprise, I've discovered that these foundations often share the following 12 common plot points:

**PLOT POINT #1 - We Meet either the Hero, Victim/Stakes Character, or Antagonist.** It's your call. In E.T. we meet the victim first, E.T. and the aliens. Same thing with JAWS, though it's doubled up with meeting the antagonist at the same time. In FORREST GUMP, we meet the hero first. In STAR WARS, we meet the antagonist first.

If you choose to introduce us to the hero first, then we will most likely be seeing the hero in his ordinary world. Forrest Gump is sitting on a bench, waiting for life to happen around him. In THE LION KING we meet Simba, safe and revered by all the animals in his parents care. In BEVERLY HILLS COP we meet Axel Foley while he's on the case, being the trickster that he is.

If you want us to meet the victim (or victims) first, then we are usually meeting them either just as or just before the moment of their victimization. In STAR WARS, our first image of Princess Leia's ship is as it's being fired on by the massive Star Destroyer. In ARMAGEDDON, some astronauts are on a space walk which lasts only a few moments before meteorites destroy them and their space shuttle before pounding New York. In JAWS we meet the kids on the beach before Chrissie goes for a...yikes...swim.

Many films lump meeting the antagonist with meeting the victims for the obvious reason of victims need someone to make them victims and antagonists need someone to antagonize. We meet the antagonist first in Jurassic Park, which opens with a worker getting killed by a Raptor.
**PLOT POINT #2 - We see the Hero's flaw in relation to the Stakes Character.**

The **stakes character** is the human face that represents all of the people that the bad guys are victimizing. It's usually someone personal to the hero, or the hero feels very deeply about. In DIE HARD, Bruce Willis is trying to save the hostages, but the stakes character is his wife. In STAR WARS, Luke is trying to destroy the Death Star and save the rebel base, but the stakes character is really Princess Leia.

In this plot point, we see what's wrong with the hero's life via the life of the stakes character. Most heroes are usually flawed or wanting in some way at the start of a film. The stakes character usually has the qualities that the hero needs to complete his arc. In STAR WARS, what is Luke's flaw? He's stuck on Uncle Owen's farm, milking space cows and fixing fences when he really wants to go the academy, zip off into space, shoot some Stormtroopers and have great adventures. Leia is the stakes character. What is she doing? EVERYTHING LUKE WISHES HE WAS! She's out in space, having great adventures, blasting Stormtroopers. Through her, we see Luke's flaw -- he's stuck on the farm -- even though we have yet to meet Luke!

In DIE HARD, John McClane is a New York cop who gets no respect from anyone. His wife, Holly, is completely respected by everyone. We learn what John's flaw is through her.

In E.T., Elliot's family has been abandoned by Elliot's father, however Elliot's response has to become inwardly focused. He has no real connection to his brother and sister. Not even totally to his mother, as is shown by his insensitive comment to her about Dad having run off with another woman. Elliot's flaw is very clearly expressed by his brother early in Act One when Elliot is told that he should think about how other people feel. Elliot is unempathetic. How is E.T. an expression of Elliot's flaw? Unlike Elliot, E.T. is totally in touch with his feelings. When E.T. is abandoned by his ship (plot point #2) he feels terrible. When he makes a connection with Elliot, it's a psychic bond so strong that they can actually share sensations. E.T. is total feeling.

**PLOT POINT #3 - Antagonist or someone or something symbolic of the Antagonist.** We finally meet our bad guy, or at least a representative of the bad guy. Sometimes it's a moment in the film that is representative of what the bad guy is trying to accomplish. In STAR WARS, Leia is captured by the Stormtroopers who are
representatives of the Emperor. In AMERICAN BEAUTY, Lester dumps the contents of his briefcase while his wife and daughter stare at him as if he's the biggest loser on the planet. In SIXTH SENSE, Dr. Crowe is shot by his deranged former patient.

**PLOT POINT #4 - The contagonist slows the hero down. Pulls him off the path.** The term "contagonist" is borrowed from the software program Dramatica. It is used to describe a character who deflects the Hero from the goal. He's the character who might want the hero to do things his way, rather than let the hero do things the hero's way. He might be an otherwise good guy, only misguided. He might be a bad guy. There might be many "assistant" contagonists in a film. Anyone who gets in your hero's face and tries to stop him is functioning as a contagonist.

In STAR WARS, Darth Vader is the main contagonist. The Jawas, the Sand People, the Stormtroopers, the goons in the bar...these are "assistant" contagonists. In JAWS, Quint is the main contagonist while the mayor, coroner, and the members of the City Council are the assistant contagonists. In DIE HARD, Hans Gruber is the antagonist, the long-haired, high-kicking Karl is the main contagonist and almost everyone else are assistant contagonists; the other terrorists, the cops who want McClane to stop interfering, the FBI agents who arrive, the smarmy Ellis...all contagonists.

Plot point #4 can be given to either the main contagonist (the preferred choice) or any of the assistants contagonists you have lying around.

**PLOT POINT #5 - Inciting Event. Hero now gets emotionally involved.** The hero starts getting tugged out of his ordinary world by an emotional connection to the adventure at hand. And if it's not the Hero who gets emotionally involved, it's the audience getting involved on the Hero's behalf. In STAR WARS, Luke sees the hologram of the Princess inspiring him to ask C3PO "Who is she...she's a babe," (or something like that.) In LIAR LIAR, unknown to Fletcher his ex-wife has just been proposed to, beginning the threat that he will lose contact with his son. In SIXTH SENSE, Dr. Crowe makes his first contact with Cole and notices the scratches on Cole's wrists.

**PLOT POINT #6 - Hero's goal as it relates to the Stakes Character and/or love interest. Hero’s problem is made clear to audience.** This is often a clarifying beat that shows or foreshadows either the Hero's connection to or problem with the character with
whom he has (or will have or wants to have) the deepest personal connection. In TITANIC we see Rose for the first time and begin to understand her reluctant engagement to Cal. In BEETHOVEN'S THIRD we see that Beethoven longs for a new family.

Often (but not always) around this plot point hovers a famous and overused line of dialog. It usually comes from the best friend who looks the Hero in the eye and says "Do you know what your problem is...?" The best friend then goes on in exacting detail to explain to the Hero (and the audience) exactly what the Hero is going to need to learn to complete his arc by the end of the film.

While this exact line of dialog might be overused, the intent of the moment is on the mark. This plot point is a good place to specify to the audience in no uncertain terms the emotional journey your Hero must embark on to become whole.

**PLOT POINT #7 - Ally (either true or unintentional) aids Hero by propelling him out of the status quo.** The two things that drive your Hero are what he wants and what he needs. Sometimes it's the same thing. Usually, they're different, but related in that the Hero often gets what he wants only by first getting what he needs.

In DIE HARD John McClane wants to get back together with his wife, but what he needs is respect. No amount of begging, pleading, or threatening would ever make Holly decide to give up her position at Nakatomi and go back home with John. It's only after seeing him (and being his partner in) kicking some terrorist booty and realizing the lengths he would go to for her, that we get the sense there is a future for John and Holly. And he didn't just fight for the respect of his wife -- McClane fought for the respect of everyone. The Los Angeles Deputy Police Chief thought that McClane was messing everything up, the FBI thought that McClane was a loose cannon (and also mistook him for a terrorist), Hans Gruber thought McClane was just another American who grew up watching too many cowboy movies. Nobody respected John McClane (with the exception of the most disrespected LA cop) until the aforementioned booty-kicking.

In LIAR LIAR, Fletcher wants to be with his son, Max, but what he needs is to learn how to be a good father, specifically by not continuing to lie to Max and breaking his heart. Only by being able to tell the truth without being controlled by the birthday
wish that Max put on him (that he can't lie for 24 hours) is Fletcher able to grab the love of his son from the clutches of separation.

With this as the preamble, Plot Point #7 brings into the Hero's story an ally who is going to help move the hero along the path towards achieving either the specific goal of what the Hero wants, or more often than not, what the Hero needs by breaking the status quo of the Hero's world.

Sometimes these allies are true allies like Hagrid in Harry Potter. Sometimes they grow to become true allies, such as R2D2. Sometimes they are anonymous characters who move into the story, serve the ally-function of the plot point, and disappear.

In STAR WARS, R2D2 runs off to find Obi-Wan and Luke is forced to track him down. The end result of R2's running off? Because Luke left to find R2, he wasn't on the family farm when the Stormtroopers arrived looking for the droids, sparing him from the same death as his aunt and uncle. R2 was on his own agenda, wasn't trying to help Luke, but in the end R2 has inadvertently saved Luke's life and started him on the path of becoming a Jedi, saving the Princess, and destroying the Death Star.

In AMERICAN BEAUTY, Lester tries to talk with Jane, who busts him for trying to become friends with her this late in the game. This conversation is the beginning of Lester's resolve to get back in touch with his lost youth and love of life. Jane is an unwitting ally, as is the Swede who, by losing his ticket on the Titanic to Jack Dawson in a game of cards, starts Jack on a journey that will change his and Rose's lives.

In all three of these cases, we've had heroes who were living through their everyday existence and through the (to varying degrees) unsolicited help of an ally, they are pushed out of their complacency and into the start of the extraordinary. It's also very telling to note what happens to the three allies in STAR WARS, AMERICAN BEAUTY, and TITANIC. R2D2 becomes a true ally in every sense of the word, Jane is a presence but no longer really helps Lester do or accomplish anything, and the Swede went back to central casting, never to be seen again in the film.

**PLOT POINT #8 - Hero seems ready to move forward toward goal and/or Stakes Character, but can’t do it.** Now that an ally has moved the Hero towards his goal, the Hero is faced with a decision to either remain bound by the ordinary life he has been leading or go for something bigger. Often the Hero is a Reluctant Hero and needs
some convincing that this is the right thing to do. As someone smart once said, "Change is hard." Nowhere is this more true than on the personal level. To change the course of one's life is as difficult a task as a person might face. Often, when the opportunity is presented, the emotional mind wants to go for it, while the rational mind starts raising all sorts of very reasonable objections. In the classic mythic structure this is the Call to Adventure/Refusal of the Call.

Jack sees Rose for the first time but doesn't dare go after her. He's an itinerant artist traveling in steerage, she's a rich girl in first class. Luke is asked to by Obi-Wan to join him in his quest to save the Princess and become a Jedi, but Luke can't leave the farm with all the work that needs doing. Fletcher wants to take his son to wrestling, but the big case is dropped into his lap that can make him partner and he has to prepare for the trial.

**PLOT POINT #9 - Antagonist or Contagonist conflict stops Hero or threatens emotional stakes.** Whatever or whoever has been lurking in the background starts moving into the foreground of the Hero's world. The Jawas are found dead and it's deduced to be the work of Stormtroopers. Tommy, who has been acting the part of Cole's friend, walks him to school and calls him a "freak." Fletcher wants to get back in time for Max's birthday but he is seduced by Miranda.

**PLOT POINT #10 - The depth of feeling between the Hero and the Stakes Character or the severity of the threat to the Victims is brought out.** Luke sees his aunt and uncle have been murdered (severity of threat). Cole stands outside his school, too afraid to go inside (severity of threat). Even though it's his birthday, Max can't enjoy himself without Fletcher being there (depth of feeling).

In Act One it's important to pound a few things into the reader's head. One of those things is the stakes. By this point in the script you should be into the high teens (page count, not subject matter). The reader should know who the main character is, who the antagonist is, and who is at stake. All that's missing is that final acceptance on the part of the Hero. The purpose of Plot Point #10 is to make sure that you've crossed all your "t's" and dotted all your "i's" in terms of making the stakes very clear.

**PLOT POINT #11 - Contagonist or Antagonist threatens to take Stakes Character from Hero.** This is a beat which the Hero may or may not be aware of as it's
happening. In STAR WARS, this beat is the start of the interrogation scene where Darth Vader enters the Princess's cell with his nasty floating droid. Luke doesn't even know that this is going on, has no connection yet with the Princess outside of knowing her situation, but the scene serves to make the viewer antsy for Luke to start being heroic and go save her.

In a similar vein, Fletcher starts his descent into honesty hell in earnest, being completely compelled to tell the truth in every situation. The end result of this is a conversation with his ex-wife where he tells the truth about why he didn't come to Max's party last night (he was too busy having sex with Miranda...ooops...) This admission is enough to make his ex-wife talk to Max about moving away.

PLOT POINT #12 - Hero decides he must act to save Stakes Character.
This is it...the call to adventure can no longer be refused. The Hero has been shaken out of complacency and must start looking to create a new equilibrium in his life.

Luke returns to Obi-Wan and tells him that he wants to go to Alderaan and learn the ways of the force like his father. Lester sees Angela performing at the half-time show and is transfixed. Dr. Crowe tells his wife of the similarities between Cole and the suicidal patient, Vincent, saying that if he can save Cole, he can somehow make up for failing Vincent. In short, your Hero now knows what he must accomplish, who is trying to stop him, and what waits for him or the stakes character if he fails.

The end of Act One brings with it complete clarity of the Central Question. If you recall, the Central Question is the question that, once it's answered definitively "yes" or "no," the film is over. This is often a single question, such as "Will Sheriff Brody kill the shark?", but sometimes the Central Question is a multi-part question. For example, in Star Wars, the ultimate Central Question is "Will Luke save the Princess?" however it can also be broken down into the main steps necessary to save the Princess; "Will Luke learn the force, destroy the Death Star and save the Princess." Ultimately, he can't save the Princess unless he destroys the Death Star, and he can't destroy the Death Star unless he learns the way of the force. But even with exploding the Central Question into a number of sections, the final, ultimate stakes is saving the Princess.
I love this part of my seminars. This is the part where I can actually see people's eyes light up. This is the part where people, burdened for years with the hope, dream, and ambition of becoming a screenwriter start thinking that they might just be able to do this after all.

As I wrote above, what comes after the Central Question are 28 plot points; 14 in the first half of Act Two to make up the Wanderer beats and 14 in the second half of Act Two to make up the Warrior beats. As simple as this is going to sound, the nature of these 28 plot points is to alternate answering the Central Question first "yes" and then "no." These are called "yes/no reversals." Any situation that brings your main character closer to his goal is a "yes." Anything that threatens to take him further away is a "no."

Act One of STAR WARS ends with Luke joining Obi-Wan on his quest to deliver the plans to the Deathstar to the Rebel Alliance, save the Princess and become trained in the arts of the Jedi Knight. Starting with our Central Question -- *Will Luke become a Jedi, save the Princess and destroy the Death Star?* -- let's look at the plot points in the first half of Act 2:

*Will Luke become a Jedi, save the Princess and destroy the Death Star? YES HE WILL* - He Goes to Mos Eisley with Obi Wan and the droids. Yay! He's on the way to becoming a Jedi! He's gonna save the Princess! He's gonna blow up the Death Star! Only...

*NO HE WON'T* - They are stopped by Stormtroopers. They're going to get caught. He's failed the Central Question. It's over. Only...

*YES HE WILL* - Obi Wan uses the force and they get past. Yay! He's gonna be a Jedi! He's gonna save the Princess! He's gonna blow up the Death Star! Only...

*NO HE WON'T* - They go to the bar and Luke is attacked. He's failed again. Only...

*YES HE WILL* - Obi Wan saves him. They find Han Solo. A deal is made. Yay! He's gonna be a Jedi! He's gonna save the Princess! He's gonna blow up the Death Star! Only...
**NO HE WON’T** - Han is stopped by Greedo who wants to kill him. Disaster!

Only...

**YES HE WILL** - Han kills Greedo. Luke sells his speeder and they have enough money for the moment. Yay! He's gonna be a Jedi! He's gonna save the Princess! He's gonna blow up the Death Star! Only...

Get the idea? The 14 plot points in the first half of Act 2 come in 7 pairs of yes/no reversals which answer the Central Question first "yes" and then "no."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAR WARS</th>
<th>Act Two (first half) - Wanderer - 14 Plot Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - Yes #1</strong></td>
<td>Goes to Mos Eisley with Obi Wan and the droids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - No #1</strong></td>
<td>They are stopped by Stormtroopers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - Yes #2</strong></td>
<td>Obi Wan uses the force and they get past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - No #2</strong></td>
<td>Go to bar. Luke is attacked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - Yes #3</strong></td>
<td>Obi Wan saves him. Find Han Solo. A deal is made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - No #3</strong></td>
<td>Han is going to be killed by Greedo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - Yes #4</strong></td>
<td>Han kills Greedo. He leaves the bar. Luke sells the speeder. They have enough to pay Han for the moment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - No #4</strong></td>
<td>They are followed to the spaceport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - Yes #5</strong></td>
<td>Unaware that they were followed, they prepare to take off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - No #5</strong></td>
<td>They are fired on by troopers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - Yes #6</strong></td>
<td>They blast off and escape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - No #6</strong></td>
<td>They are followed out of orbit and fired upon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - Yes #7</strong></td>
<td>Jump to hyperspace. Luke practices the force.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>14 PLOT POINTS - No #7</strong></td>
<td>Come out of hyperspace into destroyed remains of Alderaan. Fired on by Tie Fighter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And that, my friends, is the first half of Act Two! Seems too simple? It is and it isn't. There are certain things that must be kept in mind...interesting situations, intriguing characters, increasingly difficult obstacles...but once you understand the simple
mechanics of the yes/no reversals of Act Two, you will have a leg up on the writing process.

Michael Hauge, in his excellent book "WRITING SCREENPLAYS THAT SELL" gives the most concise definition of story I think I've ever seen. According to Mr. Hauge your story must "enable a sympathetic character to overcome a series of increasingly difficult, seemingly insurmountable obstacles and achieve a compelling desire." If you notice, he didn't say "enable a character to overcome obstacles in order to achieve a desire"; No...the character is a sympathetic character. The obstacles are increasingly difficult, seemingly insurmountable. The desire is compelling.

What Mr. Hauge is talking about can be seen clearly in the progression of plot points in Act Two of STAR WARS. Imagine you were comparing each succeeding obstacle relative to the previous obstacle that Luke and his crew had to overcome. The first obstacle for Luke to overcome at the beginning of Act Two is just going to Mos Eisley, which is no obstacle at all. Next, they are stopped by some nosey Stormtroopers. Looks bad, but Obi-Wan uses the force and easily gets past them. No biggie. Next, Luke gets attacked in the bar. Obi-Wan to the rescue, this time hacking off an alien's arm with his light saber. Next up is Greedo, who is ready to kill Han Solo, the pilot they just hired, but who ends up getting blasted by Han. The next obstacle is that they're being fired upon by a battalion of Stormtroopers in the space dock.

See the progression? Working backwards from the scene in the space dock: shooting at a lot of Stormtroopers who have Imperial blasters is more difficult than shooting only one Greedo who has only one blaster, which is more difficult (and fatal) than cutting off some alien's paw, which is more violent than using a Jedi mind trick on some Stormtroopers which is more difficult than riding in a Speeder which isn't difficult at all. "Increasingly difficult, seemingly insurmountable obstacles."

When you start layering your reversals, try to escalate the level of difficulty from easiest to increasingly more difficult.

The second half of Act Two -- the Warrior phase -- is composed of another 7 pairs of yes/no reversals. Once again, STAR WARS:
**STAR WARS**  
**Act Two (second half) - Warrior - 14 Plot Points**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>14 YES/NO's - Yes #8</th>
<th>Chase fighter. Are ready to destroy it.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - No #8</td>
<td>See Deathstar. They can't escape the tractor field. They are pulled into Deathstar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - Yes #9</td>
<td>Attack soldiers and take uniforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - No #9</td>
<td>Get into communications room. Obi Wan leaves to shut off the tractor beam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - Yes #10</td>
<td>Discover that princess is being held. Decide to go after her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - No #10</td>
<td>They are discovered in the cell block.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - Yes #11</td>
<td>Get to Princess, shoot their way out and into trash compactor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - No #11</td>
<td>Luke is pulled under by monster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - Yes #12</td>
<td>Luke is released.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - No #12</td>
<td>Trash compactor is turned on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - Yes #13</td>
<td>R2 saves them. They escape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - No #13</td>
<td>They are chased throughout the Deathstar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - Yes #14</td>
<td>They get to the Millennium Falcon, thanks to Obi Wan distracting the troopers by fighting Darth Vader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 YES/NO's - No #14</td>
<td>Obi Wan is killed. They get out of Deathstar but are immediately pursued.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And this ends Act Two. Generally speaking, at the end of Act Two, your main character should be at a low point. Luke has just witnessed Obi-Wan getting killed (at least, seemingly so) and he's devastated. Even though he has saved the Princess and has the plans, they are far from safe and his adventure is about to escalate to the final, fever-pitch. In LIAR LIAR, Fletcher's ex-wife and son are on the airplane, waiting to take off for Boston. In AMERICAN BEAUTY, Lester is with Angela, but his wife is on the way home.

**ACT THREE - 4 SPECIAL PLOT POINTS**

Act Three, the Martyr phase of the hero's journey, consists of 4 plot points. There are two yes's and two no's, but their order is a little different from the reversals in Act
Two and perfectly suited to help close out the action of your story. The last four plot
points, in order, are BIG YES, NO, BIG NO, FINAL YES.

BIG YES - The Hero has achieved a substantial victory. George McFly has
defeated Biff in BACK TO THE FUTURE. Brody, Quint and Hooper are heading back
to the shallows after being beaten up by the shark. Rose has finally made it onto a
lifeboat and is being lowered towards the water in TITANIC. And then...

NO - The Hero suffers a set back. In TITANIC, Rose jumps out of the lifeboat
because she won't leave Jack behind. The boat in JAWS blows it's engine. Marty tries to
give Emmett a note about the future that will save his life (saving Emmett's life is one of
Marty's goals) however Emmett rips the note up.

BIG NO - Disaster. Failure. Situation hopeless, seemingly beyond remedy. The
Titanic is breaking apart and Jack and Rose are being chased by a murderous Cal
Hockley, they get away from him and now ride the Titanic down into the water. Marty
finally makes it back to the future after much difficulty only to arrive a few moments too
late to save Emmett. The shark has seemingly killed Hooper, has eaten Quint and has
wrecked the boat which is sinking fast.

FINAL YES - Pulling success from the jaws of failure, the Hero achieves his
main goal, although sometimes the goal can be quite different from what the Hero first
set out to achieve. In these cases, the Hero gets what he really needs, rather than what he
thought he wanted.

| STAR WARS |
| Act Three - Martyr - 4 Plot Points |
|---|---|
| **BIG YES** | They destroy the Tie Fighters and get away. Get plans to rebel base. Will attack Death Star. |
| **NO** | They had a tracking beacon on them. The Deathstar is closing in on rebel base. |
| **BIG NO** | Massive dogfight. X-Wings are getting destroyed left and right. The Deathstar is too much for them. It comes down to Luke, who shuts off his targeting computer. Vader is going to kill him. |
| **FINAL YES** | Han swoops in, Luke uses the force, destroys the Death Star. The Princess is safe. |
Fade out...the end. STAR WARS works like gangbusters and set the mold for the modern day blockbuster.

By now you’re probably getting all excited to start writing. Or all excited to hit me with something. The point is, you’re excited and that’s good. There is, however, one more thing you need to know about these plot points and reversals.

As I stated in the Introduction, the TotallyWrite Development System is based on the concept that the human brain is hard-wired to hear stories told in a particular way. There are major, expected moments that each story has. I call these “landmarks.”

**LANDMARKS**

"Landmarks" in a story are like landmarks in geography; they provide you with familiar features on your journey so you know where you are and -- if you're lucky -- where you're going. In a story, character/plot/theme landmarks make the audience willing traveling companions because these are the moments that all good stories have in common. Just as no journey to Washington D.C., or New York, or London is complete without seeing certain landmarks, the same is true in regards to a story's journey as well. The trip for the audience just isn’t complete unless they see certain things.

Unlike the 12 Plot Points of Act One which are very specific, landmarks happen in certain regions of all stories, and not necessarily in a particular order. It’s like going on holiday in Europe; upon leaving Paris it doesn’t matter in which order you’ve seen the Louvre, the Montmarte Steps, and the Eiffel Tower, it just matters that you’ve seen them before moving on to London. Once you’re sitting down in that Central London pub eating your bangers and mash, it’s a little late to turn around and decide you want to check out the Bastille.

Revisiting the Development Paradigm, we will now make 12 distinct groupings of plot points:

**ACT ONE**

12 Plot Points #1-3
12 Plot Points #4-5
12 Plot Points #6-8
12 Plot Points #9-12
ACT TWO
14 Yes/No #1-3
14 Yes/No #4-5
14 Yes/No #6-8
14 Yes/No #9-10
14 Yes/No #11-12
14 Yes/No #13-14

ACT THREE
Big Yes - No
Big No - Final Yes

Think of each grouping as a country, and each country contains its own unique landmarks. And just like you don’t want to leave Paris an go to England without seeing certain sights, you don’t want to leave one plot point grouping and go to the next without hitting particular story landmarks.

ACT 1 -- 12 PLOT POINTS #1 THRU #3

In these first 3 plot points of Act One, several landmarks should have been spotted:

- The theme of the film will have been stated either explicitly or implicitly, either through action or a visual. Think of the opening to GLADIATOR with Maximus running his hands over the tall grass. This is a statement of the theme "There's no place like home." And trust me...that's about the only time you'll find anyone making an analogy between GLADIATOR and THE WIZARD OF OZ.

- The hero is established in his/her ordinary world as the "greatest" or "most" something. It could even be a negative. When we meet him, Woody is the greatest friend a kid could ever have; Harry Potter (even though he will become the greatest wizard), when we meet him he is the most disadvantaged foster
child we've ever met without crossing the line to being legally abused. Luke is the most ordinary farm boy in the universe.

- The hero has **limited awareness** of which aspect of him/her is "broken." This is often associated with a "ghost" from the hero's past; a major and unresolved crisis that is coming to a head and can no longer be ignored.

- Between these landmarks and the rest of Act One, the audience should start becoming aware of the hero's three areas of conflict; **professional, personal, and private**:
  - **PROFESSIONAL** - The big issue that everyone can see (there is a shark that needs killing; a troubled kid that needs saving)
  - **PERSONAL** - A smaller issue that the hero shares with only a select few ("When will the people of Amity Island accept me and my family as a part of their community?"; "When will my wife and I be able to move past the horrible incident that happened to us all those years ago?")
  - **PRIVATE** - The innermost issue that the hero must grapple with alone ("How can I kill the shark when I'm afraid of the water?"; "How can I help that kid when I can't even help myself?")

**ACT 1 -- 12 PLOT POINTS #4 THRU #5**

In these next 2 plot points of Act One, several landmarks should have been spotted:

- The **inciting incident** will occur. This will lead to...
- The hero has an **increased awareness** of his/her needs.
- The **stakes** are made clear. This is what the hero stands to lose.
- The proverbial **call to adventure** occurs or is alluded to. The hero is summoned or made aware that he/she may need to leave the ordinary world but either doesn't acknowledge or refuses to answer the call...yet.

**ACT 1 -- 12 PLOT POINTS #6 THRU #8**

In these next 3 plot points of Act One, several landmarks should have been spotted:
• The hero is hassled and or reminded about his/her major point of "brokeness." Often it's in the form of a question from an ally: "Why don't you think about how someone else feels for a change?"

• The hero's orphan status is amplified.

• The theme is amplified.

• The call to adventure is now clearly stated to the hero. "You must come with me to Alderaan if you are to be a Jedi like your father."

• The refusal of the call is made. "I can't go to Alderaan...I've got to milk the space-cows."

ACT 1 -- 12 PLOT POINTS #9 THRU #12

In these last 4 plot points of Act One, several landmarks should have been spotted:

• The intensity of the threat to the hero and/or the stakes character(s) is made clear.

• The hero can no longer ponder what the proper course of action is and must take action. This is the acceptance of the call to adventure.

• The three areas of conflict -- professional, personal, and private -- are clearly brought into focus and stated.

• The Central Question of the film is raised. Ideally, the Central Question should include the three areas of conflict:
  o Will Luke become a Jedi (by trusting the Force - PRIVATE), save the Princess (PERSONAL) and destroy the Deathstar (PROFESSIONAL)?
  o Will Fletcher learn how not to lie (PRIVATE), stop Max from going to Boston (PROFESSIONAL) and learn how to become a good father (PERSONAL)?
  o Will Lester Get Angela (PROFESSIONAL), reclaim his youth (PERSONAL) and passion for living (PRIVATE)?

ACT 2 -- 14 YES-NOS #1 THRU #3

In these first 3 pairs of reversals of Act Two, several landmarks should have been spotted:
• The hero gets help from **allies** and **aides**, often in the form of a **mentor character**.

• The villain will be established as being not just bad but **really bad**. In the absence of a standard villain (such as in a romantic comedy), the opposition to the hero's goal will be shown to be a **very strong opposition**.

• The hero **begins the learning process**, actively pursuing what he or she thinks is needed to resolve the **Central Question** while getting an insight into what will **really** be needed to resolve the **Central Question**. Generally, the hero will either be oblivious or deny the validity of this insight.

• The hero will meet with **low-level opposition** which he or she will struggle to barely overcome. These can be considered "training exercises" or "dry runs" for the skills and/or insights that the hero will really need.

• The **love story, comedic runner**, or **secondary story** will begin in earnest.

**ACT 2 -- 14 YES-NOs #4 THRU #5**

In these next 2 pairs of reversals of Act Two, several landmarks should have been spotted:

• The hero **continues to wander**, learning with greater clarity what he or she needs to do to resolve the **Central Question** while **testing the waters** with his or nascient abilities.

• The **obstacles** increase in intensity.

• The opposition to the hero becomes **aware of the hero's existence** (if the opposition wasn't already).

**ACT 2 -- 14 YES-NOs #6 THRU #8**

In these next 3 pairs of reversals of Act Two, several landmarks should have been spotted:

• The **threat to the stakes character** increases to the point of **Life or Death** (literal or figurative.)
• The \textbf{third act solution} is shown, though the significance of it is likely lost on the hero at this time.

• The \textbf{opposite value of the theme} is clearly stated ("\textit{Hokey religions are no substitute for a good blaster, kid.}")

• The \textbf{hero knows all of the rules} (or thinks he/she does) and \textbf{wandering further} will not help the hero to learn more.

• The \textbf{villain's plan} is explained either to the hero, by the hero, or to others.

• Time to fight, to enter the \textbf{villain's world}, or the world in which the villain will be encountered.

\textbf{ACT 2 -- 14 YES-NOs #9 THRU #10}

In these next 2 pairs of reversals of second half of Act Two, several landmarks should have been spotted:

• The hero will have \textbf{shifted into action}, making decisions (for better or worse) in the now active and direct attempt to resolved the \textbf{Central Question}.

• The hero will meet with some \textbf{initial success}.

• The villain/opposing force will \textbf{tighten the screws} on the hero's goal.

• The \textbf{thematic question} will be raised and heightened, often with one character expressing the pro argument of the theme while a different character expresses the opposing thematic argument. The hero will bounce between both viewpoints.

• Possibly unknowingly, the hero will \textbf{prepare for his or her big change}.

\textbf{ACT 2 -- 14 YES-NOs #11 THRU #12}

In these next 2 pairs of reversals of Act Two, several landmarks should have been spotted:

• \textbf{Intense, direct conflict} between the hero and the opposing force/villain.

• Hero realizes that he or she still \textbf{lacks the skills} needed to succeed.

• The hero enters his or her \textbf{darkest internal space}, often physically expressed by a tight, enclosed place.

• The hero undergoes the \textbf{Ultimate Test} leading to a \textbf{death-moment}. 

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ACT 2 -- 14 YES-NOs #13 THRU #14
In these final 2 pairs of reversals of Act Two, several landmarks should have been spotted:

- The hero **emerges from the death-moment** (resurrection) a new being, more fully actualized, with a new understanding...but...not quite ready for the final challenge yet. *(NOTE - THIS MOMENT WILL SOMETIMES OCCUR IN THE NEXT LANDMARK SECTION)*
- Whatever answers the question "**What's the worst that can happen?**", happens. The villain gains the ultimate upper hand.
  - The boat breaks down and Brody is stranded on the water without even a radio. *(JAWS)*
  - Obi Wan is killed and the Deathstar is led to the rebel base. *(STAR WARS)*
  - Woody is abandoned by his friends in the house of Sid, the psycho toy-mutilator. *(TOY STORY)*
- The hero **assumes the role of standard-bearer** for the positive expression of the thematic argument:
  - Obi Wan is killed, leaving Luke the defender of the Force. *(STAR WARS)*
  - Max is going to be taken away and Fletcher embraces telling the truth *(LIAR, LIAR)*
  - Cole admits that ghosts want help *(THE SIXTH SENSE)*
- The hero is at his or her **lowest moment**, which can be expressed through a **character interlude**.

ACT 3 -- BIG YES - NO
In this first pair of reversals of Act Three, several landmarks should have been spotted:

- The hero, having embraced the positive thematic argument, makes a **commitment to change**. This sets up the resolution to the **Private Conflict**.
• Energized by this private (and usually unstated) commitment, the hero understands the need to be willing to sacrifice himself or herself for the benefit of the stakes character. This sets up the resolution to the Personal Conflict.
• The hero acts out of courage and does the gutsiest thing possible. This sets up the resolution to the Professional Conflict.
• The hero meets with failure, but instead of licking his or her wounds, the hero presses on.

ACT 3 -- BIG NO - FINAL YES
In this last pair of reversals of Act Three, several landmarks should have been spotted:

• The Central Question is on the brink of being answered to the negative.
• The hero (and indeed, many of the hero's allies) make a huge sacrifice.
  o Hooper goes into the shark cage, Brody goes into the water to face the shark. (JAWS)
  o Luke switches off his targeting computer, the Princess stays on the planet, Han comes back. (STAR WARS)
• If a Third Act Solution was shown earlier, it is brought into play as the device which is needed by the hero to triumph.
  o Brody knows that the compressed air tank can explode. (JAWS)
  o Nemo knows that the drain pipe leads to the bay. (FINDING NEMO)
• The hero comes to terms with and resolves his or her Private Conflict, which in turn empowers the hero to resolve his or her Personal Conflict, which in turn enables the hero to resolve his or her Professional Conflict. (NOTE -- One can be a bit flexible about the order in which these three conflicts resolve. That being said, the closer together chronologically that these resolutions come, the more satisfying the conclusion of the story. And if you can resolve ALL THREE at the same time, you're golden, baby!)
• A short denouement scene to wrap up the story which shows the hero now fully actualized, returned to his Ordinary World, and both having embraced and embodying the positive values (I love a Hollywood ending time) of the thematic question.
IT'S TIME TO GET TO WORK

I know this is a lot to chew on, but chew slowly and you’ll find that it’s easy to digest. There is so much more to say about structure, just not now. This is all the theory you need to know for the moment. Now, it's time to beat out your stories. Such topics as character, theme, dialog, imagery, proper exposition...they're going to have to wait.

Right now, what you want to do is take advantage of the raw enthusiasm you have for your idea and act on it. Get the monster caged.

Remember what I wrote earlier; that the majority of failed screenplays begin as weak concepts? No matter how in love you are with an idea, you are foolish if you squander any of your valuable writing time by trying to turn it into a screenplay without first going through the following checklist:

- Have I answered (brilliantly) the Four Questions?
- Is my Protagonist sympathetic?
- Is his goal compelling?
- Do I have a clear Central Question?
- Do the obstacles become increasingly difficult?
- Is the Antagonist ruthlessly committed?
- Are the stakes life or death?
- Have I given those stakes a human face via a Stakes Character?
- Have I used the Formula to see if my story can go the distance?
- Does my Protagonist move through the Four Archetypes? and finally...
- Have I thanked my loved ones for putting up with me?

Whatever you do, don't take for granted the last item on this list. As difficult as it is to be in the "zone" when you're writing, imagine having to live with that person? When you're writing, make sure you take some time to smell the flowers. Even better, pick a few and give them to your wife, husband, girlfriend, boyfriend, parents, kids, friends...everyone who is supporting you as you do this insane thing called "writing."
IN CONCLUSION -- The cornerstones of every professional screenplay are character, dialog, theme and inspiration. The glue that holds them together is structure. To quote William Goldman one last time, "Screenplays are structure," and the TOTALLYWRITE DEVELOPMENT SUITE is all about structure.

Now quit reading this and go WRITE something...
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The TOTALLYWRITE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM, like my life, is a work in progress. As I learn more about the craft of writing, I will endeavor to share those discoveries with as many people as possible.

This system could not have come into existence without the help, love, and guidance of a number of people.

First and foremost, I must thank Gilbert McLean Evans. Gil is a seriously smart fellow as well as a gifted screenwriter and teacher. He and I have been having a 15+ year conversation about how screenplays work, and there's no end in sight. Gil contributed greatly to the overall system of story development employed by the TOTALLYWRITE DEVELOPMENT SUITE, and his knowledge and insights were invaluable to both this program and to my own understanding of screenplay writing. I only hope that he has learned as much from me over the years as I have learned from him.

Next, I would like to thank my wife, Marla, and my children Sara, Rachelli, Noah and Maya for letting me go hide in my office for all the time that it took to create this program. My wife is the best kept secret in Hollywood, giving the absolutely best notes on scripts. It is Hollywood's loss and my gain that her insights are all mine.

I've had the privilege of knowing several outstanding teachers, however two stand out in my mind; Howard Enders and Aram Avakian. More than twenty-five years after I graduated SUNY Purchase, Howard is still at it, pounding the finer points of screenwriting into his students' heads. A million years ago his words of encouragement to a very fragile young man made all the difference.
Aram Avakian was the first person I ever called "mentor." At one time, he was one of four world-class film editors. Sometime around the late 70's he was invited to SUNY Purchase to teach. He immediately took me under his wing and threatened that I would have a career. In 1981 he helped me get my first professional job as an apprentice sound editor in New York. In 1984 he counseled me (and made my parents easy with the decision) when I wrestled with moving to Los Angeles. In 1986 I cried like a baby when I heard that he had died of a heart attack.

Finally, I would like to thank my students; those whom I have had the honor of teaching as well as in advance to those I hope to meet one day soon. I pray that I don't disappoint.

JEFFREY ALAN SCHECHTER
PART III

Appendix

A Blank TotallyWrite Development Paradigm Form
& A Partial, Very Subjective Reading List
TotallyWrite Development Paradigm Form
(Copy and reuse FOR YOUR OWN USE ONLY)

TITLE:
By:
Date:

**ACT ONE**  Orphan

*12 PLOT POINTS - #1 (Meet either the Hero, Victim, or Antagonist)*

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*12 PLOT POINTS - #2 (See the Hero's flaw in relation to Stakes Character. Hero's need)*

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*12 PLOT POINTS - #3 (Antagonist or someone or something symbolic of the Antagonist)*

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12 PLOT POINTS - #4 (Contagonist slows the hero down. Pulls him off the path)

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12 PLOT POINTS - #5 (Inciting Event. Hero now gets emotionally involved)

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12 PLOT POINTS - #6 (Hero's goal as it relates to the Stakes Character and/or love interest. Hero's problem is made clear to the audience. "YOU KNOW WHAT YOUR PROBLEM IS?")

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12 PLOT POINTS - #7 (Ally aids Hero. Encourages the Hero towards specific goal)

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12 PLOT POINTS - #8 (Hero seems ready to move forward toward goal and/or Stakes Character, but can't do it. CALL TO ADVENTURE/REFUSAL OF THE CALL)

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12 PLOT POINTS - #9 (Antagonist or Contagonist conflict tries to stop Hero)

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12 PLOT POINTS - #10 (Hero realizes depth of feeling for Stakes Character or severity of threat to Victims. ACCEPTANCE OF THE CALL)

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12 PLOT POINTS - #11 (Contagonist or Antagonist threatens to take Stakes Character from Hero)

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12 PLOT POINTS - #12 (Hero decides he must act to save Stakes Character)

CENTRAL QUESTION:

ACT TWO  Wanderer

14 YES/NO's - Yes #1

14 YES/NO's - No #1
14 YES/NO's - Yes #2

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14 YES/NO's - No #2

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14 YES/NO's - Yes #3

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14 YES/NO's - No #3

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14 YES/NO's - Yes #4

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14 YES/NO's - No #4

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14 YES/NO's - Yes #5

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14 YES/NO's - No #5

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14 YES/NO's - No #6

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14 YES/NO's - Yes #7

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14 YES/NO's - No #7

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Wanderer / Warrior

14 YES/NO's - Yes #8

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14 YES/NO's - No #8

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Warrior

14 YES/NO's - Yes #9

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14 YES/NO's - No #9

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14 YES/NO's - Yes #10

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14 YES/NO's - No #12

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14 YES/NO's - Yes #13

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14 YES/NO's - No #13

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14 YES/NO's - Yes #14

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ACT THREE  Martyr

BIG YES

NO

BIG NO
A Partial, Very Subjective Reading List

What follows is a list of some of the books I have on my shelf that I use over and over again. The books are divided by category and might sometimes, accidentally, be in alphabetical order.

**PLOT DEVELOPMENT**

20 Master Plots (And How to Build Them)
by Ronald Tobias

An outstanding book that covers various plot paradigms. Once I determine what kind of story I want to tell, I use this book to insure that I'm not forgetting any crucial plot-points inherent to that paradigm. A MUST OWN!

Plots Unlimited
by Tom Sawyer, Arthur David Weingarten

Not a MUST OWN, but a very interesting book. Plot fragments are presented which can be mixed and matched to create a full story. I've never found it particularly useful in the creation process, but incredibly helpful during those brainstorming sessions when I want to give my muse a kick in the pants.

The Writer's Journey
by Christopher Vogler

One of those books I wish I wrote. Vogler takes Joseph Campbell, applies him to "The Wizard of Oz" and creates a book about the enduring paradigms of the Mythic Round. Basically, it's The Hero With A Thousand Faces but focused on filmmaking. A MUST OWN!

**CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

Creating Unforgettable Characters
by Linda Seger

Seger wrote one of the best books around (MAKING A GOOD SCRIPT GREAT) so I anxiously snapped up this one when it first was published. A little disappointing in its scope, but still a worthy addition to the writer's bookshelf.
The Hero Within  
by Carol S. Pierson

This book is one of the great, unsung works for writers! Not about writing at all (really) it's actually a book about psychology. It details the six main archetypes that people (and by extension, characters) fall into. The book goes on to detail the traits associated with each archetype; what that archetype's feelings are towards self, conflict, emotion...etc. A great read, an interesting book and an invaluable helper. A MUST OWN!

Writing Great Characters : The Psychology of Character Development in Screenplays  
by Michael Halperin, Ph.D.

Definitely for the more academically-minded. This book reads more like a thesis than a guide. Still interesting, but the sum of the parts doesn't equal the whole.

The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes & Heroines  
by Tami D. Cowden, Caro LaFever, Sue Viders

The single, greatest addition to my library in the past several years. Armed with the character insights from this book and with literally just the barest hint of a story, I was able to sell an idea on a pitch. This wonderful book breaks down heroes and heroines into sixteen types and then goes into great detail, using examples, of how those types interact. And after all, what do you really remember about a movie...the intricacies of the plot or the characters? A MUST, MUST, MUST OWN!

THE CRAFT OF WRITING

Story Sense  
by Paul Lucey

Yet another in a series of books about the craft. As with most books, there's never one catch-all, fool-proof approach to writing but rather something to be gleaned from all works. STORY SENSE has a lot of interesting points and should be a worthy addition to your bookshelf.

The Art of Dramatic Writing  
by Lajos Egri

The classic work on dramatic structure. Still usefull (after all these years).
Making a Good Script Great
by Linda Seger

This is it! The one...the only. Perhaps the most consistently useful book on my shelf. It doesn't teach you how to write the first draft, but it gives you a wealth of knowledge on how to fix the problems that each and every first draft inevitably has. A MUST, MUST OWN!

How To Write a Movie in 21 Days
by Viki King

This book is like having a comforting, occasionally annoying friend. Full of good advice and so-so affirmations, but darn it!, King can get you to do what she claims.

Story
by Robert McKee

The 800 pound gorilla of screenplay teachers, McKee has a lot of good things to say but it's tricky to take much of the theory and turn it into practical day-to-day tools. Still, for those who can't get enough of terms like "ironic ascension," this is the book for you.

Writing Screenplays That Sell
by Michael Hauge

An excellent, excellent book. It has as much info on the biz as it does on the craft. Another MUST, MUST OWN!

Screenplay
by Syd Field

Still perhaps the best basic writing book available, but I do mean basic. For newbies only.

Adventures in the Screen Trade
by William Goldman

A deliciously decadent read. This is the book that made me move to L.A. Goldman tells you all about his "adventures" (a little outdated, but still enjoyable) and what craft and/or business lesson he learned from them. And remember...NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING. A MUST OWN!
RESEARCH & REFERENCE

The Writer's Partner
by Martin Roth

Don't think. Don't hesitate. Just get this book. Roth has categorized his decades of notes about character, locations, professions, various genres, general writing concepts, specific writing concepts...the works...and made them accessible to all. Completely, totally invaluable. A MUST, MUST OWN!

The Comic Toolbox
by John Vorhaus

Not as dry as many books which dissect comedy, but not as much of a knee-slapper as Vorhaus would like. Then again, dying is easy...comedy is hard. A worthy addition.

The Oxford-Duden Pictorial English Dictionary

You know that part of the kayak, right in front of where the person sits, that's on top of deck? What's that called? That's why you need this book. You can't walk the walk if you don't talk the talk. (BTW, it's called the "spraydeck". You're welcome.) A MUST OWN!

NTC's Dictionary of American Slang

The title says it all. Expressions in common usage are listed in dictionary form. Handy, but not essential.

NTC's American Idioms Dictionary

More expressions of greater length. Handy Phrase-Finder in the back helps you find the idiot you want. I mean idiom...

The Writer's Complete Crime Reference Book
by Martin Roth

Great reading, if your idea of great reading is learning more than you ever wanted to know about murderers, rapists, smugglers, criminals of every stripe and the agencies, individuals and techniques out there to stop them. A MUST OWN if you're working in the crime genre.
Diagnostic Criteria for DSM-IV

I'm the only writer I know who has the big brother to this book (DSM-IV) on his shelf and who uses it regularly. This is the official guidebook of the American Psychiatric Association, and I use it whenever I want to assign idiosyncrasies to any of my characters. Is your character compulsive in some way? Check out the section on compulsive disorders, pick one, tone it down and voila! Instant character reality. One of my best-kept secrets!

How to Get Anything on Anybody: The Encyclopedia of Personal Surveillance, Book II
by Lee Lapin

I was working on a story where I needed to know about surveillance techniques when I ran across this book. Keeps it real.

Television Comedy Series: An Episode Guide to 153 TV Sitcoms in Syndication
by Joel Eisner, David Krinsky

So you're working on an idea about a kid who, through no fault of his own, is always getting into trouble and you want to come up with different things he can get into trouble about. Look at the episode list for the TV series "Dennis the Menace" and get some ideas. A very handy tool.

Scene of the Crime (and other books in the Howdunit series)

A multi-volume yuck-fest of poisons, weapons, criminals and police procedures. I'd put down that roast beef sandwich before cracking open CAUSE OF DEATH, though...

The Uses of Enchantment
by Bruno Bettelheim

Yikes! Keep this away from the kids. The psycho-sexual underpinnings of fairy tales are laid bare for all to see. An interesting work if one is dealing with classic fairy tale themes and wants to delve into the deeper psychology of them...just have that cold shower ready.

Unsold Television Pilots: 1955 Through 1988
by Lee Goldberg

One of the great brainstorming tools of the century. Thousands of failed ideas, just waiting for you to come along and make them work.
Professor Brunvand has been collecting urban legends for years. There's some great ideas in these books! ("Dead Man on Campus" is right out of CURSES! BROILED AGAIN!) THE VANISHING HITCHHIKER was the first in the series and is the driest, but the rest are good reads. I highly recommend THE BABY TRAIN for it's index of legends in the back.