

Pre-production

Module: Story-telling

“Structure is a selection of events from the characters’ life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express a specific view of life.” Robert McKee’s book Story.

“...a story, in order to be considered great, has to be about moral choices. A great story shows us how we are in some kind of slavery and it shows us how to escape... unless it is a tragedy, and then it shows us the consequences of not making the right choices.” John Truby

It is important before you even pick up a camera, that you develop a strong story outline and proposal. This story outline is not set in stone, but becomes a working document as you move throughout the production of your film. It will provide you the opportunity to critically assess, at all times, when it is necessary to shoot.

Many times filmmakers forgo this process because of the excitement of shooting their film. What generally happens is that the filmmaker ends up shooting a lot more footage than they need to, trying to find the story as they go shoot. This will inevitably make you over shoot, and not know when your film should finish shooting. Remember, everything you shoot, you have to log, digitize and capture in post-production; this can become quite time consuming and costly.

This story development process allows you to set out the scope of your project and the necessary elements you need to capture and tell your story.

Questions that the filmmaker has to ask him or herself:

- Why are you making this film?
- What is your role as a filmmaker?
- What is the point of view?
- Who is your audience?

Once you have asked yourself these questions it will provide the necessary perspective to begin writing your outline.

For example:

If my story is on skateboarding culture and I want to tell the story on how skateboarding has gone to a full fledged sport, it will be important to know who your audience is. Meaning, am I creating this for my peers? (16 year olds) if so, it is important to understand your audience and what they expect to learn from

your film. 16 year olds may be interested in the clothing, techniques, and the danger, where adults may be interested in the social roots of the sport, its effect and influence on culture. Your peers may be interested in these same aspects, but how you communicate these elements will be based on your audience's demographic.

Purpose & Process

What is your story idea?

- Clarify your idea as much as possible
- Write an outline for yourself—keep it simple—beginning, middle and end
- Know what your motivation is for doing this film
- Can your story stand-alone visually?
- Why should this story be a film, rather than a radio piece, article, report, or written essay?

Classic Story Structure

In telling your story there is plenty to learn from those that have gone before you. It is said that there are 6 points to a classic story structure. These story structures are true whether you are writing a documentary or a dramatic film. They are:

- 1. Initial harmony
- 2. Harmony disturbed
- 3. Hero is found
- 4. The quest
- 5. The trials
- 6. Harmony re-established

Here is a common structure found in many stories, illustrated by examples from Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings'.

1. Initial harmony

The initial state is one of general everyday happiness or humdrum.

Nothing unusual is happening and the normality allows the reader to associate with the leading characters. The setting may be pretty much anywhere or any time, from family life in the 1950s to a military base on Mars in the 22nd century.

In Lord of the Rings, the Shire is portrayed as a happy and harmonious agrarian place, with beer and fireworks at Bilbo's birthday party.

2. Harmony disturbed

Once established, harmony is fractured in some way, creating a tension that

forms the basis for the story. There are many ways that harmony can be disturbed, including:

- An attractive other person is seen
- A relationship is broken up
- A crime is committed (from murder to fraud)
- An opportunity appears
- A natural disaster happens or is threatened
- A war breaks out

In the Lord of the Rings, Bilbo gives the ring to Frodo, Gandalf warns of danger and the Black Riders appear.

3. Hero is found

The disturbance of harmony leads to much machinations and fretting as people run around 'like headless chickens', seeking help from any quarter. The arrival of the hero is thus greeted with much relief.

The hero can come from a number of sources, including:

- The police, military or other official organization
- An outsider who mysteriously appears
- An insider who steps up to the plate
- The person most affected by the disturbance or some friend or relative

The hero may be a single person or it may be comprised of a group of people. In a group, all the attributes of heroism may be divided amongst various individuals. These include:

- Not giving up until the goal is accomplished
- Doing what's right regardless of personal consequences
- Doing more than what other people expect of them
- Staying level-headed in a crisis
- Overcoming adversity
- Changing society for the better
- Willingness to risk personal safety to help others
- Commanding the support and respect of others
- Not expecting personal recognition

In Lord of the Rings, although Frodo is the main hero who must complete the quest, the 'fellowship of the ring' has several other strong characters that support this ultimate goal.

4. The quest

The hero adopts or is given a quest, the goal of which is generally to restore order and harmony. This can include:

- Restoring something that was stolen
- Winning the heart of another
- Rescuing those who are lost, or at risk
- Capturing or vanquishing a criminal
- Conquering an opposing force
- Finding something new, from knowledge to artifacts

There can be multiple quests, particularly if there is a group of people involved, although there is often still only one main quest and other activities may well be steps along the way.

In Lord of the Rings the main quest was to take the ring to Mount Doom and thence defeat Sauron. Other quests by the party include rescuing Merry and Pippin and defending Helm's Deep.

5. The trials

Along the way, the hero may have to face a number of tests or trials. These form episodes in the story and can be used to extend the story almost infinitely. Trials include:

- Battling with enemies
- Enduring hardship
- Solving puzzles
- Finding hidden things
- Demonstrating skill
- Showing integrity

These may be combined, for example, in a car chase, the hero may be demonstrating driving skill whilst battling with enemies in other cars, enduring the hardship of crashes and showing integrity in not harming bystanders.

Trials prove the character of the hero, as well as all others involved.

It is through hardship that the strong, weak and evil are shown for what they are.

The story may be one long, exhausting stream of trials, although it these may also be separated by periods of respite.

In Lord of the Rings many characters are tried and some fail, such as Boromir (although he redeems himself in self-sacrifice). Other trials include getting through the mines of Moria, the defeat of Shelob and persuading the Rohirrim to join the quest. Respites include time with the elves in Rivendell and Lothlorien.

6. Harmony re-established

Eventually, the problem is solved and the story comes full circle to a restored or new harmony. All outstanding tensions are resolved; the hero is celebrated and rewarded, for example with the hand of a beautiful woman. In darker stories, the fallen are remembered. The ending of the story may come immediately with solving with the quest. Endings may also be longer, with reparation of things wronged and a search for final harmony.

Lord of the Rings has a long ending, including the final end of the restoration of the Shire and the journey to the ship that takes heroes to the Undying Lands.

Here is a quick example of a 3 act story structure.

Three Act Story Structure

- Act 1: The set up (location, style, characters, catalyst, central question, main action beats)
- First Turning Point: Development (unexpected twist, new details, propels into Act 2)
- Act 2: Main Storyline, The journey, The quest, the focus of the story)
- Second Turning Point: raises the stakes, propels viewer into a dramatic climax, speeds the pace
- Act 3: Resolution, ties loose threads

Research

Once you have established what your story is going to be, the next goal is to begin researching and filling in the necessary facts, characters and setting of the story. These include:

- Subjects, Experts, Characters
- Has it been done before?
- Academic, fact checking
- Place the project in time—is it historical or current
- How will you do it differently?
- What will be the impact on the community
- What elements need more digging?

How are you going to tell the story?

- What is your point of view? Each of us sees the world in a unique way and knowing that perspective will help you create from it
- What is motivating you tell this story?
- Go back to your original outline and get more detailed—what do you want to see visually in the beginning, middle and end?
- How will the story lead from one point to the next?

What are you going to see on screen, what are you going to show?

- How will you bring your character to life?
- What is your research telling you?
- Are you interviewing people for your film or will you narrate your story using imagery or a combination?

What is the tone, feel, approach, emotion, style?

- This speaks to your point of view and how you want to show your story
- If you're interviewing people, know that they will help you unfold the story

Who are the characters?

- What is their background that makes them relevant to your story?
- What do you want each character to say? What is their role?
- Why is this character important to you?
- To find your characters, seek them out in their community or their organizations
- Perseverance is critical—it isn't always easy to get the characters you want

What is your unfolding story?

- What role do your characters have?
- How will you use dialogue versus narration?
- Are you telling an small story and the bigger issue?

Find your voice

- How do you see the world?
- What motivates you?
- What important to you?
- What is your experience?

Look to other films

- What's inspired you?
- Dig deeper and find out why a specific film spoke to you?
- How will that contribute to your personal style?

For additional resources visit:

<http://www.writersstore.com/articles.php>

<http://mckeestory.com/homepage.html>

