



FRED RITZENBERG'S

Three Act Structure Workbook

Introduction

The great screenwriter William Goldman (*Adventures in the Screen Trade*) said, “Structure is everything.” He’s right. Of course in film, everything is everything!

Structure is your foundation. It’s the bones on which to hang your story. A good structure allows you to focus on what’s really important – your characters.



The Rule!

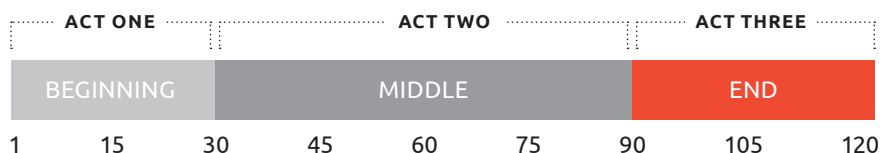
There is only one rule in screenwriting. **The three act structure.** Everything has a beginning, middle and end. That's the law of the universe. We are born, we live, and we die. No getting around this.



TREE OF LIFE, *The Fountain* (2006)

Chunk Chart

Note: Your story structure might take a slightly different shape, there is no set way. Only what works. Use this chunk chart as a loose guideline for your writing.



Where to Begin

Most writers know the turns of their story before they set out to write, thus allowing the protagonist to find their own way of achieving their goal. **Plot grows out of character.** Of course, that's why we have to know our characters. In writing, it's helpful to know where you are going. Writers write to something. We don't have to have all the answers. We can figure out our protagonist's journey along the way, as long as we know they will end up at the climax of the story.



Taking the Step

The Pillars: To begin your script, you must know three important things about your story – **the Catalyst, Plot Point 1 and Plot Point 2.**

The First Act – SET-UP

The set-up usually happens in the first 10 – 15 pages. It:



INTRODUCES THE PROTAGONIST.

The protagonist is the hero of the story with a pressing need or goal.

SCARLETT O'HARA, *Gone with the Wind* (1939)



DETERMINES THEIR DRAMATIC NEED.

This is what the protagonist will set out to accomplish. Dramatic need often works on two levels. **The external journey fulfills the internal need.**

BRUCE WAYNE AS A CHILD, *Batman Begins* (2005)



ASKS THE BIG QUESTION.

Will the protagonist fail or succeed? It will be answered in the third act.

KATNISS EVERDEEN, *The Hunger Games* (2012)



SETS THE TONE OF THE STORY.

Every story has a unique feeling. **This is reflective of the protagonist.** It is why stories feel different, even though they are pretty much the same; THE QUEST. The good news is that there are millions of ways, billions of ways, to tell that story.

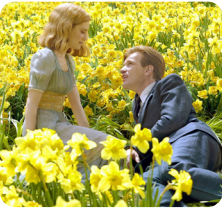
TRUMAN BURBANK, *The Truman Show* (1998)



DETERMINES THE GROUND RULES.

This is the world in which the story lives. What can happen in this world. It creates a “Suspension of Disbelief.” It is important for the audience to buy into this world.

ANNIE MEETS MARTY, *Miss Annie Rooney* (1942)



MANY SUPPORTING CHARACTERS ARE INTRODUCED.

All characters in the story serve the protagonist. They are there to tell us about her.

EDWARD AND SANDRA, *The Big Fish* (2003)



THE ANTAGONIST IS OFTEN INTRODUCED.

The antagonist is the one who is trying to stop the protagonist from achieving their goal. Your protagonist is only as good as their worthy antagonist.

KARIN AND A CRIMINAL, *The Virgin Spring* (1960)

The Catalyst

The set-up often includes or ends with the catalyst. Something happens that starts the story.

A first action point that engages the protagonist.

The catalyst pushes the protagonist to start their journey. It's an incident that calls for action.

The catalyst then pushes the story toward the first Plot Point or the Middle. This is Act 2.

Act 1 – Script Pages

PAGE 1: THE SET UP – Introduce Protagonist. Set the tone. Dramatic need. Create the ground rules. The Big Question. Introduce Supporting Characters. Introduce Antagonist.

PAGE 15: CATALYST – Action begins.

PAGE 30: THE MIDDLE – The First Turn / Plot Point One / The Beat into the Middle. Pushes the Story in a New Direction.



The Second Act

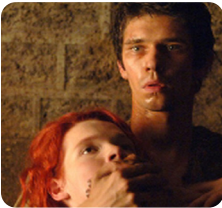
Act two or the middle often takes the story in a new direction. It is filled with:



CONFLICT & COMPLICATIONS.

Conflict is **drama**. Every scene will have conflict. Conflict forces action and **action reveals character**.

MAISIE, *What Maisie Knew* (2012)



OBSTACLES THAT FORCE ACTION.

It is how the protagonist deals with these obstacles that tells the audience who they are. Different characters will approach problems in different ways. That is what makes your character unique.

JEAN-BAPTISTE GRENOUILLE AND A FRUIT GIRL, *Perfume* (2006)



HOOVER FAMILY, *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006)



ACTIONS THAT DEFINE CHARACTER.
We are the product of our actions.

ARNIE, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993)



PROTAGONIST'S SELF DISCOVERY.

"Adversity has ever been considered a state in which a man most easily becomes acquainted with himself," Samuel Johnson.

QUAID, *Total Recall* (1990)



**OFTEN LEADS TO A CRISIS
FOR THE PROTAGONIST.**

NOBODY, *Mr. Nobody* (2009)



JAMAL, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008)

Act 2 – Script Pages

PAGE 45: CONFLICT & COMPLICATIONS.

Obstacles. Define the Protagonist.

PAGE: 60 MID-POINT.

A Seminal Event. Character Related. Something Happens.

PAGE 75: CONFLICT & COMPLICATIONS.

Obstacles.

PAGE 90: THE END.

The Second Turn / Plot Point Two / The Beat Into the End. Crises.

Low Point. Builds to the Confrontation.



The Third Act

Act three, or the end, builds to the resolution of the story. The protagonist is pushed toward a showdown or climax. The big question answered. The story resolved.

Act 3 – Script Pages

PAGE 105: SHOWDOWN.

Climax.

PAGE 120: RESOLUTION OF THE STORY.

The Big Question is answered.





Full Story Outline

PAGE 1: THE BEGINNING – THE SET-UP.

Introduce Protagonist. Set the tone. Dramatic need. Create the ground rules. The Big Question. Introduce Supporting Characters.

PAGE 15: CATALYST.

Action Begins.

PAGE 30: THE MIDDLE.

The First Turn / Plot Point One / The Beat into the Middle. Pushes the Story in a New Direction.

PAGE 45: CONFLICT & COMPLICATIONS.

Obstacles. Define the Protagonist.

PAGE 60: MID-POINT.

A Seminal Event. Character Related. Something Happens.

PAGE 75: CONFLICT & COMPLICATIONS.

Obstacles.

PAGE 90: THE END.

The Second Turn / Plot Point Two / The Beat into the End. Crises. Low Point. Builds to the Confrontation.

PAGE 105: SHOWDOWN.

Climax.

PAGE 120: RESOLUTION OF STORY.

The Big Question is answered.

Template to Outline Your Story

PAGE 1: THE BEGINNING – THE SET-UP.

PAGE 15: CATALYST.

PAGE 30: THE MIDDLE.

PAGE 45: CONFLICT & COMPLICATIONS.

PAGE 60: MID-POINT.

PAGE 75: CONFLICT & COMPLICATIONS.

PAGE 90: THE END.

PAGE 105: SHOWDOWN.

PAGE 120: RESOLUTION OF STORY.



Story is About Problems

It is how we deal with these challenges that tell us who we really are, not who we think we are.

This story paradigm will also give you structure:

- A person has a problem.
- They find a solution to the problem.
- The solution creates a complication.
- The complication gets resolved.

With a solid structure in place, you'll have a built in narrative drive that forces the protagonist to the end of the story.

Whether they succeed or fail. Whether they change or stay the same, it is completely up to the PROTAGONIST.

Give your characters enough life and they tell you!

ACTUALLY – There are two rules in screenwriting.

Rule one: The three act structure. Every story has a beginning, middle & end.

Rule two: Don't bore me.

NOW GO OUT AND WRITE YOUR INCREDIBLE STORY!



SATINE, *Moulin Rouge* (2001)

Fred Ritzenberg's Three Act Structure Workbook

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Fred Ritzenberg & David Leivick's Paradigm for Story

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