

Screenplay structure

By Stephen Hall from his book "First Screenplay Help and Tips" ©2009

Referring to the cliché 'if you fail to plan, you plan to fail' sums up the screenplay writer's needs for structure. Wail and scream all you like, but structure to your movie is all about planning. It's essential and don't believe you can miss out this important part of your writing process, even when you're an expert.

You don't decide to go on holiday abroad and just get into your car to go. You need your passport; you need to pack your case. You need to know how to get there, what you need to know to get there and you need to know your next and preferably your final destination. Okay, you could just drive, but you'd need to know to which airport or seaport or border crossing point. You'd need to know which road gets you there at the very least. You'll need to search for somewhere to stay if you're on the road too long. Don't forget that fuel for your car. All of this is planning.

You can have a loose structure. Many people work this way. They may not know the ending, but they have a perspective of where they're headed.

You can have a definite structure. Some writers spend as much time on getting their structure complete as they do on the actual writing. They break down every scene with minute detail so their journey is accurate.

Which structure is the right way? There isn't a simple answer to that.

Blake Snyder uses his '[Save the Cat](#)' fifteen beats plan to show you the way from fade in to fade out. There's no doubting the concrete planning to his structure matches the needs of any Hollywood successful movie.

Michael Hague's six point stage structure can also be matched and plotted across most major movies.

John Truby's twenty-two step story structure is another devoted plan. It creates master plans used by many on our tiny planet.

Robert McKee says the 'story is supreme' and that 'structure is character.' He's another you should check out for advice, if you can afford it. His story seminars are taken by the most gifted of writers and many award winning screenplay authors.

These are just examples (but the very best) of many options available to you.

At the end of the day, they are all versions of the three act play. We all know from school that you need a start, middle and an ending. It's how all stories run if they're successful. It's what you put into those three acts that become the plans set out by our screenplay writing experts.

1. In act one you'll have the introduction to your problem, your main star or two with an opportunity presenting itself to your protagonist and the main competitor.
2. They'll enter act two when they set off on their voyage. Here they progress and change their plans until they reach the midpoint of your movie; the point of no return.
3. The stakes get higher now before they reach a major setback. Act three takes them in to the final resolution, the big climax as they find out how it all ends followed by the after effects.

No matter what you do, don't let structure stop you from writing. It's better that you put pen to paper (well, use your computer) and write regularly and then worry about structure later, than to start with structure as a means to procrastinate to stop you essentially, from writing.

Let us know how you get on with structure - which way works best for you?