**NOTES**

**ON**

**Robert McKee's**

**STORY**

***Substance, Structure, Style***

***And the Principles of Screenwriting***

**(HarperCollins, 1997)**

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**NOTES ON ROBERT McKEE'S *STORY***

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***A word from the note-taker:***

**WHY STUDY *STORY*?**

**To book-writers:**

Perhaps you were lucky enough to have had a good writing teacher in your past, but back in the late 1960s, when I was "studying" creative writing, the assumption was that you were either "creative" or not. Nobody ever suggested that there was any ***craft*** that could be taught.

But there is, and *Story* explains the principles of that craft in enough detail and with enough examples that you can actually understand how to apply them. It doesn't matter that it purports to be a book on screenwriting. 98% of the material applies to theater as well (but do see the last section on the differences between film and musical theater).

What McKee is talking about are the mysterious "rules" that the theater people on NOMTI feedback panels seem to refer to without ever really explaining -- forms and principles of story-telling that seem to work again and again. Professionals expect us to master them, and in my experience, they liberate rather than stifle creativity. Thinking about McKee's principles has suggested solutions to many of the problems in our project, and Charles and I are eager to explore the new directions this book has suggested to us. We are also realizing that many other books about writing musicals (and films and plays) make a lot more sense after reading *Story.*

**To lyricists:**

Theater songs are much like scenes. You can think of them in terms of beats, conflict, subtext and turning point. The principles in *Story* will help you make your songs work within the book.

**To composers:**

If you are considering spending months (more likely years) on a musical, it would be nice to know before you start if it's going to be worth your time, or whether it will inevitably flop because of a bad book, no matter how brilliant your music is. *Story* will help you analyze a book so you can decide whether to invest in a proposed new project.

**Please buy yourself a copy of *STORY* that you can mark up and underline. The boiled down notes that follow are no substitute for reading the book itself. I wrote them as a way to absorb this complex material more quickly and thoroughly, and they will make more sense AFTER you read the book.**

Nancy Rexford

(whose opinions do not necessarily reflect NOMTI's official point of view)

Robert McKee

***Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting***

HarperCollins ReganBooks, 1997

McKee's website: [www.mckeestory.com](http://www.mckeestory.com)

**BASICS**

**Terminology**

**The Structure Spectrum**

**Controlling Idea**

**Structure and Genre**

**TERMINOLOGY**

**VALUES** (also called **STORY VALUES**) (p. 34-35)**:**

* Universal qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative or vice versa from one moment to the next, such as:

Good / evil Hope / despair Self-awareness / self-deception Freedom / slavery

Right / wrong Love / hate Meaningful / meaningless Justice / injustice

**EVENT** (p. 33-35)**:**

* A CONFLICT (not coincidence) that creates CHANGE in the character's life
* That is expressed or experienced in terms of a VALUE that changes from + to - or - to +
* Every scene should embody an event. If a scene is not an event, cut it.
* Larger events are also embodied in sequences (see below) and acts

**STRUCTURE** (p. 32-33)**:**

* A sequence of events designed to arouse a specific emotion and express a specific view of life

**BEAT** (p. 37-38)**:**

* an exchange of behavior; action followed by reaction

**SCENE** (p. 35-37)**:**

* A series of beats
* That embodies an action through conflict
* in more or less continuous time and space
* That turns (changes) the value-charged condition of the character's life on at least one value.

**SEQUENCE** (p. 38-41)**:**

* a series of two to five scenes (each of which changes a value in themselves)
* that changes a larger value

**ACT** (in this context, does NOT mean a "curtain" act) (p. 41)**:**

* a series of sequences (each changing a value in themselves)
* that peak in a climatic scene
* that causes a major reversal of values (turning point)

**STORY** (p. 41-42)**:**

* a series of acts that takes the main character from one condition to another
* creating a final irreversible change - no going back

**SPINE** (p. 194-197)**:**

* through-line of the story: the protagonist's deepest desire & what he does to achieve it
* if the protagonist has both a conscious desire and a conflicting unconscious desire, then the unconscious desire becomes the spine of the story (conscious desires may change)
* all story elements MUST relate to the spine, causally or thematically

**THE STRUCTURE SPECTRUM** (p. 43-66)

**CLASSICAL PLOT DESIGN: "ARCHPLOT"** (pronounced ark-plot)

* Single protagonist (or sometimes a group of people functioning as one, having the same goals, interests, reverses)
* Protagonist is active
* Protagonist struggles against mostly EXTERNAL forces (other people, nature, society)
* Protagonist is pursing a desire
* Through continuous, linear time
* Within a consistent fictional reality
* In which events are causally connected
* And end in absolute and irreversible change
* Resulting in a "closed ending" (means that all the questions raised by the story are answered)

***"AS STORY DESIGN MOVES AWAY FROM THE ARCHPLOT AND DOWN THE TRIANGLE TOWARD THE FAR REACHES OF MINIPLOT, ANTIPLOT, AND NONPLOT,***

***THE AUDIENCE SHRINKS."*** (p. 62)

**MINIPLOT**

* May have several protagonists with differing needs and goals and story lines (see **multiplot**)
* Protagonist may be passive
* Protagonist's struggle may be mostly internal
* May have an "open ending" (means that most questions are answered but one or two are left to the audience to answer)

**MULTIPLOT (a variant of miniplot)**

* Instead of a central plot, several smaller stories each have a separate protagonist
* Without a central narrative spine, multiple stories are woven around a central controlling idea
* Each story may tend toward to archplot (turns with external consequences) or toward miniplot (most action being internal)
* Still has enough narrative drive to compel interest
* Often captures the essence of a culture or community

**ANTI-PLOT**

* Time is not necessarily linear
* Reality is not necessarily consistent
* Coincidence is more important than causality

**NON-PLOT**

* Value-charged condition of character's life at the end is identical to that at the beginning
* May inform and touch us as narrative or portraiture (whether life-like or absurd)
* May have rhetorical or formal structures, but non-plot is NOT STORY

**CONTROLLING IDEA** (p. 110-131)

**CONTROLLING IDEA**

* the purest form of a story's meaning, the how and why of change, the vision of life the audience members carry away into their lives
* a one-sentence statement about the story value that wins out in the end expressed in terms of both the value's charge (+ or -) and the cause
* **value:** the positive or negative charge of the story's critical value at the last act's climax;

 how life changes from its condition at the story's beginning to its condition at the end

* **cause:** the chief reason this value has changed to its final state
* such as: "justice triumphs because the protagonist is more clever than the criminals"

 *value charge cause 🡪*

***(This is similar to what Lajos Egri calls the "premise." McKee uses "premise" differently)***

**EVERY CONTROLLING IDEA HAS A CONTRARY (= negative charge)**

* If the controlling idea is "crime doesn't pay because the detective is more clever," then the contrary idea is that "crime does pay because the criminal is more clever"
* Event structure alternates between scenes that affirm the controlling idea and scenes that affirm the contrary idea
* The ***controlling*** idea is the idea that wins out in the last scene
* **IDEALISTIC** controlling ideasproduce "up" endings expressing optimism
* **PESSIMISTIC** controlling ideas produce "down" endings reflecting cynicism & loss
* **IRONIC** controlling ideas produce endings that go up AND down at the same time. Very often the main character wins by "losing." Irony is not ambiguous or coincidental. Irony occurs when both positive and negative values are clearly true, when protagonist clearly gains something and clearly loses something at the same time

**CONTROLLING IDEA and EVENT STRUCTURE DETERMINE/EXPRESS MEANING**

**The story's event structure expresses, then proves your idea *without* explanation. Your view of the world is reflected in how you get to the value charge at the end.**

* Meaning is not something you can arbitrarily add or explain. Story converts idea to action.
* "Expressing an idea, in the sense of exposing it, is never enough. The audience must not just understand; it must believe." (p. 113) They believe what they can see in the event structure.
* "Master storytellers never explain--they dramatize . . . Explanations of authorial ideas, whether in dialogue or narration, seriously diminish a film's quality. A great story authenticates its ideas solely within the dynamics of its events." (p. 114)

**STRUCTURE AND GENRE** (p. 77-99)

**A GENRE IS DEFINED BY ITS CONVENTIONS**

* Each genre imposes conventions on story design:
* conventional value-charges at climax, i.e., the down-ending of the *disillusionment plot*
* conventional settings such as the *Western*
* conventional events such as boy-meets-girl in the *Love Story*
* conventional roles such as the criminal in a *Crime Story*
* That boy meets girl in a *love story* is not a cliché but a necessary element of form
* Genres can be combined, and they do evolve and change over time.
* Identify your genre or combination of genres early in the writing process, as this can inspire creativity as you design the story to observe the conventions without cliché

**A GENRE IS A PACT WITH THE AUDIENCE**

* The audience knows these conventions and expects to see them fulfilled." (p. 86)
* "Having told our film-goers to expect a favorite form, we must deliver as promised. If we botch genre by omitting or misusing conventions, the audience knows instantly and badmouths our work." (p. 90)

**THE ADVANTAGE OF WORKING IN A WELL UNDERSTOOD GENRE**

* "We don't want people coming to our work cold and vague, not knowing what to expect, forcing us to spend the first twenty minutes of screen-time clueing them toward the necessary story attitude. We want them to settle into their seats, warm and focused with an appetite we intend to satisfy." (p. 89-90)
* Genre conventions tend to stimulate creativity rather than stifle it

**MORE DISCUSSION ON BASIC PLOT TYPES (UNDERLYING STRUCTURES):**

Ronald B. Tobias: *20 Master Plots (And How to Build Them.* Cincinnati, Ohio: Writer's Digest Books, 1993.

Tobias discusses 20 templates for deep underlying structure capable of being developed in any number of ways:

Quest

Adventure

Pursuit

Rescue

Escape

Revenge

The Riddle

Rivalry

Underdog

Temptation

Metamorphosis

Transformation

Maturation

Love

Forbidden Love

Sacrifice

Discovery

Wretched Excess

Ascension

Descension

**SAMPLE GENRES FROM McKEE** (McKee lists and defines 25 film genres, p. 80-86)

**MUSICAL**

"Descended from opera, this genre presents a 'reality' in which characters sing and dance their stories. It's often a love story, but it can be film noir: the stage adaptation of *Sunset Boulevard*; Social Drama: *West Side Story*; Punitive Plot: *All That Jazz*; Biography: *Evita*. Indeed, any genre can work in musical form and all can be satirized in **Musical Comedy.**" (p. 84-85)

**COMEDY**

"Comedy contains myriad sub-genres as well, each with its own conventions, but one overriding convention unites this mega-genre and distinguishes it from drama: *Nobody gets hurt.*"

*See also p. 359-362 on comedy.*

**LOVE STORY**

"The most important question we ask when writing a love story is: "What's to stop them?"

Otherwise there is no story.

**CRIME DRAMA**

A rather inflexible genre filled with rigid conventions. "In the Crime Genre there must be a crime; it must happen early in the telling. There must be a detective character, professional or amateur, who discovers clues and suspects. In the thriller the criminal must 'make it personal.' (p. 87)

**HISTORICAL DRAMA**

"The best use of history, and the only legitimate excuse to set a film in the past and thereby add untold millions to the budget, is anachronism--to use the past as a clear glass through which you show us the present." (p. 83)

**BIOGRAPHY**

Biography "must never become a simple chronicle. That someone lived, died and did interesting things in between is of scholarly interest and no more. The biographer must interpret facts as if they were fiction, find the meaning of the subject's life, and then cast him as the protagonist of his life's genre." (p. 84) *See also p. 334-345, helpful perspective on exposition in biography.*

**ART FILM**

"The Art Film has become a traditional genre, divisible into two subgenres, *minimalism* and *antistructure,* each with its own complex of formal conventions of structure and cosmology. Like Historical Drama, the Art Film is a supra-genre that embraces other basic genres: Love Story, Political Drama, and the like." (p. 86)

"The Art Film favors the intellect by smothering strong emotion under a blanket of mood, while through enigma, symbolism, or unresolved tensions it invites interpretation and analysis in the post-film ritual of café criticism." (p. 88)

**CHARACTER**

**General Principles for Writing Character**

**Creating the Protagonist**

**How to reveal Character**

**GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR WRITING CHARACTER** (p. 100-109, 136-143, 375-387)

**"CHARACTERS ARE NOT HUMAN BEINGS . . .** [but] a work of art, a metaphor for human nature. . . Their aspects are designed to be clear and knowable, whereas our fellow humans are difficult to understand." (p. 375) ***Characters have two facets: characterization and true character:***

* **CHARACTERIZATION:**  the observable qualities of a human being (p. 100-101)
* Gender, age, ethnicity, nationality
* Appearance, mannerisms, speech habits
* Personality, attitudes, values, tastes
* Education, occupation
* Marital status, family connections
* Life style, place of residence
* **TRUE CHARACTER:** internal qualities (p. 100-101
* Loyal or disloyal
* Honest or a liar
* Loving or cruel
* Courageous or cowardly
* Generous or selfish
* Willful or weak

**THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT A CHARACTER IS WHAT HE WANTS** (p. 376)

* What does this character want, both consciously and unconsciously? This is what determines the choices the character makes.
* What motivates him?

"Behind desire is motivation. . . . Do not reduce characters to case studies (an episode of child abuse is the cliché in vogue at the moment) for in truth there are no definitive explanations for anyone's behavior. Generally the more the writer nails motivation to specific causes, the more he diminishes the character in the audience's mind. Rather, think through to a solid understanding of motive, but at the same time leave some mystery around the whys." (p. 376)

**COMPLEXITY AND DEPTH OF CHARACTER COME FROM CONTRADICTION**

(p. 103-4, 378)

* Between characterization and character (between Lounge Lizard and superhero in James Bond)
* Or within deep character (between guilt and ambition in Macbeth)
* Or between setting and personality (conventional personality placed in an exotic background)

**COMIC CHARACTERS** (p. 381-383)

* Are marked by blind obsession in the pursuit of their desire.
* Unlike dramatic characters, they don't know when to stop
* "The first step to solving the problem of a character who should be funny but isn't is to find his mania." (p. 382)

**VILLAINS** (p. 384-386)

* Love them if you want to make them believable
* Ask what you would do if you were the villain in that situation.
* You probably would not think of yourself as bad, but just doing the best you could.

**CREATING THE PROTAGONIST** (p. 136-143)

**HOW MANY PROTAGONISTS?** (p. 136-137)

* **Single protagonist** is the norm for Archplot
* **Plural protagonist** refers to two or more characters who all share the same desire, and suffer and benefit together in their struggle to achieve it
* **Multiprotagonist** refers to (multiplot) stories in which the characters all have separate and individual desires and all suffer and benefit independently

**WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE PROTAGONIST** (p. 136-143)

1. Anything that has free will and the capacity to desire, take action, and suffer the consequences can be a protagonist (*The Little Engine that Could* as well as Hamlet)
2. A protagonist has strength of will -- enough to:
* Keep wanting whatever it is he wants even through conflict and reverses
* Take actions that create real, meaningful, irreversible change
1. A protagonist may hide behind a passive characterization (Blanche Dubois in *Streetcar*) but a truly passive character who can't make decisions and whose actions create no change makes it nearly impossible to tell a story we will care about (the famous problem of *Company*)
2. The protagonist's desire is conscious - he knows what he wants and could tell you what it is
3. The protagonist may ALSO have an unconscious and contradictory desire (*View from the Bridge*)
4. The protagonist has the capacity to pursue his desire and a chance to attain it
* Desires must be realistic in relationship to protagonist's will and capacities
* A character who *truly* has no hope won't interest us because he lacks capacity to change
1. Protagonist is willing to pursue the object of his desire (conscious and unconscious) to the end of the line, to the human limit established by setting and genre
* Story is not about middle ground but about life lived in its most intense states
* Story must build to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another, or else the audience will go home unsatisfied, knowing the character *could* have done X
1. Protagonist has to be someone the audience can empathize with
* Protagonist need NOT be likable -- that is just an aspect of characterization
* Audience needs to recognize their shared humanity with the protagonist in order to root for them: "This character is like me. Therefore I want him to have whatever it is he wants, because if I were he in those circumstances, I'd want the same thing for myself."
* Empathy is *necessary* but not exclusive; audience may also empathize with other characters

\* Protagonist comes from the Greek: *proto =* first; *agonistes* = one who contends/struggles/fights for a prize

**PROTAGONISTS as compared to SUPPORTING CHARACTERS** (p. 379-381)

* The protagonist must be the most complex character in the cast to focus empathy on the star role because the focus of interest always moves to the most complex figure.
* Each secondary character should help delineate one of the dimensions of the protagonist's complex nature. The creation and design of secondary characters are dictated by the needs of the protagonist. They exist to make his complexity believable. (p. 279)
* Each character should be in the story for a purpose, and each should be distinct; characters should have contrasting or contradictory attitudes (p. 183)
* If two characters have attitudes and reactions that are too much alike, you will have lost opportunities for conflict; Collapse the two into one character, or expel one from the story (p. 184)
* Bit parts should be drawn deliberately flat, but not dull. If they are too interesting, the audience will expect them to come back later in the story, and will be let down if they don't (p. 381)

**IS THIS PROTAGONIST'S STORY WORTH TELLING?** (p. 149-150)

Test the story by asking:

* What is the risk?
* What does the protagonist stand to lose if he does not get what he wants?
* What's the worst thing that will happen to the protagonist if he does not achieve his desire?

If the answer is, "Life would go back to normal"

* Then what the protagonist wants is of no real value.
* A story about someone pursuing something of little or no value is boring.
* Thus the story is not worth telling

To live meaningfully is to be at perpetual risk

* "The measure of the value of a character's desire is in direct proportion to the risk he's willing to take to achieve it; the greater the value, the greater the risk."
* "We give the ultimate values to those things that demand the ultimate risks--our freedom, our lives, our souls."
* "In a state of jeopardy, we must risk something that we want or have in order to gain something else that we want or to protect something we have--a dilemma we strive to avoid."

"Consider, for example, the difficulties of writing a story about a homeless alcoholic. What has he to lose? Virtually nothing. To a soul enduring the unspeakable stress of the streets, death may be a mercy, and a change in the weather might give him that [i.e., an event that does not arise out of his own will and action]. Lives with little or no value beyond their existence are pathetic to witness, but with so little at stake, the writer is reduced to painting a static portrait of suffering.

 Rather, we tell stories about people who have something to lose--family, careers, ideals, opportunities, reputations, realistic hopes and dreams. When such lives go out of balance, the characters are placed at jeopardy. They stand to lose what they have in their struggle to achieve a rebalancing of existence. Their battle, risking hard-won values against the forces of antagonism, generates conflict [which McKee considers essential to story telling]. When story is thick with conflict, the characters need all the ammunition they can get [i.e., tools they can use to achieve their objective]. As a result, the writer has little trouble dramatizing exposition and facts flow naturally and invisibly into the action." (p. 339)

**HOW TO REVEAL CHARACTER**

**THE ONLY WAY TO REVEAL TRUE CHARACTER** (p. 100-104)

* is by showing the character making choices under pressure
* the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation of true character

"Choices made when nothing is at risk mean little. If a character chooses to tell the truth in a situation where telling a lie would gain him nothing, the choice is trivial, the moment expresses nothing. But if the same character insists on telling the truth when a lie would save his life, then we sense that honesty is at the core of his nature." (p. 101)

***CHARACTER IS REVEALED IN CHOICES MADE UNDER PRESSURE***

**FOR THIS REASON, STRUCTURE EQUALS CHARACTER** (p. 106)

* "The event structure of a story is created out of the choices that characters make under pressure and the actions they choose to take,
* while characters are the creatures who are revealed and changed by how they choose to act under pressure." (p. 106)
* "If you change event design, you have also changed character;
* If you change deep character, you must reinvent the structure to express the character's changed nature." (p. 106)
* "The vast majority of this work [writing a screenplay], 75 percent or more of our struggles, goes into designing the interlock of deep character to the invention and arrangement of events." (p. 108)

**CHARACTER ARC** (p. 104-105)

* the way inner character changes over the course of the story
* Inner character changes as a result of the choices a person makes.

**OTHER WAYS TO SUGGEST CHARACTER** (p. 377)

* By physical appearance
* By the setting in which the character appears
* What other characters say about him/her (may or may not be reliable)
* What character says about himself (often not true):

"Characters with lucid self-knowledge, those reciting self-explanatory dialogue meant to convince us that they are who they say they are, are not only boring but phony. The audience knows that people rarely, if ever, understand themselves, and if they do, they're incapable of complete and honest self-explanation. There's always a subtext. . . . Self-explanation must be validated or contradicted in action. In *Casablanca when Rick says,* "I stick my neck out for no man," we think, "Well, not yet, Rick, not yet." (p. 377)

**SCENE ESSENTIALS**

**The Gap**

**Scene Design**

**Text vs. Subtext and Scene Analysis**

**THE GAP: THE KEYSTONE OF McKEE'S THEORY** (p.143-180)

**The protagonist wants something and takes the first action to achieve it.** (p. 143-144, 147)

To begin with the protagonist takes the minimum, conservative action, *from his point of view* (it may not look that conservative from the outside), expecting the world to react to him in a way that will give him what he wants.

**But in a story, the world NEVER reacts in the way the protagonist expects.**

"The grand difference between story and life is that in story we cast out the minutiae of daily existence in which human beings take actions expecting a certain enabling reaction from the world, and more or less, get what they expect.

**In story, we concentrate on that moment, and only that moment, in which a character takes an action expecting a useful reaction from his world, but instead the effect of his action is to provoke forces of antagonism. The world of the character reacts differently than expected, more powerfully than expected, or both."** (144-145)

**The FORCES OF ANTAGONISM are whatever reacts unhelpfully - three layers** (p. 146-147)

1. The character's own feelings and emotions, and his own body

2. Other people, including family, friends, and lovers

3. Social institutions and the physical environment

**STORY is born in THE GAP**

**between what the character *expects* the world to be like,**

 **and what the world is *really* like.**

"These cracks in moment-to-moment reality mark the difference between the dramatic and the prosaic, between action and activity. True action is physical, vocal or mental movement that opens gaps in expectation and creates significant change. Mere activity is behavior in which what is expected happens, generating either no change or trivial change." (p. 152)

"Once the gap in reality splits open, the character, being willful and having capacity, senses or realizes that he cannot get what he wants in a minimal, conservative way. He must gather himself and struggle through this gap to take a second action. The next action is something the character would not have wanted to do in the first case because it not only demands more willpower and forces him to dig more deeply into his human capacity, but **most important *the second action puts him at risk.* He now stands to lose in order to gain."** (p. 149)

**SCENE DESIGN: DESIRE, ACTION, CONFLICT, CHANGE** (p. 233-251)

**A SCENE** is a story in miniature (unified around ***desire, action, conflict*** and ***change***) (p. 233):

* an action through conflict in unity or continuity of time and space
* that turns the value-charged condition of a character's life.

**SCENE OBJECTIVE *(DESIRE)***

* The character is pursuing an objective or desire related to that immediate time and place.
* The objective specific to the scene must be an aspect of his super-objective (spine), the story-long quest that unites the entire story from inciting incident to climax.

**TO ACHIEVE IT, THE CHARACTER MUST CHOOSE UNDER PRESSURE *(ACTION)***

* Human nature dictates that we will always choose right over wrong, good over evil, as it appears from our point of view - therefore this kind of choice is not useful (p. 248)
* Real choice is a dilemma between two irreconcilable goods or two undesirable evils

(p. 249-251)

* Choice may be between any two conflicting desires at any level of conflict:
* two people
* a person and a lifestyle
* two lifestyles
* two ideals
* two aspects of the innermost self

**ACTION OPENS THE GAP *(CONFLICT)***

* The character makes his choice, chooses his action BUT
* Forces of Antagonism react in unexpected ways, opening the gap and changing the charge

**CREATING A TURNING POINT *(CHANGE)*** (p.233-237, 241)

* ***Scenes turn only in two ways: on action or on revelation***. There are no other means
* The ***value at stake, at risk*** is whatever changes (its +/- charge) as a result of the action
* The change in value from + to - or - to + creates significant change in character's life
* Change may be minor to begin with, builds up to major turning points at ends of acts
* Ideally, every scene becomes a turning point

**EFFECTS of TURNING POINTS** (p. 235-243)

* Surprise - neither the character nor the audience expected the world to react that way (p. 235)
* Curiosity - the audience immediately asks "why did this happen" and mentally rushes back through the story so far to find the answer. Author's provides answer in "setups" (p. 238-242)
* Setups are bits of information planted early that the audience will understand in a new way at a later turning point
* Payoff (the audience's rush of insight) may be the setup for another payoff later on
* Insight - when audience finds those answers, it understands the character in a new way
* New direction - leads way to new story problems (end of *Empire Strikes Back*)
* Change in value creates emotion in audience. McKee says, don't describe emotion, use the turning point to create the experience that provokes emotion (p. 243)
* Audience will feel emotion at the turning point if it (1) empathizes with the character, (2) knows what he wants and wants him to get it, and (3) understand the values at stake (p. 243)

**TEXT, SUBTEXT and SCENE ANALYSIS** (p. 252-287)

**TEXT versus SUBTEXT** (p. 252-257)

* Text is what is said and done, what you can see.
* Subtext is what is underneath, what is thought and felt, the inner life that contrasts with or contradicts the text. Subtext is the real action. Subtext is what makes the scene work.
* If a scene is not working, rephrasing the dialogue won't help. You have to fix the action.

**TECHNIQUE OF SCENE ANALYSIS** (p. 257-259)

**1. Define conflict**

* Who drives the scene? Who motivates it? Who makes it happen? (can be any character or even an inanimate object)
* What does he or it want? Express answer as "to [do] this" or "to [get] that"
* What forces of antagonism block this desire?
* What do the forces of antagonism want? "to [do] this" or "to [get] that"

 **2. Note the opening value**

* Identify the value at stake when the scene opens (condition of character's situation)
* Identify its charge, + or -

 **3. Break the scene into beats**

* Look at what character seems to be doing
* Look at what character actually is doing
* Express answer as an active gerund phrase, such as "begging"
* Name essential action with emotive connotations
* Look across the scene to see what reaction that action brought and again describe it with active gerund phrase
* No matter how many exchanges of dialogue there may be, as long as the underlying subtextual action and reaction are the same, it is still the same beat
* A new beat occurs when ***behavior*** clearly changes, not just with next exchange of speeches

**4. Note the closing value and compare with the opening value**

* Note the condition of the character's situation at end of the scene
* Express it in terms of value with + or - charge
* If the opening and closing values are the same, then the activity between opening and closing was a nonevent; scene is flat (probably scene was used for exposition)
* If the value has undergone change, then the scene has turned

**5. Survey the beats and locate the turning point**

* In a well-designed scene, even behaviors that seem helter-skelter will have an arc and a purpose
* Within the arc, locate the moment when the major gap opens between expectation and result, turning the scene to its changed end values. This precise moment is the turning point

**STORY STRUCTURE**

**Overview**

**Inciting Incident and its Set-up**

**Complications, Conflict, Forces of Antagonism**

**Complicating Progressively**

**Crisis, Climax, and Resolution**

**Act Design**

**Connecting Scenes Together**

**OVERVIEW OF STORY STRUCTURE**

Prologue: **SET-UP** (p. 200-204)

* Introduce characters and setting as briefly as possible
* Tells the audience just enough so that the inciting incident has full impact, no more

Part One: **INCITING INCIDENT** (p. 181-207)

* The event without which the rest of the story wouldn't happen.
* It upsets the balance of the protagonist's life
* It arouses protagonist's desire for something that will set things right.
* It raises the *dramatic question* in the audience's mind
* It leads the audience to expect a crisis directly related to the inciting incident

Part Two: **PROGRESSIVE COMPLICATIONS** (p. 208-232)

* A series of conflict-filled events that makes life more and more difficult for the characters.
* Includes at least three major reversals (the third may be the crisis)
* May include subplots

Part Three: **CRISIS** (p. 303-309)

* Brings protagonist and antagonist face to face
* Forces protagonist to choose the lesser of two evils or between two irreconcilable goods
* Crisis means decision.
* Crisis is the obligatory scene

Part Four: **CLIMAX** (p. 309-312)

* The action the protagonist choose to take when under the ultimate pressure of the crisis
* This action should be full of meaning

Part Five: **RESOLUTION** (p. 312-314)

* Shows the spread of the effects of the climax throughout the world of the story
* Ties up subplots if necessary
* Allows audience to recover its composure

Part One: **THE INCITING INCIDENT AND ITS SET-UP** (p. 189-207)

**The INCITING INCIDENT radically upsets the balance in the protagonist's life.**

* It is the most profound cause of the story, the event without which it wouldn't happen
* It generally happens directly to the protagonist, or is caused by the protagonist
* Some inciting incidents have two events, a set-up and a pay-off
* set-up: shark eats swimmer and her remains wash up on the beach
* pay-off: sheriff discovers the corpse (pay-off needs to follow set-up quickly)
* It arouses a desire for something that will set things right, put things back in balance
* It may also arouse an unconscious desire as well
* The protagonist must react to the inciting incident
* To discover an inciting incident that will lead to the necessary reverse of values, ask:
* What is the *worst possible* thing that could happen to my protagonist? And how could that turn out to be the *best possible* thing that could happen to him? (or vice versa)
* A good inciting incident starts a journey toward the extremes, not the middle ground

**It also creates specific responses in the audience**

* It's the "big hook" that gets the audience emotionally involved with the story
* So it MUST happen on stage - the audience needs to see it
* Not all stories need an inciting incident full of spectacle - some are quiet but meaningful
* It raises the Major Dramatic Question in the audience's mind - how will this turn out?
* It makes the audience expect the OBLIGATORY SCENE (see page 19) that will resolve the problem. But you make the audience wait for that scene while you develop tension with (2) PROGRESSIVE COMPLICATIONS

**SET-UP** (p. 200-204)

* Set-up should be as minimal as possible
* "We consistently underestimate the knowledge and life experience of the audience, laying out our characters and world with tedious details the filmgoer has already filled in with common sense." (p. 203)
* BUT audience must understand enough to respond fully to protagonist's predicament
* Inciting incident should come as soon as possible
* Archetypal inciting incidents require no setup and must occur immediately - archetypal means everyone understands why it matters just from knowing *what* it is

Part Two: **COMPLICATIONS, CONFLICT and FORCES OF ANTAGONISM** (p. 208-216)

**From inciting incident to crisis, all the story's events**

* Must relate to the spine of the story (the character's conscious or unconscious desire)
* Generate more and more conflict as the protagonist faces greater and greater forces of antagonism, creating a succession of events that passes points of no return

**NOTHING MOVES FORWARD IN A STORY EXCEPT THROUGH CONFLICT**

"The Law of Conflict is more than an aesthetic principle; it is the soul of story. Story is metaphor for life, and to be alive is to be in seemingly perpetual conflict" (211) When the struggle for physical survival is eliminated, the struggle for happiness begins.

**FORCES OF ANTAGONISM** include any characters or forces that work to prevent the protagonist from achieving his desire, that make life difficult for the characters

* Inner conflict - inside the protagonist's mind
* Between the protagonist and his own body
* Between the protagonist and other individuals
* Between the protagonist and institutions
* Between the protagonist and the environment (small scale or large)

**Truly powerful and complex forces of antagonism are NECESSARY because** (p. 317-318)**:**

* The protagonist is more completely realized as we see him struggle against progressively more difficult obstacles; the protagonist will probably have to change and become stronger to overcome them
* We believe in the power and importance of the protagonist's desire only when he proves it
* Powerful antagonists take the story to the limits instead of bogging it down in the wishy-washy middle ground

**DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COMPLICATION and COMPLEXITY** (p. 213-216)

* **Complicated stories** involve conflict on only one of three possible levels and tend to use a large cast and multiple sets and locations
* ***Inner conflict (stream of consciousness)***

"The density of imagery in the Stream of Consciousness work, such as *Naked Lunch*, is so intense that locations change, as it were, three or four times in a single sentence."

* ***Personal conflict (soap opera)***

 Soap opera characters have no inner or extra-personal conflicts. They suffer when they don't get what they want, but because they're either good people or bad, they rarely face true inner dilemmas. Society never intervenes in their air-conditioned worlds.

* ***Extra-personal conflict (action/adventure, farce)***

James Bond faces a society filled with arch-villains, minions, assassins, femmes fatale, armies, helper characters, civilians needing rescue, but no inner conflict, no real personal connection either.

* **Complex stories** are those that are complicated on all three levels

**COMPLICATING PROGRESSIVELY**

**"PROGRESSIVE" MEANS THAT YOU PASS POINTS OF NO RETURN** (p. 208-209)

* "When the Gap opens, the audience realizes that this is a point of no return. Minimal efforts won't work. The character can't restore the balance of life by taking lesser actions. Henceforth, all action like the character's first effort, actions of minor quality and magnitude, must be eliminated from the story." (p. 208)
* A story must move progressively forward to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another (p. 209)

**PROGRESSION RESULTS FROM ALTERNATION BETWEEN CONTROLLING IDEA AND ITS CONTRARY** (p. 118-123, 243-248)

* Progressions build by moving dynamically between the positive and negative charges of the values at stake in the story. (Crime pays Vs Crime doesn't pay)
* Sequence by sequence, often scene by scene, the positive Idea and its negative Counter-Idea contest back and forth, building in intensity, until at Crisis they collide head-on in a last impasse. Out of this rises the Story Climax, in which one or the other idea succeeds.
* Alternating idea versus counter idea is fundamental and essential to art of story telling because calling for the same emotion twice in a row means you will feel less intensely the second time (law of diminishing returns) (p. 243-248)
* If you go from positive scene to positive scene to positive scene, audience will lose interest (like ice cream: the first cone is divine, the second is nice, the third makes you sick)
* If you go from negative scene to negative scene to negative scene, the audience will eventually laugh (a device of comedy)
* Exception is that you can progress from a slightly bad situation to an extremely bad one (or vice versa); what is required is a lot of contrast
* Note difference between emotion, which dissipates quickly, and mood (p. 245-248)
* Be careful to give full strength to the counter idea, even repugnant ideas. Even if you believe in pacifism, you still have to present the counter idea strongly: humanity loves war.
* In the alternation between the controlling idea and its contrary, every high is a bit higher than the last one, every low a bit lower

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**TO TAKE THE FORCES OF ANTAGONISM TO THE LIMIT** (p. 317-333)

* Identify the most important value at stake in your story. Generally the protagonist will represent the positive charge of this value, the forces of antagonism the negative.
* Then identify the ***degrees*** of negativity:

Positive Contrary Contradictory Negation of the Negation

Justice Unfairness Injustice Tyranny (institutions supposed to

 enforce justice are unjust)

Love Indifference Hate Self-hate OR

Hatred masquerading as love

Truth White lies Lies Self-deception

Consciousness Unconsciousness Death Damnation

Rich Middle-class Poor, suffering Rich but suffering pains of poverty

Communication Alienation Isolation Insanity

Success Compromise Failure Selling out

Wisdom Ignorance Stupidity Stupidity perceived as intelligence

Freedom Restraint Slavery Slavery perceived as freedom

Bravery Fear Cowardice Cowardice perceived as courage

Loyalty Split allegiance Betrayal Self-betrayal

**FOUR TECHNIQUES FOR EXPRESSING PROGRESSION** (p. 294-301)

 When a story genuinely progresses it calls upon greater and greater human capacity, demands greater and greater willpower, generates greater and greater change in characters' lives, and places them at greater and greater jeopardy. How are we to express this? How will the audience sense the progressions?

**Social progression:** Allow their actions to ramify outward gradually, touching and changing the lives of more and more people.

**Personal progression: "**Start with a personal or inner conflict that demands balancing but seems relatively solvable, and hammer downward, emotionally, psychologically, physically, morally, to the dark secrets, the unspoken truths that hide behind a public mask.

**Symbolic Ascension: "**Start with actions, locations and roles that represent only themselves. But as the story progresses, chose images that gather greater and greater meaning, until by the end of the telling characters, settings and events stand for universal ideas."

**Ironic Ascension:** Turn progression on irony. "In story, irony plays between actions and results (the primary source of story energy) [and] between appearance and reality (the primary source of truth and emotion)." In these stories, the characters feel certain they know what to do and have a precise plan how to do it - only it backfires.

1. He gets at last what he's always wanted . . . but too late to have it. (*Othello*)
2. He's pushed further and further from his goal . . . only to discover that in fact he's been led right to it.
3. He throws away what he later finds is indispensable to his happiness
4. To reach a goal he unwittingly takes the precise steps necessary to lead him away.
5. The action he takes to destroy something becomes exactly what is needed to be destroyed by it.
6. He comes into possession of something he's certain will make him miserable, does everything possible to get rid of it . . . only to discover it's the gift of happiness.

**WHAT ABOUT COINCIDENCE?** (p. 356-359)

* Coincidence can work in a story if you dramatize how it can enter life meaninglessly but in time gain meaning
* Bring coincidence in early to allow time to build meaning out of it
* As a rule of thumb, don't use coincidence beyond the midpoint of the telling
* Coincidence should never pop into a story just to turn a scene, and then pop out of it forever
* Never use coincidence to turn an ending - this is *deus ex machina*, the writer's greatest sin (it insults the audience, because we know that in real life we can't get out of deciding, acting, and taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions)

Part Three: **CRISIS**

Part Four: **CLIMAX**

Part Five: **RESOLUTION**

**The CRISIS is the Obligatory Scene that the Inciting Incident led the audience to expect** (p. 303-309)

* There should be a causal lock between Inciting Incident and Crisis - this gives the story unity
* Story crisis should seem inevitable, given the inciting incident
* Brings the protagonist face to face with the most focused, powerful forces of antagonism
* Story crisis is the ultimate decision, but not merely between a good thing and a bad thing
* Dilemma must be between two irreconcilable goods or to choose the lesser of two evils
* If the character has changed, this action will test and prove the change
* This obligatory scene must NEVER occur off-stage
* At the moment of decision, the moment is frozen, prolonged, while the audience asks, "What's he going to do? What's he going to do?" and the tension builds

**The CLIMAX of the story is the action the protagonist chooses to take** (309-312)

* Generally crisis and climax happen in the last minutes, and in the same scene
* If crisis has built in tension, then the compressed energy explodes in the climax
* The action should be self-evident, not requiring dialogue or narration to spell it out
* The action should give the audience the emotional satisfaction it wants
* If tone throughout story promises an up ending, it has to be an up ending (inevitable)
* But not in the way the audience expects (but unexpected)
* The climax is the biggest reversal of the play in terms of emotional effect
* To be a major reversal, the climax must:
* Change values from positive to negative or vice versa with or without irony
* Change must be absolute and irreversible - charge must be at an extreme
* The meaning of that change in values is what creates the emotional effect
* A climax built around a turning point is most satisfying of all
* Protagonist chooses an action he believes will achieve his desire, but reality doesn't cooperate
* Must decide and act again (Luke's decisions at end of *Empire Strikes Back*)

**The RESOLUTION is any material left after the climax** (p. 312-314)

* Slower curtain gives the audience a moment or two to recover and prepare to deal with their own world again
* But if it's long and boring, audience will be leaning toward the exits
* Sometimes resolution ties up a subplot (can be awkward unless it also gives one last twist to the central plot)
* Sometimes shows the spread of climactic effects - widens into society - show how entire cast is changed by the climax

**ACT DESIGN**

**ACT DESIGN** (p. 217-226)

* In this context **ACT** is not a "curtain" act but the group of scenes and sequences leading to a climactic scene that causes a major reversal of values
* There must be ***a minimum of three major reversals*** in any full-length story
* This is necessary to take the characters to the natural limits of the conflict.
* The rhythm of events can vary widely, but will depend first on the placement of the inciting incident. For example:
* An early inciting incident arriving at the first major reversal in 30 minutes
* 70 minutes to get to the second major reversal (a long second act)
* 18 minutes to get to the third major reversal (quickening action toward climax)
* 2 minutes for the resolution
* If there is a long period of time between major reversals (typically act two), you may need to fill it with either more acts (major reversals) or with subplots
* Problem is that the more major reversals you have to invent for the same story, the more likely you are to get repetitive or fall into cliché
* Multiplication of acts reduces the impact of the climaxes ("That's not a major turn. That's his day. Every fifteen minutes somebody tries to kill the guy.")
* Subplots generally work better

**SUBPLOTS** (p. 226-232)

* Each subplot has its own protagonist, inciting incident, major dramatic question
* Subplots do not necessarily have three acts. They may climax at the first act.
* Subplot may have to be de-emphasized in order to keep the spotlight on the main plot. This is done by keeping some of its elements offstage (inciting incident, act climax, crisis, climax, etc)
* Subplots may function in the following ways:
* It may help dramatize the central plot's exposition if the inciting incident must come late (may cause problems if it misleads the audience as to main theme or character)
* It may contradict the central plot's controlling idea, enriching the story with irony
* It may resonate with the central plot's controlling idea, reinforcing the theme
* It may make life more difficult for the central plot's protagonist (complication)
* While adding dimension to important characters
* While creating comic or romantic relief from the tension of the central plot
* While helping to provide events/reversals during a long second act
* When subplot does not function in one of the above four ways, but only runs along side the main plot, it splits the story down the middle and destroys the unity.

**CONNECTING SCENES TOGETHER** (p. 288-302)

**PACING** has to do with the alternation between tension and relaxation (p. 289-291)

* Use act structure to start at a base tension, then rise scene by scene to Climax of Act One.
* "As we enter Act Two, compose scenes that reduce this tension, switching to comedy, romance, a counterpointing mood that lowers the Act One intensity so that the audience can catch its breath and reach for more energy."
* After retarding pace, build the progressions of the following act until it tops the previous Climax in intensity and meaning
* Act by act, tighten and release tension until the final Climax empties out the audience, leaving it emotionally exhausted but fulfilled.
* Then a brief Resolution scene to let the audience recuperate before going home.

**RHYTHM** is set by the length of scenes - how long are we in the same time and place? (p. 291-2)

* Need to have a variety of lengths
* In film, average is 2 1/2 minutes, so a 30-second scene is balanced by a six-minute scene, etc. He explains why - has to do with there being nothing new for the camera to look at, suggesting that the optimal rhythm may be different for musicals.

**TEMPO** is the level of activity within a scene via dialogue, action, or a combination (p. 293)

**PREPARING FOR A CLIMAX** (p. 293)

* Scenes leading up to the climax should be shorter, more brisk in action
* Climax itself should be slower because it embodies profound change (not about short and explosive)
* If preceding scenes are also slow, the climax won't have as much punch because a pause becomes less effective with repetition, and the tension won't hold for the climax

**MAKING TRANSITIONS FROM ONE SCENE TO THE NEXT** in terms of film (p. 301-302)

* ***Characterization*** *trait in common OR characterization trait in opposition*

 from bratty child to childish adult from awkward protagonist to elegant antagonist

* *An* ***action*** *in common OR an action in opposition*

 from foreplay of lovemaking to afterglow from chatter to cold silence

* *An* ***object*** *in common OR an object in opposition*

 from greenhouse interior to woodland exterior from Congo to Antarctica

* *A* ***word*** *in common OR a word in opposition*

 a phrase repeated from scene to scene from compliment to curse

* *A* ***quality*** *of light in common OR a quality of light in opposition*

 from shadows at dawn to shade at sunset from blue to red

* *A* ***sound*** *in common OR a sound in opposition*

from waves lapping a shore from silk caressing skin to the grinding of

to the rise and fall of a sleeper's breath gears

* *An* ***idea*** *in common OR an idea in opposition*

 from a child's birth to an overture from painter's empty canvas to old man dying

**METHODS**

**Setting**

**Writing a Step Outline**

**Writing Character from the Inside Out**

**Exposition**

**Dialogue and Title**

**SETTING** (p. 67-78)

**SETTING** (p. 68-69) includes:

* Period - the part of history (or the future) in which the story is set
* Duration - how much time does the story span
* Location - the story's place in space
* Level of conflict - the story's position on the hierarchy of human struggles

**SETTING defines and confines a story's possibilities** (p. 69-71)

* Not every possible thing that comes to mind can happen in a well-defined story world
* Story must obey its own internal laws of probability
* Fantasy is the most rigid and structurally conventional of genres
* The writer is allowed one great leap away from reality, and after that everything must happen in accordance with tight-knit probability, with no coincidence
* Having chosen your setting and invented the strictures that go along with it, you're bound to a contract you must keep, otherwise audience will find story unconvincing
* An honest story is at home in one and only one place and time

**CREATE A SMALL, *KNOWABLE* WORLD** (p. 71-72)

* Writer must know his little world in as much depth and detail as God knows the universe
* No one should be able to ask a question about your world that you couldn't answer instantly
* "The larger the world, the more diluted the knowledge of the writer, therefore the fewer his creative choices and the more clichéd the story. The smaller the world, the more complete the knowledge of the writer, therefore the greater his creative choices. Result: a fully original story and victory in the war on cliché." (p. 72)

**THREE KINDS OF RESEARCH** (p. 72-73)

* ***Research of memory:*** What do I know from personal experience that touches on my character's lives? Explore your past, relive it, write it down. Written down, it becomes working knowledge
* ***Research of imagination:*** What would it be like to live my character's life hour by hour, day by day? How do they shop? Make love? Pray? Write it down to make it working knowledge.
* ***Research of fact:*** Read relevant works of history, psychology, biography, politics

**RESEARCH AS A CURE FOR WRITER'S BLOCK** (p. 73)

* If you suffer from writer's block, it's probably because you have nothing to say. You don't know enough about your world. The cure is to go to the library.
* The feeling that a story is writing itself marks the moment when a writer's knowledge of the subject has reached the saturation point.

**THEN MAKE CREATIVE CHOICES** (p. 76-78)

* Story is not an accumulation of information strung into a narrative, but a design of events to carry us to a meaningful climax. You need to choose wisely what to include, exclude.
* Invent more material than you can possibly use and then select quality events, moments of originality that are true to character and to world.

**STEP OUTLINE AND TREATMENT**  (p. 410-417)

**AMATEUR WRITERS OFTEN WRITE FROM THE OUTSIDE IN**

* This means that he dreams up an idea, noodles a while, and then starts writing dialogue
* Then he finds it doesn't work, so he tries to revise by rewriting the dialogue
* He tries to thread a new story line through his favorite scenes so he won't have to lose them

**McKEE ADVISES WRITING FROM THE INSIDE OUT**

* Write step-outline of the story on 3x5 cards; meanwhile continue research
* Pitch story (as developed on step outline) to friends in a ten-minute session
* Once it works, write a treatment
* Write the dialogue last (the actual screenplay)

**STEP-OUTLINE**

* Work on 3x5 cards, one for each scene or event; confine STORY to the cards at this stage
* Using one- or two-sentence statements, simply and clearly describe what happens in each scene, how it builds, how it turns. For example: "He enters expecting to find her at home, but instead discovers her notes saying she's left for good."
* On back of card, indicate what step in the design of the story this scene fulfills
* Once you find the climax, you work backwards from that to make the story logical
* Working on cards and delaying dialogue makes it easy to destroy your work and allows you to shuffle events around to find the best sequence

**RESEARCH AND BACKGROUND (not on the cards)**

* Meanwhile you are doing research and writing down lots of ideas and background information
* Developing biographies of your characters
* Descriptions of your fictional world and its history
* Thematic notations, images
* Snippets of vocabulary and idiom

**PITCH THE STORY**

* Tell your listener the story out loud
* You want to see how it unfolds in time, and see the reactions on the listener's face
* Does the inciting incident hook the listener?
* Does he maintain eye contact and interest as you build and turn the progressions?
* Does the climax produce a strong reaction?
* Until a good majority of listeners respond with enthusiasm, there's no point in going forward
* Everything that is wrong in a ten-minute pitch will be ten times worse on screen

**TREATMENT**

* Expand each scene to a paragraph or more of present-tense, moment-by-moment description.
* Indicate what the characters talk about ("he wants her to do this but she refuses") but don't write dialogue
* Instead, create subtext: describe the thoughts and feelings underneath what is said and done

**WRITING CHARACTER FROM THE INSIDE OUT** (p. 152-154)

**To write convincing character, it is NOT ENOUGH:**

* to observe others as if you were a psychologist or anthropologist
* to ask, How *should* someone react to this?
* to ask, How *might* someone react to this?
* to ask, How *would this character* react in these circumstances?
* to ask, How *would I react* in these circumstances?

Because in all these cases, you are looking at your characters from the ***outside***.

**To write convincing character. YOU MUST**

* Ask the question using Stanislavski's "Magic if"

***If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?***

* Experience the scene from the point of view of the character. This requires:
* Getting inside the character AND
* Getting inside your own self. The only reliable source of emotional truth is yourself.
* Acting out every single character as you write

"We act in our imaginations until honest, character-specific emotions flow in our blood. When a scene is emotionally meaningful to us, we can trust that it'll be meaningful to the audience. By creating work that moves us, we move them." (p. 153-154)

"Everything I learned about human nature I learned from me." (Anton Chekhov) (p. 386)

* Then move to another point of view ***. . .***
* Another character
* The inanimate world
* The speaker's own body
* The speaker's subconscious and contrary desire
* And ***FIND THE GAP***. Once one character has acted in the expectation of a particular response, you ask, "What is the opposite of that response?"
* Doubt appearances, don't take things at face value
* Seek the opposite of the obvious
* Look for the hidden, the unexpected, the seemingly inappropriate

"The spirit of creation is the spirit of contradiction--the breakthrough of appearances toward an unknown reality." (Jean Cocteau) (p. 177)

**EXPOSITION** (p. 334-345)

**EXPOSITION**

* Refers to the facts about setting, biography, and characterization that the audience needs to know in order to follow and understand the story
* Should be invisible - audience should absorb what it needs to know unconsciously

**HOW TO WRITE INVISIBLE EXPOSITION**

* Show, don't tell; dramatize exposition
* Primary purpose of every scene is to further the immediate conflict; conveying information is always secondary
* Convert exposition to ammunition: let your characters use what they know as ammunition in their struggle to get what they want (*See Jeffrey Sweet's Dramatist's Toolkit for helpful suggestions how to accomplish this)*
* A character should never tell another character something they both already should know unless it is being dramatized and used as ammunition. If not, cut it.
* No "California scenes" (in which recent acquaintances tell each other their deepest secrets)
* Even in California, what is said is always hiding something else that cannot be said
* "True confessions" should come only at the end of the line, when the pressure is greatest
* save the best for last
* reveal too much too soon and audience sees climaxes coming long before they arrive
* Reveal only the exposition the audience absolutely needs and wants to know
* Don't include things the audience can reasonably and easily assume has happened
* Don't provide information unless the missing fact would cause confusion
* Keep audience interest by withholding information, not by giving it (beyond what is absolutely necessary for comprehension
* Create desire to know by arousing curiosity - plant the question "why?" in audience mind
* Parse out exposition bit by bit through the entire story, doling it out only at the point the audience actually needs to know it
* Some exposition can be saved even into the climax of the last act; save the best for last
* when a character reveals an important fact from the back story, it can sometimes be used to create the turning point for a scene

**FLASHBACK AS EXPOSITION** (p. 341-343)

* To be good, it should be organized like a mini-drama with its own inciting incident, progressions and turning point
* Don't bring it in until you have created in the audience the need and desire to know

**VOICE-OVER NARRATION** (p. 344-345)

* Don't use it to tell the story. It patronizes the audience (but what about Ragtime?)
* Effective as non-narrative counterpoint (character's point of view, not necessarily reliable)

**DIALOGUE** (p. 388-394) **and TITLE** (p. 408-409)

**DIALOGUE IS NOT CONVERSATION**

* Most conversation doesn't make points or achieve closure, it "keeps the channel open"
* Real conversation is full of awkward pauses, poor phrasing and pointless repetitions

**THEATRICAL DIALOGUE (musicals may work a bit differently from film)**

* Requires compression and economy - must say the maximum in the fewest possible words
* Has a purpose - it is part of a design that builds and arcs the scene around its turning point
* Each exchange of dialogue must turn the beats of the scene in one direction or another across the changing behaviors, without repetition
* Yet it must still sound like talk, with an informal, natural vocabulary, including contractions, slang, and if appropriate to character, profanity

**McKEE'S TAKE ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FILM AND THEATER:**

* The aesthetics of film are 80 percent visual, 20 percent auditory. We want to see, not hear, as our energies go to our eyes, only half-listening to the soundtrack
* Theater is 80 percent auditory, 20 percent visual. Our concentration is directed through our ears, only half-looking at the stage.
* The playwright may spin elaborate and ornate dialogue--but not the screen writer [but given the compression required by musical theater, where songs take up much time and dominate the high points, the ideal may be closer to film]

**GOOD SCREEN DIALOGUE IS CHARACTERIZED BY**

* Rapid exchange of short sentences (stichomythia) because camera runs out of things to look at during long speeches (more interesting information on this topic page 390-392)
* Simple construction - generally noun 🡪 verb 🡪 object, or noun 🡪 verb 🡪 complement
* Suspense sentences
* Sentence structure delays meaning until the last word: "If you didn't want me to do it, why'd you give me that . . . ."
* Forces actor and audience to listen all the way to the end of the line
* This makes the cueing rhythm pop, allows actors to respond quickly, immediately
* As opposed to sentences that put the punch line clause in the middle and draggle off with a boring prepositional phrase, so that the responding actor wants to respond to the middle of the sentence but has to wait awkwardly through the draggling end

**GOOD SCREENPLAY AVOIDS DIALOGUE WHEREVER POSSIBLE**

* The more dialogue you write, the less effect dialogue has
* Important moments get buried if too much talking getting people onstage, etc.
* Lean dialogue, in relief against what's primarily visual, has salience and power

**WHAT MAKES A GOOD TITLE?**

* A good title positions the audience, preparing it for the experience ahead
* It names something. It points to something solid that is actually in the story - character, setting, theme or genre. Best if it names two or all elements at once.

**DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FILM AND MUSICAL THEATER**

***(musings after reading McKee)***

**Opening Out the Musical**

**Visual vs. Aural Information**

**Rhythm, Character, Treatments**

**Using Narration**

**OPENING OUT THE MUSICAL**

**THE FOURTH WALL**

* In film, characters almost always behave as if the audience were not there, as if their world were enclosed by a fourth wall
* In theater, some plays behave the same way, with characters pretending there is a fourth wall where the curtain opens; these plays are *representational*
* Plays in which characters address the audience or otherwise indicate that they know the audience is there are called *presentational*
* Musicals can be either representational or presentational but tend toward the presentational
* Because dances face forward toward the audience
* Because singers sing "monologues" that implicitly address the audience
* Some, like *Ragtime,* actually do address the audience
* The audience usually *wants* to respond, and musicals are generally written so that at least some songs have "applause buttons," fully cadenced endings where the music comes to a complete stop, so that the audience can clap

**MULTIPLICATION OF LOCATIONS**

* McKee advises film writers to design "relatively simple but complex stories [complex means involving three kinds of conflict: interior, inter-personal, and social or environmental]. 'Relatively simple' means beautifully turned and told stories restrained by these two principles: Do not proliferate characters (see notes page 29); do not multiply locations. Rather than hopscotching through time, space, and people, discipline yourself to a reasonably contained cast and world, while you concentrate on creating a rich complexity." (p. 216)
* However, writers on musical theater often advise that musicals should open up their stories with multiple locations, looking especially for public places involving crowds of people
* This provides opportunities for dance and for choral numbers that provide variety
* *My Fair Lady*was turned into a musical by putting *onstage* scenes that in the play had only been referred to (the race at Ascot, for example) and it worked beautifully
* *I Sent a Letter to My Love* seemed almost claustrophobic because it never moved away from the house and yard and gave little sense of any world outside the characters' kitchen

"Straight plays physically close in their stories by sticking to the most concentrated and fewest locations. The book of a musical physically opens up its story by rapid shifting among the most dynamic, diverse locations . . .

The most workable places will provide the spring and space to sing and dance. A book opens up a musical's story by finding the turned-out, public places and moments of most urgency or spark, the naturals of music and dance.

The sheer energy of opening up the story also leads to *turning out* the story. This externalizing is the spirit of all musical theater, making it so outer-directed that it embraces an audience. . . . To capture the audience in these embraces is a large part of a musical's success." (p. 10, 14)

Aaron Frankel *Writing the Broadway Musical*, Da Capo Press, 1977, 1991, 2000.

**VISUAL versus AURAL INFORMATION**

**FILM TELLS STORY PRIMARILY THROUGH THE EYES**

* As McKee notes, film tells its story primarily through visual means. Theater, however (and certainly musical theater) tells its story more through what the audience can hear.
* In film you can tell a lot of the subtext by bringing the camera close to the characters' faces, allowing the audience to see the play of expression; this allows film to do away with dialogue

**THEATER TELLS STORY PRIMARILY THROUGH THE EARS**

* In live theater, the audience will not see subtle details of expression from back rows.
* Meaning must by conveyed by elements big enough to be seen, loud enough to be heard
* Most plays therefore require more dialogue than film
* Musical theater can be differentiated from both film and straight plays because:
* It uses song to carry the story
* It uses music to convey mood and subtext
* It uses song to replace much dialogue and to carry the story itself
* True musicals can be differentiated from plays with music because:
* A play with music could have the songs removed and the story would still make sense; in this form (see Frankel for a fuller description), the songs comment on, illustrate, or even interrupt the action, but the songs are not pivotal to the plot
* You cannot remove the songs from a true musical and still understand the story.
* Songs move the plot forward, carry the story
* Songs embody the turning points of the scenes, when work is most truly a musical

**IMAGE SYSTEMS**

* McKee has a section on image systems (p. 400-408, no notes provided) in which he shows how visual images can, with care, be used symbolically
* Equivalent in musical theater are presumably musical motifs associated with a particular character, theme or idea
* Transitions that are handled visually in film (see page 21 of these notes) work differently in musicals
* Some hard stops with applause
* Softer scene changes could be created by thematic connections in the music
* Sometimes music needed to cover entrances, exits, scene changes

**DIALOGUE**

* Musical theatre requires that story and dialogue be compressed because the songs take up much time and dominate the high points. In film, the time is taken with visual content.
* Musical theater, therefore, is probably more like film than straight theatre in requiring great economy in the dialogue: must say the maximum in the fewest possible words
* Each exchange of dialogue must turn the beats of the scene in one direction or another across the changing behaviors, without repetition

**MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES**

**RHYTHM (variation in scene length) AND TEMPO (activity level in scene)**

* Film has taught modern audiences
* To expect lots of events packed into a story
* To expect short scenes (averaging 2.5 minutes because after that camera runs out of things to look at)
* To be sophisticated about extracting subtextual information from scene and dialogue
* In contrast, in musical theater
* Scenes are likely to include not only dialogue but also a song 1-3 minutes long
* Traditional musicals were often rather slow in event (the entire first act of *Oklahoma* is about who will take Laurie to the box social; similar pace in *Marty)*
* Does today's musical theater need to tell its story through
* Shorter scenes and shorter songs?
* More events in each act?
* A faster, more urgent level of activity in each scene?
* Through faster music?
* Or not?

**CAN MUSICAL THEATER CHARACTERS BE COMPLEX?**

Aaron Frankel *(Writing the Broadway Musical)*

 In contrast to the gradual character disclosure of realistic theater, referred to as "onion-peeling," character development in musical theater might be called, to con a word, "beanstalk-springing." In the former, character is dense: packed, detailed, in grays, color to come. In the latter, character is sharp: line-drawn, contoured, in color to start. Both will forward character, but minutely in the former, boldly in the latter; recognition in the former will come on the last exit, in the latter, on the first entrance. "beanstalk-springing" gains enormous time in a musical, to make room of course for the music. (p. 31)

 Only bear in mind that one of the main differences between plotting musicals and plotting straight plays is that musicals require events which have *larger* details, and *fewer* details. (p. 50)

**TREATMENTS FOR MUSICALS**

* McKee's description of a treatment emphasizes what you SEE on the screen, but in musical theater, a lot of this would be taken care of by the set and costume designers and the directors.
* Clearly a musical theater "treatment" would read very differently from a film treatment
* Would still describe subtext
* Might indicate where speech moves into song
* Might indicate what musical motives should be incorporated into the score

**THE PROBLEMATIC ISSUE OF NARRATION**

McKee excoriates the use of narrative in film to tell the story in all but the most limited of circumstances:

Occasionally, brief telling narration, especially at the opening or during transitions between acts, such as in *Barry Lyndon*, is inoffensive, *but the trend toward using telling narration throughout a film threatens the future of our art . . .* turning the cinema into what was once known as *Classic Comic Books.* . . . The art of cinema connects Image A via editing, camera, or lens movement with Image B, and the effect is meanings C, D, and E, *expressed without explanation.* Recently, film after film slides a steady-cam through rooms and corridors, up and down streets, panning sets and cast while a narrator talks, talks, talks voice-over, telling us about a character's upbringing, or his dreams and fears, or explaining the politics of the story's society--until the film becomes little more than multimillion-dollar books-on-tape, illustrated. (p. 344-345)

Aaron Frankel in the preface to the 2000 edition of *Writing the Broadway Musical* discusses *Ragtime:*

 As a result [of Livent's creative control], *Ragtime*'s writing, in my eyes, took second place. In the end the show was certainly a richly produced Broadway musical, beautiful to look at; and from the start it was also a masterpiece of promotion. But some inner workings were not there. As characters narrated literally about themselves in the third person (!), *Ragtime* may be the first "documusical," a pageant of tableaux, illustrating but not re-creating its source, a manufactured entertainment. Missing at its heart was the complexity, wit, and irony of the novel. Missing at its backbone was the basic song of a musical, the relationship song, where characters in conflict seek to affect each other. . . .

 Back to basics then: not songs that describe, announce, illustrate, or symbolize the story but that heighten action, reveal character, develop situation, and forward plot, and so *tell* the story. . . .

 *Jekyll and Hyde* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* are both throwbacks derived from the British examples. They are a succession of declamatory songs, seemingly one after another, expressing familiar pop emotion in place of particular dramatic action. In them all, we hear more and more the voices of the writers and less and less the voices of the characters. (p. xiii)