

11 components found in films that indicate a story is **objectively** “good”

Objective: based on observable facts and reason not emotional judgments

A good story has a **unified plot** with an ending or resolution justified in the story and an easily identifiable conflict

- Every choice is made to further the theme.
- A unified plot does not introduce something out of nowhere to resolve a situation.
- No conflict means no plot.
- **Types of Conflict**
 - Individual vs. Nature
 - External Conflict
 - Individual vs. Individual
 - Individual vs. Environment / Society
 - Individual vs. Supernatural
 - Individual vs. Machine
 - Individual vs. Self = Internal Conflict

A good story has a **fine tuned ending** matched to the central conflict.

- Surprise is weak unless the viewer can tie the ending to what has happened earlier in the movie.
- Sneak previews with audience feed back can improve ending.
 - *National Lampoon Vacation*: The original ending had the Griswolds, livid over the closing of Walley World, invade Roy Walley's house, hold him and his associates hostage, and force them to entertain them by dancing and singing Marty Moose songs.
 - Test audiences hated this ending, so Hughes had to write a new one in which Clark and Walley's confrontation ends peacefully and the family gets its fun time at the park.

A good story has a **well-developed “illusion of truth”** that is developed in one of three ways.

- **Externally Observable Truths:** Conforming to what we have observed in our daily lives. Objective, external, and observable laws of probability and necessity.
- **Internal Truths of Human Nature:** Subjective, irrational, and emotional truths of human nature. (poetic justice, retribution served, evil punished and good rewarded)
- **Artistic “truth”:** The way things never were and never will be. Early in film, the filmmaker skillfully creates a world of truth where viewer willingly suspends disbelief.

A good story is **interesting or worth watching** due to suspense or action.

- A genre of movie may not interest a viewer but a good movie itself can't be boring.
- Movies need momentum and include enough interest or insight to be worth watching.
- How?
 - Add Suspense (excite curiosity through foreshadowing, withholding answers to questions raised in story provides motivation to keep watching)
 - Add Action (not just violence, action means changing emotions and ideas within a character)

A good story **balances simplicity and complexity** from beginning to end.

Intellectual people may want more complexity while escapist viewers may want a simpler plot.

- Simplicity: two hour sitting expected so movie needs unity; irrelevant or distracting details must be removed. Longer movie needs greater unity.
- Complexity: interest needs to be sustained but foreshadowing cannot spoil the ending. Ending can be shocking or thought provoking but either ending type must be connected to clues throughout story.

A good story subtly handles **emotional material** with restraint or subtlety.

- Overuse can be unintentionally laughable. Less emotional response can often be more powerful (Understatement).
- A musical score can often indicate director's emotional intent.
- Musicals can lead a viewer specifically to a specific without getting slowed down by extensive dialogue

A good story has a **title** that often hints at a theme, character, or idea.

- A good story title illustrates an important theme or a key scene or an important character in the story.
- The title sparks interest in a story before experiencing it.
- The leads the audience to think differently about a title after the film ends.

A good story has a **controlled structure** at its foundation.

- Linear or Chronological structure. Follows a typical plot diagram (exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, resolution)
- Nonlinear structure : events are not chronological.
- Exposition can be spread throughout a movie through flashbacks, dialogue. Director can decide to scramble the story timeline for stylistic purposes.

A good story has a strong **process of characterization** starting from the beginning.

- Characterization through appearance
- . . . through dialogue – words spoken & how they are spoken
- . . . through external action – fireman rescues a girl's toy
- . . . through internal action: see and hear sights and sounds of things the character imagines, remembers, or thinks about
- . . . through reactions of other characters
- . . . through contrast with similar character (dramatic foil)
- . . . through caricature (exaggerated trait or repetition of a single action) and leitmotif (phrase, song that becomes a trademark)
- . . . through choice of name
- . . . through use of different character types
 - ❖ **Stock characters and Stereotypes**
 - ❖ **Static or Dynamic**
 - ❖ **Flat or Round**

A good story **effectively includes symbolism and metaphor** as a short cut to greater meanings.

- Universal and natural symbols. Once something is “charged” with a set of associations than a director can use it to communicate an idea throughout the story
- Universal symbols come “**precharged**”: flags, crosses, buzzards, hawks, doves
- Symbolism must also be created within a film.

How?

- through repetition
- through value placed on an object by the character
- through context
 - relationship to other visual objects in the same frame
 - by editorial juxtaposition of one shot with another
 - by object’s importance in the film’s structure
- through special visual, aural, or musical emphasis

Symbolism and metaphor in a good story (continued)

- Conflicts can be **symbolic and literal**. The conflict is at the center of the story but the conflict can also symbolize an idea that is universal to humanity.

civilization versus barbarism

change versus tradition

lawlessness versus civilization

idealism versus pragmatism

sensual versus spiritual values

individual versus society

- To understand story's theme, symbolism must be interpreted on both literal **and** symbolic levels.
- Metaphors** are comparisons between images or scenes that help communicate an idea to the audience because the scenes or images are similar.
- Symbols represent something else than what they actually are, metaphors are comparisons.

BUT. . . sometimes a cigar is just a cigar; a bird is just a bird;
and a painting behind a character is just set decoration

A good story **includes irony throughout** which serves to advance a story's theme or mood.

- **Dramatic Irony:** We know something more than a character in the story.
 - ❖ Spoken words have a literal meaning as spoken by a character (Moses words of disdain towards slaves)
 - ❖ Same words have a different meaning to the enlightened audience. (We know Moses is a Hebrew.)
- **Irony of Situation:** Sudden reversal of events so that the end result of a character's actions is the opposite of original intentions. "A healthy boxer ends up paralyzed"
- **Irony of Character:** When the characters embody strong opposites or contradictions or when their actions involve reversals in expected patterns of behavior. Example: Strong man weeps in trench from fear while "weak" soldier jumps heroically into battle.
- **Irony of Setting:** when an event takes place in a setting that is directly opposite of the setting we usually expect for such an event. "Party in a graveyard"
- **Irony of Tone:** when opposites of feelings or attitudes are juxtaposed. "Fight occurs as happy music plays."