

The Narrative



ACT 1

The opening of a narrative typically establishes characters, setting, themes and engages the audience. It features a catalyst that sends the character on their journey. By the end of the Act 1, the main character reaches a turning point where they commit to the action.

- **Establishing genre and tone.** The opening of a narrative plays an important role in establishing genre and tone. When filmmakers establish genre, they enter into a contract with the audience. If a narrative doesn't deliver on the promise of genre, the audience will be dissatisfied and disappointed. In a horror film, for example, expects suspense, a few scares and a hefty dose of gore. Anyone who has ever seen a film that is too formulaic or cliched will understand how tedious slavishly following genre conventions can be.
- **Establishing character.** All stories are about a character trying to achieve a goal. Narratives always establish characters – their traits, motivation and goals – within the first act. To become involved in a story, the audience needs to know who the characters are and what they want. Establishing character also means establishing their flaws. Characters always change. Screenwriters often refer to this change as a 'character arc'. As noted in *Writing Movies*: "Another mark of protagonists is their ability change. In pursuing their goals, protagonists meet obstacles that force them to adjust and adapt and, in turn, they grow or transform in some way. This progression is called an arc."
- **Establishing setting.** The first act of a narrative also establishes the setting. The setting is where the narrative unfolds. Films might have more than one setting. Setting often plays an important role in character motivation or might take on metaphorical significance.

- **Building empathy.** In the opening act of a story, the audience will be encouraged to empathise with the point of view of the main characters. Remember that empathy is different to sympathy. Heaping misfortune on characters doesn't encourage the audience to empathise with them. Most narratives will build empathy by showing events through the character's eyes, throwing the audience into their world and giving them worthwhile problems to grapple with.
- **The catalyst.** At the beginning of a narrative, something occurs that throws the character's world into turmoil. Most people don't like change. Characters are no different. Something dramatic happens that starts their journey. This is often called the '**inciting incident**'.
- **Debate.** In most narratives, the protagonist doesn't immediately pursue their goals or commit to the narrative. Most go through a period of indecision.
- **Turning point.** This is where the resolution may begin to unfold for the characters and the narrative. Sound is a tool often used to convey the turning point of characters and the storyline. The audience the shift and can often comprehend when the turning point occurs.



ACT 2

Act 2 of a story is characterised by rising tension. Your characters pursue their goal but encounter setbacks and obstacles of increasing difficulty. When it seems all hope is lost, they find a solution to their problems which propels the story into its final act.

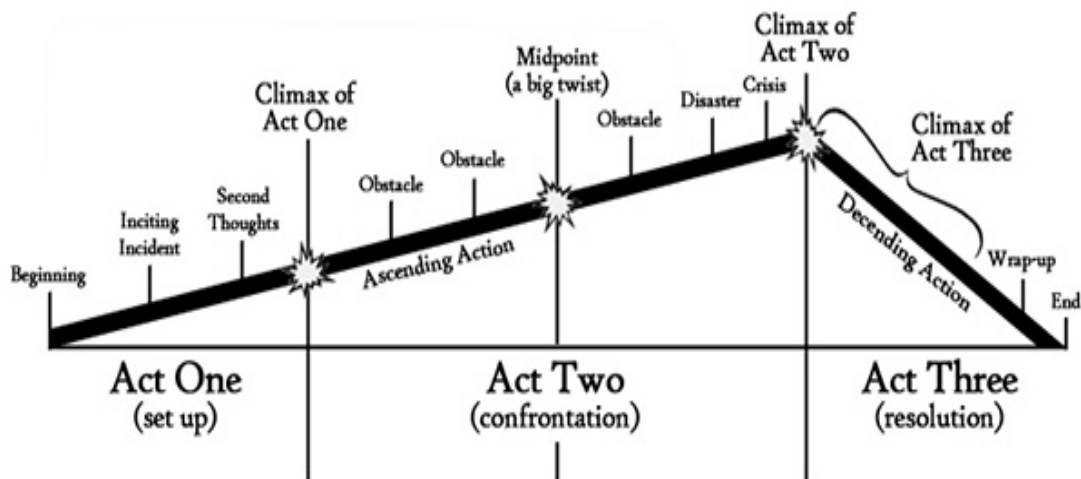
- **Multiple storylines.** Act 2 in a narrative usually involves multiple storylines. These subplots help to engage the audience in what is often referred to as the 'sagging middle' of a story. In narratives, the main storyline often deals with the main external conflict in a film whereas subplots often deal with relationships or romance.
- **Rising tension.** Act 2 is characterised by rising tension. Stories are fundamentally about characters who want something. In the second act, they go about achieving that goal but run into obstacles and setbacks of increasing difficulty.
- **Midpoint.** The middle of the film often includes what screenwriters call the 'mid-point disaster'. It's a dramatic event that raises the stakes. It can be a victory, defeat or combination of the two. If you skip to the middle of any film, chances are that you'll find yourself in the middle of an incredibly suspenseful or dramatic scene.
- **Dark night of the soul.** As the narrative pushes relentlessly to the end of Act 2, characters often endure what Blake Snyder refers to as the 'Dark night of the soul'. This is the moment when, after suffering a terrible defeat, it looks like their goal is as elusive as ever. From this desperation, the character often finds the solution to their problem and the narrative hurtles into its final act.

ACT 3

Act 3 is the most important part of a story. It is when the story reaches its most dramatic most intense point and the story is resolved. Typically, the resolution includes two important parts: the climax and the resolution.

- **Climax.** The climax is most dramatic scene in your film. The stakes are high and the character takes action to achieve their goal. What will they do to triumph? In a horror film, this is the most suspenseful scene. In a comedy, it's the funniest.
- **Resolution.** Following the climax, the storyline is resolved. The end of a story doesn't have to be happy but it must be *satisfying*. The resolution of a narrative – happy or sad, triumphant or bittersweet – should deliver on the promises of genre and tone established in Act 1.

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BRETT LAMB

MEDIA CODES AND CONVENTIONS

The media conventions, or story principles, that you need to be familiar with for Narrative and Ideology include:

- **Cause and effect.** Narratives are a series of events linked by cause and effect. Cause and effect is inseparable from character and audience engagement. In a narrative, characters trigger and react to events. What characters do and how they react is determined by the character's traits.
- **Opening, development and resolution.** The opening of a narrative typically establishes characters, setting, themes and engages the audience. It also features an event that starts the chain of cause and effect in the narrative. By the end of the first act, the protagonist reaches a turning point, where they have to commit to the action, raising a dramatic question that will be answered by the end of the film. In the development of the narrative, the characters attempt to resolve the conflict established in the opening of the narrative. Characters are forced to change and develop as they grapple with the conflict. This is often called a 'character arc'. The resolution of the narrative is when all of the storylines are resolved and tied up. The question raised in the opening of the narrative is resolved.
- **Point of view.** In narratives, the audience is encouraged to identify with the point of view of one or more characters. This identification is often achieved through a combination of production elements.
- **Multiple storylines.** In films, there is usually more than one storyline. In many films, the protagonist has to deal with both external and internal conflict. Storylines are often related and/or intertwined. Storylines are often related and/or intertwined.
- **Establishment and development of characters.** Narrative and character are inseparable. In narratives, characters react to and trigger events. Characters, and the relationship between characters, can be established and developed using a combination of media codes – including camera techniques, acting, mise en scene, editing, lighting and sound. Character traits and motivations are usually established in the opening of the narrative.
- **Setting.** The setting is where the narrative unfolds. Films might have more than one setting. Sometimes, setting plays an important role in character motivation or might take on metaphorical significance.
- **Structuring of time.** Films rarely occur in real time. Filmmakers often manipulate time – expanding and contracting it in ways that serve the narrative. Media language for TIME; Linear narrative, non-linear narrative, montage, fast motion, time-lapse, slow motion, jump cut, reversed footage, freeze frame, flash frame, split screen, smash cut, speed ramping, superimposition, whip pan, wipe by cut, audio match cut, visual match cut.