

FEATURE FILM STRUCTURE CHEAT SHEET
5 Simplified Explanations of Traditional
Long Form Dramatic Structure



NOTE TO THE READER:

This booklet is meant to be a quick reference guide to help writers troubleshoot and problem solve using a variety of perspectives on long form structure. It is NOT a substitute for the books/articles referenced, moreso a "sampler" of what these different authors have to say about the role of structure in feature film writing. I recommend you actually buy and read the books to get their full perspectives.

I will be releasing more cheat sheets on a variety of different subjects, so please sign up for my mailing list at www.michaellitwak.com to stay up to date (on average I send out an update every 3-6 months, so don't worry: I won't spam you!)

Thank you and enjoy!
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Screenwriting 101 by Film Crit Hulk!

<https://goo.gl/vT2vxA>

Shakespeare's 1st acts were always comprised of introductions and **the establishing of a preexisting central main conflict** (i.e. two families are at odds, romeo is a lovesick pup over Rosaline, Juliet is a naive and lovelorn girl). This preexisting conflict in the background is so important because **it creates a conditional world for the audience who is entering it.**

2nd act is usually comprised of **some kind of central event that challenges or deeply worsens the main conflict.** It's usually in the form of relationship development, a fight, a reveal, or a surprise (i.e. star-crossed teenagers Romeo and Juliet meet and go ga-ga over one another, which is a huge problem given the nature of the preexisting conflict of their families' feud). Basically this act features the main surface plot of the story coming into effect.

The 3rd act comprises a turning point. This need not be a "twist" per se, but more of a **spurring incident or action that makes the conflict infinitely more complicated** (i.e. Mercutio getting killed by Tybalt then Romeo killing Tybalt). Often these moments are surprising. they deeply affect not only the level of seriousness of main conflict, but dramatically alter the actual direction of it. It requires that you think intensely about the nature of your conflict: Why does it exist? What is perpetrating it? What would make it worse?

The 4th act of Shakespeare's model was known as **"the spiral"** and it is **actually full of character decisions that cause characters to sink toward the real climax** (i.e. Romeo and Juliet decide go on the lam, hatch a plan to fake their deaths, etc). These decisions are rapid. Fast-paced. Poorly conceived. And hugely dramatic. In truth, this is the point where you are really arranging and setting up the climax. This feverish, intense climate is the best place to expose the deep character flaws that will either bring down our heroes or allow them to succeed.

The 5th act is **where the audience gets the climax / resolutions / weddings / tragedy / fallout/ etc.** (i.e. Romeo and Juliet have a fatal miscommunication, kill themselves, and leave their families to be heartbroken and declare peace). The most important thing to remember is that this last act is not just wrapping things up, but is the encapsulation of the story and should exhibit all the points one is trying make in your movie. The ending is the conceit so the climax and resolution are the very goal of your movie.

Dan Harmon's Story Circles

<https://goo.gl/7Fa2h>

1. a character is in a zone of comfort
2. but they want something
3. they enter an unfamiliar situation
4. adapt to it
5. get what they want
6. pay a heavy price for it
7. then return to their familiar situation
8. having changed

1) "You" - who are we? A squirrel? The sun? A red blood cell? America? By the end of the first 37 seconds, we'd really like to know.

2) "Need" - something is wrong, the world is out of balance. This is the reason why a story is going to take place. The "you" from (1) is an alcoholic. There's a dead body on the floor. A motorcycle gang rolls into town. Campbell phrases: Call to Adventure, Refusal of the Call, Supernatural Aid.

3) "Go" - For (1) and (2), the "you" was in a certain situation, and now that situation changes. A hiker heads into the woods. Pearl Harbor's been bombed. A mafia boss enters therapy. Campbell phrase: Crossing of the Threshold. Syd Field phrase: Plot Point 1.

4) "Search" - adapting, experimenting, getting shit together, being broken down. A detective questions suspects. A cowboy gathers his posse. A cheerleader takes a nerd shopping. Campbell phrases: Belly of the Whale, Road of Trials. Christopher Vogler phrase: Friends, Enemies and Allies.

5) "Find" - whether it was the direct, conscious goal or not, the "need" from (2) is fulfilled. We found the princess. The suspect gives the location of the meth lab. A nerd achieves popularity. Campbell phrase: Meeting with the Goddess. Syd Field phrase: mid-point. Vogler phrase: Approach to the Innermost Cave.

6) "Take" - The hardest part (both for the characters and for anyone trying to describe it). On one hand, the price of the journey. The shark eats the boat. Jesus is crucified. The nice old man has a stroke. On the other hand, a goal achieved that we never even knew we had. The shark now has an oxygen tank in his mouth. Jesus is dead- oh, I get it, flesh doesn't matter. The nice old man had a stroke, but before he died, he wanted you to take this belt buckle. Now go win that rodeo. Campbell phrases: Atonement with the Father, Death and Resurrection, Apotheosis. Syd Field phrase: plot point 2

7) "Return" - It's not a journey if you never come back. The car chase. The big rescue. Coming home to your girlfriend with a rose. Leaping off the roof as the skyscraper explodes. Campbell phrases: Magic Flight, Rescue from Without, Crossing of the Return Threshold.

8) "Change" - The "you" from (1) is in charge of their situation again, but has now become a situation-changer. Life will never be the same. The Death Star is blown up. The couple is in love. Dr. Bloom's Time Belt is completed. Lorraine Bracco heads into the jungle with Sean Connery to "find some of those ants." Campbell phrases: Master of Both Worlds, Freedom to Live.

CREATING CHARACTER ARCS - K.M. WEILAND

<https://goo.gl/jRCSPf>

(POSITIVE CHANGE CHARACTER ARC)

FIRST ACT: in order for your character to evolve in a positive way, he has to start out with something lacking in his life, some reason that makes the change necessary. He is incomplete on the inside. He is harboring some deeply held misconception about either himself, the world, or probably both.

Reinforce the lie - revelation of Thing He Wants and Thing He Needs, establish how the character's internal problems are causing external problems.

Character Decision #1: point of no return, character decides. Character Decision #2: during plot point, sets up the series of runs that will occupy your character up until Midpoint. Character Decision #3: character establishes a clear physical goal, based on the Thing He Wants, has committed himself to change, even though he may still be trying to change in the wrong way.

First Half of Second Act: your character ventures into uncharted territory— and gets lost - where he begins to discover that the old rules (the lie he evolves no longer apply)

Provide the Character with Tools to Overcome his Lie. Show the Protagonist Encountering Difficulties in Pursuing His Lie. Move the Character Closer to What He Wants and Farther From What He Needs

MIDPOINT: protagonist's shift from a reactive role (not in control of the conflict) to an active role (taking control of the conflict).

Moment of Truth: Where he will gain better understanding of both he external conflict and his inner self IN that conflict. Caught between the Lie and the Truth: your character is now a divided person: caught between the Lie and the Truth.

Second Half of the Second Act: The protagonist charges ahead, thinking he now sees clearly, but is still half-blinded by the lie.

Allow the Character to Act in Enlightened Ways. Trap the Character Between the Old Lie and the New Truth. Initiate the Character's Attempts to Escape the Effects of the Lie. Contrast Your Character's Before and After Mindsets. Provide Your character With a False Victory

3rd Plot Point: forces a crisis — in both the plot and the character's arc.

The Ultimate Choice between Want and Need

The Old Self Dies - the protagonist chooses TRUTH, even though it means forever losing the Thing He Wants

Up the Stakes. Keep the Character Off Balance. Prove How Far the Character Has Come. Renew the Attack Upon the Character's New Paradigm

CLIMAX: the reason for the story. What the story is ABOUT, WHY the journey was worth it. Forces the protagonist to face the main conflict in a decisive confrontation.

THE RESOLUTION: the new normal world that has been built by the character's hard-won Truth. Find a way to blatantly state the answer to your story's thematic question.

THE SEQUENCE APPROACH - Paul Joseph Gulino/ Frank Daniel

<https://goo.gl/xcZVKP>

summary via Genre Hacks - <https://goo.gl/eBpyqy>

FIRST SEQUENCE

Excite the viewers curiosity with an OPENING IMAGE and HOOK. Present EXPOSITION explaining the who, what, when, and where of the story. Show a glimpse of the life of the protagonists before the story gets underway - the STATUS QUO. This sequence generally ends with the inciting incident or POINT OF ATTACK.

SECOND SEQUENCE

The protagonist tries to reestablish the STATUS QUO disrupted by the POINT OF ATTACK, fails, and must face a worse predicament. The protagonist's WANT is defined, as so, the sequence poses the DRAMATIC QUESTION that will shape the rest of the story. This is the END OF THE FIRST ACT, and with it the MAIN TENSION is firmly established.

THIRD SEQUENCE

The protagonist makes a first attempt to solve the DRAMATIC QUESTION and fulfill his/her/their WANT, but fails. SUBPLOTS are established. This sequence often includes the first major SET PIECE of the movie, which explores and exploits the MAIN TENSION or COMEDIC TENSION.

FOURTH SEQUENCE

Here the protagonist often attempts, once again, to restore the STATUS QUO and fails. The end of the sequence is the midpoint or FIRST CULMINATION. It often brings a major REVELATION or REVERSAL. So, a major element of this sequence is audience PREPARATION for this culmination. The audience should be tempted to guess the outcome story. The STAKES are raised.

FIFTH SEQUENCE

The protagonist deals with the AFTERMATH of the first culmination. Often new characters are introduced for new opportunities are discovered. The protagonist's NEED (as opposed to WANT) becomes a force and complication in the protagonist's choices. The sequence may deal heavily with SUBPLOTS, such as a romantic subplot, and may give the audience a break from the MAIN TENSION of the main plot.

As with other sequences, this sequence may have its own TENSION, WANT and central QUESTION that gets resolved at the climax of the sequence. However the MAIN TENSION and MAIN DRAMATIC QUESTION remain unresolved.

SIXTH SEQUENCE

This is the last sequence before the END OF THE SECOND ACT. The protagonist has exhausted all easy courses of action and must address the central dramatic question head on. Forces pushing the protagonist to a CHARACTER CHANGE become impossible to ignore.

The MAIN TENSION resumes its intensity, and is seemingly resolved in the CULMINATION at the sequence climax. This may be a "dark night of the soul" in which the protagonist feels that all is lost, or it may be a victory that leads to a bigger problem and THIRD ACT TENSION.

SUBPLOTS are generally resolved in the sixth and seventh sequences, before the climax that resolves the central DRAMATIC QUESTION and ends the story.

SEVENTH SEQUENCE

The apparent answer of the central dramatic question proves premature. The STAKES are raised on final time. A new THIRD ACT TENSION is established that will answer the dramatic question once and for all. The story seen in a new light, and the protagonist might reverse his/her/their goals. Often this long sequence ends in a FALSE ENDING/FINAL TWIST.

EIGHTH SEQUENCE

The TENSIONS created by the POINT OF ATTACK are finally resolved. Any remaining SUBPLOTS are tied up. The final image may recall images that opened the film.

INTO THE WOODS: A Five-Act Journey Into Story by John Yorke

<https://goo.gl/Zam1DS>

THE ROADMAP OF CHANGE

ACT 1

No knowledge
Growing knowledge
Awakening

ACT 2

Doubt
Overcoming reluctance
Acceptance

ACT 3

Experimenting with knowledge

MIDPOINT - KEY KNOWLEDGE

Experimenting post-knowledge

ACT 4

Doubt
Growing reluctance
Regression

ACT 5

Reawakening
Re-acceptance
Total Mastery