# Mamet’s *On Directing Film*

## The Stuff You Need to Know

## Introduction

Mamet starts *On Directing Film* by saying the book is based on a series of film directing lectures he gave at Columbia University in the fall of 1987. He had just finished directing his second film and felt he was “like the pilot with two hundred hours of flying time, I was the most dangerous thing around”[1]. So, when directing his movies and writing this book on directing, Mamet compensated for his lack of directing knowledge with his extensive writing experience.

Throughout the book, Mamet says the key to screenwriting and directing is to imagine the logical steps in a story. That what a writer’s job is, for a good writer, “gets better only by learning to cut, to remove the ornamental, the descriptive, the narrative, and especially the deeply felt and meaningful. What remains? The story remains. What is the story? The story is the essential progression of incidents that occur to the hero in pursuit of his one goal.”[2] Too often, directors ignore this and rush to use distracting pictorial images.

Instead of pretty images, Mamet says the job of the director is to understand what the story and its scenes mean and stage it. Movies should be the collection of clearly meaningful scenes instead of pretty visuals whose logical progression is hard to tie together into a story. Mamet’s sums up his advice with a Hemingway quote, “Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works.”[3]

Mamet emphasizes leaving out as much detail as possible. Mamet agrees with Aristotle, who says stories are about what happens to the hero fighting for what he wants, not what the writer thinks is interesting. Here, Mamet doesn’t give an example of “interesting” but given later cases, it’s anything from needless scenery shots, wordy dialogue, over-acting, backstory, and directors following the protagonist around; anything that isn’t “the essential progression of incidents that occur to the hero in pursuit of his one goal.”

Mamet believes storytelling is a craft just like building a house. It has natural rules to follow and thus master. While self-described artists claim any rules are a limitation to their supposedly “interesting” self-expression. A craftsman masters rules to give what their audience wants.

Hence, to make a good story, a writer or director doesn’t need to make pretty visuals, but only imagine a logical progression of incidents. “Screenwriting is craft based on logic. It consists of the assiduous application of several very basic questions: What does the hero want? What hinders him from getting it? What happens if he does not get it?.” A writer’s ego answers these questions in a logical progression to make a story. When done, he lets his id write the more artistic, and less critical, dialogue.

The hand-off between ego and id is analogous to a screenwriter giving a director a screenplay. The director’s job is to present the story as the writer wrote it, and find simple visual shots to show it. Directing is thus the “joyful extension of screen writing.” Which is how Mamet says he taught his course and wrote this book.

## Chapter 1 - Storytelling

In this chapter Mamet explains his views on movie directing. He strongly emphasizes that screenplays and directing are only tools to tell a story. Mamet says the montage theory of directing, developed by Sergei Eisenstein. He uses montage theory to oppose how most American movies “[follow] the protagonist around,” and try to figure out how to make scenes interesting, instead of finding a logical progression of incidents that is interesting.

Per Mamet, Eisenstein’s montage method “is a succession of images juxtaposed so that the contrast between these images moves the story forward in the mind of the audience.”[4] Directing becomes a series of uninflected shots — a teacup, a fork, a door, which ties together to tell a story.

Mamet notes this is how natural storytellers tell stories; “I’m standing on the corner. It’s a foggy day. A bunch of people are running around crazy. Might have been the full moon. All of a sudden, a car comes up, and the guy next to me says…”[5]. Juxtaposition implies something’s coming next but leaves the audience in suspense to find out what is next.

It’s good to make the audience wonder Mamet says. Let them be waiting for each new event and be surprised as it happens.

Mamet compares montage theory to nature documentaries. In documentaries, the action of a bird snapping a twig, then a deer raising its head, tells the story of alertness and implies impending danger inside two shots that by themselves are unrelated. In contrast, American filmmaking too often follows the main character around as they shop or eat breakfast instead of picking out the parts of protagonists day relevant to the story.

Mamet then calls most movie scripts garbage. They don’t tell a sequence of events that together makes a story. Instead, they say narration like “Nick, a young fellow in his thirties with a flair for the unusual.” Such descriptions are useless to any director because it’s impossible to shot on set. Writers write narrative scripts for movie executives—who Mamet emphasizes with strong emotions—can’t read scripts because it requires some cinematic education or humility to learn, “neither of which is going to be found in the studio executive”.[6]

Ignore the ignorant executives. Don’t write to make them happy, because a screenwriter’s job is to create the logical progression of incidents of a story. A director’s job is to compile a list of shots to represent the events already imagined by the screenwriter. The director’s work on set is nothing but sticking with this plan.

To emphasize his lack of trust in formal storytelling education, Mamet says he suspects film schools are useless. He suspects this because he found drama schools to be useless. Drama schools; “refrain from insulting the gentleman or gentlewoman student of liberal arts by offering instructions in demonstrable skill.” Instead, drama schools teach “things that will be learned by anyone in the normal course of events.”[7]

Mamet then blames technology, especially the Steadicam, for enabling lousy storytelling. With technology, directors avoid the hard work of imagining a logical story with a shot list. Because of technology, directors can use their (self-proclaimed) artistic genius to decide where to put the camera after arriving on set. Directors are then left making the story in the editing room with the film available; a process that’s best done before shooting.

Mamet then turns philosophical. He explains when writers ignore Nature’s rules of storytelling, they will make one of two mistakes. They’ll either follow other people’s opinions of high-class art (like performance artists do). Or, they’ll follow arbitrary rules to appease employers and get hired (like writing for ignorant studio executives). Writers will do this because they consciously want to please these groups and thus become risk-averse and use clichés.

The importance of following proper storytelling technique is to free the mind from these harmful influences. Once the human mind follows Nature’s rules, it’s “allowed true creativity”. Being free of outside influences means a writer’s creation will be significant to an audience and stand the test of time.

Mamet says stories with uninflected shots are natural; which is why dreams have so much power. Dreams are unrelated images that themselves have little meaning. It’s the juxtaposition of images that gives dreams their terror and beauty. Dreams don’t have narration, nor do they follow a person around for a day. Dreams are a series of shots that imply meaning. Thus, studying psychoanalysis, like *The Interpretation of Dreams, The Uses of Enchantment*, and *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* will help a filmmaker hone their craft and tell powerful stories.

The first chapter ends by Mamet saying a film is a dream sequence. *Platoon* is not any more or less realistic then *Dumbo*; both tell a logical and surprising progression of incidents with uninflected shots. All stories are thus make-believe; the question Mamet asks is, “how good make-believe is it going to be?”

## Chapter 2 - Where Do You Put the Camera

This chapter is a dialogue with Mamet and his students at the Columbia Film School. Together they put Mamet’s ideas to practice and construct a movie scene.

Mamet tells his students to create a scene about their situation — a teacher and his students in a classroom. A student jumps in with the idea that they should start the scene by putting the camera high above the classroom, to show the entire class and because it’s an interesting angle.

Mamet rejects the idea outright because the question was a trick. Asking “where to put the camera” is asking what the scene is about. And asking what the scene means is asking what the protagonist wants. Thus, you can’t put the camera anywhere until you’ve written a scene with these details. Choosing a shot first is indulging on impulse, which is what performance artists do.

To get things going, Mamet decides the scene is about a student who wants to earn the instructor’s respect. But before he proceeds to create the scene, Mamet describes how all movies break down:

* A movie is a collection of scenes about the character fighting to get what he wants.
* Each scene has a super-objective and is composed of a series of beats.
* Each beat has an objective represented by a shot.

Thus, only by understanding the super-objective of their scene can a filmmaker think of good beats/shots for the scene. Also, creating good beats answers the question “where to put the camera” because the camera needs only to shoot the already selected beat.

Now the class starts brainstorming super-objective ideas for their “student’s wants the instructor’s respect” scene. Mamet repeatedly rejects the first ideas because they’re too “interesting”. Instead, Mamet encourages the class to find the most straightforward shot to represent the objective and super-objective of the beat and scene, respectively.

For example, Mamet rejects the idea of the professor having a prosthetic arm that falls off so the student/hero can pick it up for him. This idea tries too hard to be interesting; meaning it’s also unusual for most of the audience to relate to. Mamet turns this rejection into a broader rejection of a movie script trying to “establish the character.” Referencing Aristotle, Mamet says character doesn’t even exist in stories. The character is literally what the hero does in the story, not who they were before the story started.

To Mamet, movie scripts should not establish a character with descriptions like “A fellow, trim, fit, obviously enamored of the good things in life…”[8] A movie script should only tell the heroes story in images.

He explains by saying, “A fellow goes to a whorehouse, asks ‘what can I get for five bucks,’ and the madam responds’ you should have been here yesterday, because…”[9]. The audience doesn’t care if this hero is trim, fit, and enamored of the good things in life. His action of going to a whorehouse with five bucks tells you everything you need to know about him. Not giving him characterizations lets the audience imagine him to be themselves or someone they know. The audience can then enter into a story’s reality. And entering and living inside a new reality is the magic of storytelling.

In short, simple characters make it easy to tell and listen to stories. Too many characterizations get in the way of writing stories by characters with too many characterizations are less relatable.

Mamet then says storyboards, which he calls shot lists, are a directors best tool.

Mamet tells his students to remove characterizations by using KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid). Using KISS reminds writers only to find the meaning of each beat and scene. KISS prevents information overload from interfering with the audiences’ understanding of the story.

Mamet then returns to making a scene about a student impressing his professor. The first beat is decided to be arriving early to class. The class now needs a shot to show it. Mamet says that a student’s idea of the hero walking down an empty street at sunrise is too vague. He also says the hero nervously looking at his watch is too interesting. When a student says, “A shot of the man coming down a hall. A shot of a door, he tries it, it’s locked, it doesn’t open. He sits down. That’s it.”[10] With the class, Mamet analyzes if these shots represent arriving early to class, and they all decide that it does.

When some students ask if they can add more to the scene like a janitor mopping the floor, Mamet tells them always cut out unnecessary information. They already have shots to describe the objective of the arrive early beat, and there’s no need to add more than required.

For the next beat, Mamet emphasizes the need to keep the second beat logical while keeping the super-objective to gain the professor’s respect in mind. If the first beat is to arrive to class early, the second must be prepare for class. Mamet says the student’s first ideas of “brushing up on the professor’s methodology” as too vague and ideas like “reading the professor’s book” as too narrative. When a student suggests “writing on a notebook,” Mamet likes it, especially when he tells the students to withhold showing what the student is writing because it keeps the audience in suspense.

After discussing what’s the logical step, the class decides the next beat is paying homage to the professor.

The class delves into the meaning of homage to find a shot that represents it. Mamet explains like a dream, the shot of homage (like beat in the story), can be anything. The director isn’t limited to what the protagonist is doing. He can represent the beat anyway an audience will understand it once it’s juxtaposed with the other shots. The class decides walking feet followed by the student standing up depicts “homage”, and Mamet agrees.

To create the next beat, Mamet reminds the class to keep the super-objective in mind. After dismissing the student’s ideas —like show affection and bragging, as too generic— Mamet tells the class to think of fantasy life. What would the hero do if unbound by contemporary social rules to gain the respect of his professor? Fantasy is good because audiences like stories different than a typical life and let’s heroes rise above “the rules” to achieve their goal.

To help the students think of the next beat, he tells them to create a tangible goal for the protagonist to fight for.

This means every hero must have something real to hold, have, and fight over. Thus, the class says their hero no longer wants the professor’s respect. Instead, the student wants the professor to change a grade on a term paper.

This is a key point. By giving the ideal of “respect” a real-life manifestation into a term-paper makes the story easier to write, act, and represent in shots because either the professor changes the grade on the paper, or doesn’t. Now the writer and the audience quickly know what the scene is about and when then scene is over.

Mamet then explains the heroes notebook with the term-paper inside is a MacGuffin; a commonly used plot device, like a “secret briefcase,” used to carry the action of a story. Merely knowing the protagonist needs the MacGuffin is good. The audience doesn’t need to understand why. It’s better to leave out details about goals because, like with too many characterizations, leaving stuff out lets the audience think of themselves in the story. Everyone can cheer for a hero, but emphasize the hero being super tall or really short, and now the audience relates less.

Mamet returns to writing the scene with his students. Mamet summarizes the work down so far. Note how, because the term-paper makes the hero’s goal a physical object, each beat is easier to understand. The hero is the student. The antagonist is the professor. The hero’s super-objective is to get a new grade on his term-paper. The MacGuffin is the notebook with the term-paper inside it.

The beats/shots so far are:

1. show up early/try the door handle.
2. prepare/write in the notebook.
3. pay homage/rise when the professor approaches.
4. plead case/hand over the notebook.

With the scene partially constructed, Mamet asks the students how the props should be made, particularly the student’s notebook. He rejects ideas to make it look like a “regrading notebook” or a “prepared notebook.” These are again characterizations unfit for a story. The notebook only needs to look like a regular notebook with just enough distinction to be recognizable as *our notebook*.

Easy audience recognition of the MacGuffin is vital because our notebook is now the embodiment of the scene and is, therefore, more important than the protagonist. A director could only shoot shots of the notebook and still get the scene’s point across.

With all the above in mind, and after some more work, the students and Mamet expand their shot list as follows:

1. Showing up early: Student walks down the hall, shot of a hand on a doorknob, the student sits down on a bench.
2. Preparing for class: The student takes the notebook out, rips out a tab, writes something down on a tab, puts the tab in the plastic holder, closes the tab.
3. Paying homage to the professor: Student looking and getting up. The student runs to a classroom door. He opens the door, and the professor walks into the classroom.
4. Present the case for regrading: An empty desk. Professor sits down. The notebook is put on the desk. The professor grabs it and looks at the notebook.

The last beat the class needs is the conclusion. What will the professor do?

Mamet dismisses the idea the professor decides to “think about it.” Instead, the professor should make a judgment then and there because it’s more dramatic. Mamet reminds his students the next beat doesn’t have to “follow the protagonist.” The class decides the last beats are.

1. Professor giving his judgment: Shot of other kids outside the classroom door. They look at each other. Hero/student standing in the classroom with the professor looking at him.
2. Conclusion: The professor opens the notebook. Opens desk drawer. Takes out his stamp, and stamps the notebook. Note the audience doesn’t need to see the new grade because… the hero smiles, picks up the notebook, goes to his seat, and the professor calls the waiting kids into the classroom.

The chapter ends with a student asking Mamet what if the hero didn’t get his new grade. To which Mamet responds, “I don’t know. It’s our first movie. Let’s make it a happy ending, what the hell. And now we’re done, and that was excellent work”.

By which Mamet means the class made a story with no unnecessary characterizations, “interesting ideas,” or pandering to an ignorant executive. A simple scene about a common problem that anyone can relate to and thus enjoy.

Always keep in mind every story has a super-objective, and the MacGuffin is more important then the hero. Thus, you are not the hero of your own story. The technology you create is more important, because new tools are what life needs to better evolve. Evolving new tools is the super-objective of life, and you’re just a character inside.

## Chapter 3 - Counter-cultural Architecture and Dramatic Structure

In this chapter, Mamet expands on his ideas about writing and directing stories.

Mamet starts by saying he attended a counter-cultural college in the 1960s. In his eyes, the 60’s was a time when some people thought traditional architecture was too stifling. Unsurprisingly, counter-cultural architecture proved to be unlivable. Its buildings were not designed with the needs of human habitation in mind but from the architect’s feelings and impulses. Mamet asserts these counter-cultural buildings either “fell down or are falling down or should be torn down.”

Mamet contrasts counter-cultural buildings with his house that was built two hundred years ago by hand and with no nails. He says his house will stand for another two hundred years because craftsmen made it with respect for “wood, weather, and human domestic requirements.”

Following natural rules is the basic premise of this chapter, and indeed *On Directing Film*. Like architecture, storytelling has a natural requirements that are too often countered by a person’s impulses. When building a roof, a person should “understand a little bit about the effects of gravity and the effects of precipitation.” It’s a person’s job to master these fundamental rules and not suppose they’re impulses are more important.

Likewise, the requirements of storytelling are a hero who wants something. The drama is finding out if she’ll get it. That means every shot has to be a stepping stone in the journey. Signs, dubbed words, or anything supposedly “artistically interesting” is, like counter-cultural buildings, unnatural. The only thing the audience cares about-and what the writer/director has to create-is a story about a person rising to the occasion and fighting to get what she wants.

As for other motives, Mamet says their impossible to achieve with drama; “the nature of the dramatic art [is to] to tell a story. That’s all it’s good for. People have tried for centuries to use drama to change people’s lives, to influence, to comment, to express themselves. It doesn’t work. It might be nice if it worked for those things, but it doesn’t. The only thing the dramatic form is good for is telling a story.”[11]

The film director’s job is to juxtapose uninflected images to tell a story. Movies work like this, because human perception works to perceive two events, determine a progression, and want to know what happens next in the sequence.

In contrast, performance art is like neurosis. A neurotic person perceives events and applies an overriding precondition. For example, if a person who assumes their ugly isn’t talked to at a party, will assume others agree they’re not attractive. The simple observation that the neurotic didn’t spark up a conversation either doesn’t matter. Such is the unreasonable effect of holding a pre-condition.

Humanity’s vulnerability to neurosis is why bad movies can still find an audience. The audience either shares the pre-condition of the artist’s “message” of being ugly, fat, unloveable etc. Or, because the audience will work to find meaning in a movie even if the writer and director didn’t put any inside the story.

So, even if a person doesn’t tell a proper story, an audience will still try and find a purpose to it. That’s because everyone tries to uncover the purpose to any series of incidents.

This is why good a writer/director should masters human perception of uninflected images and constructs a story with it. A good storyteller savs the audience from struggling to find meaning. Poor craftsmanship forces storytellers to try to be “interesting” or tell a neurotic message.

Mamet continues by saying a logical person building a structure in Vermont uses sloped roofs so that the annual snowfalls will slide off. However, many counter-cultural buildings in Vermont have flat roofs and thus fall down. Similarly, Mamet says the American film industry is not following logical storytelling and is caught in a spiral of degeneration. Because without coherent storytelling, the writer/director has to resort to ever greater diversions, the end of which is obscenity. “Let’s really see their genitals, let’s really endanger the actor through stunts, let’s really set the building on fire. Over a movie, this makes it more bizarre. Over a career, more outre. Over of a culture it brings on depravity”.[12]

In summary, the human conscious mind will always perceive a series of events, while the subconscious will always try to find meaning to a series of events. Thus, if the storyteller constructed a logical story, audiences’ unconscious and conscious minds are in alignment, and the audience is perceiving the story just as the storyteller built it. Proper storytelling makes a magical link between the story and the viewer and requires neither inducement in the form of spectacle. Nor does good storytelling need explanation in the form of the performance artist’s narration about their self-importance.

Mamet ends the chapter by saying a story wants to be simply told through a series of uninflected images logically strung together to tell a story. He says it’s very hard to do these very simple things. But “the mastery of them is the beginning of the mastery of the art of film”.[13]

Thus, now we, the regular people trying to decide between Antagonists and Protagonists, can now better tell them a part. Antagonists are self-serving. They want your attention but only give you a boring story and bad roofs in return. Protagonists work hard to study nature and tell a logical story and build a quality house; both of which will stand the test of time.

That’s the difference between good and bad in principle. Wouldn’t it be cool if we had easy to apply test, that told us who was who?

We’ll get there. Let’s keep learning about good storytelling.

## Chapter 4 - The Tasks of the Director

This chapter teaches us what to tell the actors and where to put the camera. It’s Mamet’s practical guide on what directors should do on a movie set.

This chapter starts by Mamet saying many directors don’t keep it simple. They don’t write proper movie scripts or make a good shot list. Thus many modern directors get stuck shooting too many takes because “they don’t know what they want to take a picture of.” If they were to follow KISS and find the objective of the scene before going on set, they’d only need a few takes. For example, if a scene is to arrive early, the director should tell the actor, “go to the door, try the door, and sit down. That is literally what you tell him. Nothing more.”[14]

Mamet wants to help directors work with actors, particularly if actors over-act and try to make the scene about them and not the scene’s objective. Over-acting ruins a movie by distracting the audience. Mamet says nails, lumber, and shingles are components that come together to make a house. A craftsman would never use lumber for a roof or shingles for a frame. Likewise, writers, directors, and actors are components; each should do their job and work together to make a story. When components keep it simple, you’ll have a well-constructed project, whether it’s a house or movie.

Movies in the Golden Age of Hollywood kept things simple. Actors like Joan Crawford, John Wayne, Humphrey Bogart were simple and thus effective and memorable. Similarly, directors don’t need to overthink their directions.

When the actor in the get a retraction scene asks, “how do I walk down the hallway?” the director can -because he’s read the script and worked hard to create the shot list-be simple. He can listen to his subconscious that’s already worked on that question, and say what he thinks “I don’t know… quickly.” That’s how making a good movie can seem like luck and “talent,” but it is really the result of working hard on the script and the shot list.

For whatever reason-usually not enough formal theater training, underemployment, and anxiety to advance their careers-contemporary actors too often resort to performance acting and try to “emote” and “discover” their character. In reality, their job is to act each beat as simple as possible. The contemporary director’s job is thus containing the impulses of actors.

Like acting, dialogue should be direct and straightforward. Dialogue should not be spoken diaries of a character’s idiosyncratic thoughts. Nor should they talk about the plot. Dialogue is simple statements about what the character wants—let the audience wonder why. When the director makes a good shot list and tells the story with pictures, the dialogue is “sprinkles on the ice cream cone.” Basically, a good movie still make sense if watched on mute.

Mamet now answers what a director should tell the crew. Particularly when they repeatedly ask, “where do I put the camera.” Like with answering actors’ questions, this question is best answered by the directors subconscious whose thought about the script and shot list in great detail. Thus the answer to “where to put the camera” is usually a well-justified “over there.” Mamet admits he’s a writer and not a brilliant visual director. He’s thus telling the reader what he knows, which is to keep things simple, and shot the necessary shot as per the shot list. Mamet again reiterates there is no such thing as an exciting angle. The movie should be interesting, not individual shots.

Mamet’s ideal movie set is like a photo shoot. Which he showcases with these shots:

1. Shot of a hallway.
2. Actor walking down it.
3. Trying the doorknob.
4. Sitting down.

These are just simple shots. It’s the string of shots that makes the movie good or not, not the location or angle of the camera. Cameras don’t need fancy angles the same way actors don’t need characterizations.

Here Mamet tells a Humphrey Bogart story. The legendary actor described how a famous scene in *Casablanca* was shot. Bogarts character owns a bar in Nazi occupised Libya during WWII. The scene is the one where his French customers sing France’s national anthem in the faces of their Nazi overlords. The scene is very powerful, yet the director only told Bogart to nod when asked by the French if they could play the anthem. The scene has huge impact because Bogart didn’t overact. The scene was about the French singing in defiance of the Nazis, not about Bogart’s character. Bogart was simply “required to nod, he nodded. There you have it. The audience is terribly moved by his simple restraint in an emotional situation—and this is the essence of good theater”.[15]

In contrast, “Contemporary playwriting, filmmaking, and acting tend to offer us the reverse—people performing mundane and predictable actions in an overblown way.” A good director should counter that trend by doing his homework, make his shot list, tell the actor to keep it simple, and then put the camera in the most straightforward place to get the shot.

Mamet now tell the reader to learn these lessons and go make a movie. Either the reader will find someone who knows all technical (and learnable) steps involved or will learn them himself. Mamet insists there’s no unique skill required to make tell a story. There’s no genius required. Like playing the piano, anyone can learn. Some will be better than others, but anyone can learn. Likewise, the components of movie-making, like cinematography and sound mixing, are just technical skills, and “directing is just a technical skill. Make your shot list.”[16]

## Chapter 5 - Pig-The Movie

This chapter is where Mamet and his class put their lessons to the test and construct a story called *Pig-The Movie*.

Mamet says storytelling starts by asking “why now?”. Why does your story force a person to leave their typical day, abandon their personality, and challenge themselves to overcome a newfound problem.

Finding out “why now? is the key to telling a story because it focuses the story’s attention on a newfound problem. After all it’s this problem that sweeps the protagonist up into a story. Since newfound problems are unforeseen events, a story must start with an”inciting event" to start the story. For example the dream of going to the ball that spurs Cinderella to fight for a better life.

Keep in mind, it doesn’t matter if a problem is “big” or “small”. It only matters that the problem forces a person to try and solve it. Moreoever, the problem is the “through-line” of the story, or the driving force of the story. Only by knowing the through-line can a storyteller keep thing’s simple when creating his story.

Mamet then says directors should study classic myths, and uses *Dumbo* as an example. The character Dumbo is a circus elephant who becomes self-conscious about his very large ears. The young elephant tries to find a cure for his deformity. Dumbo meets friends along his journey but in the end, his story turns out not to be about his ears, but about self-discovery. For Dumbo learns he can fly with his large ears, making him no worse, or better, than anyone else.

Once Dumbo is okay with his ears, his problem is over, and so is the story. Once the story is over, the protagonist is free to return to being whatever personality he wants.

Cartoons like *Dumbo* are an excellent reference for directors. Since there are no actors, directors don’t have to contain artistic impulses. Better yet, since there are no cameras, the directors must make a shot list and are free to unleash pure imagination when creating it. Mamet says the immortality of cartoons, especially ones about classic myths, showcase the rewards to directors who keep things simple.

Per Aristotle’s *Poetics*, all story’s must have twists and turns. Meaning, as the story’s plot unfolds, it must surprise audiences by its logical, yet surprising, evolution. These surprises are “Reversal of the Situation” and “Realizations of the Characters”. The first being when a character’s fortune goes from bad to good (or the opposite); for example, when Cinderella’s fairy godmother suddenly prepares her for the ball. The second being when a character realizes something important; like when the Prince realizes who Cinderella really is.

Audiences love Reversal of the Situation, and Realizations of the Characters. These moments are the most memorable parts of a story; the rewards a storyteller earns by following the natural rules to storytelling.

With all this in mind, Mamet and his class of Columbia students start creating *Pig-The Movie*. After some discussion, the reason for their pig story is decided to be the hard times of a farming family; times are so tough in fact, a farmer must now sell his pig.

With the story’s through-line in their head, Mamet tells his students to think about “why now?”. There must be an external event that causes a problem the protagonist wants to solve, like for example, “the plague on Thebes, the big ears, the death of Charles Foster Kane.” Not starting a story on a inciting event leaves dead air that’s too often filled with a useless back story.

That’s why fairy tales start with the perfect opening “Once upon a time, there was a…” because this kickstarts the story right away. This often used opening saying forces a writer to leave out useless characterizations and backstory.

Mamet now starts to create *Pig The Movie* with his students. Mamet kickstarts the creation process by saying the story is about, “Once there was a farmer who wanted to sell his pig.”[17] By giving the farmer a clear desire, the story has a natural beginning, middle, and end. It also has a long list of things the writer doesn’t need to include, like anything not about a farmer selling a pig.

A student recommends establishing the farm as the first shot. Mamet shoots that idea down outright. Like when asking “where to put the camera,” the writer must first understand his story before deciding on any shots. Thus, the classes only job right now is finding out why the farmer has to sell the pig.

Mamet than changes the through-line to “Once there was a farmer who had to sell his pig”. Making the farmer *have* to sell the pig makes it a stronger story. He advises the students that semantics are vital because words are like forks in the road, and being concise and purposeful is very important to be sure you’re on the right path.

A student then recommends shots of the farmer posting “for sale” signs. In response, Mamet says explaining a story is like a comedian explaining a joke. After the explanation, the comic’s audience may get why the joke would be funny, but they came to laugh, not understand. Likewise, people watch stories to wonder what’s going to happen next. Since signs are explanations and not stories, a director shouldn’t use them unless absolutely required.

To find a better answer, Mamet reminds the students to find the story’s reason. Why does the farmer have to sell his pig? Mamet says the students should not think of reasons like “he has too many pigs” because that’s superficial. Storytellers must dig deeper and ask what do the pigs mean to him, and why does their main characters have to sell it? Reasons cut across all cultures because most of the audience won’t own pigs, but they’ll own comparable things of value.

Thus, writers should search for their stories deeper meaning; maybe the man has fallen on hard times, or perhaps he had to leave his ancestral home. The more a writer uncovers the story’s essence, the more he can find specific images to tell the story of a farmer who falls on hard times. Everyone can relate to dealing with tough times, while most people will never sympathize with selling a pig.

Without finding the essence of the problem, the writer will not enter into the mind of the protagonist. Therefore, any story created will be superficial, like a stranger who tells you how to fix a problem before learning anything about you.

Mamet then tries to find a good reason why a farmer would need to sell a pig. It can’t be out hunger, because why not kill the pig. It can’t be an overdue bank letter, because how’s one pig going to help pay off a bank loan. But the search is vital because finding a good reason for having to sell the pig means the protagonist will have a reason for his actions, and the writer will have a good reason to start his story.

As students give their ideas Mamet’s jumps on the idea that the pig is a troublemaker and attack’s the farmer’s daughter. After some more discussion, the class agrees, *this* problem is the reason for their main characters selling his pig.

A student says the family should also be going hungry. To which Mamet replies a story shouldn’t have two problems because the protagonist can only want one thing.

Now the through-line becomes “Once upon a time, a man had to sell a dangerous pig”, which is an improvement because the language is more precise and thus helps create a more believable story.

The class creates the first shots for the story this way:

1. Pig attacks the farmer’s daughter.
2. The farmer (John) walking down the country road with the pig.
3. John soon sees a prosperous man walking the other way.
4. John about to sell the pig to the prosperous man.
5. John is happy with the easy sale and the quick walk back home.
6. The pig bites the prosperous man.
7. John is walking down the road again with the unsold troublemaker pig.

Continuing to filter student suggestions, the class settles on John coming across another man on the road; this one is fixing his car. After seeing the new potential buyer, John wipes the pig’s face and puts a handkerchief around it. Mamet says the handkerchief is good because it uses a prop to show what the protagonist wants; to capitalize on his luck and sell his pig.

To help his chances even more, John helps the prospective buyer fix his broken cart. Afterward, the two gentlemen talk, and soon the buyer picks up the pig and puts it into his cart. As the buyer reaches for his wallet, the pig’s face turns nasty…

And then we see John walking down the road with his troublemaker pig.

Happy with the work they’ve done so far, Mamet updates the through-line to be “Once there was a farmer who tried everything he could to sell a dangerous pig”. Which is a further improvement because it’s even more precise in its language.

The class then discusses what should come next.

The class decides farmer John should do lots of walking, which goes well into the night. Mamet says a long and hard trek is excellent because it emphasizes John’s punishment for not selling his pig. John ends up arriving at the large pig-pen of a slaughterhouse in the dead of night.

The beat at the slaughterhouse becomes the end of a weary quest. But the main entrance is locked, and the farmer only sees a small office light on. Mamet again rejects ideas of putting up “pigpen signs,” because all that’s important is John wanted to get to this building.

A good story reveals logical events and doesn’t explain them.

Mamet is excited when a student suggests John should tie up the pig and go for a drink. And when John’s at the bar, the man with the broken cart–who the pig bit–walks in and immediately starts a fight with John. Mamet loves the idea because it could happen, so it’s both logical and surprising. So now John’s in a fist-fight because of that darn troublemaking pig.

It gets even better when a student says what happens next.

The pig breaks free and runs to fight side by side with John!

Mamet loves the idea!

For the next beat, Mamet tells the students to stay away from adding more fights. It’s too easy to repeat good beats. Besides, the through-line is about getting rid of a dangerous pig, not fighting people. It was a great idea. It shouldn’t be diminished by repeating it, Mamet says.

Mamet then explains stories are a series of problem-solving attempts. The first is the easiest, and as they fail, the protagonist tries harder and harder solutions to solve his problem. With this in mind, Mamet adds a scene after the pig bites John’s daughter. He says a logical person would have tried setting the pig free in the woods, so in this movie, John tried that first. Of course, the troublemaker pig made his way back, forcing John to try and sell it.

To wrap the lecture up, Mamet finishes the *Pig-The Movie* like this.

After the fight, John returns to the slaughterhouse, and falls asleep holding his pig. John wakes up in the morning, and his pig is gone. John is angry because now the pig isn’t just a pig, but a friend who stood-up for him.

The slaughterhouse owner says he took the pig because he thought John was a drunk who stole it. The owner thus dismisses John’s demand to return the pig. John fights the slaughterhouse owner to get his buddy back. The next scene is a bloodied John walking on the road, back home, with his pig.

Then the pig stops, and looks back at the slaughterhouse and won’t look away.

The next shot is John at the slaughterhouse paying the bruised owner lots of money. John then goes inside a pen and takes out a new pig.

The next shot is the two pigs kissing at the farm. The next shot is many piglets playing. And John’s daughter now riding the once dangerous pig’s back. John looks around as if “what a pig.” And that ends the story of *Pig-The Movie*.

Mamet says the story is good because the dangerous pig is gone. He’s now a happy pig — a logical, yet surprising, turn of events.

Mamet comments, once the class created many good reasons why someone would need to sell a pig, creating the story was easier than trying to find “interesting ways” for the story’s events. Moreover, good reasons means characterizations weren’t required, because each character is literally what they did during the story. Lastly, with thoughtful and precise reasons for each event let the story be both reasonable and surprising. And therefore *Pig-The Movie* is relatedable to anyone dealing with a troublemaker.

In summary the objectives to each scene were:

1. A man tries encounters danger / Pig bites young daughter.
2. A man tries the easy solution to a difficult problem / Man sets pig free in the woods.
3. A man tries to capitalize on a golden opportunity / Man tries to sell pig.
4. A man comes to the end of a long quest / Man wants to relax.
5. A man tries to regain possession / Man fights for his pig
6. A man rewards a good deed / Man realizes pig wanted a wife.
7. A man enjoys solving a problem / Pig is happy with his new life.

The chapter ends with Mamet saying, “Anybody with a [camera] can make a movie of a ‘pig.’” As long as they tell a story of the hero’s persistence in a difficult world, and keep it simple with a logical series of uninflected shots strung together to make a story.

## Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Mamet starts the final chapter by saying every storyteller has a choice. Follow craft or follow their impulses and join the “‘Cult of Self’… the cult of how interesting you and your consciousness are”.[18]

Ship captains have the same choice when steering through dangerous river waters. Of course, captains “stick with the channel” because buoys mark where the captain should go. Directors have the same help.

Because among all the options a storyteller can choose, most are marked; “The river channel is the super-objective of the hero, and the marker buoys are the small objectives of each scene.”

The director’s toolkit is only the shot. The choice of shots is the only power a director has; they “can’t make it more interesting [in] the editing room”.[19] Nor can a director rely on actors over-acting to make a boring story better. Directors must follow craft, and not rely on God’s intervention, or supposed talent, to make up for not following the marked buoys.

Mamet insists there is a trade to screenwriting and a trade to directing. Both of which are very similar. Like any trade, anyone can learn it. If anyone tries hard enough, the required type of “analytical thinking” needed for storytelling will get easier. Directors must follow craft by securing a through-line as a foothold to a story and moving on up the mountain to the story’s logical conclusion. Anyone can learn storytelling. After all, one step at a time will eventually get anyone to the top of any mountain.

Knowing your craft, and applying it to your story, means a craftsman’s subconscious will recognize many of the answers a director needs to know. Working with editors, actors, and financiers will be more comfortable. A craftsman’s answers are different from the impulses of artists because craftsman knows where the buoys are.

Mamet asks if a storyteller can do everything right and still make a bad movie. He says, yes, it is possible to follow the markers and run a ship ashore. But that doesn’t mean anyone should avoid using craft in favor of impulses. Mamet explains why by asking the question, “If the gods were to tell a general he was going to lose a coming battle, should the general not still fight with sound military tactics instead of trying to be interesting?”

The only thing under anyone’s control is craft; i.e. following the philosophy of Nature. No one gets to decide between good or bad outcomes. All we small individuals can do in our lives is our job as best we can, and when done, go home.

And Mamet concludes his book by saying, doing our jobs is “exactly the same principle as the through-line. Understand your specific task, work until it’s done, and then stop.”[20]

## Definitions

Throughout the book Mamet defines several terms. Many are referenced below:

**The model story**: “Remember that the model of the drama is the dirty joke. This joke begins:”A traveling salesman stops at a farmer’s door“—it does not begin:”Who would think that the two most disparate occupations of agriculture and salesmanship would one day be indissolubly united in our oral literature? Agriculture, that most solitary of pursuits, engendering the qualities of self-reliance and reflection; and salesmanship, in which …" Does the protagonist have to explain why he wants a retraction? To whom is he going to explain it? To the audience? Does that help him get it? No. He must only do those things that help him get a retraction."[21]

**Method acting**: “[Good storytelling] is what brings the actor to the play-not those gyrations of emotional self-abuse that hack teachers hove fobbled off as preparation.”[22]

**Directors**: “The job of the film director is to tell the story through the juxtaposition of uninflected images —because that is the essential nature of the medium. It operates best through that juxtaposition, because that’s the nature of human perception: to perceive two events, determine a progression, and want to know what happens next.”[23]

**Producers**: “Those who style themselves ‘producers’ have not had the benefit of any such education (learning the craft of filmmaking), and their arrogance knows no bounds. They are like the white slave owners of old, sitting on their porches with their cooling drinks and going on about the inherent laziness of the Negro race. The ‘producer,’ having never had a run-in with the demands of a craft, sees all ideas as basically equal and his own as first among them, for no reason other than that he has thought of it. This notion is easier to fathom if one thinks back to the period of early adolescence and to, perhaps, the critique of an English teacher who said of our efforts:”I don’t understand’ or ‘It is unclear,’ of which correction one thought: ‘The old fool. . . I know what I meant.’

I have a great deal of pride and, I suppose, a large admixture of arrogant pride. I, in my generally losing contest with these self-styled ‘producers,’ many times console myself by thinking that after society falls apart, I will be able to eke out at least my meals and shelter by putting on plays that may make people laugh; but that these ‘producers’ would have to wait until I and those like me went to work before they could eat.

Yes, that is how I see ‘producers.’ They are ‘let me take that cow to the fair for you, son.’"[24]

**The Modern American Movie Industry**: “Interest in a film comes from this: the desire to find out what happens next. The less reality conforms to the neurotic’s view, the more bizarre his explanation must become, the end of which development is psychosis—‘performance art’ or ‘modem theater’ or ‘modem filmmaking.’”[25]

“You cannot hide your objective. No one can hide. Contemporary American films are almost universally sloppy, trivial, and obscene. If your objective is to succeed in the ‘industry,’ your work, and your soul, will be exposed to these destructive influences. If you desperately crave acceptance by that industry, you will likely become those things.”[26]

“It’s a good thing that the people in Hollywood have no souls, so that they don’t have to suffer through the lives they lead.”[27]

**How to Make Props:** Mamet: “So, therefore, how does the book (prop) look?” Student: “Make it recognizable.” Mamet: “Exactly so! Good! You’ve [only] got to be able to recognize it.”[28]

**Performance art**: “‘Performance art’[can only] works, as it’s the nature of human perception to order random images in favor of an overriding preconception. Another example of this is neurosis. Neurosis is the ordering of unrelated events or ideas or images in favor of an overriding preconception.”[29]

“If you go up into Vermont and you build a roof with a peak, the snow will fall off. You build a flat roof, the roof will fall down from the weight of the snow—which is what happened to a lot of the countercultural architecture of the 1960s. ‘There may be a reason people have wanted to hear stories for ten million years,’ the performance artist says, ‘but I really don’t care, because I have something to say’.”[30]

**Acting**: “The acting should be a performance of the simple physical action. Period. Go to the door, try the door, sit down. He doesn’t have to walk down the hall respectfully. This is the greatest lesson anyone can ever teach you about acting. Perform the physical motions called for by the script as simply as possible. Do not ‘help the play along.’”[31]

**Dialogue**: “The purpose of dialogue is not to carry information about the ‘character.’ The only reason people speak is to get what they want. In film or on the street, people who describe themselves to you are lying. Here is the difference: In the bad film, the fellow says,”hello, Jack, I’m coming over to your home this evening because I need to get the money you borrowed from me.’ In the good film, he says, “where the hell were you yesterday?’”[32]

**Writing characters**: “The reason we identify is that the writer left out the narration. We only saw the story. We can identify with the pursuit of a goal. It’s much easier to identify with that than with character traits.’Most movies are written, ‘he’s the wacky kind of guy who …’ But then we can’t identify with that person. We don’t see ourselves in him because we aren’t being shown his struggle but instead are shown those idiosyncrasies that divide us from him. His”knowledge of karate,’ his wacky habit of yodeling to call his dogs, his peculiar partiality to antique cars . . . how interesting.’"[33]

**Narration**: “It doesn’t matter that all your cinematographers and assistant directors and producers are pleading with you to show more of the farm. You’ll say to them,”why? It’s not a movie about a farm. You want to see a movie about a farm? Great. You know? Go see a travelogue. Go look at a map. This is a movie about a man who has to rid his house of danger. Let’s make this movie. The audience knows what a farm looks like or they don’t. That’s their lookout. Let’s respect their privacy.’"[34]

**Talent**: “If you’re correct in the small things, the smallest of which in this case is the choice of a single uninflected shot, then you will be correct in the larger things. And then your film will be as correct and as ordered and as well-intentioned as you are. It can never be more so, but it can be less so if you desire to manipulate the material, or hope that God wall intervene and save you, which is what most people mean when they talk about ‘talent.’”[35]

# Aristotle’s Poetics

## What You Need to Know

Mamet helps understand what a story is and how to create it. He, like most screenwriters, say Aristotle’s *Poetics* is the only book any hopeful storyteller needs to read. Once a person understands *Poetics,* all they need to do is keep writing until they get good at it.

So let’s learn storyteller from Aristotle.

Like Mamet, a story to Aristotle is a character addressing a problem through a series of events. The events are organized in three acts. The first act is the introduction of the problem, the protagonist who fights to overcome it, and the antagonist who fights against the protagonist. The second act is where both characters and their supporters fight over the problem. In the third act, the question of which side will win is answered in the climax. Throughout this process, drama is created by constant questions about how the events will progress and whether the problem will be overcome. The story is thus exciting, because it yields surprises as the events unfold. Crucially, Aristotle notes that the more unexpected, yet logical, the events are, the better the story becomes, because a logical story is a believable one. Believability in turn allows the audience to invest their emotions into the story; hence, a well-told story makes us feel surprised, intrigued, mad, disgusted, joyous, or any other emotion.

For example think of *Star Wars*. That story is about a feeble and hidden rebel alliance fighting to bring down an evil galactic empire. The empire depends on its all-powerful vessel called the Death Star to keep the galaxy under its control. The rebels have just stolen schematics for the Death Star that could help destroy it. The protagonist of *Star Wars* is Luke Skywalker, a young boy who yearns to leave the farm and fight for freedom with the rebels as a Jedi warrior monk. The antagonist is Darth Vader, a powerful and evil Sith Lord who rules the galactic empire and opposes the Jedi. Both Jedi and Sith use the same mysterious power of The Force to expand their mental and physical abilities. The problem in *Star Wars* is evil forces rule the galaxy with a super-weapon, and good forces struggle to defeat them by destroying that said weapon. Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Han Solo fight against the empire by struggling to bring the secret structural plans of the Death Star to hidden rebel leaders able to destroy it. Darth Vader and his supporters in the empire struggle to stop them. The secret plans are finally delivered to the rebel’s base, which also shows the Empire where the rebel leaders are. Both sides gear up all their forces for a space dogfight in the story’s climax.

Will the rocket Luke Skywalker shoots from his fighter enter the Death Star’s weak point and destroy the superweapon and bring down the evil empire?

*Star Wars* of course is fiction, yet because the story adheres to Aristotle’s principle of logical storytelling, a fictitious story is believable, and therefore entices strong emotional responses from the audience.

Any story has components. Aristotle noted six elements in dramatic storytelling. They are listed in priority below, first to last.

**Plot** comprises the arrangement of incidents of the story. The best plots, according to Aristotle, have a change of fortune for the protagonist from bad to good, or vice versa, which helps arouse strong emotions in the audience. Incidents should be logical and follow naturally from the actions that precede them. The incidents will be more satisfying to the audience if they come as a surprise, and if the audience at first thinks them to be coincidence; soon, however, the audience must see them as plausible, even necessary. Key incidents in the plot are the reversal of situations, recognition’s of mistakes, and the suffering of the protagonist. For example, in *The Shawshank Redemption*, the protagonist, Andy, wrongfully convicted of murder, suffers in jail under a brutal and religious warden, who knowingly acts to keep the innocent man behind bars. This arouses great pity in the audience. Then, after one especially brutal punishment from the warden, Andy doesn’t come out of his cell; presumably he snaps and kills himself. The plot then reverses the situation, stimulating a great emotional response. Andy has actually escaped. He has dug an escape route all the while he was incarcerated, using a little rock cutting tool he had acquired in jail. The escape tool was hidden inside a Bible, which the warden poetically said would be Andy’s salvation. The warden soon kills himself to avoid earthly punishment while Andy lives his life in freedom on a beautiful beach.



Moment of reversal

**Character** refers to the persons swept up in the events of the plot. Characters must be consistent in their characteristics and beliefs and believable in their traits, and any changes to their character must be explained, which normally means explaining how the events of the plot changed and therefore revealed a character as being, for example, strong-willed, loving, hateful, cowardly, or in Andy’s case, patient. Character is secondary to plot because says Aristotle a “character determines men’s qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse.” In short, you would never actually know Luke Skywalker hated the evil empire unless he actually went to fight it. Moreoever how could anyone know Andy was so cunning unless he tried to escape from jail instead of just talking about it. \_Act\_ion speaks louder than words. Yet characters are still vital because they are an audience’s gateway into a story.



Andy won. So he, and we, are happy. Good acting is not showing emotion, it’s doing something that makes us feel emotion

**Thought** refers to the deep convictions and motives of the characters. Thought explains why a character fights during the story. The love that Romeo and Juliet have for each other is a deep conviction, as is the hatred between their families. The eternal struggle of Jedi and Sith is another strong motivation. Convictions help motivate and justify the actions of the characters as they travel through the plot.

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Motivation at first sight

**Dialogue** consists of the arrangement of spoken words, either by the character or the narrator, and represents the thoughts of the characters as they each proceed through the plot.

Dialogue is how characters demand what they want. The most memorable moments of a movie is often its best lines. “Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”, “Do you feel lucky punk?”, and “May the force be with you”.

**Chorus**, or song, is the music in a play, which itself becomes a character, conveying and illuminating the emotions behind the plot and its characters. A great example is the “Jaws” theme, which creates suspense in the audience with only a few notes. The Jaws theme made a generation of people fear the open water.

**Spectacle** refers to the visual apparatus of the play, including set, costumes, effects, and props, which help show the story to the audience. Aristotle calls spectacle the least artistic element of storytelling, and the least connected with the work of the writer. “Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.”[^8]

Props manifest the story in the real world, making it easier to follow and understand

Not all props are mere spectacle however. As Mamet taught us inside the “Get a Retraction Scene” and its term paper inside a notebook, some props manifest the entire story. These props must stand out, and be recognizable.

A great example is the movie *Braveheart*. To showcase the love of William Wallace and Murron, the movie uses a simple flower and cloth. They’re the gifts each lover gave to the other. And as Wallace fights off the English tyranny, the cloth is a reminder of the wholesome life the Scots are fighting for.

However, the point here is that the actual prop, be it a cloth, flower, or a Death Star, is easier to make then knowing how to use spectacle to advance a story. Most movies today concentrate on the effect/prop and forget it’s suppose to mean something, and help advance a story.



The story of Braveheart, told with a flower and cloth. Making it so much easier for the audience to follow the story.