

Three-act Structure

Syd Field, author of *Screenplay* and *The Screen Writer's Workbook*, has outlined a paradigm that most screenplays follow.

A paradigm is a conceptual scheme. This paradigm is the structure that holds screenplays together.

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

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

What happens in Act I (Setup)?

- **Exposition**--The part of a story that introduces the characters, shows some of their interrelationships, and places them within a time and place.
- This part of the story introduces the main character, the dramatic premise, and the dramatic situation.
- **Main character**--the person in the story who has a need/objective to fulfil and whose actions drive the story
- **Dramatic premise**--what the story's about
- **Dramatic situation**--the circumstances surrounding the action
- **Inciting Incident**--an event that sets the plot of the film in motion. It occurs approximately halfway through the first act.

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

What happens in Act II (Confrontation)?

- **Obstacles**--In the second act, the main character encounters obstacle after obstacle that prevent him from achieving his dramatic need.
- **First Culmination**--a point just before the halfway point of the film where the main character seems close to achieving his or her goal/objective. Then, everything falls apart, leading to the midpoint.
- **Midpoint**--a point approximately halfway through the film where the main character reaches his/her lowest point and seems farthest from fulfilling the dramatic need or objective.

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

What happens in Act III (Resolution)?

- **Climax (Second Culmination)**--The point at which the plot reaches its maximum tension and the forces in opposition confront each other at a peak of physical or emotional action.
- **Denouement**--The brief period of calm at the end of a film where a state of equilibrium returns.

The "Plot Point"

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

The Three-act Paradigm:

