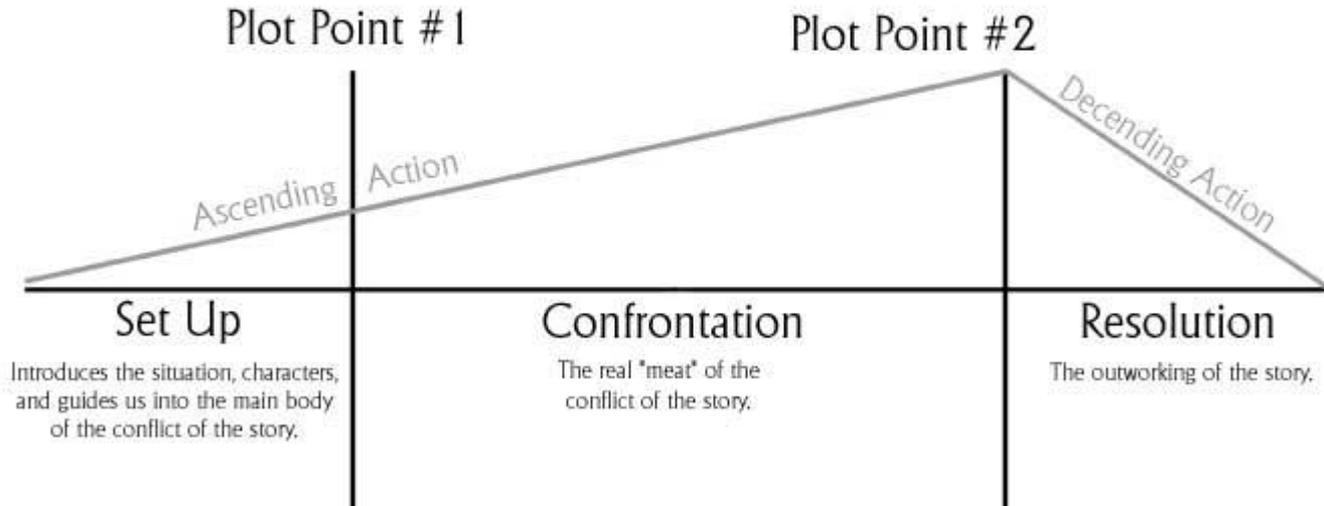


# Storytelling

**The Foundation of Film**

# 3 Act Structure: Linear

## The Basic Film Paradigm



The 3 act structure is the basic design of a fictional narrative story in literature, theater or film and is understood universally, across cultures.

Being able to organize your story along these guidelines will help create a coherent plot whether your story is 30 seconds or 3 hours.

Having the ability to recognize in films this structure will help you analyze and write about the medium successfully.

# 3 Act Structure illustrated by the film JUNO



# 3 Act Structure: Act I

**Act I:** Comprises the first ¼ of the screenplay (for a 2 hour movie that is approximately 30 minutes. For a 10 minute film, it will comprise about the first 2 ½ minutes. Act I is known as the **set up** or the **status quo**. We are introduced to static characters and settings with the expectation that status quo will change throughout the film.

Also known as the **exposition** this is the portion of the film where the audience is introduced to characters, interrelationships between characters and places those characters in a time and in a place. Act I should also include the **dramatic premises**. Meaning why are we watching this film? What is it about? If it is a film about a teen pregnancy, the audience should know about it before the end of Act I.

The first act also introduces the **inciting incident** which is the event that spurs the character into action and moving the story along to the Act II.

## **INCITING INCIDENT**

*Juno MacGuff (Ellen Page) sleeps with Paulie Bleeker (Michael Cera) and after taking three pregnancy tests, she finds out she's pregnant. (00:05:33)*



# 3 Act Structure: Act II

**Act II**, also known as the **rising action** is where the majority of your film takes place. In a 2 hour film, it would comprise about 60 minutes overall. In a 10 minute film, it would comprise about 5 minutes. Act II introduces a variety of challenges that the character must overcome. This is the point in the film where characters are attempting to attain their goal but encounter obstacles along the way.

The end of Act I and the introduction to Act II is typically marked by what is referred to as a **lock in**, in which the character has reached a point where they are unable to turn back or return to the way things were at the beginning of the film.

Act II is where filmmakers build sympathy (or disdain) for their characters. The protagonist is often liked more for TRYING than actually succeeding to overcome their challenges. Antagonists are often disliked more for preventing the protagonist from achieving their goals as opposed to simply being evil.

## **LOCK IN**

*After debating whether or not to get an abortion and visiting a clinic, Juno decides to keep her baby.  
(00:19:18)*



# 3 Act Structure: Act II

Act II is also where the **first culmination** takes place. This is the point near or at the halfway mark of the film where the audience is led to believe that maybe everything will work out for the main character, sometimes call the **happy interlude**. At this point in the film, the character has already overcome multiple obstacles and there are at their highest point since the beginning of the film.

The **climax** or the **main culmination** of the film takes place at the end of Act II. This is the moment when everything falls apart for the character.

## FIRST CULMINATION

Juno goes to the home of Vanessa and Mark Loring (Jennifer Garner; Jason Bateman) who are prospective adoptive parents. At the end of their meeting, Vanessa is anxious about Juno's decision to give them her baby and asks, "How sure are you?" Juno replies that she's very happy to have them as adoptive parents: The baby will be theirs. Juno wants her baby born into a happy family. (36:35)



## MAIN CULMINATION

While Juno and Mark are hanging out one night, Mark tells her that he's leaving Vanessa. To Mark's surprise, Juno begs him, "do not divorce your wife!" When Vanessa comes home, Mark admits that he's not ready to have a child and Juno leaves, extremely upset. Vanessa believes she has lost her opportunity to adopt Juno's baby and is devastated. (1:08:40)



# 3 Act Structure: Act III

Act III presents the **final confrontation** of the film (the final battle, running through the airport to stop the love of your life from flying away). This is the shortest act in the 3 act structure and lasts between 20 and 30 minutes in a 2 hour film. In a 10 minute film, it will typically last 2 - 3 minutes.

The third act is often referred to as **falling action** and **resolution**, though the idea of resolution can vary from filmmaker to filmmaker. Many use the third act as an opportunity to surprise viewers by not resolving the film/story in a predictable way, also known as a **twist**. One of the greatest film twists of all time comes from the *6th Sense* where Bruce Willis's character realizes (along with the audience) that he has been dead the whole time. Or, *Fight Club* in which Edward Norton's character realizes that Tyler Durden is just a figment of his imagination. These revelations employing the twist technique are offering a more dynamic ending, but one in which all the loose ends aren't necessarily tied up.

However, many films offer predictable endings. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. Filmmakers want their audiences to leave feeling satisfied.

## THIRD ACT TWIST

*Juno gives birth to a baby boy surrounded by her family. At the hospital, Vanessa cradles her newborn son, and we learn that Juno, despite Mark's betrayal, kept her promise to Vanessa. Juno says, "He was always hers" (1:23:56)*



# Alternatives

There are many filmmakers who will tell you that the 3 Act structure is arbitrary for many different types of film, such as alternative films, avant garde, documentary, and to some degree, shorts. However, when writing for screen, it is helpful to know how much time you have to tell your story and the plot points you must hit in order to make your film watchable.

The 3 Act structure is not the only structure available, however, it is important to understand this methodology because it is the most commonly used.

**Non-Linear:** While non-linear filmmaking still uses the 3-act structure, it does not use it in the order we are accustomed to. Filmmakers will often distort the timeline of the film (telling the story backwards such as *Memento* or *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*)

**Central Structure:** A two hour feature film shown in a movie theatre using continuous action. There are no intermissions. It's one continuous act-less event which revolves around a problem. One way to look at a story, when you are creating one, is not through any division into acts but through the eyes of that problem, which is the central event and the heart of a great story's structure. (Films like *Russian Ark*)

**The Ensemble (Polyphonic)** Any story structured around the experiences of numerous protagonists centered in a unified place and time. Often used as a device to explore cross-sections of society. E.G. Most of Robert Altman's films, *Magnolia*, *Crash*.

**The Repeated Action Plot:** A protagonist is stuck in a repeated loop. E.G. *Groundhog Day*, *Run, Lola, Run*.

**The Subjective Plot:** Stories told from the protagonist's internal, filtered perspective. E.G. *8 1/2*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Donnie Darko*.

**The Jumbled Plot:** Stories that present a scrambled sequence of events motivated artistically, by filmmaker's prerogative. E.G. The majority of Tarantino's films, *Out of Sight*, *Following*.

# Telling a Story in 10 minutes or Less

In this course, all of our films will be 10 minutes or less. How can we use these narrative devices to tell a short story within the constraints of our time limitations?

[Russian Roulette](#)

[UK -- 5 min -- Ben Aston](#)

[Worlds We Create](#)

[USA -- 9 min -- Nicholas Santos, Kyle I. Kelley, Alison Walter](#)

[The Light and the Little Girl](#)

[USA -- 7 min -- Guy Pools](#)

[Forever's Not So Long](#)

[USA - 12 minutes -- Shawn Morrison](#)

[Jay and Seth Vs the Apocalypse](#)

[USA -- 9 min -- Seth Rogan](#)

[Costello Cavalcanti](#)

[USA -- 8 min -- Wes Anderson](#)

**Short films Under 10 minutes**

# Writing About Film

**Objective:** When writing about a film it is more effective to approach it from an academic standpoint rather than a personal one. Whether or not you like a film shouldn't influence your critical eye. While personal feelings may play a role in your reaction to the film, those feelings must be backed up by objective facts and a close reading of story, character, acting, cinematography and other aesthetics.

# Introduction

**Introduction:** When writing an analysis it is crucial that you begin your essay with the following information:

- \* *Title of The Film - Italicized*
- \* Year of the Films Release) - Parentheses
- \* Director of the Film
- \* Stars of the Film

**Tip:** When writing for online media (blogs, articles) it is typical to include links to this information for your readers to follow for more information.

Example:

***Carrie (1976)***  
**Brian DePalma**  
**Sissy Spacek, Piper Laurie**

**or**

**Carrie (1976), directed by Brian DePalma, starring Sissy Spacek and Piper Laurie is a revenge horror film about a high school outcast who discovers she has telekinetic powers.**

# Summary

Summary: Keep your summary short, but hit the main plot points, characters and settings presented throughout the film. It isn't necessary to include an abundance of detail. You want to give your reader factual context without spoiling the major aspects of the film.

# Production Information

When relevant, you may consider using information about the film's production. This can be useful for creating a deeper level of context and understanding for your reader. For example, knowing the film is a Pixar Production vs. a Dreamworks production allows your reader to infer certain elements without extended explanation.

## *Elements to Consider:*

- \* Country/City/State of Origin
- \* Production Company/Producers
- \* Writer(s), Cinematographer, and other notable production crew
- \* Shooting Locations
- \* Adaptation/Remake/Series
- \* Awards and Honors

# Questions to Answer

When someone decides to read a film analysis or review they go in with a set of questions they hope to have answered about varying aspects of the film. It is your job as the writer to answer these questions factually.

It is helpful to do a little research before and after you watch a film you're intending to review.

You want to try answer the basic questions, but you always want to include a little something extra that the average audience member wouldn't know to add interest and credibility.

## Sample Questions

- \* Is the film's story compelling? Why or why not. And if so, in what ways?
- \* What makes the characters interesting?
- \* Describe the acting. Who is the star? How did they do in this film compared to other films?
- \* Who was the director? How does this film compare to other projects they've done.
- \* How long is the film? Does that make a difference in whether or not you found it successful?
- \* What was the most interesting aspect of the film? Describe it in detail.

# Aesthetics to Consider

\* Acting

\* Direction

\* Setting

\* Costumes/Makeup

\* Editing

\* Cinematography

- Visual Aesthetics
- Composition
- Framing
- Color
- Tone
- Camera Movement
-

# Conclusion

The conclusion of your analysis is the time and place to discuss your personal feelings about the film. Once you have discussed the factual elements of the film, your reader will want to know if you enjoyed the film, why or why not.