

# Theme & Scene: The Magic of Nuts & Bolts Week Seven

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**“I was so mad at my agent. I had polished and polished and polished [the play], and he referred to it as a draft. I wrote him a bitter letter: *How can you call this a draft? I don't do drafts!* By now I've done 18, and it's turning, in the rehearsal room, into a 19th.”**

**-- Cynthia Ozick**

Since I've already uploaded the “Film Structure Paradigms” section in Week 6, this lecture will focus on the basic components of a full-length work. Some background in screenwriting or playwrighting was required for this course, so this lecture is a **mere refresher** re your skill set. If not, please pick up one of the tomes on screenwriting (Field, McKee, Vogler, Truby, Dancyger and Rush) or playwrighting (Egris) and read up on full-length structure in more depth.

## Lecture Seven: Advancing the Action Part II

In “Advancing the Action -- Part 2,” we will briefly review some key strategic pieces that comprise a story.

- I. Dramatic Question
- II. Point of Attack
- III. Exposition
- IV. Film: Key Plot Points – Review
- V. Subplots/Multiple Plots
- VI. Stage Play Structure – Review
- VII. Teleplay Structure – Review

### I. The Dramatic Question

Not to be confused with the dramatic situation, the dramatic question (DQ) relates to the overt story line—i.e., the Quest. Basically, will the Hero get what he/she wants? Will he/she win? Will Rocky win the fight? Will the little girl win the “Little Miss Sunshine” contest?

In episodic structure, it can be a contrived dramatic question that frames the different chapters of the film. In PULP FICTION, will Honeybunny and Pumpkin rob the diner, pocket the money and escape? It's an artificial construct because it only relates to one thread and not the entire work.

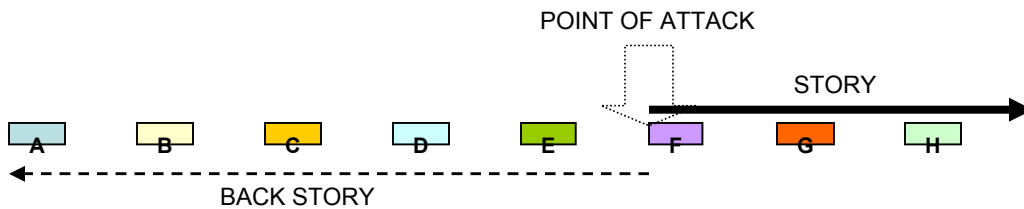
Once the Dramatic Question is answered—yes or no—the story is essentially over.

### II. Point of Attack

There are three types of information relevant to a story:

- a) **History** – All of the information (e.g., character biographies, notes on setting/milieu, past events) related to the story but may not be necessary to the actual telling of the story
- b) **Back Story / Exposition** – Selected information/events from story history that the audience absolutely needs to know to comprehend the narrative
- c) **Story** – Sequence of selected events that add up to a fully realized dramatic narrative

The **Point of Attack** is that point in the story where you begin the narrative:



Because the first few pages of a film or play need to catch fire, most writers choose a late point of attack. (Note: The first writer to use a late point of attack was Sophocles in *Oedipus the King*.)

In *KRAMER VS. KRAMER*, the marriage has been strained for years, but the film begins when the wife (Meryl Streep) walks out on her husband (Dustin Hoffman).

However, this rule is not set in stone. Shakespeare uses an early point of attack in *Romeo and Juliet*. Curtain opens: Romeo pines over another woman. He has to meet Juliet.

**Epic tales often use an early point of attack.** Bertolucci begins *THE LAST EMPEROR* with Pu Yi, a wee child, and covers the span of Yi's life (60 years) through Mao's revolution. Other examples: *GANDHI*, *LAWRENCE OF ARABIA*, *CARNAL KNOWLEDGE*, *FAREWELL MY CONCUBINE*.

**In contrast, films that depend on a ticking clock usually start with a very late point of attack.** Compression of time heightens the narrative by putting immediate pressure on the main characters to act.

### III. Dramatizing Exposition

Exposition must be woven into the fabric of the story. Few rules of thumb:

- a) **Avoid table dusting**



In the 1800s, playwrights used domestics (maids) to deliver the exposition when the curtain opened. The chatterboxes would reveal all of the scandalous, terrible and amazing things that have happened to the family in the last half a century...while dusting.

**Unmotivated exposition can kill a narrative.** Stop momentum dead in its tracks.

- b) **Show, don't tell**

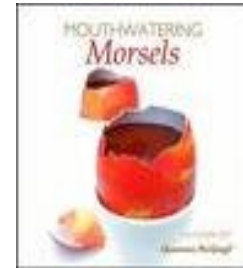
**Dramatize the exposition.** Characters can use exposition as a tactic to get what they want in a scene. In your own life, think about how many times you have used old/past information to hurt... flatter...prod...scare...guilt someone, and so forth, to get what you want.

Example: "Natalie, you went on a walk-about ten years ago with that rascal Biff...and ring it

up, here be the change...a stinkin' pit in Hell's Kitchen. *Meet* John, a sweetie, a saint. The Good Shepherd of blind dates." Audience comprehends that Natalie has been chasing bad boys for a decade and still lives in a studio in sordid part of town. And activate the line.

c) **Just in time management**

**Parse out exposition.** Stitch in only the exposition that the audience absolutely needs to know to make the story make sense in the present. If you want to keep the audience hungry for more, you give them a **few morsels at a time**. You don't hand them the horn of plenty in one sitting.



d) **Save the best for last**

**Pace the exposition.** Layer in the least critical information early in the story and reveal the most critical information last. Think of key moments that turn on revelations. Secrets are withheld until the pressure in the scene pops the lid off.

Classic film moment: Darth Vader tells Luke Skywalker that he's Luke's father. This exposition doesn't come out early in the film, but in the fight-to-the-death climax.

### Flashbacks, Dreams, Fantasies

As exposition carriers, flashbacks fall flat when they're static or unmotivated. The best way to leverage flashbacks is to dramatize them. The same rule of thumb applies to dream sequences and fantasies. They can have their own plots that also reflect in some way—e.g., counterpoint, magnification—what is taking place in the main through-line.

Flashbacks can hold the key to a character's ghost—i.e., the ghost is not talked about but played out as a concurrent mystery through-line. But don't give the key to the kingdom away in the first flashback. In the same way that you parse out exposition, you parse out flashbacks.

Kaufman has two plots converging in *ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND*. Memory and reality start bleeding into each other...until they become a single throbbing vein of action...**and where the choice in one through-line affects the choice in another.**

It's the same principle seen in material where the **boundary blurs between dream/fantasy and reality**. When a human being walks that thin line between sanity and insanity, life gets most dangerous. And the negotiation of that schism is fertile territory for innovative dramatic narrative.

Dreams are abstractions—heightened, poetic, and highly logical in their own unique way. They can provide a writer with enormous room visually and linguistically to spin magic and defy Newtonian laws of nature. Worm holes, rabbit-character, mysterious old lady...*DONNIE DARKO*...inventive story-telling.

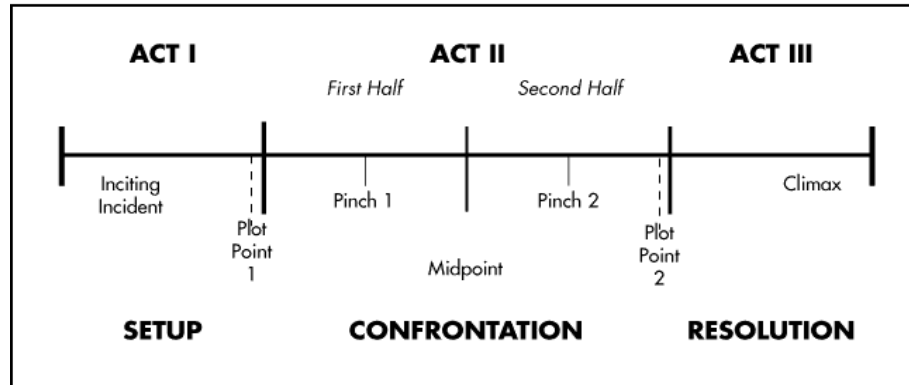
### IV. Film: Key Plot Points -- Review

Let's use Syd Field's three-act paradigm. An elementary approach to three-act film structure, the simplicity of the paradigm is of value. Key plot points are:

- A. **Inciting Incident**
- B. **Plot Point I: First Reversal**
- C. **Midpoint**
- D. **Plot Point II: Point of No Return/Second Reversal**

- E. Crisis/Climax/Obligatory Scene
- F. Resolution

## The Syd Field "Paradigm"



### A. Inciting Incident -- pp 1 (early) – 20 (late)

In the standard 3-act structure, the protagonist is a flawed Hero—that is, someone with a blind spot, weakness or internal conflict. However, the Hero's life is in stasis. It's balanced...albeit a balance achieved by denying the flaw or the hole in the gut.

**An Inciting Incident is an external event introduces the main conflict of the story and knocks this balance off.** The Hero has no choice but to deal with it. He/she must respond.

In reacting to this event—good or bad—the Hero's desire is stirred to rectify the imbalance. Thus begins the overt Quest. If the protagonist is complex, the Inciting Incident will also ignite an unconscious desire. In this case, the story becomes a dramatization of the Hero's internal conflict in the external world.

**As well, the Inciting Incident is a peephole to the Climax.** It's a glimpse—a foreshadowing—of the death-battle to come. Think of it as the front end of a telescope peering at some...fuzzy, fiery event...in the distance. By the end of the story, we are in the middle of that life-changing Supernova.

Film	Inciting Incident – Examples	Timing
NOTES ON A SCANDAL	Arrival of new teacher	Early
LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE	Olive gets the chance to compete in beauty contest	Late
BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN	First meet between the two cowboys	Early
MILLION DOLLAR BABY	Maggie shows up to Frankie's gym	Late
SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE	Harry meets Erica	Late
KRAMER VS KRAMER	Dustin's wife walks out on him	Early

**Sometimes the Inciting Incident can slap you in the face on page one. Other times, it may come as late as a few beats before the first big reversal.** It depends on the story. But the incident will turn the Hero's life upside-down... and little does the Hero realize... things will never be the same.

**REMEMBER: The Inciting Incident must be an external event. It's not a character action or the result of one. It's not an attitude taken or an idea. This is a common mistake. Think of it as a concrete, outside event that causes an abrupt change in the Hero's given set of circumstances.**

### B. Plot Point I – First Reversal (pp 25-30)

In general, the Protagonist undertakes a strategy to correct the imbalance caused by the Inciting Incident. Since human beings are conservative by nature, the Protagonist will take the easiest route that demands the least energy or conviction. This strategy backfires on him/her; that is, it's a known route that won't threaten his/her illusion of "what-is." This course of action leads to the first plot point or Act I climax.

**Plot Point I is a reversal. A turn.** Recognize the term? However, the difference between a major reversal and smaller turns in the material is the degree of the turn. It's a 180 degree hairpin turn, thus, a "reversal" of the circumstances. Similar to the Inciting Incident, it's an external event. In GHOST, Patrick Swayze dies at the first Plot Point. He has problems with commitment. First reversal: his problem just got much bigger.

Film	Plot Point I – First Reversal – Examples
NOTES ON A SCANDAL	Barbara discovers that the new teacher is having sex with an underage student
SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE	Harry has a heart attack and must recover at Erica's beach house
KRAMER VS KRAMER	Kramer's wife returns and wants custody of the son
GHOST	Husband dies

### C. Midpoint (pp 55-60)

The midpoint has been defined in various ways in the industry...which means no one really knows what it is (and why it causes so much anxiety). In some cases, the midpoint is a scene in which an important information is revealed which knits the first half of the film with the second half—e.g., the uncovering of an important element of a conspiracy (CHINATOWN), the discovery of a new weapon or route by the Protagonist to defeat the Antagonist. By the midpoint, the Protagonist is empowered in some way.

FOUR ACT STRUCTURE: The midpoint can be another climax. Some writers construct a full-length film as four acts, each with its own climax and turning point. (Think Ibsen's 4-act constructs translated to film.)

SEQUENCE APPROACH: Other writers use the sequence approach: ten-minute sequences, three sequences per each of the four acts. This approach resulted from old-era film-making: each reel was ten minutes and then the tape ran out.

SUBPLOTS: If you're using subplots to buck up Act II, it can be the first turning point in a subplot that you weave in late in the story or the second turning point in a subplot that you weave in early in the story.

Note: It's a fine line that you walk as an instructor. You want to give folks some guidelines, but you don't want to crush creative instincts or something wildly innovative. Hopefully, you'll find your own way.

**"I do not make films which are prescriptive, and I do not make films that are conclusive. You do not walk out of my films with a clear feeling about what is right and wrong. They're ambivalent. You walk away with work to do. My films are a sort of investigation. They ask questions...Sometimes I hear that some (Hollywood) studio is interested in me. Then they discover that this is the guy who works with no script, that there is no casting discussion, no interference, that I have the final cut, and that does it." -- Mike Leigh**

#### D. Plot Point II – Second Reversal (pp 75-90)

The second plot point at the end of Act 2 is also a reversal or 180 degree hairpin turn. In addition, this plot point is the point of no return for the Protagonist or main characters (ensemble).

The reversal of circumstances drives the Protagonist into the depths of despair. It's also at this point where he/she "sees the light" about his/her own flaw or weakness. It's only in complete darkness that the door swings wide open. In addict-talk, it's rock-bottom when the divine spirit appears. Once the Protagonist accepts his/her accountability for the situation he/she is in, then the Protagonist can summon new-found strength, wisdom and conviction to head into the Climax (Act 3) and take on a powerful opponent.

Film	Plot Point II – Second Reversal
NOTES ON A SCANDAL	Student's mother confronts the new teacher about the sex with her son – scandal exposed – no turning back
LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE	Olive's competitors in the contest are already professional beauty queens – small chance of a win – no turning back
KRAMER VS KRAMER	Court awards custody of son to mother – point of no return for Dustin

#### E. Crisis/Obligatory Scene/Climax (pp 90-110)

**The Crisis occurs right before the Climax. It's that point when the Protagonist is confronted with the choice between two irreconcilable values—i.e., two goods, two evils or the good-but-evil/evil-but-good paradox.** It's the life-altering fork in the road. The choice taken reveals the Protagonist's truest and deepest nature—his/her core essence.

The Obligatory Scene is the Crisis—that is, two terms for the same scene or even beats. You'll hear theatre people talk about the Obligatory Scene but you'll rarely hear film people talk about it in those terms. It's just industry lingo... difference in the use of jargon.

However, since a stage play hinges on dialectic or the choice between two opposing value systems, the Obligatory Scene must happen on stage or the play is incomplete.

Once that choice is made, the Protagonist banks on that value—the selected path—and must fight for it. **The Climax is the battle following the Crisis whereby the Protagonist is at maximum strength—power, wisdom, conviction—to take on the Antagonist.** Win or lose.

Film	Crisis	Climax
LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE	Olive does her number in the contest...a gaudy striptease that dead Grandpa had choreographed...everyone stunned!  <b>Question: Do we join our losing daughter (united we stand as group losers) or do we let Olive take the fall on her own because god forbid we have a loser in this family?</b>	Father/family decide to join Olive on stage in an ensemble funky dance
KRAMER VS KRAMER	Husband and wife wrestle with what's best for their son  <b>Question: Will these adults grow up and heed the needs of their son or will they heed their own selfish needs first?</b>	Wife realizes that the best thing for her son is to return him to his father

### F. Resolution (pp 110-120)

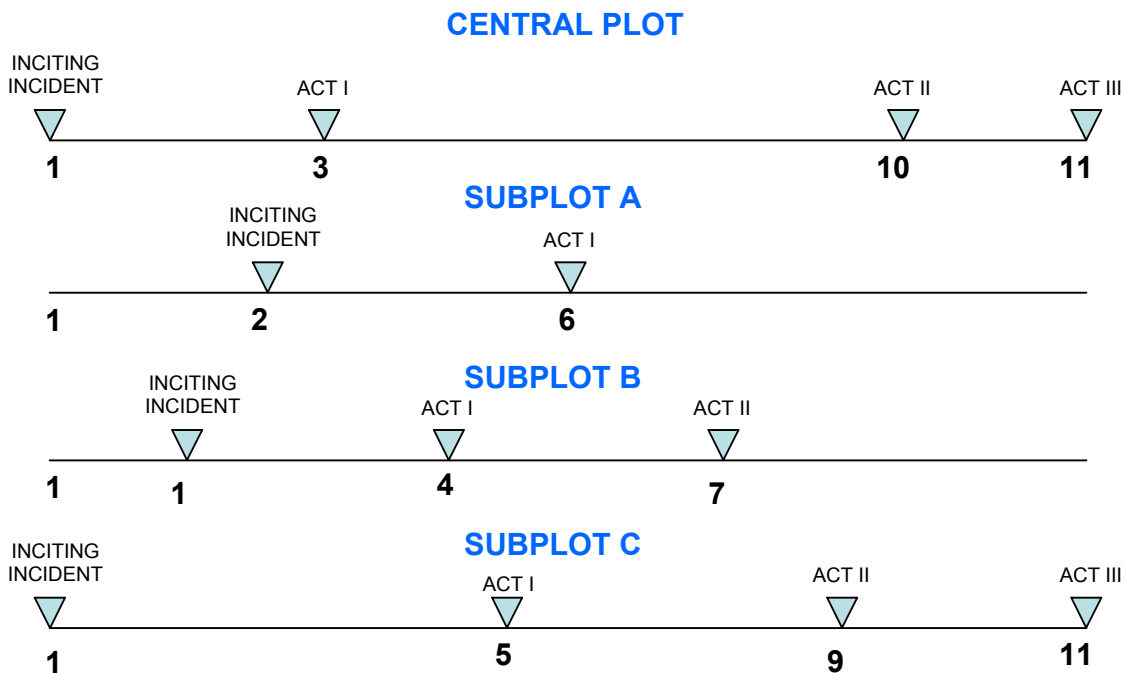
The resolution is a quick scene or two that reveals Protagonist/life changed after the battle. See below:

Film	Inciting Incident
NOTES ON A SCANDAL	New teacher returns to betrayed family while Barbara moves on to her next mark (woman)
LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE	United family gets back on bus and leaves Los Angeles
SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE	Harry and Erica/family - they gather together for a meal in the restaurant where Harry had spent a lifetime seducing young women

### V. Subplots/Multiple Plots

If you get bogged down in the second act, you can always introduce a subplot. If you look at CRASH or MAGNOLIA, it's the deft interweaving of multiple plots...as many as ten or more. Shakespeare wove in threads for sheer comic relief to keep his audiences from keeling over.

I've yanked this diagram out of McKee's *Story* (page 219), because it will give you an immediate and visual representation of the use of subplots—something that TV writers do on a weekly basis. (If you haven't taken McKee's Story Seminar, do so.) You can also add more acts, and therefore more climaxes. Only warning: every time you introduce a new thread, you add another climax. If you're not careful, you can wear the audience down with one battle after another.



#### Note on Alternative Structures:

To brush up on the rules of genre and ways to innovate on structure, please pick up:

*Alternative Scriptwriting* by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush.

I've provided a link to this book in External Links. IMHO, it's by far the best book on film structure that I've read. I first read it about ten years ago; I reread it time and time again. The tome will provide you with a run-down on classic three-act structure and then fan out and cover alternative structures. Do realize that you can innovate on structure and fly in the face of necessity, causality, time progression—that is, all of the “rules” of structure—and still ink a compelling piece of work.

Excerpt from: RUN LOLA RUN (dir. Tom Tykwer) -- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Run\\_Lola\\_Run](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Run_Lola_Run)

“*Run Lola Run* is an unconventional, nonlinear film. It covers the same twenty-minute span of time three times over, each differing in small details that in turn lead the story to radically different outcomes. The script follows a **spiral structure**. Spirals are also frequently used as a visual motif, partially as homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, which Tykwer has acknowledged. The film, particularly with its time limit and “multiple lives” concept, also owes a clear debt to Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski, who explored the theme in films such as *Blind Chance*, *The Double Life of Véronique*, and *Three Colors: Red*. Tykwer would go on to direct *Heaven*, which Kieślowski (who died in 1996) had planned as his next film.”

### Contingency versus Necessity:

Case: RUN LOLA RUN (excerpt)

“Lola (Franka Potente) has 20 minutes to find 100,000 marks to save her boyfriend. The film presents three versions of what happens when she sets out to do so. The film can be used to talk about Sartre's notion of absurdity, his view that life has no essential point or purpose, that our existence is the result of accident and contingency.

**It's a film in which chance, accident and contingency have a profound role to play in what happens.**

Depending on when Lola leaves the house, the outcome of her journey is very different indeed.

In an interview, Sartre said that one of the things that started him thinking about absurdity and contingency was film: ‘I saw films in which there was no contingency and then when I left the cinema there I found contingency. It was therefore the film's necessity that made me feel that there was no necessity in the street when I went out.’ (Simone de Beauvoir, *Adieux*, 141)

He means that in a film, there is a plot in which events fit, a ‘grand plan’. Everything happens for a purpose and all the action leads to the final conclusion in which things are resolved.

Run Lola Run is a film that goes some way towards capturing the idea of the contingency of life (although in the end there is still a process of development in the various scenarios - in the first Lola dies, in the second her boyfriend does, in the third everything works out nicely).”

### VI. Stage Play Structure

**“I'm an emotional writer. I write a play because I do not want to stay where I am. . . It's an uncomfortable place and therefore very powerful.”**

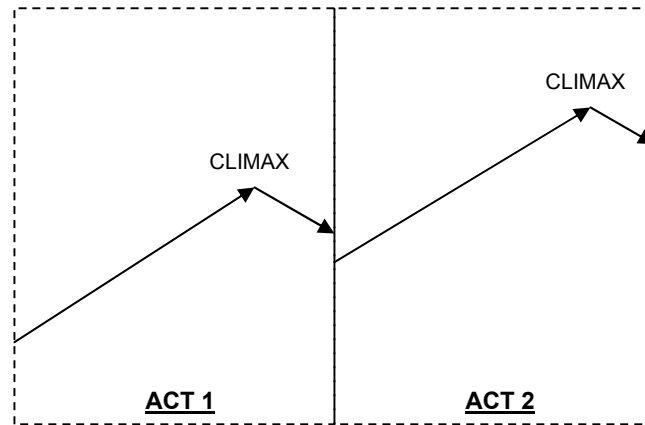
**-- John Patrick Shanley**

What you have learned in the first four weeks of this class re scene structure is the core of playwrighting. If you can write a strong scene, you can write a play. That said, there is a wonderful site called:

## The Playwriting Seminars

--at <http://www.vcu.edu/arts/playwriting/seminar.html>.

It'll take you about two hours to page through it and learn more about playwriting. Alos, Lagos Egri's *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (link in External Links section) is a wonderful tome on playwriting.



Play structure is much simpler than film structure. There is no need for major reversals at the ends of acts. **If you want to add an act, you repeat the structure. However, each act should grow progressively more heated.** Stakes keep rising. Climax hits higher points in each successive act.

The complexity of writing plays lies in the scene itself...as if you folks don't realize this after weeks of writing scene after scene. Just learning how to set up a scene properly is difficult, much less figuring out how to turn one. And the next step is to link scenes together... or advance the action.

The same guidelines concerning Point of Attack, Inciting Incident, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action and Resolution in a screenplay apply to a play.

As well, there are the dual plot tracks—the Quest (or Superficial/Suspence Plot) and the Character Spine (or the Emotional Plot). I repeat, these terms become interchangeable as long as you understand the concepts.

However, the language of a play is dialogue, not visual images. So dialogue becomes music. It's heightened and poetic in ways that rarely come across in film. Many playwrights write in very precise rhythms.

**“So somehow, things that seem extraneous to the play in reality are not. The scene lasts 37 minutes, and you only need 12 minutes of that for the plot. But if you pull the rest of it out, it's not my play.”**

**-- August Wilson**

At this point, all of you have enough skills under your belt to write a full-length play. Just spread your wings and fly.

## VII. Teleplay Structure

TV is moulting. We're in the golden era of TV where some of the best writers, actors and directors are breaking rules left, right and center. An unknown writer can come out of left field and write a remarkable TV pilot and end up a show runner of a hit series. It's certainly attracting talented playwrights—Alan Ball

(SIX FEET UNDER), Aaron Sorkin (WEST WING), Will Scheffer (BIG LOVE), Robbie Baitz (BROTHERS AND SISTERS)—right on down the line.

### **Question: What is teleplay structure?**

**Answer: There is no *one* structure.**

I can't tell you what teleplay structure is. I walked into a telly-pilot writing class (where I met Z as I said on the boards) having read a book on TV pilots that explained a four-act structure...raring to go! Each act 15 minutes! Point of no return at the halfway mark, etc.! **Well, our instructor, Bill Taub (who is auditing this class in the shadows by the way) blew us out of the water. That structure is already obsolete.**

### **Ask Zoanne how they structure GREY'S ANATOMY.**

(Once Z wraps the season, she may have a little more breathing room to answer questions.) Some shows have a teaser—e.g., CSI, the scene of the crime—others don't. If you're writing shows for HBO or SHOWTIME, there are no acts because there are no commercial breaks.

I had an agent in LA who tried to tell me how to write a TV pilot. You need three story lines: A, B, and C. You need act breaks every ten to fifteen minutes. The script has to be around 55 pages. He was wrong.

I've uploaded several successful telly pilots. You can see how each structure differs. There are certain conventions depending on genre. If it's a cop show, it usually starts with a crime. If it's a medical drama, it starts with someone getting sick or hurt... and that someone ending up the show's patient. But if you can innovate on these genres, all the more power to you.

Bill has a superb way of teaching. He tries to get you to forget the rules... what's been seen before... what's been done before. I had an idea about cult cops and ended writing a pilot called MAD WAX about a dysfunctional family that runs a wax museum. My last minute idea was the most interesting. As well, I've always perceived myself as a serious playwright... (I have a sense of humour but I don't consider myself "funny") and ended up with a black comedy. **There is tremendous value in creative freedom.**

## Week Seven Assignments

### ASSIGNMENT A:

Exploring Multiple Consciousness – Memory, Dream, Fantasy, Reality

Write a 5-7 page scene where the protagonist alternates between two different types of consciousness. At the same time, you need to maintain forward-moving action. If you use a flashback, try and motivate it. Avoid a static exposition carrier.

- ❖ 2-3 characters
- ❖ DS, PQ, need
- ❖ Stage or screen format

Readings: Charlie Kaufman's two scripts (if you're pressed on time, read ETERNAL...)

- ❖ ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND
- ❖ ADAPTATION

### ASSIGNMENT B:

Continue to work on a synopsis of your longer work. Try and nail down the key plot points.

Note: I'd rather keep the process organic than shoot for quick-fix formulaic work.

If it means that you might need to do more character work before you launch into a beat sheet, then that might be the better way to go. The more prep work you do, the easier the actual "write" will be.

You may also discover a more innovative structure if you wallow in the swamps a bit.

**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