Theme & Scene:
The Magic of Nuts & Bolts
Week Two

"If you fall down seven times, get up eight."
--Kung Fu mantra

As you can tell from having attempted the exercises in Week One, it's not always easy to stitch in the circumstances and then shape and complete a scene in three pages. You may ask, "Why three pages only?" The reason is because so many scenes are filled with dead language—that is, unmotivated language. When you're forced to write a scene in three pages, you learn how to economize. Every beat must count or you'll run out of space. Once you can sustain three pages of "motivated" dialogue/behaviour, then you can spread your wings and write longer scenes. For screenwriters and TV writers, three pages is usually the limit for a "long" scene. Again, I emphasize that these exercises are deliberately contrived to sharpen your skills.

I was always told that the hardest feat is to write a 60 pp. Act with no breaks. However, Shakespeare wrote Five Act plays with as many as fifteen scenes per act. He wrote short pungent scenes and jumped from battlegrounds to graveyards, royal parties to dung-filled stables. If he had been born in this age, the Bard would've been a remarkable screenwriter. Other writers often use what are called "French scenes" where entrances and exits of characters, in fact, mark the beginning of one scene and the end of another. I believe that it's difficult to sustain action regardless of the medium you write for—film, TV or stage. Writing short scenes or long scenes…it's a stylistic choice that ultimately must suit the story. Form follows content.

This week, we will continue with Scene Structure by examining Setting and key Scene elements.

Lecture Two:
Setting & Scene Structure

I. Setting

You may now ask, why did you leave setting for last? It's part of the circumstances when you set up a scene, yes? Time and place. Isn't that the first thing you do? One of the greatest plays in the twentieth century was about a few blokes waiting for Godot…who cares where…who cares when.

However, setting is usually an important circumstance(s) to establish from the outset, particularly when it's leveraged to heighten the action of a scene and/or magnify character or theme.

When setting your scene, there are several considerations:

- **Actual Time**

  Does the scene take place at noon or midnight? Early morning or on a lazy Sunday afternoon? Actual time can significantly impact the action in a scene.

  For example, your character has just reconciled with her boyfriend and the couple is enjoying a candlelit night-in. At three o'clock that morning, her wayward brother shows up with a back pack and a bag of weed. He's also broke. This is a very different situation than if the destitute brother surfaces on a Saturday afternoon while your main character is in the middle of doing chores.

Consider when Blanche enters the Quarter in *Streetcar Named Desire*. She arrives at dusk. She is described as a "moth." A "moth" doesn't appear in broad daylight. A moth emerges at night.

See photo of Brando at right below. Notice the telephone, the shoddy apartment, even the grim lighting. Also notice how he's dressed. The grime on his shirt. He's clutching an oil can.

From left, Jessica Tandy (Blanche), Kim Hunter (Stella) and Marlon Brando (Stanley) in the 1947 Broadway staging of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

- **Period**

Does your scene take place in the present or during the French Revolution? Even the difference between pre-911 and post-911 world will affect your scene due to the change in attitudes and the plethora of events since the attacks, not to mention war. Society's attitudes change as do hair styles, fashion, music, film, politics, the economy, etc.

- **Duration**

Does the story span 2 hours or two hundred years? Is it a snapshot in time or an epic? Does it flash back and forth in time? Visual or dialogue cues must alert the audience to the passage of time. Unlike the static arts (painting, sculpture, etc.), drama is a temporal art.

- **Location**

Where does your scene take place? Palace, ghetto, desert isle or Times Square? Be aware of the weather, customs, language and values of the region/place that you choose. Leverage the specificity of place to heighten the action.

For example, Tennesee Williams doesn't set *Streetcar Named Desire* in Mississippi (where Belle Reve was located), he moves the displaced DuBois sisters to New Orleans. But he goes further than that. He doesn't place them in the pristine garden district. He places them in the Quarter where we hear cats screeching, musicians playing, hawkers yelling, and the streetcars rumbling through. It's loud, it's hot, and it's crowded. In other words, it's a powder keg.

Arthur Miller doesn't set *Death of a Salesman* on Madison Avenue. He sets the play in Brooklyn. He is dramatizing the plight of the Everyman.

- **Milieu**

  Working class? High society? Illegal immigrants in Chinatown. Corporate sharks at the Bohemian Club? What is the socio-economic setting for the scene? Each milieu has its own traditions, hierarchy, preferences, dress codes, etc.

  In *Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams is exploring a clash in milieu. Blanche is thrust into an unfamiliar world that she not only doesn't understand, but also abhors.

  Fish out of water stories are about outsiders thrust into alien milieus. For example, in the TV series NORTHERN EXPOSURE, a Jewish doctor from New York finds himself in the Alaskan hinterland.

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How do you capture setting with authentic strokes? Research.

Old maxim: Write what you know. Heed not. It's a misnomer. Expand on what you know and then write what you know. Arthur Miller testified before HUAC during the McCarthy witchhunts. This bitter experience inspired *The Crucible*. Before Miller put pen to page, he ventured to Massachusetts and researched the Salem witch trials. Get thee to a library. Interview people. Develop collages of images of place and milieu that you can use while you write. The more research you do, the more specific your world becomes. Without specificity of behaviour, language and imagery, it's easy to lapse into cliché.

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II. Scene Structure

A quick review of what's been tackled thus far:

Definition of action: The decision to do "something" given a set of circumstances.

Definition of scene: A unit of action that is the fundamental building block of story.

Setting up a scene: The circumstances

1. Dramatic Situation (DS)

The dramatic situation is the "problem." What *is* the problem?

2. Passover Question (PQ)

What makes this time different than any other? The PQ galvanizes the action in a scene.

3. Character Need

The main character must need something from the other character **in the scene**.

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Taking the next step towards understanding scene structure, I'd like to take a step back into history when acting and directing changed drastically. In fact, it was a revolt that laid the foundations for the way we act, direct and write in the present day. And that giant step forward was due to Konstantin Stanislavsky.

Konstantin Stanislavsky

Disgruntled with the conservatism of the Russian theatres of his era, Konstantin Stanislavsky partnered with playwright Nemirovitch-Danchenko to launch a new company, the Moscow Arts Theatre (1898). He developed a new method of acting/directing based on the **psychological truth** of the character.

As opposed to the style of the day which leaned on generic "types," Stanislavsky's method required that the actor fully understand the interior life and behaviour of the character. This led to more naturalistic acting.

Stanislavsky was emphatic about sticking to the text for the given circumstances. At the time, Anton Chekhov's plays (*The Cherry Orchard, Uncle Vanya, The Seagull*, etc.) were being produced at the Moscow Arts Theatre.

So let's take a quick look at how he approached the text from the actor's and director's point of view.

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ACTOR'S (REVERSE) POV

Stanislavsky broke down the text (play) into chunks. From the smallest chunk (beat) to understanding the super-objective of the play, he dissected the text to gain as deep an insight into character intention and action as possible. Below are descriptions of his breakdown:

ACTOR & DIRECTOR	
Entity	Description
Beat	Smallest "chunk." Refers to moments in a character's dialogue or action when something changes—i.e., usually a change in tactics.
Unit	Similar to a beat, a unit is delineated by a change in subject or idea, and often involves a physical change—i.e., a character entrance or arrival of new information (via messenger)—in which the main character's want may be impacted.
Intention	The "why" behind the character's every word or action—i.e., what is motivating him/her to take an action.
Objective	"How" the character struggles to achieve his/her goal in the scene. Verb-object. Ex. To cajole him into joining the secret society.
Through-line	Progression of action adds up to a bigger question: if you can have it all, what is it you get? Or: What is the point of getting it? Usually, you will find this question answered in a key speech in the material.
Super-objective	A conclusion drawn from all the different motivations and actions of each character. Decided on a meta-level by the actors and director.

Bit by bit he digested the text until the entire play reassembled itself into a whole edifice. Note: The reason why "beat" came into existence is because Stanislavsky would say: "Do your bit! Do your bit!" And Americans mistook his Russian accent. They thought he was saying "beat."

And there's more…

The Magic If: A technique that Stanislavsky developed to support actors in those instances where they needed an "actual" reference with no personal experience re a character's action in a scene.

If I were
[this person]
in [this dramatic situation]
with [these given circumstances]
what would I do?

Sound familiar? An echo of Week One? I'm building on what was discovered and developed decades, if not centuries ago, by the masters. Now let us flip the coin and look at scene structure from the…

THE WRITER'S POV

In the same way that actors and directors break down a story bit by bit, a writer creates a story bit by bit.

Take a look at Russian nesting dolls:

If you open the head of the largest doll, inside there is a slightly smaller doll. Open that doll, there is another smaller doll inside. Keep on peeling until you discover a tiny doll the size of your thumb. In the same way that smaller and smaller dolls are nested within the large doll, action can be broken down into smaller and smaller units that are nested within the whole structure. The smallest unit is the "beat."

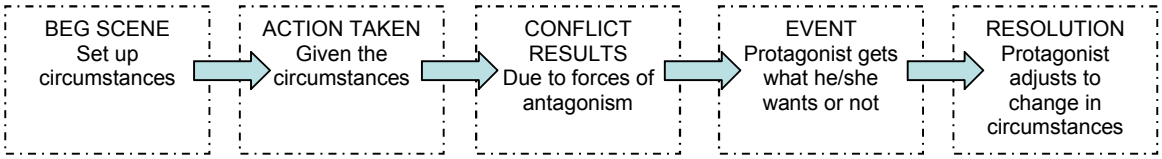
WRITER	
Elements of a Scene	Description
Beat	One transaction of behaviour—i.e. action/reaction. A scene is usually composed of several beats. (Also used in dialogue as a synonym for "pause.")
Scene	A unit of action that leads to an event. **An event is "something that happens" as a result of an action taken in the heat of conflict. It must produce a change of value in the character. That is, something happens that causes meaning change in the character.**
Sequence	(film & TV) A series of scenes (generally 2-5) that is governed by one idea and ends with a greater impact that any of the previous scenes within the sequence. One approach to feature film writing is to write the two hour feature as a series of 10–12 sequences, each lasting approximately ten minutes.
Act	(film) A series of sequences that leads to a major reversal of circumstances for the protagonist. (theatre) A series of scenes that leads to a climax, albeit a climax with less impact than any climax in subsequent acts.
Story	A series of acts that leads to climax in which the protagonist and antagonist go

	head to head in a battle of win or loss. The result is irreversible in some way. It may or may not lead to deep spiritual or moral change in the character (depending on genre).

For the first few weeks, we will concentrate on crafting a strong scene. Later, we will move on to "Advancing the Action" or plotting in which we stitch together a series of scenes into a progression. But the terms are laid for you from the start, so that you understand the path you are taking.

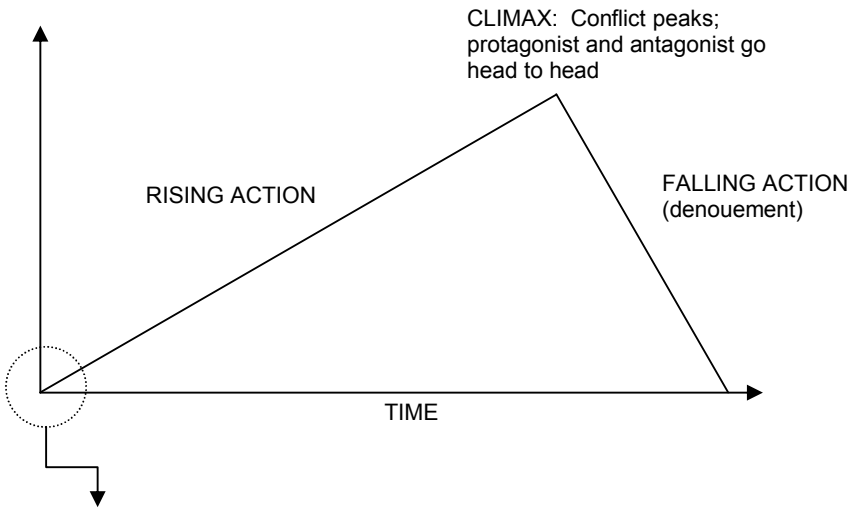
FLOW OF A SCENE

Now that you understand the elements of a scene, the next question is how does a scene flow?



I'm sure all of you have seen the standard diagram for the action/time progression for a scene. Once the scene heats up, you get rising action until the characters battle it out at the climax. The falling action should be quick as well as provide a transition into the next scene (We'll deal with cliffhangers in a later lecture).

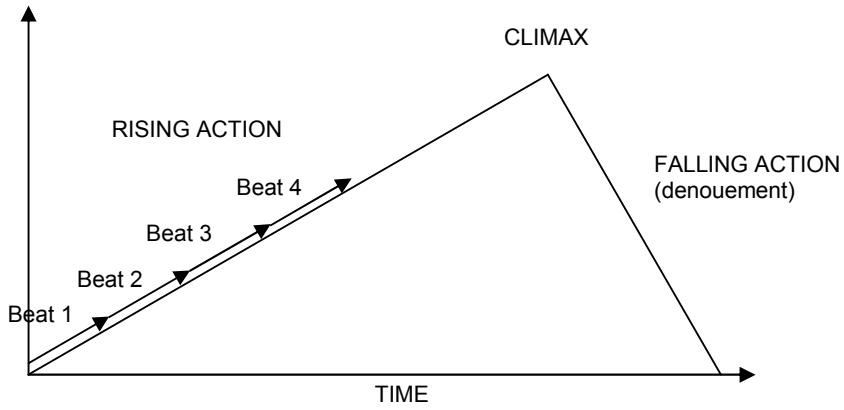
SCENE STRUCTURE - A



SET UP GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES

- Dramatic Situation
- Passover Question
- Character Need
- Setting

SCENE STRUCTURE - B

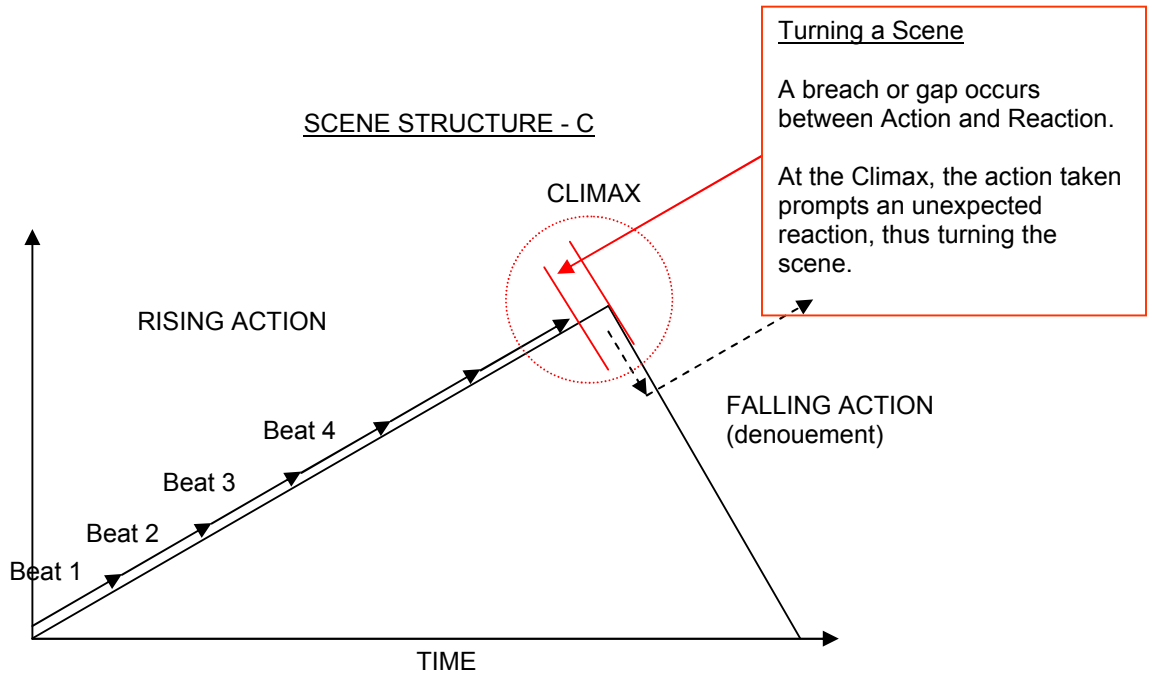


Beats in a scene: tactics to achieve goal

1. To flatter
2. To cajole
3. To bribe
4. To threaten

Above, we see that the rise in action in the scene is composed of beats. Each beat engenders a different tactic used by the protagonist to get what he/she wants. As one tactic is rebuffed by the antagonist, the protagonist will try another. And so on and so forth…until the situation escalates towards win or lose. If only things were that simple, however…

SCENE STRUCTURE - C



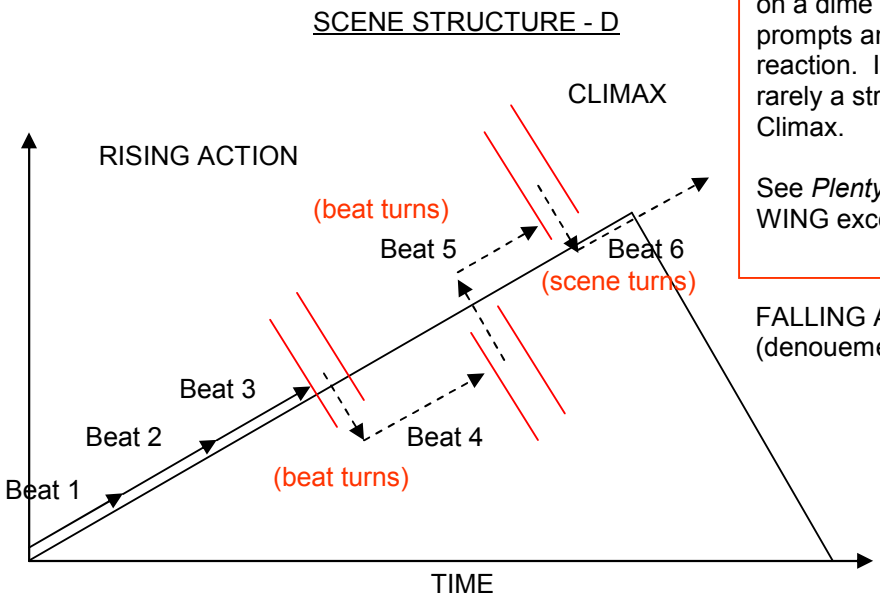
Turning a Scene

This is where it gets a little tricky. **Very rarely does a scene's action rise in a straight line.** If what happens is what's expected, why bother to watch the story? You already know what's going to happen, so you switch channels or leave the theatre. In almost all of your key scenes, there should be a breach between what the character expects and the opposing response. **This is called: Turning the scene.**

If a scene doesn't turn—that is, the result/reaction is what the character expected—it's a dead scene.

In the same way that you turn a phrase (Dialogue Lecture) to keep the language idiosyncratic and fresh, you turn a scene to keep the story fresh and surprising not only to your characters, but also your audience. Moreover, it is at that moment that your true character is revealed. It's when expectations are dashed that we see true character emerge, regardless of whether or not he/she wins or loses. Why? Because there is schism between what the character believes and the reality of the world that is. It's that moment when the **character changes**. That is, only when the character glimpses reality outside of himself/herself as different than what he/she anticipated can he/she change. Self knowledge is possible through discovery.

It is imperative that in major reversals and the climax that the scene turns. Circumstances alter. The character also changes.



Turning a Beat
Within a scene, beats can turn on a dime when the beat/tactic prompts an unexpected reaction. In other words, it's rarely a straight line up to the Climax.

See *Plenty* excerpt and WEST WING excerpt for beat turns.

Turning a Beat

In the work of sophisticated writers, not only do major plot points turn, but also **beats within a scene turn**. Actions provoke unexpected reactions throughout the scene, so that the audience is constantly on the edge of their seat. In order to achieve this level of writing, you've got to know your characters and your world from the inside out.

Read the *Plenty* excerpt and the WEST WING pilot excerpt. Beats twist and turn beautifully within the scenes. I have notated where the turns are. You may see turns that I have yet to point out.

The question is: how do you turn a scene or a beat? At the moment, it's abstract. How do I translate these diagrams and boost my scenes that extra notch? Can we get concrete here? Note: Robert McKee does a terrific job describing "writing in the gap" in his book, "Story." However, it's unclear as to "how" to do it.

First, ask yourself: What is the reverse outcome of what my character expects?

There are several techniques that you can use to turn a beat or a scene. I've outlined a few below. As well, study the work of master playwrights and screenwriters and figure out how they turn a scene. Be inventive.

Techniques to turn a scene or a beat:

- **Revelation**

  When the character driving the action realizes that what seems is not what is.

  Ex. 1: STAR WARS. Darth Vader to Luke Skywalker: I'm your father. An abrupt turn in the middle of a climax.

  Ex. 2: THE CRYING GAME. Main character's (Stephen Rea) realization that the person he's in love with is not a woman but a man. This revelation also constitutes a major reversal in the film.

- **Reversal**

  A plot reversal is a reversal of external circumstances for the protagonist that amounts to a hairpin turn (180 degrees). It's an about face. (We will explore further in Lecture on "Key Plot Points.")

  I repeat: it's an abrupt shift in **external circumstances**. Something happens that the protagonist has no control over. He/she has no choice but to face the hairpin turn.

  Ex: GHOST (film). Patrick Swayze is killed. If you think he had a problem communicating his feelings to his wife (Demi Moore) when he was alive, his problem just got bigger.

  Major reversals in film are hairpin "turns." Note: Reversals are not required in plays.

- **Action**

  Character takes an unexpected action in the face of known circumstances. This is imperative for all Climaxes because the Protagonist has to be at his/her most powerful and willful self. (Again, we will explore further in Lecture on "Key Plot Points.")

  Ex. 1: DIE HARD (film). Turning point. Bruce Willis has a gun strapped to his back. He appears to the antagonist and to the audience that he's surrendered. But he has a "surprise."

  Ex. 2: Remember the famous Harrison Ford moment in INDIANA JONES? Behind the scenes, Ford was suffering from dysentery and couldn't perform the elaborate fighting scene that Lucas had inked. So what did we see on film? Indiana Jones faces a sword-wielding, wild warrior, takes out his gun, and just shoots him.

  Ex. 3: MAGNOLIA. Phillip Seymour Hoffman is nursing a dying TV producer. The producer's son (Tom Cruise) is a male empowerment guru. Hoffman orders take-out—i.e., food and Playboy,

Hustler, etc. You anticipate that Hoffman's going to hit the centerfold. Instead, he leafs through the advertisements and finds the 1-800 number to Cruise's offices. However, one of the most predictable beats in the movie is Julianne Moore gassing herself.

- **Mismatch & Mistake**

Sometimes this is a simple mistake in the characters' comprehension of the same circumstances.

For example, the main character is in desperate need of a hundred smackers. His friend comes up with the hundred smackers. A hundred dollars. But the main character meant a hundred one-hundred dollar bills. The intention is to solve the problem, but the circumstances have been interpreted differently by the characters in the scene.

Mistaken identity is used often to turn a scene. Shakespeare used this device in *Twelfth Night*. This technique often goes hand-in-hand with revelation.

In FAULTY TOWERS, a British sit-com starring John Cleese, scenes turned because a Spanish worker-bee couldn't understand or speak English.

Simple human misunderstanding can complicate situations in unexpected ways…just like life.

- **Third Party Intervention**

Classic three-body problem. In astronomy it is easy to calculate the gravitational pull between two bodies in space. But when you add a third body, the calculations soar in terms of complexity. Rule of thumb. Every time you add a character to a scene, the complexity escalates. Why? The probability of unpredictable behaviour increases significantly. (According to a British director friend, it's why one-person shows are so "bloody predictable." She prefers casts of 3's, 5's, and 7's…just to knock off the balance.)

Ex. 1: See excerpt from *Streetcar Named Desire* – Week Two. Enter Stanley…yes, he eavesdrops on the women (foreshadowing a later conflict)…but now Stella has to choose between Stanley and Blanche. The chemistry has radically altered.

Ex. 2: FISH CALLED WANDA (film). Finally able to overcome the typical British fear of embarrassment, John Cleese ("Archie Leach") is dancing around in his underwear in front of Jamie Lee Curtis. That is, until a family (with kids) swings open the door.

- **Complicating Incident**

An incident can appear to be an action but it's not. "What happens" is not rooted in character intention and doesn't culminate from an action taken such as an event. The writer usually plants clues before the scene so that the incident doesn't seem to come out of left field.

Ex. 1: See *Death of a Salesman* – Week One reading. Willy Loman accidentally presses the on button of the tape recorder. This seemingly innocuous incident unravels him. It also seals his fate. Willy's hysterical reaction to the machine magnifies his impending crack-up to Howard, his boss. The consequence: Howard tells Willy to "take a rest."

Ex. 2: In the film, MAGNOLIA, there is a shower of frogs. Literally, a hailstorm of frogs.

If you watch "24" (such as this season's pilot), the beats within each scene turn constantly, leveraging a variety of techniques—revelation, action, incident, third-party entrances, mistakes, etc. Try and watch an episode and identify how the beats within scenes twist and turn.

Week Two Assignments

ASSIGNMENT A:

Write a three-page scene using ONLY DIALOGUE. **2-3 characters.** Stitch in a dramatic situation (DS), passover question (PQ), and a deep character need.

Build on your skills. In addition, try to:

- Leverage setting to heighten the action in the scene.
- Turn the scene at the climax.

ASSIGNMENT B:

Write a 2-3 page scene using ONLY VISUALS. No dialogue. Make sure that you reveal the DS, PQ and character need via a progression of visual images. Use standard screenplay format.

Leverage the setting and turn the scene.

NOTE: Since we are not all using the same hardware or software, please make sure to post your submissions in Rich Text File or PDF.

Good luck!
Dakota