

Film Lit Terms: Volume I

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I. ELEMENTS...

- A) Premise/Spine/Theme—"What's this film *really* about?"
- B) Conflict: "Drama is life with all the boring parts cut out."—Alfred Hitchcock
 - People never agree: "Why are these people arguing, and why are they both right?"
 - Stakes
 - Sex (Emotion) and Violence
- C) Movement (or talking heads)
- D) The Rules [Ex: [The Untouchables Opening Scene](#), [Star Trek Opening Scene](#)]
 - People want to believe in a world not necessarily their own: filmmakers can create it
 - Suspension of Disbelief [Ex: [Furious 7 Tower Scene](#), [Furious 7 Plane Scene](#), [Jurassic World High Heels Chase Scene](#)]
 - William Goldman's Three Levels of Film Reality
 - Tone: the film's attitude and approach [Ex: *Guardians of the Galaxy* Opening Scene: [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#)]
- E) Audience Caring [Ex: (SPOILER ALERT) *Inside Out*: [Joy and Bing Bong in the Dump Scene](#)] (See also: "Rule of 3")
- F) Open or Closed Stories/4th Wall stories [Ex: [Ferris Bueller's Day Off Opening Scene](#)]
 - Dramatic Irony
- G) Flashbacks
 - The Dangers of Backstory—"Writing is not about answers; it's about questions; seek [and appreciate] mystery."—Ken Kesey
- H) Time Locks [Ex: [Mission: Impossible: Rogue Nation Water Scene](#)]
 - Urgency (like life...)
- I) Exaggeration...
 - Drama vs. Melodrama/Camp
- J) On Tricks and Formulas
- K) On Pacing and Exposition
 - "on the nose" vs. less is more (visual storytelling)—"show what you can; tell what you must."
 - Hidden, efficient exposition
 - Pacing and Efficiency—"The best films are simple, direct, powerful, and emotional. Good films are about bang, bang, bang, not jabber, jabber, jabber."—James Dalessandro
 - "Subtlety is great, as long as it's obvious enough."—A. Hitchcock

II. CHARACTERS

- A) On Good Protagonists/Antagonists (Heroes/Heavies)
 - Extremes, Wills [[Darth Vader's *Original* Opening Scene](#)]
 - Stereotypes
 - Reluctant Heroes

B) Flawed Heroes and Relatable Villains

- Pet the Dog [Ex: *Inglourious Basterds*? [Hans Landa](#)]
- Engaging does not mean likable; to make a jerk likable, find a bigger jerk

C) Split Heroes/Heavies—Whose story is it?

D) Foils

E) Dialogue

- Subtext
- “Go ahead ... make my day.” [Ex: [Sudden Impact Coffee Shop Scene](#)]
- Never say what you’re feeling, never answer a question.
- Good dialogue is attitude and agenda first, information second.
- Dialogue reveals more about the speaker than about anything else.

III. STRUCTURE

A) Structure Basics

- Set things up—In good structure, there are few real surprises.
- In life, things happen one after another. In structure, things happen *because* of one another
- “Start with a Premise, add characters, and provide interesting hurdles.”—Arthur Miller
- Three (3) is an absolutely magic number.
- Enter a scene/story as late as possible—start with an ending
- Hold as much as possible as long as possible
 - To Kill a Mockingbird*
- The best way to demonstrate contrast is to first establish similarity.

B) Act I—The Beginning/Situation—Introduce the World and its Themes

- Runners/Playbacks [Ex: [Buzz Lightyear Flies/Falls](#) and [Flies/Falls Again](#), [Finding Nemo Whale Scene](#)]
- Inciting Incident [Ex: [Toy Story Birthday Party Scene](#)]
- The Catalyst and its Twist [Ex: [Nemo’s First Day of School](#)]
- The first 17 minutes (usually)
- “The” Decision—The Cross into the extraordinary world [Ex: [The Matrix “Welcome to the Real World” Scene](#)]
- Set-up, Foreshadowing, Rules

C) Act II—The Middle/Complications—Turn the Screws and Raise the Stakes

- Building action, complications—higher hurdles
- Reversals—good news/bad news [Ex: [Saving Private Ryan](#), *Saw* and [Amanda’s Bear Trap](#) (INTENSE)]
- Surprises
- Subplots (which must connect to the main plot)
- A to Z (Character Arc)
- No Easy Answers (The No-Choice Decision) [Ex: *Argo* and [The Best Bad Idea](#)]
- Darkest Hour [*The Matrix* and [The Decision to Save Morpheus](#)]

D) Act III—The End/Resolution—Give the Audience the Payoff

- “dazzle ‘em with footwork”
- climax—hour of maximum danger/final jeopardy
- Solving External and Internal problems at once
- “Falling Action” and its discontents
- “Don’t count on Hollywood to change the world.”—J. Dalessandro
 - Note: Formula is formula because it works.**