



Writing for film and television

Objective

- Learn the roles of different characters
- Learn how story structure is used
- Learn how to write and format a screenplay

Background

Storytelling is a powerful tool used by humans from the moment we were capable of communicating with one another. We communicate vital information through stories on a daily basis: from recounting your day at school to your parents, to talking about that time you went to the beach and had the most amazing ice-cream!

Film and Television is just one way of telling a story through visuals and sound but it all begins with a screenwriter producing a script: a written document that tells a story by describing movement, actions, expressions and dialogue of characters as it will be seen on the screen. It is the screenwriter's job to come up with the story, the characters and the world they inhabit.

There is no right or wrong way on how to start developing a story but we're going to start with characters, but more specifically with two very important characters that are required in every script:

Protagonist: the character who drives the plot, pursues the main goal of the story and changes over the course of the story.

Antagonist: the character (or force) that actively opposes or is hostile to your protagonist, an adversary.

Task one: create a Protagonist and Antagonist

To create engaging characters with depth we need to ask ourselves some questions about the protagonist and the antagonist:

What is your protagonist's name?

Try to make the name interesting!

What does your protagonist want?

This is usually something physical or mental that they want to obtain.

What is your protagonist's flaw?

Try to make their weakness something that directly gets in the way of them reaching their goal.

What does your protagonist need?

This is what the protagonist needs to overcome their flaw and achieve their goal.

What is your antagonist's name?

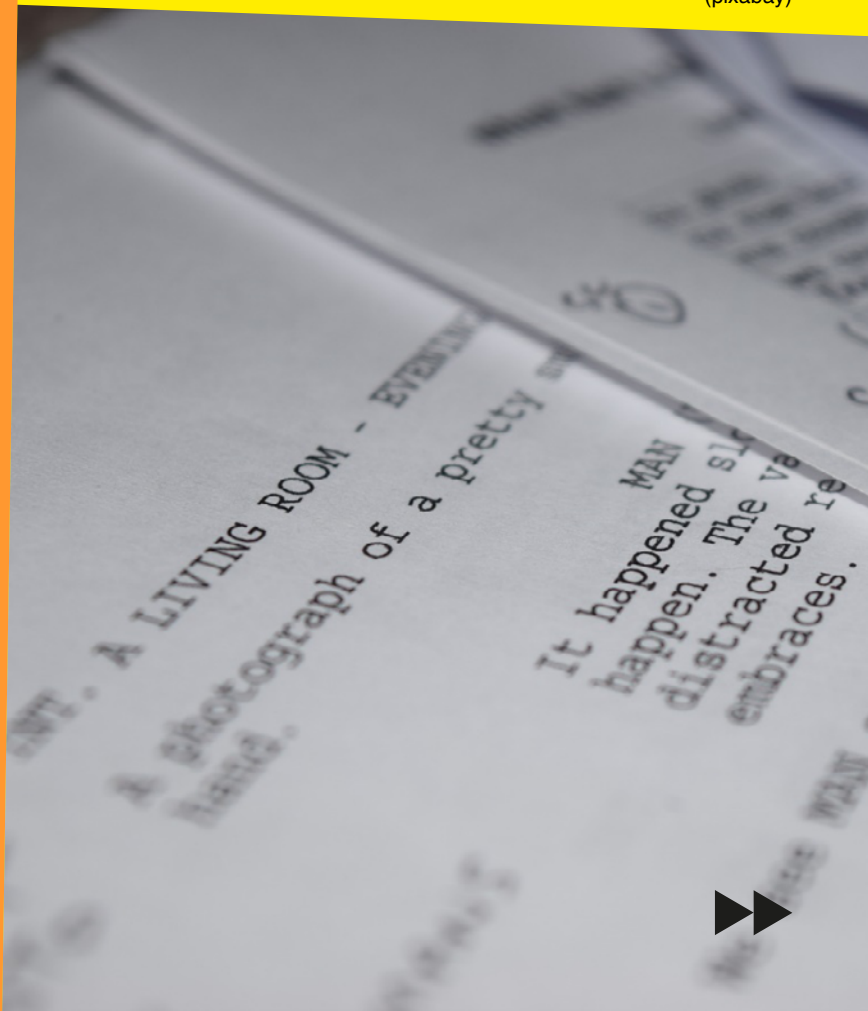
What does your antagonist want?

Make it directly oppose the protagonist's goal.

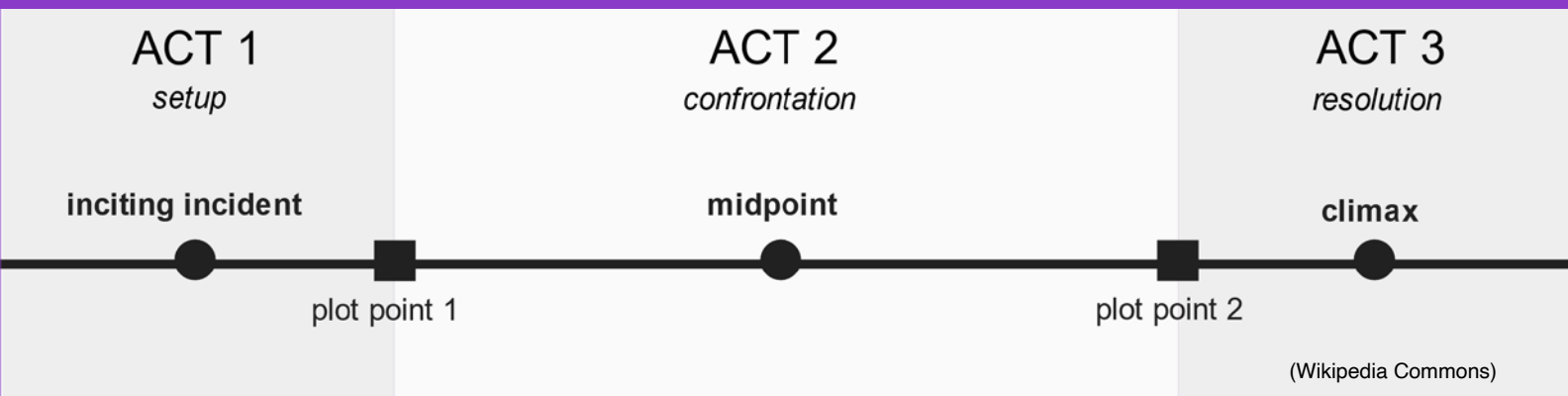
Why does the antagonist want it?

This will help make your antagonist more than just a boring villain.

(pixabay)



Once you have created your characters, we can start to place them within a story structure. Most people will know the basic structure of a story: beginning, middle and end. We can take this basic story structure and break it down even further.



Replacing beginning, middle and end we have act one, act two and act three; although the function remains the same. The difference here is that we have inciting incident, the midpoint and the climax but for now we're going to concentrate on the inciting incident.

Task two: identifying an inciting incident

Inciting Incident is an event which thrusts the protagonist into the action of the story. Without the inciting incident there can be no story. If Spider-Man never got bitten by a radioactive spider, we wouldn't have Spider-Man!

Think about the last few films you have seen and identify what the inciting incident is in each film.

The inciting incident can sometimes be difficult to identify, especially if it doesn't physically and directly affect the protagonist. When it comes to your story however, what matters most of all is that you know what the inciting incident is for your protagonist.

The last thing to go through before putting the pieces together to create your own story are character arcs.

Character Arc is the path a character takes over the course of a story which involves challenges and changes.

The character arc takes into account the traits of your protagonist; their wants, flaws and needs, and follows their journey to reaching their goal. A good story will have a protagonist who changes over time, but it is up to you to decide whether your protagonist changes for the better or for worse...

Task three: developing your story

Now you can go ahead and start planning out your story!

Develop your own story structure which includes:

- A protagonist with a want, a flaw and a need
- An antagonist with a want which directly opposes the protagonist
- An inciting incident
- A three-act structure

Task four: writing a short screenplay

The script, or screenplay, is written differently to a novel as the script has a specific function: to represent how the story will play out on screen. This single page is from La La Land and is a simple scene featuring two characters having a conversation. You can see a script uses a specific format, font and layout. It can be confusing seeing a script for the first time, but we can look at three elements to help you understand how to read a screenplay.



1 INT. SEBASTIAN'S APARTMENT - EVENING

2 CLOSE ON: The record player. An old jazz track. We see Mia and Sebastian seated at the table -- eating, drinking, laughing.

SEBASTIAN (CONT'D)
Feels so good to be home.

MIA
Stay.

He smiles.

3 SEBASTIAN
How's the play going?

MIA
I'm nervous.

SEBASTIAN
Why?

MIA
Because...
(a beat)
What if people show up?

SEBASTIAN
Screw 'em!

Laughter. Then --

SEBASTIAN (CONT'D)
You're nervous about what they think?

MIA
I'm nervous to be up on a stage and perform in front of people. I'm terrified.

SEBASTIAN
They should be so lucky to see it.
(then,)
It's going to be incredible. I can't wait.

1. **Scene Heading:** a short line that tells the reader where they are in the script. You start by stating whether the scene is outside (external) or inside (internal), becoming: EXT. or INT. You then name the location and finally whether it is day or night. In the context of this La La Land scene we know it is set inside Sebastian's apartment in the evening.
2. **Action Lines:** This is what actually happens in the scene. Unlike in a novel where the story can be extremely descriptive, action lines in a script are short and to the point. More importantly, action lines should describe what the audience will see on the screen, not what the characters are thinking and feeling. A screenwriter should visualise the story through words and, with practice, be able to write how thoughts and feelings can be shown to an audience through visuals alone.
3. **Dialogue:** Look at how this is written in the La La Land example. The name of the character who is speaking is centred and the dialogue is written underneath.

You can now write a short script for the story and characters you have developed.

Formatting a screenplay can be difficult in Microsoft Word or Pages but there are plenty of applications and software designed specifically for screenwriting. Final Draft is the industry standard but comes with a hefty price. Celtx and StudioBinder are both free to use and have all the tools you will need.

Conclusion

Screenwriters are vital to the world of film and television. The whole medium of moving image is centred around storytelling and the world wants to see your stories on the screen. The best route to get into screenwriting is to read lots of screenplays and keep writing!

Further resources

[Lessons from the Screenplay](#)

[BFI Film Academy](#)

Useful links

[Screenskills](#)

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