

## **Screenplay. The Foundations of Screenwriting by Syd Field**

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*"Writing is the ability to ask yourself questions and get the answers."*

### **Background information:**

Syd Field's "Step By Step Guide from Concept to Finished Script" attracted a lot of attention when it was published in 1979, as it is considered the first systematically deferred guide to writing a script. The great success of his book triggered a wave of easily implementable and manageable theories on the dramaturgy, especially of the film script, in the eighties. Field held seminars all over the world and worked as a so-called "Script Doctor." Syd Field started out as a screenwriter himself, but after a few years as a free lancer, he accepted a position as an editor at the Los Angeles production company Cinemobile Systems, where he later rose to head the story department. Working at Cinemobile Systems gave him a new perspective on scriptwriting, formulated in the question of why he had selected only forty out of 2000 scripts that he had reviewed within two years.

The book is clearly structured: after the basic terms have been clarified, the reader is confronted with exercises that help him to create his own script while reading the book. Field peppered his pragmatic and goal-oriented book with experiences from his seminars, with clear film examples for explanations and with practical tips from an experienced writer and reader of scripts for novices.

The classic drama structure is packaged in a timely manner. The many examples make the drama structure easy to understand, and, most importantly, give structure and order to the scriptwriting process. Of course, when it comes to structure, Field makes use of the "Poetics." The book is a concrete guide, a help for self-help. The point is not to weigh the elements of the dramatic structure against one another, or to examine the relationship between historical reality and a dramatic action, but rather to create applicable rules for writers. Sometimes this leads to formalism. The process is looked at and presented from the outside in. Field wants to help the author create the form. This form can be filled with content either beforehand or later.

Field emphasizes that the instructions are a sketch, not a script-writing formula. But he uses examples to show that deviations are likely to lead to failure. He recommends sketching a script on index cards first so that the structure is constantly checked. As a result, the creative process is continuously analytically dismantled and all content is subject to a forced structuring.

Field explains how a character has to be formed, but he restricts insights into a character to the "want""need" dichotomy (see below), from which he derives all internal motivation. The book is a practical guide to scriptwriting and focuses on structural issues. Even if Field asks

the author to start with a blank page, he basically assumes that the preparatory work, i.e. the process of finding a subject, the author's examination of his material and the resulting formation of one or more characters has already taken place.

### **Definition of the drama:**

"Drama is all about conflict. Without conflict you have no characters, without characters you have no action, without action you have no plot, without a plot you have no script. "

### **Structure of the drama:**

"A story is a whole that consists of several parts: the action, characters, the scenes, sequences, Acts I, II, and III, incidents, episodes, events, music, locations etc. - everything together forms a story." Structure holds the story together. All dramatic stories are based on a structural model: the paradigm. Field suggests that all good scripts conform to the paradigm concept, emphasizing that the paradigm is a "form", not a "formula". The paradigm formally structures a story, serving as its backbone, so to speak. It is not a formula because it is used to generate new stories over and over again. "Story determines structure, not structure the story." A paradigm is the following outlined execution of the dramatic structure of a script:

first act	second act	third act
(pp. 1-30)	(pp. 30-90)	(pp. 90-120)
exposition (10)	mid point (60)	resolution
confrontation (30)		
plot point I (30)	plot point II (90)	

An average film is between 90 and 120 minutes long. Since one page of the script corresponds to about a minute of film, the key moments of the paradigm can be pinpointed:

### ***Act I / The Setup***

On the first thirty pages the exposition (referred to by Field as "setup") takes place, the context of the story is presented: the characters and their relationships to one another, the situation, the plot and the dramatic premise are presented. "The dramatic premise is the trigger for the story, it provides the decisive impetus that will lead the story to its resolution."

### ***Act II / The Confrontation***

The second act extends as the main part (the confrontation) over the following 60 pages, i.e. from pages 30 to 90. The protagonist tries to realize the “dramatic need” which was established in the dramatic premise, but obstacles of increasing intensity stand in his/her way.

### ***Act III / The resolution***

From the end of the second act to the end of the third act (the resolution), i.e. from pages 90 to 120, the story is resolved. This does not mean that it ends here, it does mean that there is a resolution to the particular premise and to the confrontations that the main character experienced.

The transitions from the introduction to the main part and from the main part to the resolution are the plot points. Their function is to give the story a decisive turn.

"A plot point is an incident, episode, or event that interferes with a plot and steers the story in a new direction." The plot point I at the end of the first act should be placed on pages 20-30. It leads the protagonist into a new situation and is his first step into the confrontation inherent in the premise. The second plot point II indicated at the end of the second act on pages 85-90 denotes an event that brings about the consequence of the confrontation laid out in the premise.

The midpoint divides the second act into two parts of about the same length. It is the moment in which the story takes a decisive turn. Here the protagonist recognizes the core of his mission, circumstances are reversed, he sees the way to the resolution of the story. Field compares the dramatic events with an upward and downward movement. At the midpoint, the basic conflict set in the premise and announced in plot point I rises to its highest point; the protagonist achieves an unstable solution to the conflict, only to then move downwards towards an albeit tragic final solution. In the case of a story with a positive outcome, the protagonist is in the situation of a false ending, an unstable tragic solution, and then moves towards the final positive outcome of the event in an upward movement.

### **Basic dramatic principles:**

"The character is the heart, soul and nervous system of a story." There is only one protagonist per story, other characters can play major roles, but only the most active of all counts as a protagonist. Characters have an inner life and an outer life. The inner workings, his biography from birth to the start of the film, shaped the character and his needs. This constitutes the context of the story. The outward life of the character describes his action from beginning to end of the film, which is controlled by his need. The outside life reveals the character. There are three ways to reveal a character: 1. through the conflicts he experiences in order to achieve his goal, 2. through interaction with other characters, 3. in dealing with one's own emotions. In order to create a complete character, the three basic components of life must be

shown: the professional, the private and the intimate. "Form your character by creating a character biography, then reveal it by their actions (...) ACTION IS CHARACTER."

A successful film character is defined by the following characteristics: Dramatic goal, point of view, behavior, change, attitude, identification and action. A dramatic goal means what the character wants to achieve, get or work out in the course of the action. The point of view is the way the character looks at the world. A good character always has a strong point of view. The character is mostly revealed in his/her behavior and reaction to the incidents in the story. The main character goes through an emotional change during his story. The character's demeanor describes their mood. If the character and his actions are relatable for the viewer, an identification takes place, which is essential for the viewer's participation. In summary: action is character: a person is defined by what he/she does, less by what he says. Every action is followed by a reaction. The reaction by the character's environment can be positive or negative. The conflict arises for the character from obstacles to the character's need, which gives the story the dramatic tension.

Action and reaction scenes of a conflict must be coordinated with one another in the script to be effective. To structure this, Field defines elements that are related to each other. Field sees the sequence as the most important sub element of a script, below the layer of acts. A sequence is a series of scenes that are held together by a basic idea. It forms a complete unit of dramatic action. (e.g. an escape could be an act of a screenplay. The sequences of an escape could be: the outbreak, enjoying freedom, the capture) The number of sequences in a script is variable (and depends on the genre). A sequence usually consists of several scenes. A scene is a unit in which a certain action happens in a certain place. The action is supposed to move the story forward. It is the smallest structural element that Field defines. The length of a scene is also variable and depends heavily on the genre. A scene is determined by place and time. If one of the two elements changes, a scene ends and a new scene begins. Field distinguishes between two types of scenes: visual and dialogical scenes. In visual scenes, actions define the perspective; in dialogical scenes, the perspective is determined by the dialogue. A scene often consists of both components.

### **Creation of a script:**

"A script is a story told through dialogue and action within a dramatic structure." A script describes one (or more) people who are pursuing their goal. The main subject of a script is the character and her/his actions. "Action" defines all action, "Character" defines all triggers or recipients of action. The primary requirement when writing a screenplay is knowledge of all aspects of both elements. The author should be able to grasp his story thematically in one sentence. Only this level of knowledge guarantees that, when creating a story, the essential requirements for the structure (the "need" and "want" of a character, acts, plot points) can be met by the writer.

The idea for a script can come from any source: reality, literature, other scripts, imagination, etc.. Before the writing process begins, the writer must first thoroughly explore the idea and gain specific insight into the matter and its effects on the elements, action and character. The genre should also be determined before writing. A genre (e.g. the superordinate genres comedy, drama, tragedy, tragicomedy and the sub-genres, e.g. family drama, adventure, thriller, crime, etc.) determines the tone and color of a story and abstractly defines the two plot points (rising and descending dramatic curve, definition of the midpoint, wrong ending or supposed triumph).

The theme of the story gives rise to the "want", i.e. what initially prompts the protagonist to take action (In Tootsie, an unemployed actor goes as far as to disguise as a woman) and the "need" of the protagonist, i.e. what drives him to take action against the obstacles that confront him in the second act. (In Tootsie, the protagonist has to accept their true identity). So Tootsie's theme is "Identity."

The way the character reacts to obstacles determines the (superordinate) genre of the story (in Tootsie the protagonist acts extremely against his true identity in the first and second acts, which makes the story a comedy)

In comedy and drama, the obstacles that create conflict are the essential elements of the story. "A story must always move forward, towards its dissolution."

In order to write a story stringently and in a dramatically effective form, the author must know its end. Only in this way can the author define each scene as a step towards this end.

Since dramatic efficiency requires a story to transform the character or his environment, it is effective to have the beginning and the end e.g. in the same place or at the same time in order to prove this efficiency. (E.g. the character returns to his hometown after she/he has achieved a victory (place) or the plot is an experience that the protagonist describes, which has made him into a different person. (time))

Field sees two different ways of developing a script: Either you work out the idea (the topic) for the story and then develop the characters, or you first have a character in front of you and then build the story around them. For both processes, Field recommends proceeding from the outside to the inside: If the character design is first in the foreground, one first develops the environment (the context) of a person, and then turns to his inner life. The inner life is defined by the biography and this must focus on the "want" that triggers the story and the "need" revealed by it. (So the protagonist in Tootsie had to prove his "worth" over and over again to his mother. This led to an inner devaluation of his true identity. When the circumstances undercut his own devaluation (the role as a tomato he is forced to take), this triggers the above-mentioned act of desperation).

If the action is at the beginning of the considerations, a list of the sequences should first be created in chronological order. Here Field advises the index card system as a structural aid, since the topic is often only recognized in the course of dealing with an action, which, once properly defined, can influence the sequence of actions. First, a sequence should be recorded

on an index card. The idea for sequences can already be divided into scenes. It is helpful to use different colored index cards for each of the three acts. Field recommends planning four days for structuring: the first day for act I, the second day for act II up to the central point, the third day from the central point to the end of act II, the third day for act III. Once the story has been structured and this structure has been internalized, the writing of the scenes should begin.

An intermediate stage before writing actual scenes is to write a treatment. A treatment is a summary of the story, on around 20-30 pages, in which the central points (plot points) should be clearly defined. It can also involve dialogue. Once the sequence and structure of the characters have been thought through, the plot structure is transferred to the paradigm model in order to check its dramatic efficiency. Then sequences and scenes should be worked out. When designing a scene, as with a sequence, the context should be created first, then the content. First of all, the function of the scene for the whole story must be clear in order to then formulate its content.

There are no superfluous scenes in a stringent script. When designing scenes, attention should be paid to their visual quality: a certain location has an effect on an action, a certain time of day allows for emphasizing certain elements of an action. Another means of achieving additional dramatic efficiency is through physical obstacles. (An escape leads to a maze, the search for a person in a packed stadium, a declaration of love on a construction site, etc.) Field advises against flashbacks, the character should explain himself through his actions and his reactions to given events in the now.

According to Field, the viewer decides after just 10 minutes of runtime time whether he likes the plot or not, the same applies to the assessment of a reader while reading the script: the first 10 pages decide. The author must therefore create an introduction that announces the essential elements of the story (action, character, genre, tone) in an efficient manner. The dramatic premise and the context of the story must be clearly defined. Dialogue should communicate facts, reveal emotional stages of character and announce conflicts. The scriptwriter should not mention any camera positions. "The scriptwriter's job is to tell the director what to shoot, not how." He should adhere to the formal guidelines when creating a script, which in the US are standardized up to the millimeter-precise specification of the distance between stage direction and dialogue. This is the only way to guarantee that one page of a script takes up about a minute in a film, which of course only applies if it is a "standardized" situation, for example a dialogue between two people and not a description in the form of an instruction of a complex action.

When actually writing, Field recommends a fixed schedule of about three hours a day. The first draft should be finished in six weeks. When writing the first draft, the first thing to do is to write, i.e. to produce material, and to stick with the designed structure even if there are doubts. In this way, this structure can be checked efficiently. Extensive changes should be left to the second draft. Self-criticism when creating the first draft hinders the creative process. The rewriting process should take three weeks. Above all, the author should check whether

he has favorite scenes that do not fit into the concept. In a third phase, the structure should be weighted to check whether individual acts are too long or too short compared to others.

### **Chinatown by the rules of Syd Field:**

Field's request to introduce the main character in the first 10 minutes of the film, to define the dramatic premise and the dramatic situation, as well as the genre and the tone, is fulfilled: Jack Gittes is an elegantly dressed private detective for "delicate investigations" and we meet him in his everyday world, his office. When talking to a client, Gittes is empathetic. But his statement: "You need to be rich to kill somebody and get away with it." testifies to a "need" to heal the cause of the deeply rooted cynicism. Gittes' point of view on privilege and justice introduces the premise and theme of the story. Gittes "want" is to take revenge on the mighty and the powerful of the city who have robbed him of his self-respect. His "need" is to accept himself as he is and to know his limits.

The alleged Mrs. Mulwray delivers after five minutes of film time the triggering element of the film, with her assignment for Gittes to find out with whom her husband is having an affair. This sets the story in motion.

Gittes does the job routinely. But then his weak spot is touched several times: his honor is violated. First his photos of evidence get in the newspaper and he is accused of breaking a code of honor for private detectives. Then the real Mrs. Mulwray threatens with a formal complaint: the woman who gave Gittes the job was not Evelyn Mulwray, another severe humiliation. Ultimately, Gittes risks to lose his license as a detective.

Plot Point I of the story is when Gittes' sees first indications that he (as well as the alleged Ms. Mulwray, who is now dead) was the victim of an operation to cover up a huge scandal over the water supply of the city of Los Angeles. Gittes hunting instinct is awakened.

The real culprits he is to track down now are precisely the arrogant powerful people who have severely humiliated him in the past. Gittes is on the hook.

Field's demand has been met that Plot Point I should turn the story into a different direction: a routine research into adultery has now turned into a hunt for life and death. Gittes 'will risk his life to restore his honor, but there is much more to it than that: He wants to regain the dignity that was taken from him in Chinatown.

In the second act, which is now beginning, Gittes first recognizes the gigantic extent of the scandal he has tracked down: it is about the water supply for the entire city, about land speculation with amounts in the three-digit million range.

At this point at the latest, a hero who is not subject to the special premise of this story would turn to the authorities or ask for help in some other way. But for Gittes it's about everything, that's too tempting.

Hollis Mulwray dies, like the supposed Mrs. Mulwray before, and Gittes encounters other significant obstacles. Police officer Escobar and his cronies try to prevent him from

investigating, they even slit his nose, and threaten with license revocation, all warnings that Gittes is playing a game he is not up to.

After 63 minutes, the central point is reached when Gittes discovers Noah Cross. Cross and Mulwray used to jointly own the waterworks. Gittes now knows that Cross, Evelyn Mulwray's father, is the real antagonist. He also knows what Cross is capable of, two people are already dead. But Gittes continues unabashedly. Gittes' goal shifts, now he wants to convict Cross. He meets Cross to assess him. Cross surprisingly assigns him to find the (supposed) lover of Hollis Mulwray (who is actually Hollis Mulwray's stepdaughter). Gittes believes he is still in control of the game, so he accepts the assignment. This is the supposed triumph from which Gittes will go steeply downhill. Because with the assignment Cross has made his decisive move, Gittes is already defeated here, the tragic thing is that he not only doesn't know, Gittes believes, just like Cross planned it, that he controls the game.

Now a love affair is developing between Evelyn and Gittes. Gittes follows Evelyn to a house where Mulwray's lover is said to be. He confronts Evelyn. She says the lover is her sister, but Gittes no longer believes her because of her many excuses.

Gittes is now already in Cross' world and area of influence. Hollis Mulwray appears to have drowned in the ocean. A remark by the Chinese gardener puzzles Gittes: "Salty water is not good for the grass." The Mulwray Estate garden pond contains salt water. Gittes finds Mulwray's glasses in the pond and realizes that Cross must have drowned Hollis Mulwray in the pond. When he meets Evelyn again to tell her that, Gittes realizes that Evelyn and the supposed lover are very intimate. He confronts Evelyn: She then provides the decisive revelation and plot point II: The lover is her sister AND her daughter!

Here the movement of the story takes a last turn: Gittes now only wants one thing: to stop the amorality, i.e. to stop Cross. With Evelyn's revelation, Cross has shown that he is beyond all laws that play a role in human coexistence. Gittes could have recognized the full extent of Cross greed here, assessed that he may not beat Cross but still be able to save himself, Evelyn and her daughter. But he can't let go of the obsession to revenge his past humiliation.

This introduces the (short) third act. There are now only a few steps left to resolution. Gittes believed that Evelyn and her daughter could be best protected from Cross in Chinatown, but in the end he himself brings Cross on their trail (and thus to his destination). Gittes tragically repeats the experience of his defeat as a police officer in this neighborhood: "I tried to help somebody but all I did went in the opposite direction".

His unsuccessful attempt to arrest Cross shows Gittes his decisive mistake: he is all alone, no one, not even the police (Escobar), are on his side. This is the world of Cross, in it there is no place for Gittes and his claim for decency and morality for everyone.

Gittes' appeal to Escobar therefore also goes nowhere: "Hey is rich! Understand? The rich allways get away with it! " He is deep in the world of Noah Cross in which he has no more allies and will not find any.

The result is that he again, and this time definitely, loses his dignity: he cannot keep his promise to protect Evelyn and her daughter.