

Animation: The Story

Character and Narrative Structure
Ideas for Writing
Basics of the Script

Elements of a good story.

- **Goal: To evoke a strong emotional response from the audience.**
- Necessary basics: Setting, character, conflict, and satisfying resolution.
- Interesting characters: The viewer should care for or be challenged by the characters.
- Conflict: The audience should relate in some fashion to the conflict.

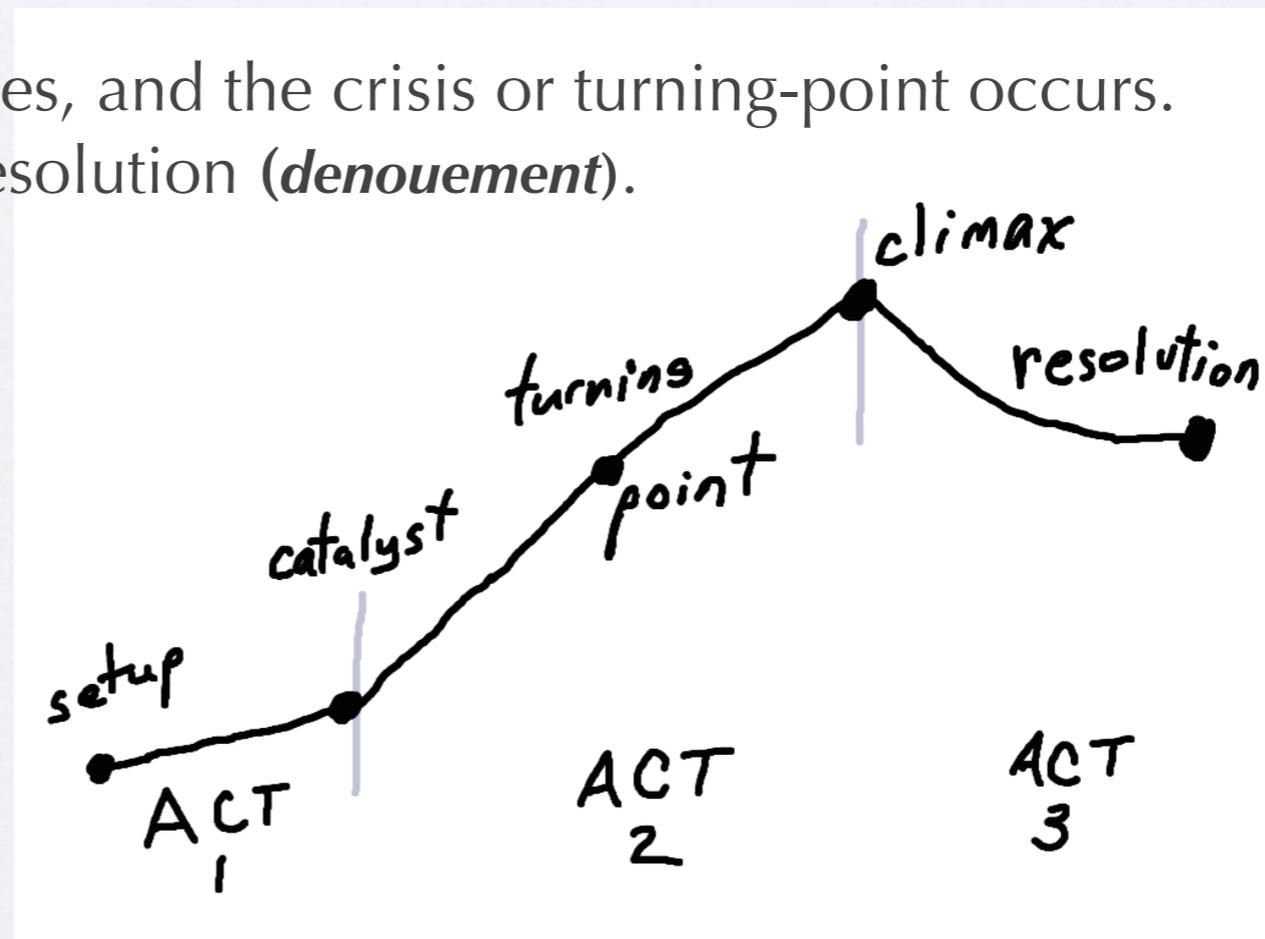
Narrative structure.

- The most applied and well-known story structure dates back to *Poetics* by Aristotle; it is still one of the best written works about story.
- Consider the three-act structure:

ACT I: Setup the story; introduce setting, characters, status quo, and then the catalyst.

ACT II: The conflict rises, and the crisis or turning-point occurs.

ACT III: Climax and resolution (*denouement*).



Characters and conflict.

- Good *character* development creates and reveals *motivation*.
- The catalyst and other *obstacles* to a character's motivation create the *conflict*.
- *Conflict* in turn changes the character.
(*epiphany -- point of realization*)
- The audience should relate emotionally to the conflict and change in the characters.
(*catharsis -- emotional release*)

Tips for interesting conflict.

- Build the characters as much as possible and lock the conflict early in the story. Each scene should also advance the plot and increase the conflict.
- Types of conflict: man versus man (society or others), man versus himself, man versus nature. ("Man" can be male, female, or even other creature or object, particularly in animation.)
- Conflict may be physical, mental, spiritual, or emotional, or a combination of these.

The resolution.

- Some type of resolution needs to occur to satisfy the audience.
- Happy endings are most popular, of course, but a sad or tragic ending will still satisfy the need for resolution and may better fit the goal of the story.
- Denouement -- falling action, “wrapping up” any subplots or loose strings.

Writing for animation.

- Animation is mainly a *visual* medium, so “show don’t tell.”
- Shoot for storytelling through *action*.
- Dialogue and sound are still important but should be considered carefully with the visual aspect in mind.

Writing process.

- Pre-writing: free exposition of ideas to brainstorm about the following:
 - Character background, setting, conflict, resolution.
- Outline for structure.
 - Form three act structure and devise plot points.
- Actual writing.
 - Treatment, scene breakdown, then script.
- Revision.

Developing ideas.

- **Research:** Consider personal experiences; novels, magazines, comics, short stories; movies, plays, television; history, dreams, myths.
- **Brainstorming:** Create a list for several ideas including characters, setting, motivation, and a couple obstacles for each.
- **Story premise (concept sentence):**
 - **Literal:** It is a story about a little girl on a subway late at night who murders a frustrated, solitary man who ignores her.
 - **Deeper, figurative:** Adults should pay more attention to needy children.
 - **Typical Hollywood premise:** You may be beautiful and popular if you only take off your glasses.

Checklist and pitfalls.

- Does the story seem to work? Does it have good structure? (Beginning/middle/end?)
- Is it a good visual story? (Good for 3-D animation?)
- Is it clever or original?
- Is the motivation of the characters clear to the audience?
- Does the audience relate emotionally?

Other things to be careful:

- **Obvious linear progression.**
- **Stereotypical, contrived, or 2-D characters.**
- **Non-human characters in a human world.**
- **Characters and conflict appropriate for 3-D animation.**
- **Dream sequences and flashbacks.**
- **Dialogue.**
- **Cramming too much.**
- **Superficial action (murders, weapons, etc.)**

Short Story Examples: *The 55 Fiction Contest*

Bedtime Story

“Careful, honey, it’s loaded,” he said, re-entering the bedroom.

“This for your wife?”

“No. Too chancy. I’m hiring a professional.”

“How about me?”

He smirked. “Cute. But who would be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man.”

She wet her lips, sighting along the barrel.

“Your wife.”

- Jeffrey Whitmore

Short Story Examples: *The 55 Fiction Contest*

Grandma Meets the Ax Murderer

The crazed ax-murderer approached the house. Having ravaged the entire neighborhood, his sack of booty was almost full.

Alone inside, the old woman sat knitting. The murderer raised his blood-stained ax and rang the porch doorbell. Slowly, she opened the door and peered into his face.

“Trick or treat!” the little boy shouted.

- Diane Elliot

Basic scripting.

- Format: plain-type (courier) on 8 1/2 x 11 paper.
- Composed of scenes, master scene described (specific shots not usually included).
- Slug line: INT/EXT, LOCATION, TIME
- Brief but vivid descriptions of scene to the full width of the margins.
- Dialogue blocked with each character's name above. (CAPS when introduced.)
- Focus on presenting the story through character development, action, careful dialogue, and avoid "directing" the film in the script.

Sources and additional material.

- Aristotle, *Poetics*, 350 B.C.
- Blacker, Irwin R., *The Elements of Screenwriting*, Macmillan, 1986.
- Trotter, David, *The Screenwriter's Bible*, Silman James Press, 1994.
- Maestri, George, *Character Animation 2: Advanced Techniques*, New Riders, 2002.
- Coleman, T., Sheridan, S., and Vogel, N., *Maya 2: Character Animation*, New Riders, 2000.
- Moss, S., *The World's Shortest Stories*, Running Press, 1995.