



# STRUCTURING *a* SCREENPLAY

Every good film starts with a good screenplay, or visual story. Unlike a novel, where the action unfolds in the mind of the main character, or a play, where the action unfolds through the words of the characters, film is a visual medium. The viewer must be able to see the action unfold.

The process begins when the writer develops a “treatment” of the story. A treatment is a brief synopsis that tells the core of the story. It is generally 4 to 20 pages in length and includes the plot, action, central characters and emotional sub-plots of the story. It is an excellent tool to allow the writer to see where story points work, and where they do not.

Next, the screenwriter begins to work on the screenplay itself. In doing so, he or she uses a very specific three-act structure: In the opening act (usually about 30 minutes), the writer sets up the story and establishes the relationships between the characters. Then, there is a second act (usually about 60 minutes), when the main character must face a series of crises or overcome obstacles that keep him from achieving his goal. Finally, there is a final act (generally about 30 minutes), when the crises or conflicts are resolved.

One page of screenplay is equal to about one minute of time in the film. That means the screenwriter must set the story up in about 30 pages, develop the conflicts or complications in 60 pages, and resolve the conflicts and tie up the loose ends in the last 30 pages.

Pick a film that you would like to see. As you watch, try to identify the beginning, middle, and end. Use the space below to make notes.

Title of film: \_\_\_\_\_

How is the story set up? How are the characters introduced?

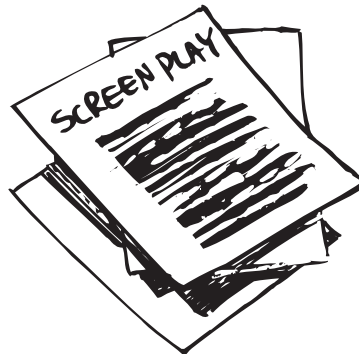
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What is the conflict in the film? How does the conflict develop?

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\_\_\_\_\_

How is the conflict resolved? \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_  
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Now, think about a story that you would like to tell. Make your rough notes in the space provided. Use the other side of the paper if you need room.

How will you “set up” the story and introduce the characters?

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What conflicts will your characters face as the story unfolds?

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How will you resolve the conflicts as you end your story?

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Now you are ready to write a “treatment” for your story. Use another sheet of paper to write a one-page treatment.

