

The Three-Act Structure

Here is the story structure timeline that nearly every scriptwriter follows. It's a simple formula, Act I is the beginning, Act II is the middle, and Act III is the end.

Scripts are generally 100 to 120 pages. Each page, on average, equates to 1 minute of screen time. Of course some action-filled pages may take 5 minutes apiece while some pages loaded with dialogue only 20 seconds but it all evens out.

One of the first things that producers check when reading the script is the length. If it is under 100 pages then it appears that the scriptwriter doesn't have enough material to tell a feature length story. Go the other way, over 120 pages, and the script is automatically thought of as cumbersome. Once you have a solid reputation as a scriptwriter you can get away with going over 120 pages but you should stick to these guidelines if this is your first spec script.

The easiest way of keeping to this unwritten rule is to break your story into three acts. In a 120-page script the first act would take up one quarter (30 pages) of the script. Act II takes up half (60 pages) of your script. Act III takes the final quarter (30 pages) of your script.

Act I - The Beginning

In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth. He did this in the dark, which makes it even more impressive. As a scriptwriter you need to make an equally impressive start to your writing project if you want to create a masterpiece.

In Act I you begin with a main character whose life is about to be turned upside down, and who's going to be pushed harder than ever before. Pushed so hard that his outlook on life will change forever.

The Ten Most Important Pages of Your Script

The first ten pages you write in your script are without doubt the most important. You need to grab the reader there and then or else they will put your script down and move onto the next script in the pile.

Elements of the First Ten Pages

In the first ten pages you will want to setup the following:

The Main Character

Exactly who is your main character? What are his strengths? What are his weaknesses? Does he live a jet setting lifestyle or does he life revolve around his desk job? Whatever sense of normality your main character has is about to be torn apart.

Location and Mood

Where does your character reside and how are the conditions? Does he live on the peaceful beaches of Hawaii or the cold, dingy streets of Philadelphia?

Imagine if Rocky had been set in Hawaii, the movie just wouldn't have worked on the same level.

Genre

By the end of the first ten pages it should be clear if your movie is an action flick, a romantic comedy, horror or other.

The Premise

The premise is the basic story. For example you could describe Rocky as the ultimate underdog getting his one shot at glory against the boxing world heavyweight champion.

After the first 10 pages there are two more important plot points in Act I:

The Inciting Incident

So far the first ten pages have told the viewer of the main character's life. Well now is the time his world is going to be thrown into chaos. A major problem occurs which the main character will have to resolve for their life to return back to normal. Your main character should have the motivation and will to achieve this goal by doing anything imaginable.

Plot Point I

Nearing the end of Act I, around page 25, another huge event happens - Plot Point I. Thus far the story has been driving along and now is the time a tyre blows and sends the car careering off in another direction. The event will test your main character and challenge them to answer, "how far will you go to achieve your goal?"

Act II is the longest act in the script and you should make it seem as long as possible for your main character yet as short as possible for the reader. Your main character will come face to face with a whole variety of obstacles, the obstacles steadily growing bigger and tougher. Every time he takes a step on the path to reach his goal some force (inner or outer) will block his path, forcing the main character to think quicker and grow stronger if he wants to succeed.

For this reason it is a good idea to have only one or two main characters in a movie. Anymore and you risk having characters become undeveloped and the audience not really caring about them since they don't appear to be in any big danger.

This act is all about conflict and confrontation; nothing should come easy to your main character.

The Midpoint

Act II can be the hardest act to write as a scriptwriter. When you begin a writing project you often have a clear mental picture of the beginning and end of the script, but it's how you get there that proves difficult. Fortunately the midpoint of the script offers a lifeline to the scriptwriter. Here we have another turning point, often the introduction or death of a character which sharpens the focus of the main character on achieving his goal.

In Rocky II Rocky has been looking for a white collar job but has been unable to due to his lack of education. Going against Adrian's wishes Rocky accepts a challenge to a rematch from Apollo Creed.

Plot Point II

Towards the end of Act II and the beginning of Act III we come to a crisis point, Plot Point II. Right now the main character in your script has had enough. They're sick and tired of all the obstacles being thrown in their way. Their world is a dark place with only a small beam of light left. Plot Point II should:

1. Force the main character to take action in attempt to solve the problem created by the inciting incident.
2. Make the character (and audience) fully aware of the "ticking clock". Time is running out for your main character to finish the job.
3. Focus the main character on their ultimate goal.

Think of Rocky II when Adrian emerges from her coma to tell Rocky to win the fight. He re-focuses on his training and becomes faster, tougher, and stronger.

The clock has run out, it's now or never for your main character. By now your main character sees the goal in front of them, but even closer to him are several more obstacles. These will be the biggest obstacles of all but your main character has come too far to turn around and head for home now.

Your character has to want to achieve to achieve their goal so badly that nothing will stop them. That does not mean to say that your story has to have a happy ending. Just a glimmer of hope or a torch being passed is equally satisfying, especially if you are expecting to write a sequel to this script.

Scriptwriting is all about solving your characters' problems and resolving their story. However always be careful not to give your story the "yellow ribbon ending". This is where all the loose threads in the story are tied up neatly, so neatly the ending seems false.

The Climax

The climax is the biggest scene in the movie, the final battle between right and wrong, good and evil. Your main character will save the day and resolve their problems in dramatic fashion. You have to make sure that it's the main character that saves the day and not some Johnny Come Lately bailing him out, then your main character has achieved nothing.

In Dodgeball the Average Joes team beat the team from Globo-Gym only for White Goodman to reveal that Peter La Fleur had already sold him the gym, so the victory was all for nothing. La Fleur counters with the revelation that he placed all the money White had given him and bet on Average Joes to win. This leaves Peter La Fleur with another money to buy a controlling stake in Globo-Gym and take back ownership of Average Joes gym.

I hope this section on the three-act structure of film scriptwriting has helped you greatly. Now go forth and get writing!